

Article

Curating Awareness and Hope: Performing Field and Finzi as Gentle Climate Activism

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Abstract

This article presents an autoethnographic narrative account of curating and performing two pieces for solo piano and string orchestra—*Climate Concerto* by Brian Field and *Eclogue* by Gerald Finzi—to advocate for climate action. It discusses the selection of a concert venue that could be “thickly lived”, offering layers of cultural, historical and aesthetic resonance, and a concert date that could generate “interaction chains”, where engagement in one event motivates engagement in others. The article reflects on the multiple forms of loss brought about by the climate emergency, exploring Field’s musical portrayal of environmental loss and Finzi’s evocation of a harmonious human-nature relationship, which highlights a way of being-in-the-world that has been lost. In response to pervasive pessimism and dystopian narratives in climate communication, the discussion foregrounds hope as a powerful motivator for positive action, showing how the narrative scope of Field’s large-scale forms and the aesthetic beauty of Finzi’s music can elicit felt hope. The article also advocates for gentle musical activism for climate action, emphasising music’s capacity to cultivate relational sensitivity, ethical responsiveness, and collective responsibility toward each other and the world—even amid ecological crisis, social fragmentation, and uncertainty.

Keywords: artistic citizen; climate emergency; ecological self; environmental humanities; interaction chains; gentle musical activism; hopefulness; loss; musical greenfluencer; place as lived experience

1. Introduction

15 June 2025. It is a busy concertising period, and I am poised to cross the threshold from the green room to the stage for the third time in ten days. This time, however, I feel the responsibility of my artistic-citizen role as a performer—its emotional and moral charge—with heightened intensity. Following a familiar pre-performance pattern, I muse on the two remarkable works I am about to perform, attune myself to the tactile qualities of the instrument I will play, share a brief “enjoy” with my performance partners, and wonder whether any familiar faces will be in the audience. Tonight, though, as I stand ready to step into the light, my thoughts carry me well beyond this hall toward events happening with alarming frequency, and the anguish of people in distant lands touches me: I grieve for the 19 lives ended and more than 10,000 displaced only yesterday in Kinshasa, Congo, after violent rains; for the 103 people who perished and the 4000 left homeless in Cape Town, South Africa, after last week’s storms and floods; and for the devastation in Blatten, Switzerland, where the collapse of a glacier a couple of weeks ago triggered avalanches and debris that destroyed an entire village—all stark reminders of the accelerating volatility of our earth’s climate. And all this even before I grapple with the human suffering caused by ongoing wars and conflicts around the globe. I try to re-channel the sense of despair and desolation that overcomes me by recalling the



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restorative encounter with nature and the chorus of birdsong at sunrise last week, during the Dawn Chorus Walk in London as part of The Great Big Green Week—UK’s annual climate action festival. I make a conscious effort to direct my attention to the two pieces I will perform: the first begins with a beautiful, extended piano solo, and I am briefly transported to my previous experiences of performing the opening of Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4¹ and Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 2.² I prepare, once again, to gently coax my fellow musickers in the hall—the conductor, colleagues in the orchestra, and audience alike—into an intimate, intersubjectively shared space with my solo entry, where something transformative might transpire for all of us. Feeling ready for this relational field that will emerge through our collective presence, my attention settles on the intention behind the curation of the two pieces I am about to play: to raise awareness, to inspire hope, and to awaken an affective community—one that will hold both beauty and the weight of a critical historical moment, and will feel motivated to transform felt experience into action in the face of a global emergency, vast in scale and unevenly lived across the globe, yet pressing in its stark reality. Still in the green room, a sense of belonging and solidarity with this imagined affective community takes hold of me. As I walk on stage, I embark on what I hope will be a deeply humanising musical experience, one that will reveal a mode of being-in-the-world that encourages wise reflection and a sense of collective responsibility in the face of the climate emergency and the threat it poses to our planet and our species.³

A universal human practice and form of expression, music is woven inseparably and distinctively into the fabric of each culture, and musical experience, tapping deeply into our biological and social nature, can have profound impacts on the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of our being. Extensive research on human musicality and the role of music in human experience attests to music’s extraordinary power to nurture our inner lives while also enabling meaningful connections with others and the world: music not only creates subjective contexts for cultivating aesthetic sensibility, affective awareness, personal identity, self-reflection, transformation, and critical consciousness, but also generates intersubjective encounters that invite embodied resonance and affective attunement, affording the development of collective identities and solidarities (e.g., [Small 1998](#); [DeNora 1999](#); [Cross 2005](#); [Love 2006](#); [Turino 2008](#); [Cobussen and Nielsen 2012](#); [Schulkin and Raglan 2014](#); [Clarke et al. 2015](#); [Malloch and Trevarthen 2018](#); [Möller 2020](#); [Bowman 2021](#); [Frishkopf 2022](#); [McDonald et al. 2022](#); [Ansani et al. 2024](#); [Reybrouck 2024](#); [Doğantan-Dack 2025](#); [Tukachinsky Forster et al. 2025](#)).

Beyond fostering personal and collective growth, musicking can also offer a particularly compelling means to imagine alternative, and better, worlds ([Hess 2021](#)) by engaging “foresight”, the distinctive human ability to construct and explore future possibilities ([Sudendorf et al. 2022](#))—enduringly exemplified by John Lennon’s “Imagine” and its cultural legacy.⁴ By inspiring humans to envision what could be, musicking can, in turn, scaffold collective resistance to, and subversion of, unjust and oppressive power structures in society and culture. As [Malloch and Trevarthen \(2018\)](#) remind us, music—with its vast range of personal and social affordances—is indeed “at the centre of what it means to be human”.

It is precisely for this reason that music—and musicking in all its manifestations—must be an integral part of the efforts to address, tackle, and resolve the unprecedented challenges currently facing humanity, brought about by human choices, not least “the urgent and existential threat posed by climate change”, formally recognised as such for the first time by the United Nation’s main judicial authority, the International Court of Justice, on 23 July 2025 ([International Court of Justice \(ICJ\) 2025](#), ¶ 73; also see [Popovski 2024](#)). In her 2022 article titled “How can music help us to address the climate crisis?”, Helen Prior draws insights from music psychology to argue that the emotional and social power of music may foster engagement with the climate crisis. She notes that, at first glance, “music might seem irrelevant to this problem, and the notion that music could be viewed as an

important tool in addressing climate change might seem naïve or even ridiculous” (Prior 2022, p. 2). However, since the climate crisis is fundamentally driven by, and can be likewise mitigated or even reversed through human behaviour, dismissing music as immaterial risks overlooking a potentially valuable resource: “if we simply assume that music is irrelevant, then we might miss something helpful” (ibid.). For all musickers, adopting such an assumption and thereby turning away from engagement with the urgent climate issue through musical interventions would also constitute an abdication of responsibility.

My own musical practice has evolved over the last decade to embrace the roles of artist–citizen and artist–researcher, and I actively seek contexts to mobilise music-making as a means of civic participation, and develop critical and reflective discourses through which such engagement can be amplified and advanced. At the present historical juncture, marked by the convergence of multiple global crises of unprecedented scale, the notion that musicians can justifiably concern themselves only with the preparation and delivery of technically and expressively brilliant performances appears particularly indefensible. Given the skills musicians hone over many years to move, to unite, to inspire, to heal and to motivate audiences, failing to apply these skills to critical and civic engagement with the pressing issues of our time would constitute a profound missed opportunity. Driven by this conviction, when a collaborative artistic opportunity to address the climate emergency as a pianist–scholar arose in 2023, I felt highly motivated to commit to it and explore how my artist–citizen and artist–researcher roles might enable a meaningful response to this unfolding crisis. This project ultimately culminated in a live orchestral concert in London in the summer of 2025. In this article, I reflect on and engage in an autoethnographic narrative enquiry into my curation and performance of two pieces for solo piano and string orchestra as part of this concert, which sought to mobilise the wide-ranging capacities of musical experience to elicit aesthetic, reflective, emotional, and socio-political engagement in order to advocate for climate action. The research presented here focuses on the *curatorial intentions, artistic decisions, and reflective processes* that shaped this musical intervention, tracing how climate-conscious meanings and affects, as experienced by one particular artist–researcher, were intentionally embedded in the program to serve as an artistic *invitation* to foster greater awareness of, and hopeful engagement with, the climate emergency. While the research design did not involve gathering audience data to investigate whether, and to what extent, the audience’s lived experiences resonated with this invitation, future research on musical interventions aimed at inspiring positive engagement with the climate emergency would benefit from incorporating audience-centred approaches, since investigating how audiences receive such programs could provide crucial insight for further developing socially and environmentally engaged curatorial practices in the classical genre.

In their editorial for the *Journal of Autoethnography* titled “Good Autoethnography” (2023), Adams and Hermann highlight the role and value of the researcher’s situated and nuanced positioning in the process of knowledge production within an autoethnographic framework, writing that “Your mind, body, instincts and intuitions, interests, emotions, experiences, perspectives, values and beliefs, and everything else makes you a one-of-a-kind research instrument”, and that as readers of autoethnographic research “We want to experience the world through your senses and your voice, and we want to learn about topics that you find worthy of your energy and attention” (Adams and Herrmann 2023, 4). Furthermore, as Ronald Pelias suggests in his seminal work titled *A Methodology of the Heart* (Pelias 2004), a central purpose of autoethnographic narrative writing is to create resonance or “me too” moments for the readers. An autoethnographer never writes merely about private, inward-looking experience, bordering on solipsism; she is, instead, always oriented towards generating meaning for the benefit of others. In this sense, autoethnographic narrative enquiry is a thoroughly intersubjective and relational endeavour. In line with

these perspectives, by employing this research method to share and reflect on my lived experiences of curating and performing a classical music concert program, I aim to generate resonance in my readers and inspire them to engage in future musical interventions as a form of climate advocacy. My starting position for this enquiry is that, similar to the research method I adopt, curating musical experiences is inherently relational and socio-culturally situated. As Wernicke and Kunkel write, “Curating makes us think about the interconnection of the aesthetic/conceptual aspects and the socio-political dimension of . . . what is actually happening when people come together in a room to experience music together. It allows us to reflect on the meaning of the relationships that we create between the different agents” (Wernicke and Kunkel 2023, p. 2).

I also aim in this article to extend, across space and time, the performative impact of the concert under discussion, by giving narrative form to some of its features, and enabling them to resonate beyond its immediate, lived sonic dimension, and beyond the brief programme notes, which adhered to the conventional style and offered contextual information on the composers and the pieces, and pre-concert remarks. It is important to emphasise that music does not actualise its socio-cultural impact through sonic patterns alone, and that in achieving this aim it relies on its intimate alliance with language. Indeed, one of the remarkable aspects of music is its capacity to generate socially and culturally situated discourses. The experience of musicking universally encourages the creation and expression of verbal meaning about its various dimensions—e.g., what it is, what it does, why it matters—through culturally specific evaluative and normative frames. As Cook notes, music “never is ‘alone’” and “is always received in a discursive context” (Cook 2001, p. 180, emphasis in original), and a musical culture “is as much as anything a historically transmitted way of talking about music” (Cook 1999, p. 10). Consequently, the ways musical experiences and musicking practices are talked about become a constitutive dimension of those experiences, rather than merely supplementing them. By writing, as an artist–researcher, about my experiences of curating and performing music for climate activism, I thus extend my musicking and its performative force beyond the concert venue—and beyond mere documentation—to continue fostering awareness, reflection and collective action.

2. Music as Advocacy Amid the Climate Emergency: Initial Considerations

Since 2004, Oxford University Press has been annually designating a “Word of the Year”, selected with input from its language research and development team, lexicographers, and the public. The choice is based on data from around 150 million words of contemporary English, and highlights words that are newly coined, rapidly gaining usage, or used in novel ways, capturing the cultural shifts or defining moments—the zeitgeist—of the year. In 2019, the Word of the Year was “climate emergency”, surpassing all “other types of emergency to become the most written about emergency by a huge margin, with over three times the usage frequency of health, the second-ranking word” (Oxford Languages 2025). The term not only indicated the surging global concern but also revealed the inadequacy of terms such as “climate change”, “global warming”, or even “environmental crisis” to capture the gravity of the situation and the magnitude of the risk, as grounded in scientific data, suggesting that we are “at ‘code red’ on planet Earth” (Ripple et al. 2022; see also NASA 2024; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) 2023).

Alongside this growing sense of urgency, there has been increasing recognition that the arts and humanities can play vital roles in educating the public, raising awareness, and inspiring impactful action in response to the climate emergency. Climate Humanities, also known as Environmental Humanities, is now an established interdisciplinary area of

inquiry (e.g., Sörlin 2012; Holm et al. 2015; Heise et al. 2017; Kueffer et al. 2017; Robin 2018; Cole 2023; Mora and Cobos 2025), with research centres and degree programs proliferating globally. Reflecting a core principle of Environmental Humanities that arts have “the capacity to trigger the cultural change needed to deal with the socio-environmental crisis” (Sanz and Rodriguez-Labajos 2021; see also Robin 2018), the number of artists using their work to engage the public with climate issues and encourage proactive responses has also been on the rise (Blanc and Benish 2017; Hanh and Berkers 2024; see also Brown 2014; Reiss 2019; Sommer and Klöckner 2021). Awards such as the international *Laurel Prize for Poetry* (annual since 2019, for “the best collection of nature or environmental poetry to highlight the climate crisis”, Armitage n.d.); the international *World Around Young Climate Prize* (biannual since 2022, for individuals under 25 working on climate-focused design and architecture projects), and the UK-based annual *New English Art Club (NEAC) Climate Emergency Prize* (since 2025, for an artwork addressing the climate crisis) attest to the growing valuation of creative contributions to tackling climate and environmental issues.

Unsurprisingly, many musicians have joined the growing movement of artists who use their work to connect audiences with urgent environmental concerns (May 2024). Well-known examples from popular music include “Love song to Earth” created in 2015 by 16 international musicians; “All the good girls go to hell” (2019) by Billie Eilish; and Brian Eno’s 2022 album *ForeverAndEverNoMore*. Notable commitments to climate advocacy in the classical genre are embodied by Orchester des Wandels, founded in Germany in 2009 by professional musicians who regard the “protection of the climate, nature and species as part of our cultural mission. . . [and] want to use the emotional power of music to reach and inspire people” (Orchester des Wandels n.d.); Orchestra for the Earth established in 2018 in the UK, which emphasises that “The solutions to climate change lie [sic] [in] cultural change, and that is where we can make a genuine difference” (Orchestra for the Earth n.d.); violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja’s *Dies Irae* project, a staged concert-theatre experience (premiered in 2017, and performed at the 2021 UN Climate Conference, COP26, in Glasgow) that reflects on humanity’s relationship with ecological collapse; musical works by composers such as Tim Kliphuis, Steve Heitzeg, and John Adams, written “to help us navigate this perilous era of our own creation” (Adams quoted in May 2024); and cellist Trey Lee’s album *Seasons Interrupted* (2024), which “has allowed me to construct a narrative that expresses something that is becoming more palpable with the passing of the seasons: anxiety from the looming climate crisis” (Lee 2024). I should also mention that the leading music industry labels—Universal, Sony and Warner—have formed a Music Industry Climate Collective (MICC) in 2023 “to address the pressing challenges and profound changes in global climate” (Universal Music Group (UMG) 2023). In the same year, the Musicians’ Union in the UK has created a Climate Emergency Group to look “inwardly and outwardly at ways the Union, the wider music industry and the Government can address the climate emergency”, and issued in 2025 a Climate Manifesto that “commits to the ongoing care, stewardship and regeneration of the planet including all its inhabitants, flora, fauna, landscape and natural life” (Musicians Union (MU) 2025).

In my own artistic practice, particularly over the last decade, I have increasingly taken on the role of social change agent (Hill 2022), and the promotion of socially engaged music-making that connects with communities has become a highly valued and personally meaningful part of what I do as a musician. This involves working with community organisations, promoting local venues, collaborating with local musicians and fundraising for urgent causes. In seeking to contribute to social change, I have founded and served as the artistic director of two community orchestras in London—Ensemble Vita Nova and Ensemble Luce (Ham & High 2019)—bringing together professional, experienced amateur, and student musicians. I have also organized and performed in various fundraising

concerts—e.g., for the victims of the Grenfell Tower disaster (2017), a devastating fire in a 24-storey residential building in London that killed 72 people and injured many more, and for the thousands of Ukrainian refugees fleeing war since 2022.

Hence, when the American composer Brian Field invited me in February 2023 to review the score of his “Three Passions for our Tortured Planet” for solo piano—a composition motivated by “the astonishing number of people I encountered who were in denial of what is happening to our environment” (Field quoted in [No Dead Guys 2022](#)), and completed in 2021 in order “to create an ongoing, global cadence of awareness to keep [the climate] issue top of mind and spur subsequent action” ([Stereo Stickman 2022](#))—I was immediately interested and eager to join this vital initiative. “Three Passions” had already won several awards in 2022—Gold Prize at the Global International Music Competition, Platinum Prize at the North American Virtuoso International Music Competition, and the Absolute First Prize at the UK International Music Competition—and had already been performed and recorded by various pianists globally. Field explained his choice of solo piano medium for this work by noting that he wanted to make it “logistically easier to work into concert programs when one can be less concerned about finding rehearsal time with other ensemble members” ([Stereo Stickman 2022](#)). While I could foresee that participating in this project as a solo pianist would be highly rewarding both musically and as a form of activism, I was convinced from the start that an orchestral version of the “Three Passions” could powerfully symbolise and embody the collaborative effort and collective commitment that action on the climate emergency demands; through an orchestrated version, its urgent message could be delivered collectively, and the hope we need to take action could be voiced together as one resonant expression.

In the research literature, ensemble performance is often conceptualised as a micro-cosm of human relationality and sociality, serving as a cite for joint action, cooperation, and attentive listening, where diverse roles converge towards shared goals, and where participants develop self-awareness, self-confidence, trust, empathy, collective identity, and affective solidarity, as well as critical thinking and effective communication skills (e.g., [Keller et al. 2016](#); [Bishop 2018](#); [Doğantan-Dack 2022](#); [Bussy and Mangiarulo 2024](#); [Doğantan-Dack 2024](#))—skills and experiences that will prove invaluable as individuals and communities work together with care and resolve to address the climate emergency. “In times of distress and uncertainty”, classical orchestras “can serve as communicative spaces that offer a sense of connection, inclusion, hope and unity; ...[and] help communities process grief and provide emotional support” ([Kolokytha 2025](#), p. 3). Furthermore, there is empirical evidence indicating that “the orchestral audience in the UK is growing”, and that “a record number of British adults [eight in ten] want to experience an orchestral concert” ([Royal Philharmonic Orchestra \(RPO\) 2024](#)). With these considerations in mind, and relying on the extensive connections I have with various ensembles and orchestras across London, I approached Field to explore the possibility of orchestrating the “Three Passions”—a conversation that ultimately led to the creation of the *Climate Concerto* in three movements for string orchestra and solo piano, completed in March 2024.

[Manners et al. \(2015\)](#) note that putting on “live music performances requires a great deal of planning, organising, leading, controlling resources, coordinating and communicating on many levels in order to achieve specific objectives. ...[and] is furthermore an intense and difficult task that requires common sense, imagination and experience”. When planning a classical music concert, there are crucial logistical considerations beyond artistic negotiations and decisions, foremost among them securing the performers, a venue and a performance date. Hence, my first step upon receiving the full score of the new concerto from the composer was to contact the artistic director of the London Concert Sinfonia, the violinist George Hlawizcka, with whom I had collaborated in numerous projects over the

years. Some of these collaborations involved presenting world premieres of works for piano and orchestra by London-based women composers (e.g., “Jovanka” by Elizabeth Norden, 2018). As I had anticipated, Hlawiczka, who not only champions new works alongside canonic repertoire but also acts as an influential ambassador for building cultural bridges globally through classical music ventures (e.g., [The Chennai Chapter 2014](#)), welcomed the opportunity to program the premiere of the *Climate Concerto* with enthusiasm. However, considering our busy performing schedules for the rest of 2024, we agreed to plan the world premiere for 2025. In any case, given that London is a global hub for classical music where large numbers of live performances take place daily, booking the desired venue and date can take a considerable amount of time. London Concert Sinfonia does not maintain a fixed home venue, but performs across the capital, bringing live music to diverse spaces that range from major concert halls such as St John’s Smith Square to smaller community centres and churches. This operational approach allowed us flexibility in selecting the most appropriate venue for the world premiere of the *Climate Concerto*. During this process, we were guided by our own experiences as performers and artistic directors, as well as research demonstrating the significant influence of performance space on audience experience.

For the majority of the twentieth century, the dominant approach in music scholarship regarded musical experience as a disembodied, objective appreciation of autonomous tonal structures—of “tonally moving forms” ([Hanslick \[1854\] 1986](#), p. 29), or “the music itself” ([Cusick 1994](#)). As late as 1996, statements such as “The listener’s and performer’s experience of a musical piece can be described as a conceptual structure, an abstract message that specifies the relevant musical relationships in a piece” ([Palmer 1996](#), p. 25) could thus be articulated as part of the widespread normalisation of this formalist ideology. The performative turn that brought about a scholarly paradigm shift from an understanding of music-as-text to music-as-performance during the twenty-first century dismantled this formalist approach and challenged the sharp division between “the musical” and “the extra-musical”, rejecting conceptions of musical experience that exclude human presence and the socially and culturally situated contexts of production and reception. The fundamental assumption of the performance studies approach is that musical experience is always situated, not only socio-culturally and personally, but also in space and time, and that, consequently, in studying performances, no aspect of the performance environment—whether material, symbolic, or psychological—“can be discounted as irrelevant to its impact” ([Kershaw 1992](#), p. 22). As Cook notes, “the concept of the extra-musical is simply inapplicable to performance” ([Cook 2013](#), p. 332): every facet of a performance context has the potential to contribute to the musical experience that unfolds. In this sense, just as a performer’s experience of a musical performance begins before the first note is played, even in the green room ([Doğantan-Dack 2014](#)), a listener’s musical experience at a live concert is influenced by anticipation and expectation regarding various aspects of the event, not least the place and time of the performance ([Pitts 2005](#)).

Psychological and phenomenological inquiry into place as lived experience highlights its foundational significance in human life, demonstrating how it resonates bodily and affectively, and thereby shapes meaning-making and behaviour ([Duff 2010](#); [Seamon 2013](#)). One of the important assumptions in this literature is that places are not neutral spaces: they generate distinctive affective atmospheres and so-called emotional geographies (e.g., [Relph 1976](#); [Davidson et al. 2007](#); [Duff 2010](#); [Michels 2015](#); [Galvez-Pol et al. 2021](#)). In this connection, Edward Casey’s distinction between “thick” (or “thickly lived”) and “thin” places ([Casey 2001a, 2001b](#)) has become an influential conceptual tool for understanding the connections between affect, self, identity, lived experience and place.⁵ According to Casey, thick places are permeated by memories, histories, narratives, and lived experiences that cultivate a sense of belonging and personal enrichment, and invite “concernful absorp-

tion” or intently engaged, involved attentiveness (Casey 2001a). Thin places, by contrast, are spatially present but do not afford personal and social meaning- and value-making; they are generic, instrumental, impersonal—like corporate meeting rooms with standard designs that feel interchangeable. According to Casey, a thickly lived place “helps us grasp the particular place we are in as the particular person who we are” (Casey 2001a, p. 684). In other words, it has a self-revealing quality that not only engages us with its particular material features but also deepens our awareness of *ourselves* as situated, embodied, affectively attuned and responsive beings in that moment. This kind of awareness is crucial for engaging meaningfully with the climate emergency as it encourages us to recognise ourselves not as external spectators of ecological realities, but as ecological actors co-constituting and co-responsible for these realities.

Music performance venues are similarly more than neutral settings for musicking, and can be more or less thickly lived and actively contribute to the emergent meanings of a performance, co-constituting the affective experiences that musical sounds afford. Empirical studies provide evidence that “The concert venue has a decisive effect on the listeners’ experience in classical music concerts” (Tröndle et al. 2025; see also Burland and Pitts 2014). Factors such as the location, acoustics, spatial layout, architectural aesthetics, and historical associations of a performance venue can all add to its atmosphere, impact the interactions between performers and audiences, and shape how the music is experienced, remembered and talked about (Winslow 2024; Chordwell 2024). As Whiting argues, “live musical performances need to be ‘read’ (or heard) as embedded in the unique, located, aesthetic and multi-sensory richness of the sites in which they take place” (Whiting 2021). Research also suggests that smaller venues foster a heightened sense of intimacy, with closer proximity to performers enhancing audience engagement and participation (Dobson 2008). Guided by these insights, our search for the “right” venue led us to St Stephen’s Church in South Kensington—a place that could be thickly lived thanks to its aesthetic, historical and cultural resonances, as well as an unexpected, and poetic, connection to our climate advocacy. Built in 1867, St Stephen’s is a remarkable Victorian church, with an elegant interior and an intimate performance space with excellent acoustics. Visitors describe the atmosphere it offers as “an oasis of calm” (Girl Gone London 2022) and note that “The steepled stone church evokes a village church, with its gables and glass, its garden. . .[uniting] the sense of intimacy and reverence, of the immanent and the eminent. . .[and]. . .a comfortable feeling of coming home” (Sunderland 2010). Evening lighting is gentle and nuanced in illuminating the space unevenly: it invites a contemplative attentiveness to the music and the performers. St Stephen’s is also a strong multi-cultural community hub committed to social action; it is known for serving the homeless and the marginalised, with volunteers welcoming up to 100 guests each week for hot meals and clothing. Its proximity to the Royal Albert Hall and the Royal College of Music situates the venue at the heart of London’s musical ecosystem. This central London location offers an additional environmental benefit, as performers and audiences could travel to the concert by public transport, walking or cycling, thereby reducing the carbon footprint compared with suburban or rural venues (Association of British Orchestras (ABO) 2010; Brennan 2020; Independent Society of Musicians (ISM) 2022). Reducing travel impact through choice of concert venue aligns with an emergent shift in the classical music world, where performers and organisations—e.g., the London Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Orchestra for the Earth, EcoClassica, Aldeburgh Festival—are increasingly adopting strategies to reduce carbon emissions in relation to touring and event planning (Røyseng et al. 2025; also see Narayan and Srivastava 2025).

Of particular significance for our concert was St Stephen’s status as a cultural landmark due to its association with T. S. Eliot, who served as churchwarden for twenty-five years from

the mid-1930s. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has been widely interpreted through an ecocritical lens, and as a striking precursor of contemporary climate awareness (e.g., [Berry 2011](#); [Griffiths 2013](#); [McIntire 2015](#); [Parashar 2015](#); [Chahal 2023](#); [Xie 2023](#)). McIntire writes that

“Whether he knew it or not, Eliot was writing a version of what we would now call ecopoetics, or ecocriticism. . . . Emerging as a distinct approach within the humanities over the last few decades, influenced by environmental studies and ecology, ecocriticism pays attention to the ways in which sensitivities and awarenesses of our environmental milieus make their way into aesthetic expression. . . . Eliot, in this sense, seems already aware of the terrifying breaches that a ‘post-natural’ world signifies between ‘nature’ and ‘the human,’ where ‘nature’ is profoundly unbalanced by the effects of the human on a global scale even as we spectacularly fail to bear adequate witness to the massiveness and irreversibility of these changes. *The Waste Land*, in other words, comments on the cultural, personal, and ecological consequences of modern industrialization that we feel increasingly today”. ([McIntire 2015](#), pp. 181–82)

In choosing St Stephen's for the world premiere of the *Climate Concerto*, we thus hoped that the rich layers of cultural, historical and aesthetic resonance it affords would render it a thickly lived space, actively participating in our climate advocacy and helping to transform the performance into an invitation to environmental reflection and action.

As with the choice of venue, the selection of the concert date was approached as a significant curatorial decision aimed at potentially enhancing the impact of the world premiere of the *Climate Concerto*. While St. Stephen's offered alternative dates between January and July 2025, we opted for a date in June, the month during which other significant events related to the climate emergency were scheduled to take place in London. When organising a concert that engages with current social, cultural, and environmental concerns, situating it in close temporal proximity to other thematically aligned events can significantly enhance its reach and impact by generating “interaction chains” where participation in one event increases the likelihood of engagement with others ([Collins 2004](#)). This strategy creates a collective experiential momentum that can broaden dialogue around the climate emergency across different formats and platforms. The concert itself becomes embedded within a wider lived social context and public discourse, rather than functioning as just another date on the cultural calendar. In June 2025, two major climate-related initiatives were planned in London: the London Climate Action Week, Europe's largest climate festival that “aims to demonstrate ‘the whole of society’ engagement needed to support the delivery of decarbonisation and resilience as well as stimulate other global cities to host similar events” ([London Climate Action Week \(LCAW\) 2026](#)); and The Great Big Green Week, “UK's biggest celebration of community action to tackle climate change and protect nature” ([The Great Big Green Week 2026](#)). During the same month, two other events—the “Right Here, Right Now Global Climate Summit” at the University of Oxford, and the Bonn Climate Change Conference, a crucial UN meeting leading up to COP29—further sustained the public's attention on the climate emergency. By coordinating our concert with this larger network of events, we sought to strengthen its critical message and call to action. The June timing further minimized energy use, as heating was not required. The next step was to develop the program and identify repertoire that would complement the *Climate Concerto* and deepen its message.

3. “I Want Them to Feel That Sense of Loss”⁶: Raising Awareness, Bearing Witness

For most people, the climate emergency continues to be a distant abstraction, something heard about on the news, with little tangible impact on personal or local daily life. It

is often framed as storms, heatwaves or droughts happening “elsewhere”, without being felt or lived firsthand. The emergency appears psychologically distant not only because people struggle to connect “avalanches of impersonal data . . . to concrete [lived] experiences” (Cole 2023, p. 2798; see also Norgaard 2011), but also because its effects unfold as a form of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) over a very long period of time, obscuring their human-made causes. As Hepach and Hartz argue, “Whilst anthropogenic climate change is a virtual scientific certainty, the nature of climate change’s presence in *experience* is less so” (Hepach and Hartz 2023, p. 214, emphasis added). As a “hyperobject” that is “massively distributed in time and space” (Morton 2013, pp. 1, 3), climate emergency resists, for many, not only direct experiential understanding but also clear conceptual grasp, creating a cognitive gap that underlies the prevailing lack of motivation to act decisively (Norgaard 2011; Van der Linden et al. 2015; Weik von Mossner 2017). As Weik von Mossner argues, “As long as we do not believe that climate change concerns us directly, we are unlikely to engage in or support any action” to mitigate its effects (Weik von Mossner 2017, p. 119). Consequently, enabling people to engage with the climate emergency affectively and experientially through community-level artistic interventions plays a crucial role in raising awareness and motivating positive action (see McDonald et al. 2015; Weik von Mossner 2017; Illingworth et al. 2018; Van Lange and Huckelba 2021; Keller et al. 2022; Cole 2023).

Field’s *Climate Concerto* wraps the impacts of the climate emergency in an emotionally compelling musical narrative, directly engaging the affective world of audiences by “transcend[ing] the explicit, the ‘told’ and the intellectual” (Field quoted in No Dead Guys 2022) in relation to the crisis. Its sound world immerses the audience in the reality—in the here-and-nowness—of climate change. During an interview I had with the composer, he described his intention for the *Climate Concerto* as not simply a musical representation of the crisis, but as an attempt to elicit a strong emotional response to it: “I want them to feel that sense of loss”, he noted, pointing to the loss of species, of biodiversity, of entire ecosystems around the world. This aim resonates strongly with the discourses of environmental humanists who emphasise that

“to be moved to act . . . you first need to be moved. People need to feel for themselves that they have a stake in the transition to a new and sustainable society; to know what they, personally, will love and lose if we do not make this happen”. (Holmes and Dobrzynski 2026)

In this connection, music—one of the primary catalysts for powerful, transformative affective experiences (Gabrielsson 2011)—can “win over hearts” as it conveys environmental themes, narratives and images (Holmes and Dobrzynski 2026), and awaken the awareness that far too much is at stake if we do not take urgent collective action. This is precisely what the *Climate Concerto* seeks to achieve. Across its three movements, Field renders the different manifestations of the current ecological decline tangible and immediately graspable on a human scale by employing distinct rise-and-fall tension trajectories and an accessible tonal language (Field 2024), affording a lived musical experience that is simultaneously affective and aesthetic, as well as socio-political. In performing the world premiere of the *Climate Concerto*, I experienced my role as an artist–citizen with particular intensity, as my awareness of my performing self ceased to be only that of a soloist collaborating with ensemble partners to bring to life a musical depiction of ecological destruction; I became also a messenger conveying an urgent plea to awaken a sense of *environmental global citizenship* (Guzman and de Velazco 2024). During the performance, I had the vivid feeling of not only actively diminishing the psychological distance that the abstract notion of climate emergency creates, but also kindling a sense of our connection to a much wider, global affective community, transcending national borders and fostering solidarity with

all of humanity in responding to this existential challenge. As the composition's depiction of elemental forces of nature—now rendered destructive through climate change—came to life under my hands, I was giving them more than musical meaning. As I transformed them into symbols of our collective vulnerability, our shared musical experience became at the same time an act of bearing witness to the unfolding environmental changes, to what our planet is enduring and the imperative it places upon us to act.⁷

The first movement of the *Climate Concerto*, titled “Fire”, emerged as Field's response to the increasingly frequent forest fires, particularly in the US, largely driven by droughts intensified through climate change. Starting with a spark, evoked through brisk melodic minor seconds and swift crescendos that quickly move from *piano* to *forte*, the music enacts the spread of the fire through a thickening musical texture. In terms of its embodied feel at the instrument, the piano part becomes progressively un pianistic and agitated, with rapid register-crossing leaps that generate a visceral sense of alarm—an embodiment that parallels the question “can this be executed accurately at this tempo?”—potentially inviting the audience, through empathetic participation, to reflect on the limits of effective action in response to the climate crisis. Following a triple *forte* climax, the fire collapses, fading into silence. The second movement is titled “Glaciers” and depicts the vast ice masses of the polar regions, whose deepening fragility has been recognised by the UN, which declared 2025 “the International Year of the Glaciers' Prevention” to draw attention to their multidimensional significance for our planet. This slow, stately movement—marked “Cold and still”—is structured around rapidly falling piano gestures that depict the breakdown of glaciers as temperatures rise. The movement's serene and majestic calm is interrupted, with increasing frequency, by *fortissimo* descending figures in the piano part, the final one culminating in a massive tone cluster executed with the forearm—an embodied enactment, by the pianist, not only of the glaciers' sudden and violent collapse, but also of the heavy-heartedness, the eco-anxiety (Pihkala 2020; Stanley et al. 2021) it evokes. The final movement, “Winds”, is a virtuosic finale in which murmuring soft winds grow violent, transforming into a destructive hurricane—an extreme weather event becoming increasingly frequent due to climate change—before fading back into a pianissimo breeze.

While programming the world premiere of the *Climate Concerto* clearly advanced our intention of raising awareness of the climate emergency through musical activism, it is important to emphasise that “There is not a one-size-fits-all approach that is able to engage society as a whole with regard to climate change” (Illingworth et al. 2018, p. 10). By implication, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that can engage each audience member during a shared musical experience invoking environmental challenges. Given the magnitude and seriousness of the climate issue, it is thus essential to make use of every resource in the artistic curatorial toolbox, as it were, to raise awareness and motivate positive action. Hence, one of the questions we asked when searching for music to pair with the *Climate Concerto* was whether we could further reduce the psychological distance of the climate emergency and bring the message closer to home for a London audience. What repertoire might intensify the affective awakening we sought to achieve through the *Climate Concerto* for this specific audience? How might we make the rupture of the familiar caused by the climate crisis—the rupture of trust in the regularity of our “given” dwelling place, the always-already meaningful context of our human existence (Heidegger 1962)—more palpable for them? Could we perhaps tap into a phenomenon highly valued within the English collective psyche that is under threat from the environmental crisis, and also holds particular resonance for London audiences? Searching for answers to these questions, we were ultimately led to a work for string orchestra and piano composed by a Londoner between 1927 and 1929, premiered at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1957,⁸ evoking the English landscape and resonating powerfully with the

English pastoral sensibility: the “breathtaking” (Burns 2022) and “spell-binding” (Oliver 1988), yet infrequently performed *Eclogue* by Gerald Finzi (1901–1956).

Described as “the quiet man of British classical music” (Padmore 2011), Finzi was born in London. As a passionate heritage orchard conservationist deeply attached to rural life, he spent the greater part of his adult life in the English countryside. At a time when biodiversity was already in marked decline (Davis 2020; McKie 2021; Millhauser and Earle 2022; Scott and Parker 2024), and long before climate change became a widespread public debate, he devoted himself to preserving endangered English apple varieties and rural landscapes, exemplifying the kind of self-awareness that motivates the development of an “ecological self” (Taylor 1993; Naess 1995; Valera 2018)—which can be understood as a process that involves recognising the ecological and existential connectedness between human beings and the natural world, rejecting imperialist and mechanistic views of nature “as a system of resources to be managed and exploited for human benefit” (Schwartz 2006, p. 325), understanding what it means to be human through our continuity with nature, and acknowledging our obligation not only to show up for one another in responding to the unprecedented challenges our species faces today, but to show up for our planet in its moment of crisis. At a time when English landscapes are increasingly under threat from climate change (Cook 2019), we hoped that the *Eclogue*, described by one listener as “absolutely epitomizing everything about the beauty of the English countryside” (DavidAps1 2019), might render not only environmental loss but also the ongoing loss of locally grounded ways of life palpable for our audience. We believed that, as a place-sensitive piece of music that speaks to highly situated ecological vulnerabilities, the *Eclogue* would heighten the personal relevance of the climate emergency by triggering lived experience and memory, and encourage action among London audiences in a particularly compelling manner. Opening the concert with Finzi’s *Eclogue*, we thus positioned ourselves as musical counterparts to “green influencers” (or *greenfluencers*), who create social media content such as “stunning landscapes, beautiful sunsets, or close-up shots of plants and animals” in order to “raise awareness about the beauty and fragility of the natural world . . . a sense of urgency around environmental issues, motivating [their followers] to make changes in their own lives that reduce their impact on the planet” (Hartmann et al. 2025, p. 623).

The *Eclogue*, originally composed as the slow movement of a piano concerto that was never finished, was published and premiered posthumously. It has been noted by critics for its “soft, shimmering beauty” (Padmore 2011) and for capturing the essence of the English countryside in a nuanced way that “grasps you emotionally from the very start” (Burns 2022). First-person accounts from listeners attest to the *Eclogue*’s remarkable affective power, as exemplified by one listener who recounts hearing it “for the first time on the radio” while driving and being so profoundly moved that they “had to take the nearest off-ramp. It immediately seized my heart and mind” (AntPDC 2024); another listener reflects on hearing it on *Classic FM* on the way to work, recalling how they were “almost breathless with its exquisite beauty and passion and had to take a few moments before starting my day. This is pure poetry” (GwenMarsh 2015); yet another listener who engaged with a recorded performance of the *Eclogue* online writes, “I tried typing something but I can’t. I’m trying to understand my reasons why I’m so affected by this music. Speechless by beauty!” (darnfirefingers 2016). The publisher of the *Eclogue*’s score, Boosey & Hawkes, indeed emphasises the music’s “unfailing moving” quality (Boosey and Hawkes n.d.).

In evoking the traditional idyllic and pastoral beauty of the English landscape and composing into the music the potential for such powerful affective responses, Finzi structures the *Eclogue* through call-and-response exchanges between the piano and strings that alternate with lush orchestral tutti sections in which the soloist participates, creating an interaction “that feels organic and unforced” (AntPDC 2024), and affording an interpretation

that hears in the music the harmonious and peaceful union of humans with nature. This interpretative affordance, together with the piece's aestheticization of "the deeply embodied and interactive process of what Heidegger called 'smooth coping' or the 'ready-to-hand' encounter with the environment and identified as our 'primary mode of being-in-the-world'" (Doğantan-Dack 2026), meant that in programming the *Eclogue* as the concert opener, I could imagine our performance suggesting a sense of being safely at home and inviting a way of being-in-the-world that we must protect. The piece's tender, lyrical beauty was also intended to ease audiences into a broadened emotional space, creating the potential to cultivate a readiness to engage with the urgency of the crisis in the following *Climate Concerto*. The *Eclogue*, and the ecological identity of its composer, further gave us the opportunity to situate the contemporary crisis within a broader historical context, encouraging audiences to recognise that the current emergency has roots in earlier periods (Schwartz 2006) and to appreciate how the affective structure of human-nature relations has shifted over time and led to the current fracturing of the "environing world" (McManus 2021, p. 103), which stayed stable "for the past several thousand years" allowing communities "to plan for the future" (McCarthy 2021)⁹. My own lived experience of opening the concert with Finzi's music made the act of bearing witness to the environmental emergency in the *Climate Concerto* feel more powerful, with the historical framing of the human-nature relationship—"taking one back to a bygone age" (dttrinity 2025)—amplifying the current sense of existential fragility.

In performing the *Eclogue* in a tranquil and spacious manner, shaping its long and gently undulating *cantabile* lines and smooth sectional transitions, I began to embody during the concert a temporal experience that constitutes the radical "other" of the anxiety-provoking temporalities and time consciousness produced by neoliberalism's profit-driven, short-termist agenda and its disastrous culture of speed—increasingly seen as undermining the capacity for effective climate action (Parr 2013; Ciplet and Roberts 2017; Bresnihan 2020; Jones and Stafford 2021; Dent 2022; Ekberg and Pressfeldt 2022). Within the slow order of the *Eclogue*, fragmentation of attention and of temporal experience, which has become habitualised in the neoliberal age, began to give way to a more mindful and bodyful way of being *present* in the here-and-now, generating the kind of awareness that is necessary to respond to the environmental crisis with greater care and with a renewed sense of one's agential potential (Doğantan-Dack 2024). Imagining the performance of his works by future generations of musicians, Finzi had said that it would be like "shaking hands with a good friend over the centuries" (Padmore 2011), and, for me, it felt a privilege to shake hands with this wonderful musician, who was also a remarkably humble and gentle activist and a committed humanist. It was especially gratifying to hear from audience members after the performance that they also experienced a similar sense of connection with the music and its composer during my performance, and the words they chose to describe their responses—"a timeless communion", "the gentlest of music", "tender", "profoundly consoling"—have stayed with me as reminders of the humanising potential of the *Eclogue*.

By pairing Field and Finzi, we sought to evoke multiple, interwoven layers of meaning, and to form a musical diptych that juxtaposed a pastoral world of beauty, warmth and stability alongside anthropogenic climate destruction, slow time alongside escalating environmental urgency, and a sense of stability against potential rupture, so that the stakes of failing to act urgently and collectively could be conveyed in a more pressing and tangible manner.

4. Inspiring Hope Through Gentle Activism

Growing research literature on eco-emotions, which studies the wide range of affective experiences the climate emergency elicits (McCaffery and Boetto 2025), suggests that negative feelings—including anxiety, anger, rage, worry, sadness, grief, shame, guilt, alongside a pervasive sense of pessimism, hopelessness and helplessness—have become increasingly prevalent global responses (Ogunbode et al. 2022; Isham et al. 2023). Eco-depression and eco-anxiety, together with solastalgia—i.e., the distress experienced in the face of environmental loss—are increasingly recognised as significant mental health concerns (Cosh et al. 2024; Kovács et al. 2024; Mosca et al. 2025). In addition, dystopian future narratives continue to proliferate, and the climate emergency is increasingly communicated in apocalyptic, doomist terms (Weston 2020). In the area of climate fiction, i.e., literature created around the climate issue, most works “are leading readers to associate climate change with intensely negative emotions, which could prove counterproductive to efforts at environmental engagement or persuasion” (Schneider-Mayerson 2018, p. 473).

The relationship between felt emotion and motivation to act for change in relation to the climate emergency is complex, non-linear, and context-dependent, as the scholarly literature indicates. Lived emotions influence behaviour through mediating variables that include individual factors (e.g., personality traits, coping strategies, personal concerns and goals), social and normative determinants, threat appraisal, perceived consequences for self and others, beliefs about action efficacy, and attributions of responsibility (Kovács et al. 2024). While there is some evidence that eco-anxiety, climate-related anger, guilt, and frustration can motivate *some* people to engage in climate action—even in high-risk and non-normative forms of pro-environmental behaviour (Davies-Rommetveit et al. 2026)—there is no evidence that negative emotions consistently translate into active engagement with the climate emergency (Clayton and Karazsia 2020; Brosch 2021; Whitmarsh et al. 2022; Kovács et al. 2024; Stanley et al. 2025). Under certain conditions, negative climate emotions may inhibit action by undermining perceived self-efficacy, as exemplified by phenomena such as “eco-paralysis” (Innocenti et al. 2023; Kovács et al. 2024). As Brosch has recently argued, “Even though negative emotional messages have been shown to be effective in promoting intentions to act, communicators should consider that people tend to evaluate these messages as negative and generally prefer climate messages without negative emotional content” (Brosch 2021, p. 18). Such adverse appraisals may in fact generate further obstacles to action: empirical evidence suggests that pessimism and “learned helplessness”—i.e., a psychological state of passivity, withdrawal and reduced motivation arising from persistent exposure to negative events that are presented and perceived to be uncontrollable (Seligman 1975)—“act as a barrier to pro-environmental behavior in the face of environmental concern” (Landry et al. 2018, p. 18; see also Ojala 2012, 2015). In this connection, research indicates that positive, constructive climate communication narratives can significantly decrease feelings of helplessness and thereby increase motivation to act (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009; Said and Wölfl 2025). By mitigating paralysis, such narratives can establish the conditions for the experience of *hope*, which has been described as the “necessary bedrock” upon which collective action is grounded (Aminzade et al. 2001, p. 31). Indeed, a growing number of scholars emphasise the central role of fostering constructive hope, through public discourses and artistic interventions, as a vital motivational force (Ojala 2012; see also Greenaway et al. 2016), a position supported by empirical evidence that “increasing hope increases climate engagement” (Geiger et al. 2023).

There is no space here to discuss in detail a phenomenology of hope. However, from a phenomenological perspective, constructive hope is more than a passive feeling of optimism, or “hopium” (Macy and Johnstone 2022; Geiger et al. 2023). While hope, as a future-oriented affective state, is inherently related to uncertainty and is thus “uncondi-

tionally disappointing" (Bloch 1998, p. 341), this very openness to face an indeterminate future renders hope distinct from wishful thinking: hope generates a felt sense of being agentic in relation to a possible, alternative future, fostering belief in one's capacity to actively contribute to shaping that future. In this sense, constructive hope is empowering. In a well-known passage from her 2016 book titled *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, climate activist Rebecca Solnit wrote that:

Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. . . . To hope is to give yourself to the future—and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable. (Solnit 2016, p. 4)

While hope has strong cognitive and analytical dimensions (Rand and Touza 2021; Gallagher et al. 2025), it is ultimately grounded in felt, affective experience. As sociologist Carl Cassegård notes, "hope is created practically rather than intellectually. . . . [In this endeavour] the senses are central—working with physical objects, being with others and so on—while intellectual reasons for hope are often secondary. . . . The hope generated here is to a large extent a *feeling* of hopefulness" (Cassegård 2024, p. 455, emphasis added). This felt dimension is intrinsically tied to one's sense of agential potential to act in the world, individually or jointly with others. It is thus crucial to foster an awareness and a sense of "I can" when designing musical interventions as part of climate activism, as these interventions can fuel hope and thereby promote more immediate engagement.

During my interview with Field, he continued the sentence I quoted in the previous section's sub-heading—"I want them to feel that sense of loss"—by adding, "and then [feel] a sense of release and hope":

"The fire dies out, the glaciers continue, the wind drifts away. So, there is a hopefulness about it. I want [the audience] to realise that it's not a foregone conclusion that we're all damned to disaster; that there's a potential for greater change that they can participate in".

The question of how felt affect—such as a sense of hopefulness arising within an aesthetic experience of form and expressive content—can lead to social and political action is profoundly complex. As Holm and Tilley write in a recent article,

"Despite the two-plus millennia of thought directed to questions of art and its social and moral impact—from Confucius to Plato to the burgeoning scholarly interest in creative activism today . . . the specifics of how 'good art' can best deliver 'good activism' remain unclear. This does not mean though that we ought to (necessarily) abandon art as a means to change the world. Instead, we need to think harder about art and action". (Holm and Tilley 2023, p. 137)

In music scholarship, this challenge is particularly evident in discussions of modernist aesthetic, which values forms and tonal languages that disrupt established conventions, creating challenging and difficult musical experiences (e.g., Paddison 1996; Moss 2021). Modernist aesthetic resists offering a sense of security through familiar forms and content in order not to encourage false consciousness. In this connection, the perspective provided by the humanities scholar and activist Caroline Levine in her 2023 book, *Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*, is thought-provoking. Levine writes that the current climate emergency, generating "acute precarity" and "rapid and destructive change" globally, has challenged

“my own long-standing embrace of disruption and prompted me to revalue terms I had long dismissed, like stability, security, and predictability. These have been bad words for artists and intellectuals, but they have also been much too easy for the privileged to take for granted. Right now, as all of us are threatened by rapid and multiplying forces of destruction, the unmaking of forms, so often the goal of artists and humanists, has become eerily consonant with domination and exploitation”. (Levine 2023, p. xiii)

Levine goes on to argue that the modernist orientation in the arts and humanities is profoundly unsuited to addressing the current crisis because it confines scholars and artists to questioning and critique, rather than enabling them to envision, plan for and work towards a secure, sustainable future for all. The musical worlds Field and Finzi created embody the perspective Levine advocates, harnessing the narrative potential of familiar musical forms and the expressive force of aesthetic beauty, with the potential to inspire a sense of hope in audiences. In the *Climate Concerto*, Field facilitates the emergence of felt hope by shaping the large-scale form of each of the three movements through clear rise-and-fall tension profiles—a technique familiar from common period tonal practice—and thereby embedding accessibility, comprehension, and emotional anchoring in the musical experience. The underlying message of his compositional approach is that while the climate emergency itself is a complex, unsettling and disruptive physical phenomenon with complex psychological and social dimensions, its effective representation and communication through musical narratives need not adopt equally disruptive and challenging forms; that it is possible to present the audience with the alarming reality of the current crisis, while simultaneously offering an accessible, and hopeful, narrative that does not overwhelm and paralyse them. An affective community can form more readily, within the space and time of one concert, when the aesthetic forms are sufficiently accessible.

With Finzi’s *Eclogue*, the emergence of feelings of hopefulness is closely related to the experience of beauty it can evoke, which can facilitate an awakening to nature’s “breathtaking” richness and inspire audiences to imagine a future that preserves this kind of encounter through acts of environmental care. Empirical research suggests that engaging with aesthetic beauty can foster hope, as well as prosocial behaviour (Mattheis and Herrmann 2024). Furthermore, when people feel moved by beauty, they may experience an opening up to the world (Kudahl and Roald 2024), which weakens ego-centric focus and heightens concern for the environment and for others (Zhang et al. 2014). Musical beauty can create a space for renewal, nurturing the positivity and generosity that are needed to sustain positive action in the face of catastrophic climate scenarios. As a “promissory” experience (Nehamas 2010, p. 195), experienced beauty becomes a counterpart to hope, taking on a vital social-political role in climate activism. The experienced hope-beauty axis can assume a restorative dimension, functioning as a healing mechanism that not only supports coping with adversity but also generates positive affective states and engagement with the world. Listener responses to the *Eclogue* suggest that, by enveloping audiences in a gentle, reassuring atmosphere, this music can indeed open up a restorative realm where negative experiences are transformed into hopeful encounters with the world. Comments that describe the *Eclogue* as “blessed with a mood of benediction” (Davis 2018), “a story of . . . hope for the awakening of a better humanity” (tA_aT287 2019), “a wonderfully restful, calming and even restorative piece. . . .It’s beautiful” (Stockinger 2011), and “a kind of balm” (ibid.) that can “help” listeners to “get through” trials and tribulations in life (DonFranco79 2012) all attest to its profound power for positive affective re-orientation.

It is important to note that activism growing from lived experiences of hope does not always take the form of “vocal, antagonistic and demonstrative” protests (Pottinger 2017, p. 215). It can instead surface as *gentle activism*—as our curated concert aimed to

do—grounded in a way of being-in-the-world that “involves empathy over anger, being prosocial over being aggressive, and connecting over confronting” (Niemiec et al. 2024, p. 721); it can draw its strength from kindness and humility. Curating musical experiences with the intention of enacting gentle activism can foreground and harness music’s power to disclose us to one another as affective, agential, creative, expressive, reflective, and social beings capable of cultivating relational sensitivities, ethical responsiveness, and a collective responsibility toward each other and the world, even in the face of ecological crisis, social fragmentation, and growing uncertainty. By inviting us to receive, engage with and respond to musicking others with care, gentle musical activism can teach us how to become more open to the world, how to show up for one another through our presence, and how to soften unhelpful boundaries imposed by discourses of neoliberalism between self, others and the lived environment, contributing to our life-long work of becoming more fully human (Freire 1972; Roberts 2016). Such gentle musical activism can also play a vital role in creating spaces where our primary mode of being—as *being part of nature*—can be experienced, reflected upon and cultivated through shared musical engagement. As David Abram notes: “We may acknowledge, intellectually, our body’s reliance upon those plants and animals that we consume as nourishment, yet the civilized mind still feels itself somehow separate. . . . Only as we begin to notice and to experience, once again, our immersion in the invisible air do we start to recall what it is to be fully a part of this world” (Abram 1996, p. 260). Musical experience can be a powerful means of awakening us to such lived immersion, and remind us that none of us can any longer afford to be an indifferent observer or an exploitative consumer of the natural world, and that each of us must become a concerned and engaged inhabitant of our originary home.

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Notes

- ¹ See Doğantan-Dack (2024) for a discussion of my performance of the slow movement of Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4.
- ² See Doğantan-Dack (2026) for a discussion of my interpretation of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2.
- ³ The other pieces in this concert were: Elgar’s Serenade for String Orchestra op. 20, Barber’s Adagio for Strings, Pagano’s “Onore e Gloria”, Larsson’s Concertino for Trombone, and Wieniawski’s Faust Fantasy.
- ⁴ While music can also be used to divide peoples and to promote violence, in this article I focus on aspects of musicking that can be mobilised to promote a better world, as this was the curatorial intention of the concert I reflect on.
- ⁵ A complementary anthropological perspective is provided by Marc Augé’s notion of “non-place”, which refers to spaces that “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé 1995, p. 78), and which are produced and proliferate under late capitalism and globalization as anonymous and interchangeable. The notion of “non-place” has implications for thinking about the lived experience of place: “As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality” (Augé 1995, p. 94). In this sense, non-places hinder the creation of thickly lived social relations; they can also weaken place-based responses to environmental and climate issues. As Bertling notes, “Non-place presents fundamental and existential challenges . . . to instilling place-consciousness and, correspondingly, pro-ecological attitudes and behaviors” (Bertling 2018, p. 1628).
- ⁶ Personal interview with composer Brian Field regarding the *Climate Concerto*, 4 July 2025.
- ⁷ For a discussion on the relationship between artistic experience and bearing witness, see Bacharach (2023).
- ⁸ On 27 January 1957, with pianist Kathleen Long and the Kalmar Orchestra, conducted by John Russell.
- ⁹ “Just as an ethical commitment to racial equality today calls for a better understanding of the origins and history of racism, so too a commitment to addressing the climate emergency calls for a better understanding of the long history of humanity’s relationship with the rest of nature” (Hawkey 2023, p. 15).

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