Kyle Devine, Christoph Jacke

Sustainability, Solutionism, and the Problem of Music[1]
Kyle Devine interviewed by Christoph Jacke

Christoph Jacke: So, Kyle, would you be so nice and please sum up the basic results of your two inspiring publications/projects *Decomposed* (2019) and *Audible Infrastructures* (2021) for those who have not read them yet?

Kyle Devine: *Decomposed* is about the human and environmental costs of recorded music. Everyday intuition says that the history of recording has been a story of dematerialization—a steady march from physical discs to invisible digits. By contrast, the book shows that recorded music has always exploited natural and human resources, and that our reliance on those resources is probably more damaging in today's digital moment than ever before.

The book's subtitle, *The Political Ecology of Music*, is meant to capture and describe those dimensions of recording. At the same time, another subtitle could have been "A Critique of Music's Political Ecology". That would have underlined a connection to Marx's critique of political economy, which was not only about describing the conditions of capitalism. It was equally about diagnosing the assumptions of classical political economy that allowed the conditions of capitalism to become naturalized. *Decomposed* does not just describe the conditions of music's relations to ecology. The book also tries to say something about the conditions of musical thought and scholarship that have allowed certain aspects of music's reliance on resources and labor to be naturalized and concealed.

It is apparent that the modes of research and critique developed in *Decomposed* are applicable beyond recorded music. They extend to the entirety of the musical world and to sound culture more generally: touring, writing, publishing, instruments, the built environment, and so on. That was the starting point of *Audible Infrastructures*, which I edited with Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier.

As the anthology developed, we saw that it was about more than ecological issues. The book became a more general conceptual and political exploration of music and sound in terms of their media infrastructures—which we defined in terms of the material, organizational, and ideological systems that facilitate three main phases in the social lives and social deaths of music's material culture: (a) resources and production, (b) circulation and transmission, (c) failure and waste. The goal was to understand how such infrastructures inflect and reflect aesthetic proclivities, material-environmental situations, and political-economic conditions in rich and poor places around the world.

What does this thinking ask of us? Where does it take us? For me, approaching music (and sound) in terms of political ecologies and media infrastructures starts by epistemologically breaking with the cultural force of an abstraction called "music."

"Music" can function as a label, in the old sociological sense of that word, meaning that what we think of as music is a consequence of classification rather than something inherent or es-

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sential to sound and practice. One of the prevalent understandings of music that circulates and exerts influence in our moment encourages us to see many humble things and ordinary people as peripheral to the musical world, or irrelevantly "nonmusical," when they are actually and inescapably integral to that world. In other words, thinking in terms of political ecologies and media infrastructures asks us to understand everything that music and sound seem not to be as inseparable from what they are. This is a conceptual benefit, in that it allows us to construct our object of study with a greater degree of reflexivity. It is also a benefit of scope, in that such work enables us to paint a more complete picture of what it actually takes to make the musical world go round. But the advantages of this work go beyond conceptualization, completism, or how-it's-made-ism. Looking at music's supply chains, circulatory systems, and waste streams is a political decision. It is on these levels where we face some of the most urgent issues regarding the conditions of music, and the human condition more broadly.

Christoph Jacke: What has happened to those kinds of (research) areas since the publications?

Kyle Devine: That is not for me to say. In any case, my goal has not been to define or develop research areas. I have tried to ask critical questions about the musical world, to understand music as a problem.

I use "problem" not in the everyday sense that music is challenging or unwelcome, something we need to deal with or overcome. Rather, I amm using the word more in the sense of a puzzle or equation. This is closer to how historians of science discuss problems, as arrangements of precepts and practices that decide the terms of their own engagement. That is, to define a problem is to determine the scope of its possible solutions. The preferred unit of analysis in this way of thinking is therefore not the solution to a given problem but, rather, the way a problem has been set up in the first place.

Music is a problem in the sense that it is an arrangement formed for us by history and society. It presents certain pre-authorized lines of inquiry. To take up such lines of inquiry in our research is always to risk holding up a mirror to music rather than shining a light into it. Yet if we work to problematize music on our own terms, it becomes possible to ask questions of it that do not have readymade answers—which is to open engagements with knowledge, truth, critique, and politics that may help to change the circumstances of, say, music's place in an expansive and unsettling cobweb of labor and resources.

This is why I do not see political ecology or audible infrastructures as research areas. There is definitely important work to be done along these lines. But the meaning or value of such work will not be found in establishing the contours or boundaries of an approach or field of study. Rather, it will be found in figuring out what these ideas can achieve as modes of critical questioning and problematization.

Christoph Jacke: Connected with that and more general: What do you see as the crucial transformations (and their effects) of our societies? And the crucial persistence(s)?

Kyle Devine: If *Decomposed* shows that recorded music, even and especially in our digital moment, has human and environmental costs, then it is understandable to ask: What do we do about it? How to we improve things? How do we solve music's environmental problems? What transformations are required?

These questions come up a lot. I have always known that I did not have the answers. It took time to figure out that I did not have to have the answers.

All throughout the musical world, people are working out their own answers to such questions. They are publishing journalism and reports that call attention to music's ecological associations. They are inventing recording formats made out of plant-based substances. They are developing listening devices powered by the sun. They are building instruments from responsible resources. They are blueprinting new concert architectures with lower emissions. And they are forming organizations that calculate and assess the environmental impact of the musical world writ large.

This constellation of activity is what I call the Great Recomposition. It is the empirical focus of the book I'm currently writing, *Recomposed*. The book is a critical study of how the musical world is transforming itself in response to climate crisis. This transformation is occurring, not just at the level of songs and styles, but also at the level of the general technical and social conditions through which musical culture expresses itself in the first place. While the transformation goes back to about the year 2000, it has gathered stronger momentum and achieved more definite solidity in the past couple of years.

All the elements of this transformation are capable initiatives being carried out by intelligent, well-meaning people. But the point of *Recomposed* is not to promote or celebrate such work. Neither, of course, is the idea to attack or dismiss it. Rather, *Recomposed* attempts to describe, understand, and evaluate the principles of thought and action that are guiding the musical world's transformative response to climate crisis. The goal is to put into conversation the concrete realities of the musical world and the critical requirements of interventionist thinking, so that they may work on one another—and work together—not to "solve" the climate crisis but, instead, to recompose how we think about the climate crisis as a problem in the first place, such that previously unimagined responses might be created. In other words, by entering this space of collision between the concrete and the critical, my hope is that *Recomposed* can serve as a partial user's guide for something that does not yet exist.

That iss a tall order. I willll try to illustrate something about it by looking at so-called sustainability, although many other avenues are possible (and I write more about them in the book). For example, what does it mean that carbon metrics feature so prominently in the political imagination surrounding climate crisis? Why is it that carbon auditing, including self-auditing, is seen as a go-to way of managing the crisis? What is the history (and what are the politics) of the conviction that the primary power of musicians, musical cultures, and musical forms is to raise awareness and redistribute sensibilities with regard to climate? What is the role that the term *crisis* plays in all this? This brings us to the heart of the argument I'm making in *Recomposed*: Severe as our climatic situation is, crisis designations (Roitman 2014) also function as labels that construct the realities they purport to describe and conceal the problems they purport to disclose. As such, it is advisable to direct some reactive effort away from the content of this crisis, toward the more basic forms of its existence—which are the economic arrangement (capitalism) and corresponding social architecture (class) that define the world today. Because if the climate crisis is treated only as a climate crisis, then the crisis of our planet cannot actually be addressed.

But I will focus here on sustainability because this is one of the most consistently and explicitly mentioned principles in the musical world's current response to climate crisis. The underlying assumption here is that solving music's environmental problems involves finding ways of making our current listening formation both more lasting and less resource intensive. The expectation is that musical production and consumption can go on in the ways we have become accustomed to—so long as we buy the right stuff, invent the right tech, impose the right regs, tap the right energy. In other words: How do we keep going along this path but in a less damaging way? Yet there is a more fundamental question that goes unasked: What iss wrong with musical culture such that it takes a heavy toll on the planet and its people?

In the case of recording, a different approach can begin from a different question. Not *how do we make what we have got sustainable?* but *what exactly are we trying to sustain?* A little reflection suggests that what we want to preserve is a listening formation that has taken shape over the past 150 years in relation to the industrialization of recording and the individualization of listening, which have only intensified in the past twenty years with downloading and then streaming. This musical culture expects a kind of twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, all-you-can-eat buffet model of listening—at bargain basement prices. In other words, what we want, and what we expect to sustain, are the excesses and expansions of an economic system that is defined by particular forms of accumulation and growth as well as exploitation and inequality.[2] What we are trying to sustain, in other words, is capitalism.

This returns us to the issue of problems and solutions. As many people work to address music's environmental costs, I have come to see the fixit instinct at the core of this work—the impulse to immediately request and offer practical responses—as a type of solutionism that is part of the problem. If it is in the nature of solutions to accept terms that have been formed for them by the way a problem has been imagined, then the problem of music's sustainability not only accepts but doubles-down on our contemporary economic formation: Capitalism got us into this mess; capitalism will get us out of it. The difficulty here is that everything I read about climate crisis, from workaday public journalism to hardcore ecological socialism, says there are no ways out of the mess we are in that are compatible with capitalism.

Again, none of this is to say that the people and organizations driving music's current response to climate crisis aren't doing important work. They are. But it is to suggest that the transformation underway is not radical enough.

Radical, in the historical sense of the word, relates to the notion of roots. To suggest that the musical world's climate transformation needs to be more radical is simply to say that there are root issues that should be examined. I have mentioned sustainability as a form of solutionism that does not really get down to certain core issues. For example, running a streaming service on sunshine is a good idea. But this alone misses a bigger picture. The almost miraculous efficiency and abundance of streaming, along with the legitimate benefits of solar energy, are no match for the socioeconomic system that puts them to work.[3]

2   I use the phrase *particular forms of growth* deliberately. Although it has become common to hear about "degrowth" in mainstream liberal leftist climate discourse, there are strong arguments for the necessity of certain kinds of continued non-capitalist growth as well as against the politics of less that defines a lot of climate thinking (Phillips 2015, Huber 2022).

3   For a critique of the "bright green lies" surrounding issues such as renewable energy, albeit in a book that is dangerously misanthropic, see Jensen, Keith, and Wilbert (2021).

Maybe I can explain what I mean in another way, by taking an example from a different part of life. Consider dentistry. There are real social and health reasons to whiten teeth and fill cavities. Sometimes, though, people require root canals and tooth extractions. As much as polish and fillings serve their purposes, they are not adequate to situations that require removing nerves or pulling teeth. Similarly, the most prevalent ways of talking about climate solutions—and here music is only a microcosm of much wider difficulties—confuse cosmetic and maintenance procedures for radical and structural changes. Developments in the musical world that take capitalism and its class structure for granted may lead to real improvements in terms of carbon emissions and labor arrangements. Such work is currently widespread, exciting, and needed. But the people transforming our musical world in response to climate crisis may also problematize their cultural formation in ways that consider the need to uproot capitalism and class—and to build something better.

I have taken the long way around to answering your question. That is because addressing climate issues requires unlearning a lot of common sense—a job made doubly difficult by the ways that "music" as a label hides the far-flung material conditions through which this cultural field constitutes itself as a fact of life. Having done some of that work, I will try to answer a bit more directly. Knowing what we know about music's exploitation of human and environmental resources, and knowing something about that world's current efforts to address such issues, what do I see as the crucial transformation? Simple: the transformation of the transformation.

Christoph Jacke: "Solutionism", to me, seems a big part of the problem, because economic solutions very often do not serve to make popular music or media cultures more sustainable in the first line, but effective, usable, and sellable. Coming back to *Recomposed*: Could you please give us some more details about the transformation of the transformation you are mentioning? Do you mean that the crucial transformations you are writing and talking about are transforming themselves? Could you describe this structure and process a bit closer?

Kyle Devine: It is an observable phenomenon that, in the past few years especially, the musical world has initiated a transformation of itself in response to climate crisis. The Great Recomposition is underway. I am not talking about musicians writing songs about climate change. Nor am I talking about artists using their voices, or celebrities using their platforms, to raise awareness. Those things are definitely happening. But something else is going on, too. At infrastructural levels, from recording formats and instruments to touring formations and funding bodies, the climate crisis has become a fundamental part of how the musical world is imagining, materializing, and arranging itself. Formats and tours market themselves as green or sustainable, while nonprofits and arts organizations offer themselves not just as arbiters and champions of cultural expression but as auditors and consultants of carbon emissions.

So goes the transformation I am observing. It seems not only sensible but laudable. What could be more uniformly positive than initiating sustainability campaigns and imposing carbon calculations on the musical world? After all, these are the best conceivable responses in many political circles and business sectors. What else could there be?

Real advances will emerge from this formation of imagination and action. But so long as "solutions" such as sustainability are saturated with a particular idea of economic growth—which is an unexamined truism that defines the common sense of our moment—then they ultimately will only ever be marketing tools that try to fight fire with fire. In other words, if the musical

world seeks to transform itself only along the lines of sustainability, then the sustainability of this world cannot really be addressed. Sustainability is, on some level, precisely that which is not sustainable.

This is part of what I mean when I say that the transformation itself requires transformation.

Christoph Jacke: How did it come that even Cultural, Media, or Popular Music Studies have not paid more attention on researching those negative aspects and effects of especially popular music industries and businesses like pollution, waste, labor in combination with different kinds of exclusions and inclusions? Maybe because it is a kind of a "dirty business" per se? (Do not get me wrong as I am a scholar and journalist of popular music and media.)

Kyle Devine: I will begin with your last two statements, which suggest that popular music might be an unavoidably dirty business but also that you do not want to be too negative, because you are professionally (and presumably personally) devoted to such music.

I actually do not think there is any contradiction between being drawn to popular music, on the one hand, and being repelled by its conditions of existence, on the other. In fact, I am convinced that the people who are most drawn to popular music as an object of affection should be the first to understand and improve the realities of resources and labor that energize this culture and provide its material form. Such realities are not simply "related" to popular music. Neither are they mere supports that are attached to a preexisting domain called popular music. Rather, they *are* popular music.

In terms of why some scholarly constellations have not focused on particular "negative aspects" of culture, media, and music, I still hesitate to think in terms of fields or research areas. In this case, I am reluctant because the kind of intellectual history that would be required to say something meaningful about these fields and their priorities is beyond our scope. (Such work, it seems to me, would have to reevaluate the affinity of the "cultural turn" to neoliberalism as well as what those formations have meant, not just for music and musicians, but for music research and music education writ large, since the 1970s; see Ritchey 2019, Valiquet 2020; see also Chibber 2022). Nevertheless, I have mentioned how the category of "music" presents itself to us in preconstructed ways—ways that have defined not only the borders of what we consider to be musical, but also where the boundaries of musical thought and scholarship have typically been drawn. Although certain kinds of work and certain kinds of stuff have fallen outside those confines of understanding, this does not make them any less constitutive of the realities of what it takes to produce and consume music in a field of attraction.

Since it can be counterintuitive to think of music in these terms, an example from another sphere may be helpful. Michael Stamm has written an outstanding history of the supply chains that underpinned the twentieth-century US newspaper industry. He encountered obstacles to understanding and unlit corners of discourse that parallel the ones I'm describing:

> In many cases, historians of American journalism have written a history of the newspapers that they admire … In doing so, they have forgotten that success in the business of selling printed newspapers was not just the result of publishing good journalism but also, and perhaps more importantly, the result of developing an industrial and organizational apparatus to manufacture and distribute journalism and advertising printing on sheets of paper made from trees. (Stamm 2018, 26–27)

Something similar applies to popular music.

Christoph Jacke: Thinking about Recomposed, could you give us some short examples of a more sustainable and "fair" way of producing, distributing, receiving, using and post-processing popular music as a whole way of life (see Jacke 2018)?

Kyle Devine: This is a good way to start wrapping up, because it exemplifies one of the thought-patterns I encounter in studying the musical world's transformation in response to climate crisis. It goes like this:

> Q: So, the musical world exploits resources and labor. What can we do about it? Can you provide an ecological to-do list or some quick examples of best practice?

> A: I think the first step here should not be to answer those questions directly, but to ask some questions of the questions. When we pause in this way, it is possible to see that the *what do we do?* reflex is a well-meaning instinct that nevertheless contains some unhelpful assumptions about the problem we face. I think we need to redefine that problem, rather than providing solutions to a problem that has been badly defined for us. This is why, for example, I would rather talk about what sustainability takes for granted than to provide a list of "sustainable" solutions to music that take capitalism and class structure for granted.

> Q: Right, gotcha. That's very interesting… So, how about that list of things we can do to make music more sustainable?

That I encounter this pattern so frequently says something about my inability to communicate on these issues with clarity and concision. I am learning. But it also says something about how difficult it is to dislodge our default settings regarding climate change and solutionism.

Of course, as I have emphasized, the many people working toward green, sustainable, fair, and responsible popular music cultures are making real advances with records made from less toxic materials, with servers and stereos powered by the sun, with festivals with good public transportation, no single-use plastic, and edible plates, as well as with frank assessments and advice about greenhouse gas emissions—not to mention many other initiatives.

All of this will make a difference. But, on another level, much of our common sense and many of these initiatives are addressing the wrong problem, attempting to solve for the wrong variable. The goal in such activity is (explicitly and implicitly) to make our current capitalist arrangement a bit more "sustainable," whereas I am suggesting that we need longer discussions and deeper reflections on which aspects of this arrangement are worth fixing in the first place.

How then do we make music more sustainable? How do we address music's human and environmental costs? Answering those questions, for me, requires relearning how to pose them.

Sometimes people get frustrated with this focus on problems rather than solutions, with this emphasis on scientific reflexivity over the fixit reflex. They roll their eyes. They say I am being overly scholastic, not concrete enough. But what could be more concrete than learning?

Christoph Jacke: To be honest, I think you are realistic and not at all overly scholastic: I think, especially in Cultural Studies we should improve analyzing the culture of culture, so to say, which are the roots and crucial mechanisms of the collective interpretation slide(s) which we

call culture. And is it universal, or is it different models of reality and/or different slides of interpreting this? Anyway, coming back to your statement about (necessary, I would emphasize) reflexivity and sustainability: What exactly does sustainability mean (to you)? Where does it come from in popular music (industries)? I think, by the way, that people themselves, be it musicians, producers, promoters, journalists, or fans, have to kind of culturally transform…

Kyle Devine: It does not really matter what I think sustainability could or should mean. What matters is the work sustainability does—which is to operate as a euphemism that conceals contradictions and consecrates illusions. Sustainability masks the contradiction that inheres in the joint pursuit of ecological friendliness and certain types of economic growth. And it shelters the illusion that our warming world is primarily an engineering challenge, a market failure, or a knowledge gap with correspondingly benign technical, administrative, and cultural remedies. It hides the planetary factory (Dyer-Witheford 2018) that will be required do the heavy lifting in any green transition—which is to say that, while decarbonization is undoubtedly a pressing matter, there is also a centrifugal force whereby rich countries disburden themselves of the full costs of low-carbon energy, imposing those messy externalities of extraction and emission onto ever poorer people in evermore oppressed places. (That these sentences paraphrase, adapt, and expand Ivan Illich's *Energy and Equity*, from 1974, shows that we have been operating under similar contradictions and illusions for half a century.)

In terms of the idea that individuals need to transform if we are to effectively address climate crisis, there is truth to this. But we should be careful not to overestimate the differences that will come from lifestyle choices, personal development, and self-improvement regiments. This is easier said than done.

Every day, from all angles, we are exposed to ways of thinking that convert what were once considered political issues into personal ones, and which convert what were once considered social responsibilities into forms of self-reliance. This is part of a bigger picture that scholars talk about in terms of responsibilization. As a phenomenon, this solicitation of "the individual as the only relevant and wholly accountable actor" (Brown 2015, 133) is evident and troubling in relation to climate crisis. For example, there are longstanding, widespread, and duplicitous initiatives that figure everything from littering and recycling to carbon footprints as personal responsibilities.[4] Such initiatives would have us swap structural changes for shopping carts.

The way people are encouraged to think about music in relation to environmental issues also follows this pattern of responsibilization. Listeners want to know which format is most ecologically sound for them to use. Musicians want to reduce their own carbon footprints. Those are understandable wishes. My hope is that the infrastructural transformation currently underway in the world of music represents a more collective, organized, and structural recomposition.

Christoph Jacke: From your point of view what is the most unsustainable and the most sustainable aspect of recent popular music?

Kyle Devine: The unsustainable aspect of everything, not just popular music, is capitalism.

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4   In the 1970s, anti-littering campaigns were funded by major bottling and packaging interests. In 2005, the oil industry (BP in particular) worked to popularize the notion of a personal carbon footprint. In these cases, and many more, such public-relations and advertising campaigns work to shift a sense of duty onto individuals while the larger companies and political formations do little or nothing to change their own practices.

Christoph Jacke: Final and expectable question and talking about reflexivity (of pop): Do you know a pop song/track that specifically deals with green/fair pop music? And if so, could you please explain for readers who maybe do not know the song/track?

Kyle Devine: There are countless examples of environmental protest music, from classic songs about paving paradise to contemporary dances of "discobedience." People are noticing these things and writing insightfully about them (e.g. Strong 2020).

My professional focus lies elsewhere, for several reasons. One of the unfortunate realities we face today is that forms of artistic critique, including ecological commentary through music, seem not to pose real challenges to the cultural logic (the new spirit) of capitalism that defines our conjuncture. And one of the disturbing realities of the climate crisis is that, while the kinds of critical awareness and affective investment that are fostered through artistic critique have never been higher, these forms of awareness and investment are not leading to collective action or change on the scales of strength or speed that are needed. This could be critiqued along the lines of philosophical idealism. It probably also has something to do with the issue that critical aesthetics and affective awareness can embody those values of individualism and self-expression that, although they may feel oppositional or transformative, are actually produced and accommodated by neoliberal capitalism. Put another way, it is possible to understand ecological artworks (and perhaps the wider environmental humanities) not as political critiques of climate crisis but, rather, as the situation of politics that the capitalist climate crisis itself is rendering aesthetic.

This is one reason why I treat the human and environmental politics of music in terms of what it is, rather than what it is about or how it sounds. I see a possible hope for the future in how the musical world is reorganizing itself at levels that are independent of particular artists, songs, genres, and their listeners. It is such activity, and potential hope, that I am writing about in *Recomposed*.

Christoph Jacke: Thank you so much for this inspiring interview, Kyle.

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Abstract (English)

In this interview, Kyle Devine and Christoph Jacke discuss how the worlds of popular music, and popular music research, are responding to climate issues. They touch on Devine's recent books, *Decomposed* (2019) and *Audible Infrastructures* (2021), as well as the book he is currently finishing: *Recomposed: Music Climate Crisis Change*. The discussion takes a critical, reflexive perspective in relation to several key issues in popular music's (and wider culture's) mainstream climate discourse: sustainability, solutions, crisis, capital, class structure, responsibilization, environmental humanities—even music as such. One of Devine's central points is that much climate thinking, and many responses to climate issues, actually keep the secrets they pretend to tell.

Abstract (German)

Im vorliegenden Interview diskutieren Kyle Devine und Christoph Jacke, wie sich die Welten von Popmusik und ihren wissenschaftlichen Erforschungen mit im weiten Sinne Klimafragen auseinandersetzen. Dabei werden Devines aktuelle Buchpublikationen *Decomposed* (2019) and *Audible Infrastructures* (2021) wie auch das demnächst zu publizierende Buch *Recomposed: Music Climate Crisis Change* zum Thema gemacht. Die Diskussion wird geprägt von einer kritischen, (selbst-)reflexiven Perspektive in Bezug auf einige Schlüsselthemen im Umfeld bekannter und etablierter Klima-Diskurse zu Popmusik und Kulturen: Nachhaltigkeit, Lösungen, Krisen, Ka-

pital, Klassen-Strukturen, Verantwortlichkeiten, Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften und Umweltfragen sowie Musik selbst. Einer der zentralen Punkte in Devines Argumentationen ist die Beobachtung, dass viele Thematisierungen von Klimafragen oftmals die Geheimnisse, über die sie aufklären, eher noch verfestigen.

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