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**Ecomusicology: A Study of Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*, *The Echo Maker* and *Orfeo***
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**Abstract**

Richard Powers' fiction is recognised for its inclusive and multidisciplinary approach towards ecological studies. The paper contends to explore Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*, *The Echo Maker* and *Orfeo* through ecomusicological lens. Ecomusicology is a portmanteau of music and ecology, thus bringing sound studies, music and ecological concerns towards new emergent fields of study. The paper employs Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's understanding of music in *a thousand plateaus*, Aaron S. Allen's work on musicology and environmental sustainability and R. Murray Schafer's understanding of soundscapes to study Powers' novels for using music both as a form and subject. Powers addresses issues like racial discrimination, identity politics and capitalist ventures that are all linked together through a world of human and nonhuman music.

**Introduction**

Ecosophy or deep ecology is a broad concept that aims to create a harmony between culture and nature. It is an ecological philosophy appreciating a holistic approach towards the environment. It believes in all life forms thus giving equal weightage to nature and culture. It appreciates tangential connections that are established between different phenomena in the creation of ecosophical paradigms. An engagement with sound and music plays a significant role in achieving a harmonious balance in our relationship with nature. Ecomusicology is one such emerging field that jells music and ecosophical concerns together. It borrows from both music and ecology and takes it further as an independent field of study. An ecomusicological study of Powers' work explores the role that sounds, music, and soundscapes play in supporting the ecosophical dimensions in his narratives.

This article aims to examine Powers' use of natural and cultural sounds and music as a means of exploring themes ranging from minoritarianism, racial discrimination, issues of identity, and placemaking music to the most important ecological and environmental concerns like extinction and autism. This includes but is not limited, to music as a form and metaphor for exploring issues of identity, social unrest, and racial discrimination in *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), placemaking music, and ecological endangering of cranes in *The Echo Maker* (2006), music as a form of expression to connect creativity and expression to nature and culture in *Orfeo* (2013).

In a world where the nature-culture divide is continually increasing, ecomusicology, with its diverse and open framework, serves as an ideal ground for exploring the complex issues connecting music and sound to the human and non-human world around us. *Cambridge Dictionary* defines sound as "something that you can hear or that can be heard" whereas it defines music as "a pattern of sounds made by musical instruments, voices, of computers, or a combination of these, intended to give pleasure to people listening to it". This definition of music lacks everything that ecomusicology addresses or attempts to redress: to take musicology beyond the human-centered cultural fields, connecting music to the broader ecological realities, and bring sounds produced by natural phenomena into the realm of music.

**Objectives of the Study**

1. This discussion will look into the multiple ways in which Powers' fiction engages with natural sounds and cultural music. It explores how sound and music fuse to facilitate an ecomusicological reading.

## Research Question

1. How does Powers' body of work display a gradual progression from natural sounds to cultural to a combination of both in his later works where enriching patterns of ecologically driven sound patterns connect the cultural world of humans to the diverse music produced by natural phenomena?

## Literature Review

Powers seem equally impressed by and interested in exploring multiple dimensions of both music and nature and offers a befitting body of work for an ecomusicological research. In an interview with Angela Becerra Vidergar, Powers comments on his choice of subject in *Orfeo* (2014): "I'm a novelist who thrives on the connections that aren't immediately apparent.....To see that everything is connected to everything else, you just have to walk outside your office and start talking to people" (Vidergar 2014, 2). Together music and ecological concerns are the subject matter for most of Powers' later works.

Powers' interest in music is evident from the musicological research on his work. *The Time of our Singing* (2003) and *Orfeo* (2014) both have been studied as musicological works whereas *The Echo Maker* (2006) has been studied for its ecological background and zoomusicological nature of crane behaviours. *The Overstory* (2018) has often been studied for the challenging nature of its ecological or environmental concerns but there are no ecomusicological studies of it and *Bewilderment* (2021) which directly deal with music, both human and non-human, nor has it been studied for its rich sonic patterns. Doro Wiese in her article "Writing Sound, Hearing Race, Singing Time: Richard Powers' *The Time of our Singing*" studies how the "aural semiotic model proposed in *The Time of Our Singing* allows reconciliation between different philosophical propositions that deal with the notion of "race"" (2018, 560). Her analysis of Powers' skill of 'writing sound' is linked to the main theme of encapsulating musical notes and patterns through the narrative. This research will take Wiesel's study further by exploring how writing sound and hearing race become part of an ecomusicological analysis that addresses Minoritarianism through the use of music. Pim Verheyen in his thesis titled "Music in the Fiction of Richard Powers" (2012) engages with the ideas of time and music that are reflected in the structure that constantly moves forwards and backward rejecting linear patterns. This rejection of linearity also strengthens a musicological reading of *Orfeo* (Powers 2014).

Heather Houser's "Wondrous Strange: Eco-Sickness, Emotion, and *The Echo Maker*" (2012) engages with the ecological and environmental aspects of Powers' *The Echo Maker* (2006) and provides some vital points for the present ecomusicological study. The paper also extends the exploration of musical motifs in *The Echo Maker* (2006) as studied by Ellen Y. Siegelman in "Echoes of Memory, Echoes of Music" (2007). Siegelman studies the themes of echoes through the cranes' mating rituals and dances. Marco Caracciolo, in his well-researched work, "Flocking Together: Collective Animal Minds in Contemporary Fiction" (2020) offers an anthropocentric and non-human critique of crane narratives in *The Echo Maker* (2006) and offers the possibility of being extended to an ecomusicological study.

*Orfeo* (2014) is Powers' most elaborate work on music with a sustained musical structure. Ivan Delazari in his article "'Gradations of Fictivity': Borges and the Music of the Spheres in Richard Powers' *Orfeo*" (2018) studies the literary legacy of Jorge Luis Borges which manifests itself both in the narrative form and subject matter. The article looks into the contrapuntal texture of the double narratives that Powers employs. The present study will further this idea through the study of Peter Els' awakening to the ecological understanding of music that is embedded in the narrative structure of the novel: Els' musical past and future both unfold simultaneously as his journey forward can only be understood through an unfolding of his past. The combination of environmental and musical concerns through a detailed study of Orphic myths is the subject of Miriam Fernandez-Santiago's "Of Language and Music: A Neo-Baroque, Environmental Approach to the Human, Infrahuman and Superhuman in Richard Powers' *Orfeo*" (2019). Fernandez-Santiago talks in detail about the intersectional points between Orphic myths and contemporary western conflicts that are reflected in "the natural and the technological in its existential, ethical, social, political and aesthetic dimensions" (2019, 129). The present study develops these ideas further as the ecomusicological is inclusive of the dimensions.

### Research Design and Methodology

The research paradigm is qualitative, and the textual analyses covered by the study will be hermeneutic establishing an ecomusicological reading of Richard Powers' *The Time of our Singing* (2003), *The Echo Maker* (2006) and *Orfeo* (2014). Aaron S. Allen's extensive work on ecomusicology, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's exploration of music in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005) and R. Murray Schafer's work on soundscapes guides the research design which explores Powers' books for ecological and musical studies. "

### Theoretical Framework

Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe in their groundbreaking work, *Current Directions in Ecomusicology* (2016), define ecomusicology as the critical study of music/sound and environment. In the contemporary literature, it is the fusing together of issues and discussions pertaining to music/sound studies with environmental/ecological studies and sciences. Given the diversity of meanings for those disciplines and interdisciplinary, a useful and productive way to conceptualise the field of ecomusicology is as ecomusicologies (p. 2). Building ecomusicological structures as spaces of intersection and resistance is vital in today's changing post-humanist scenario. Forwarding and believing in anthropocentric doctrines and narratives has created a huge gap between the human and non-human segments. It has destroyed the environmental and ecological harmony that existed on the planetary level for millennia, robbing the world of its biodiversity through environmental damage and extinction. Capitalism reinforced the human-centric discourses because it meant greater profiteering. The destruction of the earth's biosphere has inspired artists, researchers, and environmental activists to look for post-humanism as one of the possible ways in which to save the earth from further devastation. After recognizing the threats posed by capitalist anthropocentric approaches, competing with these resistive structures is of utmost importance. Ecomusicology helps writers, artists, and researchers to look for alternative ways with which to reduce the gap between the human and the non-human worlds. It tries to redress the imbalance in the sonic world which has silenced natural sounds through artificial sound waves.

### Soundscapes

Ecomusicology studies the relationship between music and ecology which is not possible without an understanding of soundscapes. Canadian composer and writer R. Murray Schafer, who is known for his work on the World Soundscape Project and his concerns for acoustic ecology explored soundscapes. He referred to the soundscape as an "acoustic environment consisting of events heard, rather than objects seen" (Schafer 1997, 7). He points out two types of soundscapes that are created by the environment: hi-fi settings that make it possible to hear sounds distinctly because there is no background noise to obstruct the sound (e.g., rural landscapes and naturally occurring settings are particularly conducive to hi-fi soundscape) and low-fi signals that are obscured by sounds, and perspective is lost within the broad-band of noises. Schafer also coined the term 'soundmark', which refers to a community sound that possesses salient and unique qualities to the people of the community: "The term soundmark is derived from landmark and refers to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which makes it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community" (Schafer 1994, 10). Schafer's theoretical concepts of hi-fi and low-fi are employed by Powers in *The Echo Maker* (2006). Powers also create a soundmark when a whole community recognises and is recognised by sounds produced by millions of migratory birds in Kearney, Nebraska. Once a soundmark has been established, it needs to be taken care of because soundmarks enrich the unique acoustic life of the community, a concept Powers engages with, through the character of environmentalist Daniel Reigel, in *The Echo Maker* (2006).

### Music and Politics

Ecomusicology also explores the relationship between sound and its contextual environment in a politically charged world. Ecomusicology, like ecosophy, cannot be studied without its political dimension. In the early 1990s, Philip Bohlman argued that practicing any Musicology is a political act, regarding both, what we choose to study, and what we exclude (1993). For much of the twentieth century, Musicology "insisted on its apolitical status," and in so doing it "has come face-to-face with its political acts" (Bohlman 1993, p. 419). Musicology ignored "for too long the musics of women, people of colour, the disenfranchised, or Others we simply do not see and hear" (Bohlman 1993, 436). Aaron S. Allen, Jeff Todd Titon, and Denise Von Glahn in their article "Sustainability and Sound: Ecomusicology Inside and Outside the Academy", comment: "ecomusicology is part of a transformation of education that seeks to

create a more just and sustainable world” (Allen et al. 3) thereby discussing the path through which “ecomusicology becomes activism” (Allen et al. 3).

### **The Three Ecologies**

For this research, the functional definition of environment is inclusive of the mental, ecological, and social dimensions in the light of Felix Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies* (2000). In *The Three Ecologies* (2000), Guattari presents his anti-capitalist philosophical understanding and creates awareness of an ecosophical world where ecological harmony among different spheres can control the damage done by capitalist forces. A Deleuzoguattarian version of ecology does not see nature as a separate distinct form, but as coexistent with culture, and agency here is not limited to any one side of the equation: “we make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production or industry” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 4). Another important work that informs this research is Deleuze and Guattari’s monumental work *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005) where the philosophical duo time and again connects music with human and non-human forces. Quoting Messiaen, Deleuze, and Guattari write, “music is not the privilege of human beings: the universe, the cosmos, is made of refrains;... The question is more what is not musical in human beings, and what already is musical in nature” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, p. 309). Though they never use the word ecomusicology their understanding is highly ecomusicological as they bring together music, nature, and culture, “A bird launches into its refrain. All of music is pervaded by bird songs, in a thousand different ways, ....” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 300). *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005) is replete with examples where Deleuze and Guattari strive not to privilege the becomings of human existence at the expense of the wider living and inorganic ecological world, a recurring tendency in Western philosophy. Deleuzoguattarian concept of becoming seeks to “acknowledge and understand the varied ways in which diverse things exist as a process, ranging from human bodies, concepts, and languages to microorganisms and animal species” (Moisala et al. 2014, p. 73). Their essential understanding of music lying beyond the human sphere is explored in detail while working on the subject of cranes in Powers’ *The Echo Maker* (2006). A similar idea is explored by Rosi Braidotti in her *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (2011) where she talks in detail about nomadic and rhizomatic music which questions the anthropocentric notion: “human is not the ruling principle in the harmony of the spheres” (p. 109). Braidotti’s take on nomadism is quite relevant to the present research as it opens up new areas for an exploration of ecomusicology in works of literature.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Most of Powers’ narratives are multi-focal with rhizomatic centres. Such a structure supports an ecomusicological study of his work. Music exists in nodes with other social and ecological subjects: colour, race, and civil rights movement co-exist with music in *The Time of our Singing* (2003), environmental sickness, migratory birds, and extinction issues are explored through the genre of neuro-novel in *The Echo Maker* (2006), creative tensions, musical history, and natural music are knotted together in *Orfeo* (2014), deforestation, scientific research, virtual reality, and tree narratives support one another in *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021) sounds, nature, ecology, and autism come together to explore the multi-centric nature of Powers’ work. Powers has claimed that all his novels are about connection, symbiotic and interdependent mutualism, collective identity, complicity and interdependence, and the impossibility of separation, opposition, or binary categories (Fuller and Powers 2003, 110). The paper uses the ecomusicological lens through which the readers can engage with the interconnectedness of different art and life forms.

*The Time of our Singing* (2003) and *Orfeo* (2014) can be grouped for detailed ecomusicological analyses because music is the central subject in both. Both novels study the relationship of music with social ecology that stresses an inclusive approach respecting differences and diversity. Felix Guattari’s “social ecosophy” (Guattari 2000, 3) includes social ecology in addition to environmental ecology. Guattari discusses how in a capitalist society, only those values are respected and promoted that are profitable for the majority thus ensuring greater profit making (Guattari 2000). It helps in establishing a hegemony that flattens out all forms of individuality. As an active and important component of social ecology, music can become a structure of resistance in the face of unchecked capitalism. Music, as an act of creative expression, is reflective of overall social and ecological behavior. In an

interview, Powers talked about the political aspect of his work: “Most works of arts have some activist component to them whether they wear it overtly or covertly” (Notes 2021, 3:43-52). This makes music a political act with far-reaching practical and historical implications. A recent example can be found in ‘Bella Ciao’s revival during the Iranian protests against Islamic rule where the old Italian resistance song has been translated into Persian. Although this dimension of ecomusicology is not discussed anywhere in mainstream academia, this research will attempt such a reading of Richard Powers’ work.

In *The Time of our Singing* (2003), Powers uses music as a powerful tool to focus on the issues of race, colour, and discrimination in the turbulent history of American race issues. The narrative framework employs music as one of the many subjects that Powers engages with in detail to study questions pertaining to social ecology. The importance of *The Time of our Singing* (2003)’s musical subject can also be validated by its adaptation for opera by the world-renowned Belgian composer Kris Defoort. Inspired by the police brutality on George Floyd and the revival of revolutionary slogans like Black Lives Matter during the resurgence of racially charged confrontation in 2020, Defoort draws parallels between *The Time of our Singing* (2003) and recent US history which resulted in his magnum opus opera, *The Time of Our Singing* (2021). In collaboration with Defoort’s librettist, Peter van Kraaij, Kris Defoort created an imaginary space in which official version of history and personal histories intertwine, where characters come together to knit a narrative, and in which jazz and classical music are enriched by one another. Such an operatic engagement with a piece of musical literature creates a new genre in itself by visually manifesting the role of music and sound in troubled American racial history. It adds another dimension to the present research. Powers opts for multiple narrative timelines in the novel; about the generation of parents who, at the height of the struggle against racial segregation, have to fight all the possible prejudices against mixed marriages and face a grim world their children step into. The generation of their mixed-race children grow up during the Civil Rights era.

The Strom family comprising Delia Daley, a black American musician mother, David Strom, a white German Jewish physicist father, and their three children Jonah, Joseph aka Joey, and Ruth, is the focus of the narrative. The selection of characters from two historically discriminated minorities reflects Powers’ interest in exploring the dynamics of minoritarian culture. Capitalist ecology does not entertain any difference, creating a society that depends on suppression and repression to maintain its hegemony. Powers brings in music in this background as the central refrain that unites the drama played in the disparate lives of the Strom family and American history. Powers seems to believe in the cyclical and non-chronological idea of time, hence the novel has a non-linear structure, inspired by Einstein’s theory of relativity, where the passage of time depends on the observer’s frame of reference. In the narrative world of *The Time of our Singing* (2003), music serves as the reader’s point of reference, providing much-needed stability to the structure. Delia Daley possessed enough musical talent but could never think of a professional musical career because of the colour of her skin, becoming one of the many victims whose creative expression was sacrificed at racism’s altar. Jonah, Delia, and David’s eldest child, grows up to be an outstanding tenor singer but not without his struggle for survival. Throughout his early life, Jonah, along with his two siblings, finds encouragement and protection from a family whose only refuge from social persecution is the world of music. The timeline in the novel deals with the cultural world of the 1950s and 60s, when music like other cultural forms was undergoing a huge shift from the classical to more experimental forms like Jazz.

The musical world of *The Time of our Singing* (2003) is highly political. The novel explores the tension and conflict between the Western-dominated world of classical music and the African-American world of jazz. The elder two Strom brothers opt for music careers; Jonah becomes a gifted professional singer and Joey accompanies him on the Piano. Their music careers help readers explore the possibility of whether the racially discriminated musicians are displaced and dominated by classical tradition or they can come up with alternative ways to make music that preserves their minoritarian identity. The only way forward for the family is through music that, they believe, can save them from outside dangers. But it is their younger sister Ruth who opts for a radical political career. Being the most musically gifted of all three Strom children, she suffers the worst from her mother’s mysterious death. Attributing her mother’s death to some racial conspiracy of which no definite proof is ever given, she gives up classical music at her mother’s funeral. In the later years, she embraces race and radical politics as a reactionary. Her music transforms into a politically reactionary mode when she decides to join Black Panther Party.



*The Time of our Singing* (2003) records the political and racial history through the multiple music forms; the classical form is reflected by the overall social structure that is highly controlled and well organized by the conductor (writer, society) containing a symphony of thematic concerns. Jazz, on the other hand, with its intonations of ragtime and blues is manifested in the individual lives of the Strom family. This polytonal structure comprises of race, music, time, science, and history as all these thematic notes are simultaneously played by Powers to create a symphony of operatic proportions. Delia's love for music is never understandable without acknowledging the colour of her skin. Similarly, David's Jewishness constantly comes in the way of his love for physics as "his appointment in the Physics Department at Columbia seemed a thing so fine, it would certainly be taken away by anti-Semitism, anti-intellectualism, rising randomness," (2003, 13) while their marriage and children have to move forward in a society which has historically mainstreamed racial discrimination. Powers, like a master conductor, creates a literary symphony out of all these notes.

In the racially charged world of American social life depicted in *The Time of our Singing* (2003), there are too many contrasts available. Each member of the Strom family has his/her musical talent thwarted, discriminated, and persecuted against on the basis of their negro mother and Jewish father. Their love and excellence in music offer no respite in this racially divided world. The world music represents, is as divided as the society around them. Music also provides the Strom family with the lone possibility of attempting to get a recognition and a place in a society that otherwise believes in the binaries. The society at large compartmentalises individuals according to its system of identification affording no respect and place to those who are a minority. While, at the level of themes, the musical careers of the two Strom brothers are destined to fail by their initial refusal to comply with the prevalent and ingrained social morals, the novel, at the level of the subject, problematizes the idea of music as a purely social and cultural construct. The story narrates the fate of a society in which music fails to bring together people from diverse backgrounds. Music proves to be as much a racist construct as any other phenomenon. Delia Daley's tragic failure at capitalising on her musical talent goes on to show that music is not colour-blind in a predominantly white society. The narrative revolves around the Strom family's struggle to create their identity in the world of American music ranging from discrimination their children feel at school where "In the dining hall that first week, a sunny-headed new boy blurted out, "You two have black blood? I'm not supposed to eat with anyone with black blood." (2003, p. 63) to the end where Ruth joins Black Panther as her reaction to the colour-prejudiced world of Western music.

The musicological patterns in the *The Time of our Singing* (2003) cannot make sense without the social world that surrounds them. Music becomes a way to survival in an otherwise hostile social ecology, "[m]usic means those years of harmonizing together, still in the shell of our family, before that shell broke open and burned" (Powers 2003, p. 4). The narrative is built around David and Delia Strom's focus on music as the only mode of survival for their children, "singing together on those postwar winter nights, with music their last line of defense against the outside and the encroaching cold" (Powers 2003, 9). It becomes a way of conferring a mark of recognition, a way in which the Strom family struggles to keep the dangers at bay, "[and] for pure safety, nothing beat music.... Music was their lease, their deed, their eminent domain. Let each voice defeat silence through its vocation" (Powers 2003, 9). The novel can be seen as a constant battle between the outside noise and the inside symphony of the Strom household which the latter is destined to lose.

In *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), music operates at both the thematic and structural levels. Powers uses different musical techniques to annotate the plot line. Counterpoint is one such technique explored by Powers through the Strom family's personal lives and the political history of America's rights movement. The polyphony is essential to render the operatic vision Powers is attempting to capture in which music, race, time, marriage, physics, and politics are all notes that strike together to create an ecological symphony which shows that when it comes to the issues of race, every note is corrupted. The novel is a linguistic representation of a symphony that has rules defined by white male supremacy which admits no non-white outsiders.

The political background to *The Time of our Singing* (2003) can be complemented by Felix Guattari's idea of social ecology in *The Three Ecologies* (2000) which discusses the aggressive tendencies of capitalism to weaken the socially vulnerable by strengthening capitalism's already established network of profit and identity mongering (38-41). Guattari presents his ideas about capitalism's attempts at crushing any "singularity" (2000, 50) that might

potentially threaten it. The Strom family, in *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), is the musical singularity that the American racially driven musical world cannot accept. The Strom family's racial identity always predefines their music, thus making music an equally manipulative political act. The children's fate is no different from their parents. "Negro" (Powers 2003, 28) is a slur the Strom kids have to grow up with, but a little Negro boy an expression they are never at home. As young boys, when Jonah and Joey sing for a church choir they are called negroes, to which Jonah replies: "Oh, ma'am, we're not real Negroes. But our mother is!" (Powers 2003, 28). However, the memory haunts them all their lives. After establishing himself as a soloist, Jonah, cannot escape the racial slur that even cultured music cannot undo when a leading critic writes about him: "becoming one of the finest Negro recitalists this country has ever produced" (Powers 2003, 313). Even the classical music brings home a cold reminder that the society they survive in has its roots in racism and discrimination. The fate of the three Strom children represents the choices that a predominantly white society with a prejudiced musical tradition offers to the children of a mixed-race family. Jonah's choice of classical music brings him success but each success is laced with racial slurs. Joey opts for a more neutral approach by selecting a teaching career for himself, putting aside his musical talent for more creative practices. Ruth, the youngest Storm child, symbolises music's utter failure as a refuge or redressal power when she joins the black political organisation, Black Panther, to find her truth in a world of binaries.

Powers, once again, takes up the political dimension of music in *Orfeo* (2014) which discusses the musical fortunes of Peter Els, the protagonist. Both the novels explore music in terms of identity politics but in varied backgrounds. In *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), music offers a way of avoiding and resisting the dominant discourse of racial discrimination, whereas in *Orfeo* (2014), music is a way of protecting one's individuality and subjectivity. In the former, it empowers the Storm children in their struggle to use music as a way of preserving their racial identity in an otherwise white-dominated society, while in the latter it consoles Peter Els to retain a sense of individuality in an otherwise overtly capitalised world of commercial music. The chemist-turned-musician experiences how music becomes a source of inspiration for an individual who finds the meaning of his life through his compositions: "Nothing can save him but a new piece—something bright and brutal and unforgiving" (Powers 2014, 69). If *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) uses music to talk about the social and racial dimensions of the twentieth century America, *Orfeo* (2014) explores the post 9/11 US through the musical saga of its protagonist.

Music thus becomes a befitting subject for Powers to study social ecology in all its complexity. Powers demonstrates that music, like literature, does not lie in an ideal unidimensional world but is a product of a plethora of social realities that may or may not work out. Thus music, as a pure art form, is not extricable from other social realities and domains. Powers' selection of the use of music as a tool for political and ecological exploration during two very difficult and turbulent times in recent American history alerts the readers about the importance of music in Powers ecological interests. In *Orfeo* (2014), Powers employs music both as a form and subject to answer some of the critical questions in an era of fear during the post-9/11 political and artistic scene where the already existing boundaries and binaries become sharper.

Ecomusicology, which is by no means limited to the exploration of music as a means for social and political identity, also provides the readers with another possible perspective to explore all such spaces and places that come into being when music joins other realms of ecological existence. It works in tangential ways creating new pathways. If in *The Time of our Singing* (2003) Powers brings together musical history and issues of race, time and science, in *Orfeo* (2014) he once again returns to the theme of music combined with musicology, musical history, politics, and bioterrorism. In *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), what separates Delia and Strom from mainstream social identity are their racial and ethnic origins whereas in *Orfeo* (2014) it is Peter Els' ambitious belief in creating extraordinary music that stops him from becoming a mainstream musician. In *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), music is one of the many themes and its exploration is mainly through historical and racial background whereas in *Orfeo* (2014), music is coupled with identity politics of an ideal composer along with bioterrorism and fear culture in the post 9/11 scenario in US politics. Peter Els, the protagonist in Powers' *Orfeo* (2014), is a chemist turned musician, who when we meet him at the beginning of the novel, is teaching music as well as decoding it in the DNA of a specific bacteria in an attempt to save music files for eons to come. Els attempts to do so by splicing the DNA of bacterial human pathogen, *Serratia marcescens*, with his music. When the novel opens, we see him in a small lab in his home with his dog,

Fidelio, who suffers a stroke and out of sheer panic Els calls 911 for help during his dog's last moments. After the dog dies and Els buries him in his backyard. People from the animal protection bureau visit him and report the lab he has set up as suspected to the FBI. In the post 9/11 world, he is hounded by the FBI for once and all.

Powers' choice of Orfeo as his novel's title is telling as it at once reminds the readers of the life and fate of the mythological Greek musician whose name is synonymous with music and musicality. A few important parallels exist between Orpheus and Peter Els, the least of which is not how the two draw their fame through a music which connects with both environmental and ecological dimensions. When Orpheus, "made music, everyone and everything listened. People fell silent, animals clustered around him, and even the trees drooped their branches.... he could enchant even the wildest of beasts" (Mills 2003, 82). Peter Els, the twentieth-century American narrative hero, draws his lifelong lessons in music, from his surroundings, seconds before the FBI enters his daughters's apartment:

The spring wind takes the metal blinds and scrapes them against the window casement. There are sirens, miles away. Fire or violence, someone's life ending. A trickle of radio from a passing car. The chirping of gadgets. The chime of a glockenspiel broadcast from an ice-cream truck three blocks and sixty-six years away. The television of neighbors through the townhouse walls, tuned to the eternal national talent show. The hum of air conditioners, like frogs in the trees. A cheering crowd, an echoing PA. A cloud of buzzing insects and the silent pings of bats that hunt them in crazy knots across the sky. The coursing of blood in the capillaries of your ears. (Powers 2014. 366)

Orpheus' myth serves as an interpretive key for Els' character (Fernandez-Santiago 2019, 129) helping the readers look for intertextual details. Els, like his mythical counterpart, undertakes a katabasis towards the end of the book where he visits his divorced wife, Maddy, while being chased by the FBI. The difference is that for Peter Els his immediate world is fraught with the dangers that Orpheus had to encounter in Hades, where the latter goes to retrieve his dead wife, Eurydice. For both the characters, the saving grace is music: Orpheus with his songs to charm the ferryman and make his dog sleep (Mills 2003, 83), and Els with his tweets to let the world know of his musical truth.

Both Orpheus and Els transgress the limits imposed by nature, hence both need to be punished. Orpheus uses his music to bring his dead wife back from Hades and Els tries to incorporate his music into the DNA of bacteria to "make his great song of the Earth at last—music for forever and for no one . . ." (Powers 2014, 333). Both try to transgress the boundaries reason and nature have placed and both get a punishment that lasts a lifetime. Orpheus, in doubting the very gods he had trusted to win his wife back, is denied Eurydice's return to the world of living when he looks back to ensure that she is coming back. Having been told never to look back until he was out of Hades, Orpheus couldn't bear the suspense, thus once again losing what was already not his. Similarly, Els is trying to achieve the impossible: coding his music in the bacterial DNA and getting punished by the chasing FBI.

According to the myth, Orpheus' head kept on singing even when his body was dismembered by the Maenads, implying the unstoppable power of human creativity and musical expression. Peter Els is not beheaded like Orpheus but he has to flee, leave his teaching position, and stay on the run, tweeting his music. The Greek mythological hero and his modern day equivalent both represent the flow of musical expression even when external circumstances reduce them to nothing. For both, music represents the power of subjectivity and identity, displayed by their struggle to define themselves through music.

Despite many similarities, there are some differences between the mythic hero and an ordinary human character. The focus in Orpheus' myth is on the power of musical expression and to what use Orpheus puts his music. The myth solely engages with his musical dimension, whereas the focus in *Orfeo* (2014) is on Els's life where he is presented with a multitude of choices from the beginning. He prefers music over other choices to the point where he does things with music by incorporating it into the DNA sequences of bacteria. Els in *Orfeo* has to unlearn all the necessary lessons, musical compositions, and his teaching of music to reach a level at which Orpheus existed to see how holistic sound was, in ways that have become imperceptible for modern man. Once he is awakened to the natural sounds and notes around him, he realises the interconnectivity of life forms and how the same music flows through them. Like the music of the spheres, everything exudes its inherent music and there is nothing more musical than



what exists abundantly in nature. None of it can be encompassed by any theory, by any singular frame, as nature defines and defies itself. This is represented through the multiple musical forms that the novel draws from.

Music, for Peter Els, represents his wish to express and exercise his freedom of choice and expression. Powers, in an interview with Angela Becerra Vidergar, throws light on his choice for delineating such a character. He states: “My protagonist, Peter Els, commits himself to an art of challenge and uncertainty and subversion, and in so doing, runs smack into a society intent on keeping themselves safe from the strangeness and individual whim” (Vidergar 2014,3). It can also be studied for his ecomusicological understanding where music is not an isolated field, but one that resonates in every other field too. At fifteen, he is enthralled by chemistry, only to realise later on that “music and chemistry were each other’s long-lost twins: mixtures and modulations, spectral harmonies and harmonic spectroscopy... The formulas of physical chemistry struck him as intricate and divine compositions” (Powers 2014, *Orfeo* 57). Later on in life, it is his interest in biochemistry and music, both of which converge in his experimentation with the bacteria. Els here becomes a mouthpiece for Powers’ ecosophic vision where everything co-exists acknowledging the interconnectivity of all life and art forms. Once faced with the diverging roads in life, Els leaves chemistry to choose music, only to grow old to realise that nothing exists alone. When the FBI declares him a bioterrorist on the basis of his lab equipment, Els finds out that music, like all other fields, is recognised and appreciated only through other social and academic realities.

Ecomusicology has the potential to bring together and create dialogue among multiple fields and subjects within the sciences, the social sciences, arts, and humanities. Just as diversity in an ecosystem indicates health and life, so too does diversity in ecomusicology indicate a healthy field and abundant energy. The very act of Peter Els of writing/decoding music into the DNA of bacteria can be read as discovering new limits in ecomusicological connections. Powers’ choice of connecting bacteria and musical composition is reflective of the ecomusicological structure that *Orfeo* (2014) attains. The novel incorporates at the thematic and structural level the very subject it talks about. The sound of dying dog, Fidelio, signing birds, replicating bacterial DNA, and classical music all fuse with the fear culture in post 9/11 scenario, bioterrorism, music politics, and the production of great music by Messiaen during the Second World War.

The bird songs and other subtler natural sounds that most people have grown up listening to have receded in modern times as digital and mechanical sounds/noises have taken over. Ecomusicology studies these shifting scenarios and their impact on modern life. It does not only look to preserve the environmental ecology but also explore the meaningful ways in which the relationship can be explored. This is where literature transverses ecomusicological studies. In *The Echo Maker* (2006), it is not only the impact of the cranes on the human environment but how changes in ecology affect the crane population and crane behaviour which helps readers explore these concepts from a multi-focal perspective.

*The Echo Maker* (2006) brings together voices from multiple soundscapes and studies all those spaces where voices fuse together. Mark is a young local slaughterhouse worker who drives his own truck. Unfortunately, he has an accident that leaves him unconscious with a severe head injury. To take care of her injured brother, Karin, Mark’s only sister, has to give up her job and life and come back to her hometown Kearney, Nebraska. After being hospitalised, Mark wakes up with some part of his memory gone. He remembers all his former colleagues and friends except his real sister, Karin. The narrative brings together human and animal voices in a comprehensive way which enables researchers to read it as a dimension of ecomusicology: a coming together of music/voices from different perspectives be they human, animal, or machinist.

The novel begins with the sounds of the sandhill cranes when the tired birds arrive on the Platte River and settle down for the night. But it is not the sound of the sandhill cranes that is the sole subject of the novel, but it is the interaction of the bird sounds with a very human endeavour:

A squeal of brakes, the crunch of metal on asphalt, one broken scream and then another rouse the flock. The truck arcs through the air, corkscrewing into the field. A plume shoots through the birds. They lurch off the ground, wings beating. The panicked carpet lifts, circles, and falls again. Calls that seem to come from creatures twice their size

carry miles before fading. (Powers 2006, 4)

The coming together of the metallic ‘crunch’, ‘broken scream’, and ‘wings beating’, describes all that is ecomusicological in this novel: the noise of the millions of birds flapping their wings together in unison with the squeal and crunch of the metallic truck and its wheels on the road. Powers consciously brings together all these sounds, both on the structural and thematic levels, to explore deeper ecosophic connections between different life forms.

The novel is polyphonic to accommodate a wide exhibit of voices and sounds. In its own way, *The Echo Maker* (2006) alerts readers to the importance of sounds that seem to fall outside mainstream human communities: the sandhill cranes and the neurological patients. According to Powers, the human threat to the already receding music of sandhill cranes needs to be listened to before any more damage is done. Ben de Bruyn, in his article “Polyphony Beyond the Human” (2020), analyses how sound plays a crucial role in the novel and attempts to imagine more inclusive communities (de Bruyn 2020, 19). Powers addresses it by the repeated staging of scenes where characters listen attentively to creaturely sounds.

*The Echo Maker* (2006) narrativises the subject of birds and their habitats in a way that can be interpreted as ecomusicological. The novel explores the changing patterns of ecological balance through the study of migratory sandhill cranes. The title of the novel reflects the sound patterns created by millions of these cranes on their way to stay in Nebraska’s Platte River during late winters on their northward journey. The title, ‘The Echo Maker’, has a singular subject because the birds are treated as a species here. Their significance is in their being together in millions rather than an individual bird. Their song is the song of every bird, but it is the collective sound that shapes the soundscape. The novel studies the planning and execution of construction activities in and around the Platte River and its impact on the sandhill cranes.

Like always, Powers uses the dual narrative technique in the novel to talk about the two central strands: the narrative of the sandhill cranes and Mark Schluter’s accident. Primarily a neuro-novel, *The Echo Maker* (2006) studies the psychological dimensions of Capgras syndrome that Mark suffers from after injuring himself in the horrible accident the night the cranes settle down in Kearney, on the Platte River. The details of Mark’s accident, his illness, and rehabilitation are alternately placed with the cranes’ narrative. The birds’ song is the structural and metaphorical echo that forms the background to the psychological drama unfolding in the novel. Powers’ carefully structures the narrative in a way as to reflect the effect of the environmental ecological realities on the human world and vice versa. He removes the distinction between the human and the nonhuman population of sandhill cranes by establishing a posthumanist unity. Powers uses Karin’s character to give words to his condemnation of the destruction of ecosystems in the name of human development: “For an instant, as the hearing turned into an instinctive ritual, it hit her: the whole race suffered from Capgras. Those birds danced like our next of kin, looked like our next of kin, called and willed and parented and taught and navigated all just like our blood relations. Half their parts were still ours” (Powers 2006, 347).

The title ‘*The Echo Maker*’ immediately draws readers’ attention to the sound produced and the subsequent listening of it. The cranes, the echo makers, we are told, have been here for millennia and their song is an inspiration for human growth: “They make a sound, prehistoric, too loud and carrying for their body size” (Powers 2006, 402). The third part of the novel begins with mythical folklore narrating a time when “animals and humans still shared the same language” (Powers 2006, 178). A time when Crane was “the great orator” (Powers 2006, p. 178), and their speech was known everywhere. These mythical details are essential to understanding the connections that Powers wishes his readers to understand. Humans need to acknowledge and register their relationship with the nonhuman world. The music produced by the birds makes us stronger because it helps us understand more about our own interdependence on natural phenomena: “When animals and people all spoke the same language, crane calls said exactly what they meant. Now we live in unclear echoes” (Powers 2006, 180). The segregation from the ecosphere is taking its toll on human beings, be it in the form of becoming racially more discriminating as in *The Time of our Singing* (2003) or distancing ourselves even more from nature as in *The Echo Maker* (2006).

The cranes have been there for eons, guided by an infallible memory that is pitched against the fallible memory of Mark Schluter, whose Capgras syndrome incapacitates him from realising the factual from the fictional;

he keeps thinking that his sister Karin, is not his real sister but an impostor who acts as Karin. The crane has a memory that is handed down in no unmysterious way. Similarly, the song of the sandhill cranes has something immortal about it. It represents a permanence in the middle of ever-changing human activity. The bird songs become a metaphor for the natural sounds:

The nameless bird opened its throat, and out came the wildest music. It sang senselessly.... — the cottonwood and the Platte, the March breeze and rabbits in the undergrowth, ... secrets and rumours, news and negotiation, all of interlocked life talking at once.... Nothing at all was her [and] she felt free of herself, a release bordering on bliss. The bird sang on, inserting its own collapsed song inside all conversation. The timelessness of animals: the kinds of sounds her brother made, crawling out of his coma. (Powers 2006, 59).

Karin, Mark's sister, ultimately understands these sounds in terms of the cross-species message of vulnerability expressed, supposedly, by all prelinguistic cries. The word "timelessness" (Powers 2006, 59) reminds the readers of the sandhill cranes and how we are told they have "converge(d) on the river at winter's end as they have for eons, (Powers 2006, 1). The sound patterns connect humans and animals together at an unconscious level that needs to be dug out to understand the deeper interrelationships.

Powers connects the human and the nonhuman through the sounds. The different kinds of sounds play a decisive role in the novel to help readers imagine more inclusive communities. This is made apparent by the repeated narration of scenes where multiple characters consciously listen to creaturely sounds. Although the patient, Mark Schluter, initially does not 'stop to listen' to animal sounds (Powers 2006, 53), shrugging off 'cicadas on a warm night' (Powers 2006, 61), later on, his nurse, Barbara, encourages him to notice 'the cicada choruses that he hadn't heard since fifteen' (Powers 2006, 305). Daniel Reigel, the dogged but aloof environmentalist similarly pleads Karin to attend more closely to the natural world—an invitation to listen that the book returns to twice: "shrink your sphere of sound inside your sphere of sight" (Powers 2006, 94). If humans listen closely to such sounds, they can understand and appreciate the musical quality of nonhuman sounds, as is shown by the vocalization of sandhill cranes: 'One bugles a melody, four notes of spontaneous surprise. The other picks up the motive and shadows it' (Powers 2006, 537). Even when the human listeners feel excluded from this nonhuman audio, the experience reinforces the sense of a deeper, primordial connection. When Gerald Weber, the psychiatrist whom Karin approaches for Mark's treatment, leaves a loud bar, the calls of owls and coyotes trigger a remarkable perspective reversal which suggests that human noise is no different from other sounds: 'creatures, all of whom heard humans and knew them as just part of the wider network of sounds ... just another swarming node in the vbiome' (Powers 2006, 411). But these are just occasional observations. Humans, drowned in their own sounds or soundproofed from the natural ones, are fast becoming alienated in an isolated bubble. But the bubble cannot stay for long for it would burst and when that happens the sounds of nature triumph: "Extinction is short; migration is long. Nature and its maps will use the worst that man can throw at it. The outcome of owls will orchestrate the night, millions of years after people work their own end" (Powers 2006, 443). The owls' orchestration denotes that environmental sound/ music exists irrespective of human listening but a conscious attempt at attentive listening can help humans look for greater connectivity and understanding that acknowledges the place of humans within the ecosystems.

*The Echo Maker* (2006) is Powers' attempt as stalling his readers from their typical humanistic readings to listen to the sandhill cranes. Literature always works subtly, indirectly to finely tune our imagination to voices that we often overhear or fail to acknowledge completely. Not getting into the debate of what comes first: the critical theory or literature, one can assess the importance of ecological works. In a world where words spread faster than fire choosing the right words for the right purpose is essential. Powers seems to understand the significance of moving beyond the human, the anthropocentric he, towards a wider more inclusive field of play. It's high time that writers narrate the nonhuman ecological tales before even the music gets extinct like so much of the natural world. Powers immortalises the seemingly immortal song of the Sandhill cranes in *The Echo Maker* (2006). W. Alice Boyle and Ellen Waterman study the relationship of bird song with the environment: "The "music" that birds make is dependent upon the environmental context and the nature of their audience"("The

Ecology of Musical Performance: Towards a Robust Methodology 28). To someone like Daniel, the bird song represents the much cared for balance that is needed for the ecological harmony. Karin grows to appreciate the songs but to many others the bird song remains a part of peripheral voices that can easily be silenced through capitalistic games of profit.

Construction industry plans to raise more buildings in order to convert Kearney into a successful tourist site so a greater number of people can come to witness the sandhill cranes stay at Platte. Daniel Reigel can see through the short-term profit making in the plan. The river has already been reduced and the waters are shrinking, and any more human activity will eventually make it unsustainable for the cranes. But the birdsong is in danger of being over. Human activities are taking over the birds' territory. Daniel Reigel, the environmentalist, becomes Powers's spokesperson in raising a voice for the birds' loss at human hands. He struggles throughout the narrative to create awareness regarding the ecological damage that humans are causing to the environment. The novel raises this awareness through the metaphor of cranes' song. The novel begins with the noise generated by millions of birds when they are settling on the wide waters of Platte River in the evening. This sound is taken over first by the loud noise crash of Mark's accident and later on by the human voices. But for the ecosystems to survive each sound needs to co-exist, and the onus for any such survival is on the humans. The construction and tourism businesses are planning to greedily thrive on sandhill cranes migration phenomenon disregarding the fact that these commercial activities, when unchecked, will choke the sounds completely. Music that engages with the environment can help shape human perception of the landscape, which will lead to a deeper understanding of it and of how much of it can be protected from decimation and climate change through sustainable modes of living.

Similarly, *Orfeo* (2014) offers a lot of insight where nature with its infinite tonal symphonies inspires man time and again. One day, while walking in a park, Els comes across a woman with an iPod and headphones who surprises him by her knowledge and understanding of the birds singing around her. Whereas Els can only appreciate the birdsong and its closeness to a symphony by Mozart: "Why listen to anything else, if you can hear that?" (Powers 2014, 78), she can understand more and name the bird too: "White-throated sparrow! She opened her mouth wide, and a clear, bright alto poured out. Poor Sam Peabody-peabody-peabody... The bird answered, and the imitator laughed. ... Oh-migod. I love that bird. I wait for him, every spring" (Powers 2014, 77). The woman seems to be an anomaly in the modern age where gadgets would usually imprison people in their own private sound bubbles, unable to appreciate the musicology of nature. But the song plays for everyone who has the time to listen to it. These are learning experiences for Els who gathers this ecological wisdom wherever it comes from.

Artists and conscious listeners would use natural auditory stimuli to enhance their own creativity. As he sharpens his skills and directs them towards the outer nature, Els realises that music hides everywhere; a leaf has "rhythms" (Powers 2014, 331) inscribed in its veins, a dog splashing in a pond churns up ripples containing 'enough data to encode an entire opera (Powers 2014, 331). Similarly, he is able to see that the mud on his shoes contains billions of small organisms containing "encoded songs", "deafening festivals of invention for anyone who cared to attend" (Powers 2014,332). Els' understanding makes him go for a more creative form to preserve music in the DNA strands of bacteria. Current studies are starting to shed light upon the purposes of bird songs. Birds sing purely for pleasure, at times for courtship, and also for territorial threatening purposes. As Denise Von Glahn observes, "previously, we had identified aesthetic pleasure as a unique characteristic of human music-making" (Allen et al. 2014,24). Human intentions and standards in music making are different from the ones practised by birds and animal. Trying to measure both in the same scale would always bend it in the humans' favour in the anthropocentric world.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, ecomusicology is a dynamic field that gives researchers space to explore new arenas in musical and ecological studies. A study of Powers' work, through the ecomusicological lens, shows how Powers uses the natural sonic world and man-made music to create patterns and motifs that help bridge the nature-culture divide. His books are structures of resistance against the rampant alienation and exploitation of our ecological balance. The need for an ecomusicological inquiry is far greater today when the natural world is facing the tough challenge of looming extinction.

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