Safe & Sustainable Music Practice
Empowering Wood Buffalo Artists as Environmental Changemakers

Arts Council Wood Buffalo (ACWB) & SCALE-LeSAUT 2026

1. Why Sustainability in Music Looks Different in the North

Music production in northern regions is shaped by:

- Long travel distances between communities
- Limited rail infrastructure
- Air travel dependency
- Winter road risk
- High heating loads in rehearsal and venue spaces
- Seasonal wildfire smoke
- Limited backline and rental inventories
- High freight costs
- Small, dispersed audiences

In many cases, **transport emissions exceed all other impacts combined**.

Sustainability here must address:

- Touring logistics
- Freight weight
- Venue energy use
- Instrument materials
- Audience travel
- Festival waste
- Temporary production infrastructure

Music is mobile by nature. Mobility is the core climate challenge.

2. Touring as the Primary Impact

For most bands and orchestras, touring generates the largest environmental footprint.

Primary sources:

- Flights

- Diesel vans and buses
- Freight shipping
- Crew travel
- Equipment duplication

In northern regions, flights are often the default — but not the only option.

3. Slow Touring: A Climate Strategy

Slow touring reduces emissions by restructuring time, routing, and scale.

It is not about cancelling touring.
It is about redesigning it.

Slow Touring Principles

1. Geographic Clustering
Book multiple dates within a region before moving on.

2. Fewer, Longer Residencies
Replace one-night stops with multi-night stays.

3. Route Efficiency
Avoid backtracking. Move in one direction where possible.

4. Ground Travel Where Feasible
Train or bus instead of short-haul flights.

5. Reduce Freight Weight
Travel light; rent locally when possible.

6. Shared Touring
Coordinate joint bills to reduce duplicated travel.

7. Seasonal Planning
Avoid winter travel where risks increase fuel consumption and safety concerns.

Slow touring strengthens:

- Audience relationships
- Community engagement
- Financial sustainability
- Artist wellbeing

It reduces:

- Air travel
- Burnout
- Logistical stress
- Redundant freight

Mobility becomes intentional rather than extractive.

Further reading
Gallery Climate Coalition – Travel Guidance

4. Freight & Equipment

Heavy freight increases emissions and cost.

Impact areas include:

- Amplifiers
- Drum kits
- Orchestral risers
- Lighting rigs
- Merch inventory

Lower-Impact Strategies

- Carry only essential instruments
- Use regional backline rentals
- Share gear between touring acts
- Digitize sheet music instead of shipping
- Minimize merchandise overstock
- Choose lighter packaging materials

Freight strategy is climate strategy.

Resource
• Gallery Climate Coalition – Shipping Guidance

Further reading
• Gallery Climate Coalition – Packaging Guidance

5. Air Travel Reduction

Short-haul flights are disproportionately carbon intensive.

Where possible:

- Replace flights under 800 km with train or bus
- Combine multiple engagements into one trip
- Avoid flying crew separately
- Prioritize direct routes over multiple connections

If flights are unavoidable, reduce frequency rather than relying solely on offsets.

Offsets do not replace reduction.

Further reading
• Gallery Climate Coalition – Travel Guidance

6. Venue & Rehearsal Energy Use

In northern regions, heating dominates energy demand.

Music-specific energy impacts include:

- Amplification systems
- Stage lighting
- HVAC during concerts
- Rehearsal hall heating
- Standby electrical loads

Reduction Strategies

- Use LED stage lighting
- Power down systems between sets
- Avoid unnecessary rehearsal amplification
- Program HVAC only during occupancy
- Use acoustic rehearsal when possible

Resource
• Natural Resources Canada – Energy Efficiency

Sound level does not have to equal energy intensity.

7. Instruments & Material Impact

Instrument production involves:

- Rare woods
- Brass and metals
- Synthetic composites
- Rosin, varnishes, adhesives

Environmental considerations:

- FSC-certified woods where possible
- Repair before replacement
- Maintain instruments to extend lifespan
- Avoid unnecessary upgrades
- Share specialty instruments regionally

Repair culture reduces resource extraction.

Further reading
• Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) – Certified Wood

8. Orchestras & Large Ensembles

Orchestras have unique impacts:

- Large travel groups
- Instrument freight
- Venue heating
- Printed scores
- Touring production scale

Mitigation strategies:

- Regional programming clusters
- Longer residency models
- Reduced freight through local partnerships
- Digital score distribution
- Hybrid programming to reduce travel frequency

Scale is a climate decision.

Further reading
• Orchestras Canada – Environmental Sustainability Guide & Charter for Canadian Orchestras

9. Festivals & Outdoor Events

Northern music festivals often operate seasonally.

Environmental impacts include:

- Diesel generators
- Temporary staging
- Audience travel
- Single-use plastics
- Food waste

Reduction Strategies

- Shore power instead of generators where available
- Solar supplementation for small stages
- Reusable cup systems
- Water refill stations
- Compost coordination
- Shuttle buses from urban centres

Hospitality is part of the music footprint.

Further reading
• Orchestras Canada – Environmental Sustainability Guide & Charter for Canadian Orchestras

10. Wildfire Smoke & Air Quality

Outdoor festivals and tours in boreal regions face increasing wildfire events.

Consider:

- Flexible scheduling policies
- Indoor backup plans
- Monitoring Air Quality Index (AQI)
- Limiting extended outdoor rehearsal exposure

Musician health is part of sustainability.

Further reading
• Alberta Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)
• Health Canada – Wildfire Smoke and Your Health

11. Merchandise & Physical Media

Merch can significantly increase freight weight and waste.

Strategies:

- Print-on-demand merch
- Lightweight apparel
- Sustainable fabric sourcing
- Limited vinyl runs
- Offer digital downloads instead of CDs
- Recyclable packaging

Merch decisions affect both footprint and inventory waste.

Further reading
• Ellen MacArthur Foundation – Circular Economy for Fashion & Textiles

12. Audience Transportation

Audience travel frequently exceeds artist travel emissions.

Mitigation approaches:

- Carpool boards
- Public transit partnerships
- Bike incentives
- Local venue selection
- Digital streaming components for remote audiences

Community mobility planning is part of climate planning.

13. Waste Reduction Backstage

Common sources:

- Catering waste
- Single-use water bottles
- Plastic wrap
- Set lists and printed materials

Strategies:

- Refillable bottles
- Digital set lists
- Reusable catering ware
- Accurate food estimates
- Compost coordination

Small backstage shifts compound over time.

14. Community Integration & Local Capacity

Northern touring models can unintentionally extract value.

Slow touring encourages:

- Workshops during residencies
- Collaboration with local musicians
- Shared rehearsal space
- Knowledge exchange
- Local hiring

Environmental responsibility includes economic reciprocity.

15. Institutional & Organisational Practice

Music organisations can:

- Track travel distances
- Establish touring guidelines
- Include sustainability riders in contracts
- Prioritize regional programming
- Share best practices publicly

Policy formalizes practice.

Further reading
• Orchestras Canada – Environmental Sustainability Guide & Charter for Canadian Orchestras
• SCALE-LeSAUT – SAGE: Sustainable Arts & Green Ecosystems Toolkit

Closing

Safe and sustainable music practice in northern and remote regions is not about eliminating touring.

It is about:

- Designing mobility intentionally
- Reducing air dependence
- Planning freight strategically
- Extending instrument life
- Reducing energy intensity
- Supporting musician health
- Building regional cultural resilience

Slow touring is not a constraint.

It is a structural shift toward longevity — artistic, environmental, and human.