

# Lament, Poetic Prayer, Petition, and Protest: Community Choirs and Environmental Activism in Australia

JULIE RICKWOOD

---

*Abstract: Many community choirs sing simply for the love of music or for fun. Others sing as an expression of identity or are driven by philosophical and political constructs. Some choirs follow the tradition of utilizing singing and song as protest. Within this latter cohort, choirs have emerged that are committed to sustaining environmental activism. This article will broadly consider the context for the alliance of community music and political activism and its expression in Australia. A comparative analysis of two community choirs that engage in environmental activism will then be provided, followed by some concluding remarks on that confluence.*

*Résumé : De nombreux chœurs communautaires chantent simplement pour l'amour de la musique ou pour le plaisir. D'autres chantent pour exprimer leur identité ou sont mus par des motifs philosophiques ou politiques. Certains chœurs suivent la tradition qui consiste à utiliser la chanson et le chant comme moyen de protester. Parmi ces derniers sont apparus certains chœurs qui se vouent à soutenir l'activisme environnemental. Cet article examine sous un angle large le contexte de l'alliance de la musique communautaire et de l'activisme politique, ainsi que son expression en Australie. Nous présentons une analyse comparée de deux chœurs communautaires qui se sont engagés dans l'activisme environnemental, analyse suivie en conclusion de quelques remarques au sujet de cette convergence.*

---

Over 15 Ecopella singers gathered with Koori<sup>1</sup> Radio's announcer, George Kookaburra, on the rooftop of the *Gadigal* Information Service building in Redfern, Sydney, on 1 April 2017. Wearing their various shades of green, it was a photo opportunity after the choir had sang a few "cheeky and defiant songs for justice and the planet" live in the studio.

Dressed in their signature shades of purple, the members of a Chorus of Women were distinctive in the March for Science protest on the lawns outside Parliament House in Canberra,

Australia's National Capital, on 22 April 2017. The national news broadcaster, ABC, screened their passionate singing in leading "All we are saying is give science a voice" to the familiar musical line of "All we are saying is give peace a chance."

Since the mid-1980s, when a contemporary a cappella scene emerged in Australia, community choirs have grown enormously in number and presence throughout cities, towns, and regional communities. Many community choirs sing simply for the love of music or for the fun of gathering together. Others are motivated by the desire to gain from the often heralded social, physical, and mental benefits that have become part of the mainstream dialogue about and within community choirs. Still others have been established as an expression of identity and/or driven by philosophical and political contexts. Ecopella and a Chorus of Women are two examples of this last category, committed to engaging in and sustaining environmental activism.

My previous postgraduate and postdoctoral research projects investigated community choirs in Australia, initially as a feature of the a cappella scene (Rickwood 1997), and later at their convergence with reconciliation (Rickwood 2013a). More recently, I have examined community choirs that make musical protest, employing their musical performances in environmental activism (Rickwood 2014a). This article draws on that recent publication, a conference paper given later the same year (Rickwood 2014b), and two other previously delivered conference papers (Rickwood 2013b, 2013c). This article, however, moves beyond earlier thinking, integrating more recent conversations within the field of ecomusicology and the ongoing activism of Ecopella and a Chorus of Women.

Ecomusicology is an interdisciplinary and dynamic landscape that is vibrant with research and dialogue. The study of the intersections of music/sound, culture/society, and nature/environment has gained wider academic interest as environmental issues and, particularly, climate change stimulated by global warming, have become mainstream. Recent publications by Aaron S Allen and Kevin Dawe (2016) and Mark Pedelty (2016); earlier contributions by Pedelty (2012), Marc Perlman (2012), Allen (2011a, 2011b, 2013), and Nathan Currier (2013, 2014); various conferences, including the Ecomusicologies series; journals such as the *Ecomusicology Newsletter*; and the Ecomusicology website have all ensured that intellectual engagement in the field maintains a rich vitality. My research can be included in ecomusicology, but is not reflective of much current ecomusicological literature. Rather, it builds on a particular aspect of activism that is inherent in environmentalism.

It engages most significantly with issues and ideas raised in Pedelty's recent exploration of musical performance as environmental activism. It is, ultimately, a contribution to that conversation from an antipodean perspective (2016).

My interest in *Ecopella* and a Chorus of Women was prompted by the emergence of ecomusicology within the academy and the opportunity to reinvestigate a long-term investment in the environmental movement since studying in the Human Sciences Program at the Australian National University (ANU) during my undergraduate degree in the 1980s. The program included courses in human ecology, sustainable agriculture, and human adaptability. A singer in community choirs for almost three decades, I was familiar with both *Ecopella* and a Chorus of Women, having seen them perform in concert, at rallies, and at festivals over the last decade or so. I draw on that long-term engagement with both choirs, and more recent performances and discussions with members for this article.

With a focus on Australia, a brief review of the history of the alliance of music and political activism will be followed by an exploration of the way community choirs and environmental activism are brought together. I will then provide an analytical description of *Ecopella* and a Chorus of Women. These treatments do not overly engage with the music as such, but, in taking Mark Pedelty's lead, I invite readers to listen to the choirs on their website (listed in the references), where the songs and combined voices of two open choirs are available. The songs' perspectives on environmental issues are best demonstrated aesthetically. A comparative analysis of the choirs will then follow. I conclude with some reflective thoughts on the confluence of community choirs and environmental activism in Australia, as represented by *Ecopella* and a Chorus of Women.

## Music and Political Activism

The pleasures of music are part of its politics, not an incidental feature of them. (Street 2003: 130)

As John Street has argued, music has long been a site of resistance and opposition (2003: 120). Protest music has a significant history, with a glorious heyday in the 1960s when folk and popular musicians involved themselves in the major social movements of the time, and later, during the punk/New Wave era. These political and musical movements were intimately linked. I do not intend to spend time reiterating that history as it has been well articulated by Street (2003), Rosenthal and Flacks (2011), and more recently, outlined by

Pedelty (2016). Instead, I want to focus on contemporary issues in Australia where music and musicians have been “playing for change” (Rosenthal and Flacks 2011) in the service of social movements.

Music was implicated in the Australian Federal Government’s 2015 schools-based education initiative, the Radicalisation Awareness Kit. Rewriting the repetitive call of conservative thinking in the past, the government was warning young people about the danger of music. The example of “Karen” listening to John Butler and attending a sit-in suggested that involvement in the alternative music scene could lead to a life of radical eco-activism. It received appropriate ridicule and critique from popular music scholars, including a response from the International Association for the Study of Popular Music Australian New Zealand Branch (2015) and Green Music Australia’s Tim Hollo (2015). As has been referred to above, music has played a significant role in the service of social movements and has contributed to, or provoked, sometimes radical changes in society. However, the Australian Government’s use of this example simply exposed a naïve understanding of the complexity involved in the process of radicalization of young people.

Like many other countries, Australia has a record of protest music, including some of the broad social movements of the 60s and 70s, particularly opposition to our involvement in the Vietnam War. Importantly have been concerns specific to place and history, significantly the treatment of Australia’s First Nations people by government and society; racist policies and practices including, but not limited to, the issues of land rights, the stolen generations, and deaths in custody. The environment has also captured the imagination of singer-songwriters, writing in response to the destruction wrought by industry and disaster and/or to support the protection of precious natural features like rivers and reefs.

Artists playing music within the scope of First Nations interests include Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Kev Carmody, Paul Kelly, Warumpi Band, Yothu Yindi, Christine Anu, Midnight Oil, Goanna, Powderfinger, Xavier Rudd, Blue King Brown, the John Butler Trio, Briggs, and others. As suggested above, John Butler has also engaged in music aligned with environmental matters. Other musicians in this environmental space were captured in Sara Phillips’ attempt to find “The Hottest 100, environmentally speaking” (2011).

In response to national broadcaster Triple J’s Hottest 100 list of the most popular songs in any one year, Phillips suggested that the “Coolest 100” could acknowledge musical efforts to prevent global warming from occurring. She listed songs performed by Midnight Oil, John Williamson, Xavier Rudd, The Herd, Cat Empire, Blue King Brown, Hunters and Collectors, Icehouse, Christine Anu, and Paul Kelly. Ash Grunwald and Goanna could also be added

to the list. Goanna band member Shane Howard wrote the well-known “Let the Franklin Flow” during the Franklin River protest in Tasmania that received global attention in the 1980s. Howard recently suggested the song carried its message powerfully because of music’s “capacity to open the soul, and in a way prepare us for a transformative message” (cited in Hollo 2015). The “untold” stories from the 1980s Franklin River environmental activists were recently published and included a CD that contained the campaign’s anthem “Save the Franklin” (Hungerford 2013). Environmental activism and music were deeply intertwined at that time.

The repetition of some names in both lists above is self-evident, and Phillips recognized this. Her exploration found, however, that the songs containing First Nations’ concerns seemed to overwhelm “songs about deforestation, salinity, climate change, droughts, floods, species loss, and pollution” (Phillips 2011). Phillips and others involved in Australian radio (see, for example, McMahon 2013) have queried the broad lack of environmental protest songs on contemporary popular media channels. Academic Mark Pedelty declared that the environmental movement has, so far, no musical equivalent to the songs that “worked their way . . . deeply into the activist practice or the popular imagination” of the peace, civil rights, and labour movements of previous generations (2016: 2). There may be good reasons why that is so, and Pedelty provides a thorough analysis of how environmentalist musicians could better capture audiences, ideas I will explore below. Alternatively, Hollo proposed that the growth in neoliberalism that paralleled environmental concerns and activism meant that corporate powers worked to silence the movement’s musical expression through radio airplay and other popular media, suggesting that social media is more recently enabling that to change (2015).

As founder of the non-government organization Green Music Australia (GMA), Hollo is deeply committed to environmental activism. GMA was established to enable musicians and festivals to harness “the cultural power of music and musicians to lead the way to a greener world.”<sup>2</sup> Its most recent campaign, “Musicians Stopping Adani,” is part of the broader #StopAdaniRoadshow. GMA is collaborating with 350 Australia, Midnight Oil band member Rob Hirst, and Ash Grunwald to brief other musicians interested “in supporting campaigns to prevent the biggest coal mine in Australia from being built.” The campaign’s text concludes with the statement

[t]his is the single most important fight in Australia – to protect our fragile climate, to defend rights of indigenous people, to save what we can of the Great Barrier Reef, and to prevent ever worsening fires, floods, droughts and heatwaves.

The crossover interests of the above musicians and GMA's agenda suggests some alignment between Australia's First Nations and the environment, a consideration I will investigate in the following section.

## Community Choirs and Environmental Activism

Music and politics can be closely intertwined within the context of community choirs throughout the world. Lotte Reimer and Kelvin Mason recently wrote about the "blossoming movement of radical street choirs" in the United Kingdom (UK) (2016). They cited a combined street choir that sang "about saving public services, union solidarity, scrapping Trident, and (hydraulic fracturing) fracking" (Reimer and Mason 2016). Caroline Bithell vigorously researched UK-based community choirs and their motivations, many of which would also be captured in this rise of "campaigning choirs" (2014). More recently, Bithell has extended her attention to the alliance of community music and socio-political causes. Exploring representations of local musicking for a global cause, she found that many choirs expressed concern with the increase in fracking as part of a subset of environmental concerns. Overall, many controversial issues have captured the musical imagination and action of community choirs (Bithell forthcoming). Bithell's research highlights how empowerment and transformation is made meaningful at the local level through the act of participation. Musical protest about global issues, such as climate change, reinforces a sense of translocal, transnational kinship for the community singing activists.

As has been outlined elsewhere (Rickwood 2013a), there are similarities between the UK and Australia in the development of community music and community choirs. In the late 1980s, a popular music scene (Straw 1991) emerged in Australia that adopted the term a cappella to describe its practice, in an attempt to highlight its difference from formal and entrenched choral structures and institutions. This "a cappella scene" created a vigorously organized amateur music network that drew on a global music<sup>3</sup> repertoire. The scene changed the landscape of community choral singing by creating a fresh, open approach that had broad secular appeal and operated outside established choral traditions (Rickwood 1997, 2013a).

The scene was regarded as alternative, driven by a desire to democratize singing and to create a contemporary, "hip" engagement with unaccompanied harmony singing. It aligned strongly with the multicultural movement of the 1980s-1990s, and embraced "world music" as a cosmopolitan representation of itself. Both the repertoire and practice of the a cappella scene mirrored the

Australian folk movement's sense of authenticity, and, as Smith recognized, shared the same left political leaning, participatory nature, and community spirit (2005). Not surprisingly then, many community choirs promoted their music-making within political frameworks. Some embraced the politics of ethnicity and cultural pluralism of the time; many of the women's community choirs and professional ensembles declared their feminist agenda; and other choirs formed that musically engaged with a range of issues such as labour rights, gay rights, and social justice. The repertoire performed was scored, or selected and arranged, to express these various political agendas. At the time, although some choirs offered environmental commentary, no community choir existed that specifically focused on environmental issues.

Over the last decade, the a cappella scene has been absorbed into the community music movement, which is now wider-reaching than the scene had been able to achieve. Nevertheless, the scene made open community choirs more possible and visible, and greatly contributed to the growth of community music in Australia. The scene's alternative and political edge has been somewhat muted in recent shifts that have responded to funding opportunities and engaged with other social and cultural interests. As the community music movement aligned with the health agenda dominating community arts over the last decade, community choirs have increased in number and, at the same time, become more normalized. Consequently, the music performed by many choirs is reduced in political intent and musical edge. Some choirs nevertheless continue, or have subsequently emerged, to be politically engaged. It is those choirs that provide identifiable connections to the a cappella scene.

Drawing on this legacy, the repertory adopted by environmentally active Australian community choirs explores a range of perspectives. Included are songs written by indigenous musicians about country,<sup>4</sup> activists remarking on environmental threats, or composers responding to nature's beauty. This vast potential is impossible to map definitively given the proliferation and nature of community choral music in Australia. I therefore concentrate on specific examples.

Community choral events such as Melbourne-based music organization The Boîte's 2009 Millennium Chorus Concert *Our Home Our Land* celebrated the declaration of a jointly managed national park in *Yorta Yorta* country, in South East Australia, and fostered awareness of indigenous knowledge of caring for country. The production offered a regional history of land, compensation, "right treatment," and constructions of Aboriginality. The concepts of "land," "country," and "environment" intersected within *Our Home Our Land*, foregrounding indigenous interests. As a result, the politics of "place" were

inevitably an undercurrent within the music (Rickwood 2013a).

The title drew on the song “Our Home Our Land”<sup>5</sup> written by the project’s Artistic Director, Lou Bennett. Bennett was central to the project, and not simply as the composer of “Our Home Our Land.” Bennett is a Yorta Yorta/Dja Dja Wurrung woman from Echuca, on the Murray River in Northern Victoria. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bennett was a member of the trio Tiddas, whose songs inspired many women’s community choirs during that time. She has since been involved in other musical projects, including with her band, The Sweet Cheeks, as a member of The Black Arm Band, and in various theatre productions, notably “*Yanagai! Yanagai!*”, a production that retold the story of the Yorta Yorta struggle to regain their land. Bennett has also been active in responding to and resisting Aboriginalist discourses that work to sustain non-indigenous audiences’ expectations of indigenous performers (Barney 2009). Her music is an important vehicle for her broad views: “Indigenous issues, lots of women’s issues, lesbian issues, it’s about respecting our earth, it’s humanitarian issues, yeah so there’s a bigger picture than just indigenous music” (qtd. in Barney 2009: 12). Bennett has also undertaken postgraduate research at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University that extends her personal experiences to academically explore the arts as a medium for the retrieval, reclamation, and revitalization of First Nation languages, with a particular focus on Yorta Yorta. As the Artistic Director, Bennett was able to orchestrate the representation of Aboriginality in this performance – the continuity between traditional and contemporary representations of Aboriginality in music, dance, and language; and direct the narrative, through song and text, of the connections between indigenous and environmental issues (Rickwood 2013a).

Songs were drawn from established material relevant to the occasion in order to present “inspiring messages of hope” (Wilson 2009: 2). They included not only “Our Home Our Land,” but also other songs composed by Bennett, such as those from the Tiddas repertoire, and songs written by other First Nations and non-indigenous songwriters. Songs were performed in English and/or Yorta Yorta.

As a limited project performed in a concert hall, *Our Home Our Land* did not sufficiently provide a body of work for an exploration of environmental protest music. At the same time, it is important to point out that the links between indigenous connection to country and environmental issues are not inherent, but are only made clear through the deliberate constructions of text and performance in *Our Home Our Land*. As Dunbar-Hall and Gibson argue, there is no simplistic reading of the music/place relationship (2004: 26-27). Relating music to First Nation beliefs about country presents difficulties in

terms of the politics of representation and the problematic ways that ownership might be explained.

A more significant body of work was located in two community choirs that predominantly or solely perform songs exclusively themed around environmental activism: A Chorus of Women, based in Canberra; and Ecopella, a network of choirs based in various locations in the state of New South Wales and in Canberra.

## A Chorus of Women

We stand in the ancient sacred lineage of the chorus.  
 As women citizens we sing out in the theatre of life  
 commenting and telling what must happen.  
 We affirm the citizens' place in the public life of our country.  
 We give voice to matters at the heart of our communities,  
 weaving integrity, compassion and respect for the Earth  
 into Australian democracy.  
 Honesty, clarity and wisdom are our aims,  
 artistic expression a means to these ends.

On 18 March 2003, some 150 women filled the Australian Parliament House foyer, the day Australia's intention to invade Iraq was announced. "Lament," written by Glenda Cloughley and Judith Clingan, was sung over and over by the women. When challenged by security, Cloughley responded by stating that their singing was "not a protest, this is a lament for people who will die" and they were allowed to continue (qtd. in Hassan 2017). It was in a radio interview following the event that Cloughley clarified the women were not a "choir" but simply a chorus of women. That statement gave the ongoing entity a name and A Chorus of Women has since continued to "sing into the politics of peace, social justice and climate change."<sup>6</sup>

A Chorus of Women is motivated by deep philosophical engagement. It is an open group that welcomes all singers who share their mission (quoted above). The Chorus has presented an expanding repertoire of original songs and spoken texts during well over 150 public presentations throughout Australia and Europe. Some 75 songs and the instrumental and vocal scores for three major productions have been produced. They have recorded three CDs and one DVD. Although Clingan, Cloughley, and musical director Johanna McBride have composed many of the songs, other members have also been motivated and encouraged to contribute. The music is inspired by a "response

to the world ... from an ethical and emotional core,” and often delivers earnest and powerful vocal harmonies, which are occasionally accompanied by various instruments. The classical music training of Clingan, Cloughley, and McBride is often evident in the melodies and rhythms, and the tonality of the women’s voices.

Australian social commentator Phillip Adams described A Chorus of Women as “the most controversial choir in Australian history,” a reference made to their singing in Parliament House in 2003 (A Chorus of Women 2017). The Chorus, however, emphasizes that its “voice is non-adversarial.” They regard their “art-making [as] a quest for symbolic ways to portray possibilities and meanings that are larger than those than can arise from the adversarial habits of public debate.”

A Chorus of Women’s *Songs for Care of The Earth*, their environmental repertoire, provides an ideal body of work in which to explore their environmental activism. Since 2006, many of these songs have become musical contributions to a regular event called Canberra Conversations, to Science Week programs, and to numerous community performances. The Chorus has collaborated with the ANU’s Climate Change Institute in order to bring “emotional and ethical drama to the issue of climate change in order to find wisdom, to translate the language of facts and theories into experiences that move people and get us all singing back the melodies, harmonies and rhythms of life.”

Lyrics from “Songs in the Science” demonstrate this: “There are songs in the science in search of singers. If we make that music now, we can change the climate.” These sentiments reflect lyrics previously written for the Chorus’s major production in 2008, *The Gifts of the Furies*. This production was created by Cloughley when she “began to feel that the human causes of the climate change crisis were more likely to be addressed if the power of poetics to reach people’s feeling could be activated than if it were all left to rational analysts and lecturers.”

*Songs for Care of The Earth*, which includes songs drawn from *The Gifts of the Furies*, expresses dark concerns in relation to climate change and the future: tragedy, violence, tyranny, hate, suffer, anguish, crisis, mourn, cry, anxiety, worry, helplessness, anger, distrust, grief, wailing, sorrowing, edge, fear, frustration, abyss, rage, dread, terror. For example, in “The Watchman,” the cry is repeated “hard times looming, black dread blooming.” There is an attempt to balance these emotions of loss with words such as love, hope, faith, waiting, understanding, stillness, silence, cherish, balance, fragile possibility. “The Songman,” for example, concludes with the lines:

Songman, sing up the harmony  
 Of Earth and her husband, the Sky  
 Feel the sorrow beneath Gaia's fury  
 For lament is the start of renewal.  
 Lament is the start of renewal.

Space does not allow me to share the wealth of material available, but it is evident that lament is the primary song structure for A Chorus of Women. In a recent interview, McBride stated that lament creates space for hope. She added, "Lament in song is an embodied and vital thing. It is part of the natural cycle of the human psyche. If you are allowed to lament, as needs to happen, then there's some kind of renewal" (qtd. in Hassan 2017). A few songs have been written in a more lighthearted spirit, other songs created to celebrate and inspire, and more simple rounds or chants to be performed at rallies.

As the introductory description of the Chorus indicated, they continue their activism, not only in rallies and marches but also in working collaboratively with the Climate Change Institute, supporting the Climate Council, and developing new projects. The Chorus is committed to creating opportunities to "continue to weave music, conversations and current affairs into the fabric of Australian life, connecting heart and head to re-sound the role of the Citizens' Chorus of the ancient Greek theatre when democracy was new and vibrantly participative" (A Chorus of Women 2017).

At the end of 2016, A Chorus of Women held an end-of-year concert that combined music and spoken reflections on the laws of regeneration, regenerating humanity, and regenerating the Earth. Recognizing that this theme had already been operating within their work, they sought to create a focused project with various possible activities and collaborations, including contributing to the inaugural Australian Religious Response to Climate Change national conference in 2017. They continue to seek various mechanisms for artistic work, musical events, and the transfer of ideas. As their logo in



Fig. 1. Logo for the Singing Regeneration Project (used with permission of A Chorus of Women).

Fig. 1 graphically indicates, the Chorus remains very much committed to its musical, philosophical, and political endeavours.

## Ecopella

We're not your everyday choir  
From our gear you can plainly see –  
We are in many shades of green –  
Diversity in harmony.  
And as you will soon be hearing  
Our repertoire's different too –  
In melody, rhythm and words,  
We're bringing a message to you.

“Save-The-World-Music” by Cathy Rytmeister, 2011 (Ecopella 2017)

Ecopella is a network of a cappella ensembles that sing “for our threatened environment and for the people whose energy and love are devoted to protecting it.” Adopting the motto “Save-The-World-Music” in 2008 made the choir’s musical project explicit. As with a Chorus of Women, philosophy and politics motivates the choir members and the music performed. The members of Ecopella are articulate about the choir’s endeavours:<sup>7</sup>

... raising environmental awareness and bringing harmony and voice to saving the planet;

... supporting communities to raise awareness of environmental concerns;

Ecopella ... is a choir with a purpose – to inform and entertain about the environment. We hope to give an environmental message through music and help rebuild the strength of those fighting for environmental issues, by singing to them;

To bring songs to people in the context of protests and activism fosters solidarity and celebration, two things that are vital in tough times, especially when conservative governments and climate change nay-sayers have centre stage.

Community music and activism have always blended for Ecopella's musical director, Miguel Heatwole. Heatwole is a well-known vocal performer, workshop presenter, and highly regarded community choral leader, as well as an arrested protestor,<sup>8</sup> evidence of his deep commitment to environmental activism. He was musical director of the Sydney Solidarity Choir from 1991 to 2012. As a political choir, the Solidarity Choir has performed at several hundred community events, public meetings, protests, conferences, concerts, and folk festivals and continues to do so, celebrating its 30th anniversary in early 2017.

Ecopella was formed after members of the Solidarity Choir requested to sing "green" songs. The existing material of Solidarity's repertoire, a locus of songs invoking social and political justice, was already extensive. Rehearsals and performances could not be further extended so Heatwole established a separate choir to focus specifically on environmental issues. Ecopella was thus formed as a single entity in Sydney in 1998. Six branches of the choir now exist in Sydney, the Blue Mountains, the Central Coast, Canberra, the Southern Highlands, and Illawarra. In order to maintain a performance choir, a combination of members from the different chapters are needed to attend gigs. Numbers might vary. Some performances may have only a handful of singers, others over fifty. From a modest four performances in 1998 they now have over six hundred performances to their credit. These have included environmental protests, campaign launches, community gatherings, benefit concerts, and folk festivals.

Like Heatwole, many members of Ecopella have been active in other politically inclined choirs or are environmental activists themselves. Paul Spencer, a prolific songwriter within the choir, is possibly its "most arrested" member. Cath Blakey has a similar record of police arrests. Others have been actively involved in protests, with one member commenting that the choir sustained their involvement in movements for social change. At the



Fig. 2. Ecopella's logo (used with permission of Ecopella).

same time, another member recognized that singing "in the group is a safe way to be an environmental activist, this gives a voice to the problems of the planet." Heatwole commented that the choir was singing about environmental issues well before Al Gore's (2006) *An Inconvenient Truth* lifted the profile of climate

change and prompted increasing popular concern. Similarly, another member declared that “when the choir started ‘environment’ was not such a sexy topic.”

The repertoire of Ecopella has somewhat reflected the evolution of environmental concerns over the last 15 years. It has recorded two CDs that captured this shift. *An Organism Called Earth*, the first album, clearly declared its environmental focus. Much of the repertoire implores a shift in attitude; whether through a greater regard for nature and its beauty or a deeper attention to individual responsibility. The songs are creative responses to human activity that destroy natural environments, and the lyrics swing between poetic prayers for nature to petitions against the Earth’s destruction. The second CD, *Songs in the Key of Green*, was released in 2008. *Songs in the Key of Green* celebrated Ecopella’s “decade of environmental harmony.” A number of songs recaptured and developed the previous album’s themes, but others more strongly championed and supported environmental activists and directly engaged with the issue of climate change.

Ecopella suspects that audiences might imagine the choir to be a gloomy ensemble. The choir is alert, however, to the challenge of bringing a balance and includes “quite a number of witty . . . and very funny pieces” (Heatwole 2011) in an attempt to lighten its confronting or solemn musical expressions. The choir’s promotional material insists that a sense of fun fills each performance with positive and satirical messages, and “even when the mood becomes serious the beauty and solemnity of the music uplifts the listener” (Ecopella 2017). But while the choir can defend itself against being a gloomy ensemble, it is nevertheless a message-laden one.

Its performances are predominantly within the world of folk, taking place at festivals and community events. Ecopella’s repertoire is eclectic, drawing on folk, classical, pop, and occasionally jazz, which provides some variation in musical and delivery styles. A significant proportion of songs contain a bleak communication of environmental destruction. Pedelty argues that serious messages are more common in a folk music setting, where grave and intense emotion is acceptable, and the choir’s performances are often before audiences who share their values and concerns (2012: 143).

Miguel Heatwole believes that the high standard of a cappella harmony singing to which Ecopella aspires and the songs themselves encourage “positive change in people’s thoughts and actions” (Ecopella 2017). It is not easy to achieve the balance of being both politically and musically interesting. As one member commented, “a good message doesn’t make a good song.” Not all songs lend themselves easily to choral arrangement either, and Heatwole’s arrangements in particular can be very sophisticated four-part harmonies, or three-voice/eight-part songs with textual overlaying. Heatwole has a strong

sense of aesthetics that drives his selection of material to arrange for the choir. He declared that his investment of time in arranging and teaching means he is disinterested in anything that lacks appeal. His primary objectives are the message of the song and the sound of the choir; he concentrates on pitch and rhythm over vowel production and blending. Strong harmonies and tight performances are preferred in some environments, but, at the same time, simply belting out songs or rounds by a few of its members attending rallies is equally valued.

Discussions with members indicated that they shared a collective intent to create fine a cappella performances that expressed their active investment in the environmental movement. One of Ecopella's members commented that singing can "share a story with nuance, humility, emotion, and details rather than rant or proselytize. I think it's potentially more engaging and transformative for an audience than lecturing." In a similar tone, another member said "Singing at a rally [is] more interesting and powerful than shouting or chanting slogans." Another explained, "I sing, and love the message that is given in the songs. The music is challenging, and there is a high standard." One member said she took pride in making good music. Other members also referred to the ambitious arrangements and the opportunity to "get together with a group of (reasonably) like-minded people to sing about something we care about." Many held a belief in the power of people coming together to make change. One member clearly articulated a common theme, that the choir was a "great affinity group for protest actions, but one where we [have] fun, and [feel] supported [to participate] as singers, not merely as passive observers."

Ecopella's presence has recently been found at protests outside the Commonwealth Bank headquarters in Sydney to put pressure on the bank to cut off its investments in fossil fuels; at the "Climate Justice Uprising" rally in Newcastle, at the March in March: Stand Up Sydney! rally; supporting community events; and attending folk festivals. Two of its members, Jenny Fitzbiggon and Paul Spencer, have established a resource website called Carbon Canaries that provides songs, song sheets, and other information to musically support environmental activism.

Ecopella's mission is clear. It is a community choir that does not simply sing songs about the environment but sees itself participating in and contributing to direct action. Its repertoire clearly demonstrates a moral value for the Earth, a concern with environmental destruction, support and sustenance of activists, promotion of ethically engaged lifestyle choices, and comments on political and industrial interests that work against a sustainable environment.

## Comparative Analysis

Part of the challenge is to maintain the beauty, inspiration, fascination, and emotion of music while not weighing it down with too much gloom and doom and, at the same time, connecting music and musicking to issues much bigger than ourselves. (Allen 2013, quoted in Torvinen and Engström 2013: 22)

There certainly is, adopting Aaron Allen's words, "beauty, inspiration, fascination, and emotion" in the music of *Ecopella* and *A Chorus of Women*, and their music-making is connected to "issues much bigger than ourselves." Both choirs express a sensitivity to threats to nature and human justice, or adopting Anna Grear's terminology, an awareness of the dangers to "eco-humane justice" (2013). They provoke public spaces, politicians, industry, and the sites of environmental destruction, creating "ecotopian spaces," soundscapes of environmental advocacy, and awareness (Galloway 2014).

Although *Ecopella* and *A Chorus of Women* are community, amateur expressions of environmental activism, they are uniquely different to the *Raging Grannies of Victoria* (Pedelty 2016). *A Chorus of Women* is a musically astute and earnest performance of environmental activism. *Ecopella* is more buoyant, but also musically astute in its endeavours. Both, however, can be somewhat weighed down with "gloom and doom" and can lean toward what Pedelty sees as problematic didactic and accusatory topical music (2012). Similarly, Jennifer Leigh Publicover (2016: 130) found that "environmental topics are not well-served by music that is preachy, propagandizing, simply utilitarian." Like many artists creating responses to climate change, present is the tension of effective messaging and making music of quality. Present also is the tension between pronouncing a sense of acute crisis – the "apocalyptic strain" as Alexander Rehding has identified – and the romantic line "which operates with ... a sense of nostalgia" (2011).

The creative output and performance endeavours of *Ecopella* and *A Chorus of Women* exhibit what Pedelty identified as the three aspects of environmental activism and popular music: communication, art, and advocacy (2012). Adopting Martin Branagan's earlier framework, both choirs can be seen to draw together environmental education, activism, and the arts. Branagan suggests that the arts can address environmentalism's worthy but dull image, claiming it can educate people in a variety of holistic ways – emotional and physical – and on several intellectual levels (2005). In a similar vein, Allen has argued that environmental crises are a failure of culture, and that the communicative and emotional powers associated with music are

powerful tools in humanity's quest to understand and address the problems and challenges of the future (2011b). Currier suggests that the arts can creatively register the current climate crisis within "the collective gut" (2014). More recently, Pedelty has declared that the arts have the power to interpret, express, inspire, and instruct, and that music, in fact, has the emotional power to make "it useful, even obligatory, for institutional advocacy" (2016: 19). Interestingly, these sentiments were similarly expressed by Australian poet and activist Judith Wright some decades ago. During the campaign to save the Great Barrier Reef in the late 1960s, she wrote that "a re-imagining of nature could encompass the arts, affirming the truths of feeling, and the sciences, affirming the truths of intellect" (Cited in McCalman 2013: 297). These ideas, then, are neither new nor unique although Pedelty's declaration that "ecological models" of communication should include the arts and popular culture as well as science, policy making, and social movements show further understandings of the connections required (2016: 25).

Recent discussions within the field of ecomusicology show an alertness to the tensions, dimensions, and perceptions present in the art and advocacy of environmentalist music. Some musicians, critics, and scholars argue that political advocacy diminishes art; others determinedly use their art for that very purpose. But, as Publicover argues, there are choices musicians must make in creating their environmental messaging, choices caught within the nesting of simple to complex music, communicating positive or negative emotions, making music that is inclusive or adversarial, and direct or ambiguous (2016: 138). Pedelty's investigation more succinctly suggests the keys to musically communicating environmentalist thinking are voice, place, scale, identity, humour (2016). He further argues that effective narrative requires rich and meaningful settings that enhance a song's capacity for translation, which might better capture audiences. These narratives often draw on a deeper articulation between people and place by using the imagery of a specific place.

Selection and arrangement of material for community choirs engaged in environmental activism equally needs to be sensitive to the potentials and pitfalls that the above academic commentators have identified. The place of performance and the musical expression of environmental activism adopted by both *Ecopella* and *A Chorus of Women* balance these tensions, as befits their separate though similar endeavours.

Both choirs have joined a collective provocation: artists targeting current values so that shifts to 21st-century challenges progress. They musically articulate not only the necessity to mourn and heal the damages wrought, but also to express possible solutions through a call for different values. These are representative of the critical engagement, lyrical expression, and

transformative action identified by Tim Collins and Reiko Goto (2013) that moves beyond “gloom and doom.”

Australian climate scientist Michael Raupach argues that narratives have to play an important role in guiding and empowering human action for the future. While contemporary narratives tend to operate at the polarities of a benign or malign world, he suggests they – whether told through fictional writing, a painting or a song – need to shape a shared future that expresses the interplay between expansion and sustenance (2014).

The endeavours of community choirs to “save the world” by creating “sacred music for the environment” in Ecopella’s case, or to “make music [that can] change the climate,” in the example of A Chorus of Women, are noble, grand, and symbolic narratives. Performances are political actions, reflecting strong philosophical positions, and are intentionally affective. For choir members, their musical missions are galvanizing. The influence on audiences is not fully measurable, but the shedding of a tear or a nod of agreement from an audience member, environmental activist, or scientific collaborator sustains commitment to making music that matters. That commitment sees the continuing evolution in the repertoire to moving beyond the blaming and grieving captured in a poetic prayer, petition, or lament. Included now are expressions of healing, and proposing a future that not only advocates eco-humane justice but also rehearses resilience and adaptation, considering a desired future rather than a distraught present. It is a call for different values.

A member of both Ecopella and a Chorus of Women recently told me a major reason for belonging to both groups is that each provided songs and situations that offered hope for the future in many forms. She said that being with people who sing for change, for a more positive future, was essential to her creative expression, her very being.

## Conclusion

Music ... has no direct role in resolving the dilemma of potential self-extinction that opens [the Anthropocene],<sup>9</sup> but is nevertheless an art form that goes to the heart of human perception and human performance – our species’ agency of planet Earth. (Currier 2014: 50)

Academic engagement with climate change, environmental crises, and/or the Anthropocene is not limited to the sciences and humanities but is increasingly being addressed by the arts. Its role is an important one in the communication

of an uncertain future. Creativity explores big ideas and delves deep in order to unsettle or make uncomfortable; to express empathy, identity with place, and be interactive; to affect, connect, regather, and show the potential for a different reality.

Collaboration between the arts and sciences is growing. And in Australia, both the arts and sciences are engaging more respectfully, collaboratively, and effectively with First Nations people who are generously sharing their culture and knowledge systems. Environmental activism and its musical expression might more often intertwine scientific understandings of the threats to the environment and First Nations connection to country. This was somewhat demonstrated in the *Our Home Our Land* project and various collaborations and actions undertaken by Ecopella and A Chorus of Women. These kinds of collaborative projects are attentive to the possible colonization of knowledge systems, and, at the same time, grant that the approximately 60,000 years of living culture on this continent might suggest ways to achieve adaptability, resilience, and eco-humane justice in the face of climate change. Professor Will Steffen of the Climate Council is alert to this, as he indicated in a communication to the Chorus of Women after their fundraising concert in 2016:

I was struck by how we humans have a very long tradition of using singing as a way of expressing our feelings about the rest of the living world, and about the Earth itself ... And although earlier societies and indigenous cultures around the world could not have had the modern scientific understanding of the Earth System, their songs had not only the word "Earth" in them, but also showed a really deep understanding of the Earth as a single, complex system and that we humans are embedded in it. Our scientific understanding has come really late!

A Chorus of Women and Ecopella embody the present confluence of community music and environmental activism in Australia. They emerged from a history that brought together protest music and the democratization of music-making in Australia. Concerned with contemporary issues, these choirs have prioritized environmental activism. Lament, poetic prayer, and petition might have once dominated their protest music, but it is evident that both choirs are promoting and fostering better stewardship of the planet, adding their voice to the soundtrack of what Raupach has identified as the evolution to resilient narratives, ones that empower a transition to a society that is both sustainable and improves global human wellbeing. 🌿

## Notes

1. The term “Koori” is commonly used to describe the various Aboriginal language groups resident in New South Wales. It is also often applied to Victorian Aboriginal language groups. “Indigenous” is a term frequently used to describe both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and is sometimes adopted as an alternative to First Nations. First Nation peoples are more frequently using the name of their language group/s (such as *Gadigal* or *Yorta Yorta/Dja Dja Wurung*) as the most significant identifier.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, quotes are drawn from the Green Music Australia website.

3. Mitchell (1996: 213) described Australian community music in the 1980s as “the dominant local variant of world music.” While not denying the scene did indeed embrace world music, as has been argued elsewhere (Rickwood 1997), the adoption of global musics was not merely through the “world music” market, but was also mediated by musicians living in or visiting Australia at the time.

4. Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people have diverse relationships with, connections to and understandings of the Australian environment. Some of these relationships are based on the traditional knowledges and practices that have been passed down from generation to generation, while others have resulted from the various impacts of colonization. Relationships to country are complex and interrelated (Queensland Studies Authority 2008).

5. Sometimes the song is titled “Our Land is Our Home.”

6. Unless otherwise indicated, the comments from choir members from A Chorus of Women are from their website or an informal conversation on 20 November 2014 and April 2017.

7. Unless otherwise indicated, the comments from choir members from Ecopella are as a result of an informal meeting held with the choir on 19 October 2013 (prior to their performance in a concert entitled *Earthbeat*) or email discussions that shortly followed and brief discussions again in April 2017.

8. For example, he was arrested protesting against the Whitehaven Coal’s Tarrawonga mine in 2014.

9. The Anthropocene is the name proposed to define “the first time, human beings are influencing the physical processes of the Earth; we have now moved from being serial depleters of local environments to become a planetary geophysical force” (Encountering the Anthropocene: The Role of Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences). In other words “a new geological period” (Currier 2014: 50) and an “ethical imperative” (Collins and Goto Collins 2014), which names our avarice and demands we take responsibility for it.

## References

- A Chorus of Women. <http://www.chorusofwomen.org/> (accessed 7 April 2017).
- A Chorus of Women. <https://www.facebook.com/AChorusOfWomen/> (accessed 4 April 2017).
- Allen, Aaron S. 2011a. Colloquy: Ecomusicology. *Journal of American Musicological Society* 54 (2): 391-393.
- . 2011b. Ecomusicology: Ecocriticism and Musicology. *Journal of American Musicological Society* 54 (2): 394-398.
- . 2013. Ecomusicology. <http://www.ecomusicology.info/> (accessed 3 January 2014).
- Allen, Aaron S. and Kevin Dawe, eds. 2016. *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Barney, Katelyn. 2009. "Hop, Skip and Jump": Indigenous Australian Women Performing Within and Against Aboriginalism. *Journal of Music Research Online* 1. [www.jmro.org.au](http://www.jmro.org.au).
- Bithell, Caroline. 2014. *A Different Voice, A Different Song*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2018 (forthcoming). Local Musicking for a Global Cause. In *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Local Musicking*. Ed. Suzel Reily and Katherine Brucher. London and New York: Routledge.
- Branagan, Martin. 2005. Environmental Education, Activism and the Arts. *Convergence* 38 (4): 33-50.
- Carbon Canaries. <https://carboncanaries.com.au/> (accessed 4 April 2017).
- Collins, Tim, and Reiko Goto Collins. 2014. Concept, Experience and Understanding: Shaping Values. *The Anthropocene: Artists and Writers in Critical Dialogue*, Workshop. Humanities Research Centre, Canberra: ANU, 19-21 June.
- Currier, Nathan. 2013. Discussion: Music in the Anthropocene. *Ecomusicology Newsletter* 2 (2): 1-2.
- . 2014. Classical Music in the Anthropocene. *Ecomusicology Newsletter* 3 (1): 8-12; 30-52.
- Dunbar-Hall, Peter and Chris Gibson. 2004. *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Ecomusicology. <http://www.ecomusicology.info/> (accessed 7 April 2017).
- Ecopella. <http://www.ecopella.org/> (accessed 4 April 2017).
- Ecopella. <https://www.facebook.com/Ecopella/> (accessed 4 April 2017).
- Encountering the Anthropocene: The Role of the Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences. 2014. Conference. Sydney: The University of Sydney, 26-28 February.
- Galloway, Kate. 2014. Ecotopian Spaces: Soundscapes of Environmental Advocacy and Awareness. *Social Alternatives* 33 (3): 71-79.

- Grear, Anna. 2013. Human Bodies in Material Space: Lived Realities, Eco-crises and The Search for Transformation. *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 4 (2): 111-115.
- Green Music Australia. [www.greenmusic.org.au](http://www.greenmusic.org.au) (accessed 6 April 2017).
- Hassan, Toni. 2017. The Power of Lament and Song. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 11 March. <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/the-power-of-lament-and-song-20170309-guuw4r.html>.
- Heatwole, Miguel. 2011. The Earth in Harmony: Ecopella at Humph Hall. *Jam: Folk Federation of NSW*. <http://jam.org.au/moxie/venues/hh/20110702-Ecopella-Humph-Hall>.
- Hollo, Tim. 2015. #FreeKaren: Is Music a Gateway to Activism? *Environment: Content from Across the ABC*. <http://www.abc.net.au/environment/articles/2015/09/29/4321777.htm>.
- Hungerford, Alice. 2013. *UpRiver: Untold Stories of The Franklin River Activists*. Tasmania: UpRiver Mob.
- International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Australia and New Zealand. 2015. IASPM-ANZ Statement on the Federal Government's "Radicalisation Awareness Kit." <http://iaspm.org.au/iaspm-anz-statement-on-the-federal-governments-radicalisation-awareness-kit>.
- McCalman, Iain. 2013. *The Reef: A Passionate History*. Sydney: Penguin Books.
- McMahon, Jeannette. 2013. What's Up with Protest Songs? ABC Newcastle. <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2013/07/17/3805076.htm>.
- Mitchell, Tony. 1996. Real Wild Child: Australian Popular Music and National Identity. In *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop, and Rap in Europe and Oceania*, 173-87. Ed. Tony Mitchell. Leicester and New York: Leicester University Press.
- Pedelty, Mark. 2012. *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- . 2013. Ecomusicology, Music Studies, and IASPM: Beyond "Epistemic Inertia." *IASPM@Journal* 3 (2): 33-47.
- . 2016. *A Song to Save the Salish Sea: Musical Performance as Environmental Activism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Perlman, Marc. 2012. Ecology and Ethno/musicology: The Metaphorical, The Representational, and The Literal. *Ecomusicology Newsletter* 1 (2): 1, 15-21.
- Phillips, Sara. 2011. The Hottest 100, Environmentally Speaking. *Environment: Content from Across the ABC*. <http://abc.net.au/environment/articles/2011/02/03/3127144.htm>.
- Publicover, Jennifer Leigh. 2016. Perspectives on Music, The Environment, and Sustainability Education from Recording Artists Featured on the David Suzuki Foundation Playlist for the Planet 2011. MES thesis, Dalhousie University.
- Queensland Studies Authority. 2008. *Relationships to Country: Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islander People*. Queensland Government, Australia.
- Raupach, Michael. 2014. *The Past, Present and Future of Australian Environmental Science*. Public Lecture, Shine Dome, Australian Academy of Science, 19 August.

- Rehding, Alexander. 2011. Ecomusicology Between Apocalypse and Nostalgia. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64 (2): 409-414.
- Reimer, Lottie and Kelvin Mason. 2016. Raised Voices: The Campaigning Choirs Movement. *Red Pepper*. <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/raised-voices-the-campaigning-choirs-movement>.
- Rickwood, Julie. 1997. Liberating Voices: Towards an Ethnography of Women's Community A Cappella Choirs in Australia. MA thesis, Australian National University.
- . 2013a. We Are Australian: An Ethnographic Investigation of the Convergence of Community Music and Reconciliation. PhD dissertation, Australian National University.
- . 2013b. Choralecology? The Confluence of Community Choirs and Environmental Activism. Paper presented at the IASPM-ANZ Conference, Brisbane, Australia.
- . 2013c. Harmony to the Earth: A Critical Examination of The Repertoire of Ecopella. Paper presented at the Ecomusicologies Conference, Brisbane, Australia.
- . 2014a. Choralecology? Community Choirs and Environmental Activism. *Social Alternatives* 33 (1): 30-38.
- . 2014b. Choralecology: Locating the Sound of "Green" in Community Choir. Paper presented at the Dialogues, Ecomusicologies Conference, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 4-5 October.
- Rosenthal, Robert and Richard Flacks. 2011. *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Graeme. 2005. *Singing Australia: A History of Folk and Country Music*. North Melbourne: Pluto Press Australia.
- Straw, Will. 1991. Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music. *Cultural Studies* 5 (3): 368-388.
- Street, John. 2003. "Fight the Power": The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics. *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 38 (1): 113-130.
- Torvinen, Juha and Andreas Engström. 2013. The Study of the Music & Culture of the Environmental Crisis: Interview with Aaron S. Allen. *Ecomusicology Newsletter* 2 (2): 3, 20-23.
- Wilson, Katrina. 2009. Program Notes. Our Home Our Land Concert Series. Melbourne: The Boîte.

## Interviews and Personal Communications

- A Chorus of Women members. 2014. Personal conversations with author. Canberra. 20 November.
- Ecopella members. 2013. Personal conversations. Canberra. 19 October.

Ecopella members. 2013. Emails with author. Canberra. Throughout December.  
Hollo, T. 2016. Personal conversation with author. Canberra. 15 April.  
Member of both choirs. 2017. Personal conversation with author. Canberra. 7 April.

## Discography

A Chorus of Women. 2006. *Giving Voice*. Self-produced. Compact disc.  
A Chorus of Women. 2009. *The Gifts of the Furies*. Self-produced. Compact disc.  
A Chorus of Women. 2013. *I Am Ethos*. Self-produced. Compact disc.  
Ecopella. 2002. *An Organism called Earth*. EEK01. Compact disc.  
Ecopella. 2008. *Songs in the Key of Green*. EEK02. Compact disc.

## Videography

Guggenheim, Davis, dir. and Al Gore. 2006. *An Inconvenient Truth*. Paramount Classics.  
A Chorus of Women. 2015. *A Passion for Peace*.