

Inclusion and sustainability at ICMPC17

A personal statement by Richard Parncutt

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COMMENTS WELCOME!

To my knowledge, the 17th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition (ICMPC17, Tokyo, August 24-28, 2023) is being planned as an in-person conference without virtual participation. That will effectively screen out most international colleagues in relevant academic disciplines, while at the same time encouraging others to emit large amounts of CO₂. With a few changes, the plan could be made much more inclusive and sustainable.

The global problem

The daily news is increasingly dominated by the catastrophic consequences of human carbon emissions (for current details, search for “climate change” and any one of “heatwave”, “fire”, “flood”, “famine”, or “drought”). A statistical increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather was confirmed two decades ago (Meehl et al., 2000); today, extreme weather is breaking records. Increasingly, causality can be demonstrated for specific weather events (Perkins-Kirkpatrick, et al., 2022). The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted these developments decades ago and was effectively ignored. The IPCC is now predicting a steady worsening in coming decades as global mean surface temperature continues to rise (Pielke et al., 2022). Every fraction of a degree of global temperature rise will increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events.

Global warming is exacerbating existing death rates from direct heat, hunger, disease, violence, migration, and conflict ([Oxfam](#)). Estimates of the current global death rate due to global warming vary from 250,000 per year from 2030 to 2050 ([World Health Organisation](#)) to 5 million per year (Zhao et al., 2021). Future developments will depend on how quickly global emissions can be reduced. Meanwhile, we are witnessing a sixth global mass extinction event (Ceballos & Ehrlich, 2018) and a long-term global downward economic spiral (Gowdy, 2020; Keen, 2021) that was predicted long ago (Meadows et al., 1972). The warnings continue to be ignored.

The UN has been trying to reduce global emissions for three decades. Instead, there has been a steady increase – largely due to the activities of climate deniers and the fossil-fuel industries that support them (Oreskes & Conway, 2011), or merely a stubborn refusal to take the problem seriously. The only significant reductions in global emissions followed the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 covid outbreak (Wang et al., 2021).

Today, about 73% of effective global emissions are from the energy sector (Ritchie, 2020), which includes industry (24%), transport (16%), and buildings (17%). Aviation is currently contributing about 2.5% to global CO₂ and 5% to global warming, the difference being due to other greenhouse emissions. Aviation is a special case because it is elitist: only 2% to 4% of global population flies in a given year and just 1% of world population emits 50% of CO₂ from commercial aviation (Gössling & Humpe, 2020). That is reminiscent of colonialism (Nevis et al., 2022) and linked to racism (Williams, 2021). If everyone in the world flew, aviation might contribute half of global emissions.

Global solutions

To limit warming to 1.5°C (if that is still possible), global emissions must be halved by 2030. That means that the biggest global carbon-burning industries and governments must be radically reformed. At the same time, *people with relatively high carbon footprints must reduce them*.

The problem will only be solved if emissions of all kinds are reduced, at all levels. We no longer have time to prioritize one strategy over another or to wait for others to reduce their emissions first. We must unilaterally reduce our emissions within our field of influence, and on that basis argue that others must reduce (Lépissier & Mildemberger, 2021).

In recent years, global air traffic (in passenger-kilometers) has increased faster (approx. 5%/year; Fleming & Ziegler, 2013; Lee et al., 2021) than the energy efficiency of aircraft (2%/year: Kharina et al. 2016). Electric planes and sustainable aviation fuels will make little difference to that trend in the next decade, although research in both areas must be promoted for the longer term. The aviation industry's published plans to globally reduce emissions, including the CORSIA offsetting scheme, are implausible (InfluenceMap, 2022). Public information on aviation is dominated by greenwashing ([Stay Grounded](#)). If emissions in all sectors must be halved by 2030, have no choice but to fly less (Planès et al., 2021).

Kant (1785) argued that we should "act only according to that maxim whereby we can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (categorical imperative). Put simply, we should be the change we want to see. That is in the best interests of everyone, because global warming will affect everyone. In particular, it is in the best interests of the academic discipline of music perception and cognition, which will suffer as a result of global warming in the same way as every other academic discipline.

Some people are better placed to lead the sustainability transition than others. Likely leaders include those who understand the problem in its interdisciplinary complexity and those who have the financial means to make a difference (Rakete, 2021). Researchers with academic positions therefore have a special obligation.

Relevance for the ICMPC

In the past few years, ICMPC's Executive Committee (EC) has repeatedly discussed these issues. In some cases, we made progress, in others not. Some members even argued that the Executive Committee has no mandate.

Meanwhile, colleagues all over the world are visiting the new ICMPC17 homepage, wondering how virtual presentations will work, and if not, who is responsible. Current plans suggest that there will be no virtual presentations, consistent with a proposal that was correctly submitted and approved by the previous EC chair in 2020.

I have been speaking to colleagues in South America, Africa, and India about this issue, and they tend to agree with the following:

- Hardly anyone from the Global South can afford to fly to Japan. An “in-person” format effectively eliminates participation from the Global South.
- Cost is not the only problem. After covid, we can no longer rely on aviation. Cancellations and delays have become more frequent.
- Global warming – largely caused by the Global North – can no longer be ignored, and it will affect colleagues in the Global South even more than the North.

But this new situation can also be seen as an academic opportunity. By taking advantage of emerging technologies, we can fly less while at the same time aspiring to the highest academic standards (Kreil, 2021). We can simultaneously make our conferences more inclusive and more sustainable (Parncutt et al., 2019, 2021; Parncutt & Seither-Preisler, 2019). We can promote interdisciplinary outreach by showing colleagues in other disciplines how best to reform their conference traditions.

Specific proposals

Given these various factors, and on behalf of the many colleagues who depend on the ICMPC to disseminate their research findings, I respectfully ask organizers of ICMPC17, under the leadership of Dr Masanobu Miura, to make the following changes to their conference planning:

1. Ensure that any expert in music perception and cognition, regardless of geographic location or financial means, can participate actively in ICMPC17 if their abstract submission is accepted.
2. Limit carbon emissions by limiting live participation to colleagues from the local region of Japan, China, and Korea.
3. Offer a well-developed virtual program that ensures a satisfying conference experience for remote participants, including formal and informal personal communication with other virtual and on-location participants, and taking advantage of the latest technological developments.

These changes could be made relatively quickly and easily. Moreover, at the time of writing (October 2022, after the call for papers in September), there is still plenty of time.

Unfortunately, it is too late to implement a multi-hub solution with hubs on different continents, which to my knowledge is the best option. However, this option is planned for future conferences.

Please note that this is a personal request. Even as president of the ICMPC Executive Committee, I do not have the right to demand these changes from the conference organizers.

Reflections

Not all researchers in music perception and cognition are free to make personal statements of this kind. Depending on country or nationality, expressing one's opinion can be dangerous. I am one of the lucky ones with freedom speech. Most of us can exercise that freedom, provided we do not infringe the rights of others. We can raise our voices and be heard, and change things for the better. We also have the freedom to ignore the personal statements or opinions of others.

This proposal is *democratic* in the following ways:

- The EC is currently equally split 3:3 between those who favor climate action and those who do not. Note, however, that the organizer of ICMPC17 is himself currently a member of the EC. If he is omitted from voting due to his conflict of interest, the EC is 3:2 in favor of climate action.
- The surveys on conference formats held at the end of ICMPC15 in 2018 and ICMPC16 in 2021 suggested that a majority of colleagues in music perception and cognition are in favor of conference formats that are both more sustainable and more inclusive than the traditional single-location model.
- The planned format of ICMPC17 in 2023 contradicts ESCOM climate policy (see ESCOM homepage), ESCOM being one of three main societies participating in ICMPC. To my knowledge, neither SMPC nor APSCOM have a climate policy.
- This proposal promotes the interests of a majority of international experts in music perception and cognition, including those who will not participate in ICMPC17, either because they cannot afford the combination of registration, travel, and accommodation, or because they prefer not to fly for environmental reasons.
- This proposal promotes the interests of younger colleagues, who will be affected more than older people by global warming. Senior colleagues may not be fairly representing the views of junior colleagues on this point, and junior colleagues may be hesitant to voice their opinion for fear of career consequences.
- This proposal is consistent with relevant recent work on decolonization and cross-cultural research, both within and outside our discipline (Adams et al., 2015; Baker et al., 2020; Chávez & Skelchy, 2019; Crumley-Effinger & Torres-Olave, 2021; Jacoby et al., 2020; Savage et al., in press).

Taken together, the above points suggest that a majority of international colleagues in music perception and cognition will agree with the general direction of this statement. If so, both the conference organizers and the entire discipline will benefit from adjusting the conference format in the recommended ways.

As current EC chair, I have the following explicit or implicit responsibilities:

- to ensure that central problems surrounding the ICMPC are acceptably solved in the interest of a majority of international colleagues;
- to ensure that younger and older colleagues, colleagues in different global regions, and those who can and cannot attend our conferences (for whatever reason), are treated equally; and
- to ensure that our research does not harm humans, non-human animals, or the natural environment – especially if promising non-harmful alternatives are available.

As a relatively privileged human, I have a moral obligation to represent the interests of voiceless young people everywhere in the world, and future generations — those whose lives are currently being destroyed by greenhouse gas emissions. As EC chair, I am co-responsible when colleagues from Europe and North America burn a tonne of fossil carbon each to attend the conference, producing roughly four tonnes of CO₂. (Accurate estimates of equivalent carbon emissions for specific routes can be checked [here](#).)

I would welcome a constructive and respectful discussion of this proposal that focuses on *the main issues*. In my opinion, the main issues are:

- the right to life, and the right to quality of life, of all young people and future generations everywhere; and
- the responsibility of privileged academics to contribute constructively to the solution of global problems.

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