[*JWPM* 11.1 (2024) 97–100]
https://doi.org/10.1558/jwpm.27331
JWPM (print) ISSN 2052-4900
JWPM (online) ISSN 2052-4919

Book Review

Tore Størvold. 2023. *Dissonant Landscapes: Music, Nature, and the Performance of Iceland.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. 216 pp. ISBN 9780819500496 (pbk).

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Keywords: popular music; ecomusicology; Iceland; borealism

Dissonant Landscapes is Tore Størvold's first monograph. It is strikingly accessible immediately from the first few pages of the introduction, and simultaneously a work of insightful academic scholarship, in which readers will find themselves immersed in a tale of popular music artists, composers and nature set in the global north. The author's intention is to build on the usual associations of Iceland with: "either music, nature, or both" (3), which he does by exploring the geographical, political, historical, and social connotations of Iceland's environment and landscape, whether factual or as portrayed representations of the country, in relation to its contemporary musical expressions.

The metaphor of the landscape in music and how it relates to constructions of nationhood is thus the common thread throughout this book. The author positions the volume within the interdisciplinary field of ecomusicology but seems to be conflicted about this choice. In the Introduction, Størvold expresses a "hope" to be included in the ongoing conversation about this field (17), but in the notes to the Introduction, he confesses to feeling uncomfortable with the openness of the field itself, a field that seems to "appropriate and label" all scholarship on music that somehow engages with the environment (148), thus building upon concerns raised by Kyle Devine that ecomusicology might be just another trendy—albeit useful—turn in music studies (Devine 2019: 128).

Despite these concerns, this volume seems to fit well the inclusive parameters of ecomusicology as mapped out by Aaron Allen and Kevin Dawe in their foundational volume on the topic, where they outline four directions for ecomusicological enquiry: the ecological, the fieldwork, the critical, and the textual (Allen and Dawe 2016). In my opinion, *Dissonant Landscapes* is situated somewhere between the latter two directions as it considers and critiques

issues of exoticism and nationhood concerning this Nordic nation, while deeply engaging with the textual component of the musical works examined. Excepting one particular chapter, the book doesn't address specific ecological concerns, but rather it explores, dialogically and critically, the musical representation of the rapport between humans and nature within the Icelandic context, thus contributing to ecomusicological literature by presenting a series of case studies all perfectly situated somewhere along the continuum of approaches, "from poetical to practical" (Allen 2021: 104).

Dissonant Landscape is constituted of three parts comprising two chapters each, plus an introduction and a conclusion, and each of the six chapters is dedicated to a single highly contextualized case study. While there are no introductory sections for the three parts, the dialogical connections between the chapters are easy to deduce. The first part, "Nationalising Nature", enquires on how a sense of nation is constructed in music in relation to the Icelandic landscape. In the first chapter, the author makes the case for an Icelandic pastoral genre, using as an example the song 'Stingum Af' by the singer-songwriter Mugison, in comparison to an early twentieth-century poem set to music in *Lied* style that celebrates the landscape. This case study is introduced by a quick but appreciated excursus on Icelandic history in relation to the landscape, and the author argues that the examined song presents utopic human–nature relationships as a hypothetical alternative to the fast-paced capitalism that allegedly brought the country to bankruptcy in 2008. Conversely, chapter 2 includes a not-so-harmonious relationship with the environment. This is the most ecocritical—in the most activist meaning of the word—chapter in this volume. It explores three musical responses to the now-completed construction of the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Plant in the eastern highlands. The case studies presented (the composer Valgeir Sigurðsson, the band Sigur Rós, and Björk) approach the issue from different angles, from the poetic to the practical. The chapter concludes with a brief description of the issue of the romanticization of the conservation discourse in the country.

Part two, "Journeys North", deals with one of the fundamental themes of this volume: the exoticised image of the North in the popular imagination. Following Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Størvold in chapter 3 briefly introduces the idea of *borealism*—an imaginary view of Nordic countries influenced by myths, legends and ideas about the landscape and the weather of (in this case) Iceland (65–67). Elsewhere, Størvold (2018) expands on the subject of the band Sigur Rós's representation in the English language music press. The theme of a romanticized view of the nation is not limited to this section of the book. It permeates the other chapters too and is reflected in the author's considerations about previous literature in the English language concerning

Iceland and its music, and his own outsidership and acknowledgement of the "perils of exoticizing another country" (13). Perhaps, considering the importance of the topic, and the limited existing scholarship concerning music and borealism, a longer paragraph included within the Introduction would have helped to deliver a better understanding of the issue. With that said, the two case studies and corresponding chapters included in this section explore this topic well, introducing the idea of an "Icelandic sound" (67) with a rich exploration of a case of online fieldwork—Ólafur Arnalds's *Island Songs*—and the analysis of Jóhann Jóhannsson's soundtrack for the crime drama *Trapped.* These add diversity to the complexity of musics and fields of enquiry explored in the volume, presenting how borealistic imagery is constructed and turned into a marketable brand that stimulates tourism, both physical and virtual.

The third part of the volume is evocatively named "Tectonic", referring to and comparing the important geological features of this arctic island and the groundbreaking reconfigurations of nature presented by the artists featured in the two case studies included here. The fifth chapter revolves around the composer Anna Þorvaldsdóttir. The ecofeminist analysis of her musical expressions of "cosmopolitan and ecological ideas" (103), highlights the attempts of the composer to establish a different sonic relationship with nature, to overcome any dualistic separation between humans and nature, and urges the listeners to conceive this relation ecologically (113). The sixth and final chapter features again the band Sigur Rós—surely one of the author's favourites. Building on geosocial theory, the author analyses the relationship between the band's single and music video 'Brennisteinn' and the cultural impact of the volcanic activity on the island. Størvold interprets the seismic instability—both real and the one represented in the music video—as a metaphor for human–environment relationships that are often unrepresented within academic scholarship. The chapter ends with a Latourian message to re-interpret those relationships, albeit with a general sense of doomed future, perhaps generated by the sulphuric and volcanic environment subject of the video.

In conclusion, *Dissonant Landscapes* displays a series of case studies that give an epistemological representation of the ways in which musical means are drawn upon to project ideas about this nation's natural landscape. Experiencing Iceland through the music of the various artists featured in this volume, the reader gets the impression that the Icelandic landscape is at the same time a symbol of nationhood and belonging, an exoticized and mythical land up North, and a system of ecological relations, thus enabling different possibilities of nature's meaning and representation. The music of the composers and artists analysed here seems to give life to the land and to meanings that go way beyond any extractivist worldview. *Dissonant Landscapes* is a

well-conceived depiction of how music mediates between humans and the Icelandic landscape. It will hopefully stimulate further enquiries and discussions in the realm of sonic ecological relationships that situate human populations within their environment, not only in the Global North but hopefully also everywhere else.

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