

Ethics of Musical Ecologies Reflections on Interspecies Musical Encounters and their Mediations

I have been working for over 7 years recording and making art from cod sounds, together with biologists (UiA) and Norwegian and Sami artists from the arctic region. This collaboration contributed directly to scientific breakthroughs in understanding fish communication, and in continuing this transdisciplinary and transcultural collaboration, I now aim to make an equally important contribution to artistic research. Frustrated with methods of recording and recomposing fish sounds— methods which reproduce “resource extraction” processes that created the climate and overfishing crises— my current PhD project, *Listening-Ecologies*, critically responds with live listening based interspecies performance practices, beginning with the burning question: *How can we make music with and not from other species?* But the ethics of these musical interactions are complex— to what extent can we *collaborate* when we cannot know what fish sounds “mean”, and when they cannot directly express consent? These central ethical questions demand that *listening* is at the center of my project, as well as collaboration with biologists who can interpret fish behavior.

After several trials at aquariums and research stations, I visited Vesterålen in the arctic circle where I played music with 40,000 cod living in sea pens. Using underwater speakers and microphones, I created a sonic interface allowing mutual audibility between species. I spent three days documenting a series of improvisations with the fish. But this encounter revealed yet another ethical tension shaping the work, as I began to hear and see the infrastructure mediating my relation to the fish. These fish in their storage pens were waiting to be sold and killed. The imbalance between species was stark, but this situation draws attention to a crucial ethical dilemma that is present in effectively all interspecies music of the Anthropocene age. Rather than abandoning the project as unethical, the question becomes: how can we create interspecies music that makes space for the voice of the other, while *also* revealing the structural hierarchies and violences that humans have created? Only when

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addressing this question can our music illuminate potentialities of new ways of being with other species, and not just the superficial appearances of equality.



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John Andrew Wilhite (b.1991, Richmond VA) is a Norwegian-American composer and musician. Often working with large-scale and interdisciplinary projects that inspire collaboration across both discipline and geographical space, he is a recipient of commissions from institutions and festivals such as The Norwegian National Opera, Munch Museum, Norwegian Center for Technology in Art and Music, Nordic Culture Point, and MINU. As a performer, John Andrew works regularly with artists such as Elliott Sharp, Sofia Jernberg and Alpaca Ensemble, and has been a soloist with The Norwegian Radio Orchestra, among others.

John Andrew holds master's degrees in both double bass performance and composition from the Norwegian Academy of Music, where he studied with Håkon Thelin (bass) and Trond Reinholdtsen (composition). He also studied at the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music. John Andrew studied Slavic art and philosophy and was assistant to philosopher Boris Groys at NYU.

Relevant additional video materials:

https://johnandrew.no/Sample_video_Wilhite_EPARM.mp4

Explanatory note: This video shows a cello improvisation out on the platforms in the arctic circle (Myre, Vesterålen). One hears the Skrei in both the low pitch “grunts” (for example, from 37s to 44s) and the high pitched “clicks” (for example around 1m43s). Under the water I also played a recording of a human folk song about animals, to further reflect upon the problematic relationship humans have to animals.