# Sustainability as a Metaphor: Musical Ecosystems

**I. Introduction**

MUSC1010: Introduction to Music explores a variety of music as well as ways of hearing music that will help students develop their experience of music and develop a lifelong ability to analyze and think critically about the act of listening to music.

**Destinations: Planetary Thinking in the Curriculum** provided me with the opportunity to create a new module for MUSC1010—“Sustainability as a Metaphor: Musical Ecosystems.”

Broadly, the module asks students to consider “musical ecosystems” and draws their attention to what must be present in order to support a vibrant cultural life.

While this module can be modified to include many genres and styles of music as well as the arts as a whole, the Fall 2016 module focuses on the musical ecosystem of Western classical music.

**II. Background Course Activities**

**Discussion:**
One of the first “Think, Pair, Share” activities in MUSC1010 is on the question, “Is music an ‘activity’ or a ‘thing’?” This question relates to issues raised in writings such as “To Do or to Have” (Van Boven, Gilovich) and asks students to consider how music consumption relates to their experience of music. The discussion also challenges us to think about the easy availability of music, its place in society, and factors such as the commodification of culture.

**Metaphors for Music Analysis:**
In the first weeks of the course, the class completes an analytical assignment and votes on a metaphor to best explain what “it is like” to analyze music. Creating analogies normalizes vocabulary and analytical approaches in a general education course that includes students with a wide range of musical competencies. Non-music majors are able to perceive and describe musical phenomena with a high degree of accuracy.

Analyzing music is like...

**III. A Sustainable Musical Ecosystem**

**MODULE ACTIVITIES**

**Listen:**
Students listen to four pieces representing the stylistic plurality of art music composed in the twentieth century.

**View:**
Students view a short video by Alexandre Magnin that explains what is meant by “sustainable development.”

**Read:**
Students read a blog post on Western classical music as an “endangered ecosystem” by Jeff Todd Titon, a professor emeritus of ethnomusicology at Brown University.

**Write:**
Students prepare a written assignment in which they explore the aptness of the metaphor of environmental sustainability for the sustainability of classical music.

**Discuss:**
Students hold a Canvas discussion in which they post a response to this “crisis” with at least one possible actionable solution—they are asked to be sure to explain what aspect of the issue their solution solves and how it will do that. The students also respond thoughtfully to at least two of their peers’ posts.

In likening musical culture to “ecosystems,” this module increases the awareness that not all musics thrive in the same environments. And, for example, that holding Western classical music to popular music standards—e.g., relying on models from popular culture such judging “success” as commercial success and idolizing “stars” may not be the best strategy for building audiences. On a broader level, students are exposed to the concept of sustainability. In particular, this module aligns with other attempts to have students consider how “happiness” and “quality of life” correlate to consumption.

**IV. Anticipated Outcomes**

- Students are introduced to the concept of sustainability and its application to musical culture.
- Students are encouraged to think critically about the commodification of culture and the role of music in society.
- Students develop an understanding of the metaphor of environmental sustainability as it applies to classical music.
- Students are challenged to think about actionable solutions to the “crisis” of classical music sustainability.