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REFERENCES

1 John T. Lysaker’s study of Brian Eno’s album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978) piqued my curiosity, first and foremost, as a serious examination of the work that coined the term “ambient music”. The introduction by Kevin C. Karnes, then editor of the Oxford Keynotes series (Kevin Bartig is the present editor), declared that the series aimed at defining the canons of Western music also “as lists of works that comprise the bulk of what consumers listen to, purchase, and perform today”, which I read as a less than deferential reference to popular music. Thus, I was also curious to see how this little book measured up to those intentions, assuming that Brian Eno may be considered – not exclusively, it is true, but in addition to other possible tags, such as “visual artist”, “avant-garde musician”, etc. – as a popular musician, having been a member of Roxy Music in the early 1970s, collaborated with rock stars such as Robert Fripp, David Bowie, or David Byrne, among others, and also published as a pop solo artist. Examining the current list of Oxford Keynotes titles, though, became a source of disappointment, as besides symphonic and operatic works, a few contemporary music compositions, and a couple of musicals, only two albums, Laurie Anderson’s *Big Science*, and the one that is the object of this review could be located in a grey zone between popular music and the avant-garde. Therefore, “the bulk of what consumers listen to, purchase, and perform today”, which this reviewer would have expected to refer to albums by, let’s say, Bruno Mars or Rosalía, to name just two prominent figures of today’s popular music scene, apparently remains below the radar of the Oxford Keynotes series. As I will argue in the
following paragraphs, Lysaker’s take on Eno’s *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* is in line with this approach.

2 Lysaker, William R. Kenan Professor of Philosophy at Emory College, Emerson scholar and a practicing musician, had previously published an article on the Deleuzian and Guattarian notion of “assemblage” applied to the analysis of Eno’s *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, where he discussed its avant-garde influences. In the Oxford Keynotes volume he goes beyond those initial considerations and does an excellent job gathering useful information on Eno’s career, thought, and work on that particular album, drawing on the most important monographies and articles on Eno, on Eno’s published writings, on authoritative online sources and old press articles. Some of this material, plus some musical references, are commented on in the closing chapter titled “Additional sources for reading and listening”, which makes up for the lack of a proper bibliography and discography. Yet, Lysaker’s intentions, as stated in the Introduction, go beyond the factual, as he wants to answer the following questions, which inevitably carry prescriptive undertones: “What confronts us when we play the album? To what should we listen? And what should we have in mind as we do?” (p. 7-9). While these questions may make us think of a phenomenological setting, inside our minds and out of time, the author strives to find answers in historical knowledge, though supplements it with thorough reflections on many intriguing aspects of Eno’s *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, from compositional detail to the different levels of reception it allows. Yet, Lysaker’s selection of sources, illustrations, and music examples, particularly the audio files referenced throughout the text and accessible on the companion website set by Oxford University Press, clearly frame Eno’s work as avant-garde music and conceptual art, presenting him as somebody who (emphasis added) “seemed to enter music through rock ’n’ roll”, but whose ambient venture “is very much a piece of twentieth-century avant-garde music practice” (p. 9). As the author admits in the Afterword, he “might have undersold its pop and rock dimensions” (p. 148).

3 After describing Eno’s *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* as object and briefly summarizing its contemporary and later reception in the Introduction, in Chapter 1 (“A first listening, or through a glass lightly”) the author intends to, enigmatically, explore “the general sonic character” of the work to discover what one finds “when one simply listens and listens simply” (p. 9), where “one” seems to be the author himself. The analysis of the sounds of the four album tracks is preceded by a comparison of the drawings on the back side of the album cover, which hint at some kind of graphic notation, with twentieth-century avant-garde scores, notably Earle Brown’s 4 Systems; a possible comparison, though certainly not the only possible one, as on Lysaker’s own admission, Brown’s instructions are for performers, while Eno’s represent tape loops and synthesizer overdubs (p. 12). As for the “simple” description of the album sounds, Lysaker strives to characterize what happens in the tracks, how “varied blocks of sound” shift in “2/1” or create “very dense networks of sound” in “2/2”, resulting in diverse aesthetic sensations, for instance a “gentle, patient, and somewhat charming” feel (p. 16) in “1/1”, the first track, where a descending piano phrase reminds him of “Frère Jacques”; a resemblance that eludes my ears. However, he seems to be equally interested in underlining the strangeness of Eno’s compositional procedures, namely the fact that “1/1” “does not represent the performance of a scored piece or even a part of a piece” (p. 14-15), that “2/2” “doesn’t really instruct our attention in the manner of a score” (p. 16), or that in “1/1” “nothing effectively sustains a melody”
(p.18) and “2/1” presents “juxtapositions (and blends) rather than melodic developments” (p. 20). While the author recognizes the production techniques applied by Eno and the distinctive sounds of electric instruments playing in the tracks⁴, he still looks forward to appreciating the organic sounds of the classical tradition and tonality, noting for example that “the tones neither work together like instruments in a chamber setting, developing lines of musical thought, nor establish a tonal background, whether for variations on a theme or refined explorations of a key” (p. 23). Towards the end of the chapter the term of comparison is, again, a contemporary musical work, Music for Airport Furniture (2011) by Stephen Whittington, if only to discover that, contrary to Whittington’s intention to portray “the airport departure lounge as an arena for human emotions” (p. 21), Eno’s album “conveys little if any emotion” (p. 22), a statement many listeners of the album would not subscribe, at least not without qualification. Summarizing his position, Lysaker characterizes the album as an artifact where melody, rhythm, and harmony “have been ignored in favor of other relations” (p. 26), among which is timbre.

In Chapter 2 (“Music for Airports and the avant-garde”) Lysaker takes a step to trace what he terms Eno’s album’s “avant-garde predecessors” (p. 26) situating Ambient 1: Music for Airports in the so-called “sonic turn”, which he presents as “a move away from traditional Western musical structures toward sounds, whether found and/or manipulated” (p. 9). Somewhat disconcertingly, the chapter opens with a personal account of the author’s interest in Eno’s work, after his collaboration with Bowie in the early 1980s, and how listening to his albums Discreet Music (1975) and Music for Airports, and to his two albums with Robert Fripp, (No Pussyfooting) (1973) and Evening Star (1975), led Lysaker to experiment with two turntables, playing and mixing LPs, and recording the results, just to conclude that mixing music was not really making music (p. 28-29).

From that autobiographical departure point the author begins to assemble a “conceptual map” of the “sonic (or auditory) turn in the history of music” (p. 29), which does not necessarily link the dots of Eno’s biography and interests, but intends to “draw a larger picture of the context out of which MFA [Ambient 1: Music for Airports] emerged and to which it contributed” (p. 29). This larger picture features the most important figures of European and North American avant-garde music from the end of the nineteenth century: from Claude Debussy, Ferruccio Busoni, Charles Ives, and their microtones (p. 30); through Arnold Schoenberg’s “new harmonic possibilities” (p. 32), Luigi Russolo’s intonarumori (p. 32-33), Pierre Schaeffer’s musique concrète (p. 33-34), and Edgar Varèse’s compositional innovations based on “technological development” (p. 36-38); up to the most important North American experimental composers, John Cage (p. 39-41), Steve Reich, Alvin Lucier, La Monte Young and Terry Riley (p. 41-45).

The account is vague and confusing, and the author’s intention to explain the emergence of Eno’s album results in such a weak comment like this, regarding Riley’s work, particularly his famous In C (1964): “Under Riley’s direction, therefore, avant-garde techniques entered frankly hummable music, and this brought the sonic turn into non-academic arenas, which helped create a context wherein a sometimes rock persona might venture an album like MFA – a stretch for many ears, but not an unthinkable one” (p. 45). Adding to the confusion is Lysaker’s purpose to also account for how this context “helped secure a listening space for MFA” (p. 47), in an effort that collapses the more than forty years separating the moment in which Eno’s album was published, when (for the record) the term “sonic turn” had not been coined yet, from today’s listeners.
Luckily, Chapter 3 turns to firmer ground, as it follows “Eno’s journey from art school to the studio”, underlining his identification as a “non-musician”. Reflecting on this notion, Lysaker identifies three different ways in which Eno might be considered as a “non-musician”: as somebody who does not read music or know music theory, does not play any musical instrument at virtuoso level, and does not have a technical knowledge of psychoacoustics, either (p. 52). Yet, the author also presents “non-musicianship” as a particular “sensibility with which Eno operates: (a) minimal to modest technique (but no virtuosity), (b) self-trust in intuitive judgments, and (c) a willingness to let more general theories (as opposed to music theory) propel his creative efforts” (p. 52). Then, Lysaker tells the story of Eno’s formative years as a visual arts student at Ipswich Civic College, where he was influenced by Roy Ascott, who “brought a cybernetic conception to art” (p. 54), and was also in contact with avant-garde music, including the works of Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, Cornelius Cardew and La Monte Young (p. 56). In particular, Lysaker credits Eno’s performance of Young’s \textit{arabic numeral (any integer)} (1960) for his awareness of playing with organized sound, and the dynamic of “variety in repetition”, which he would later apply to \textit{Ambient 1: Music for Airports}. Eno’s participation in Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra, especially in the performance of “Paragraph 7” from \textit{The Great Learning} (1968-1971), is also identified as one of the major sources for his first ambient album for its combination of simple, fixed rules and unexpected, unpredictable results (p. 62). Steve Reich’s \textit{It’s Gonna Rain} (1965) provided, according to the author and Eno himself, the notion of looping recordings that would fall out of phase, creating thus new relationships between the original recordings (p. 64), as happens in some tracks of \textit{Ambient 1: Music for Airports}. This notion will result, years later, in Eno’s notion of “generative music”, which is dealt with in Chapter 5. While Eno might have learned compositional strategies from key figures of avant-garde and experimental music, what he learned as member of Roxy Music were, according to Lysaker, mostly technical skills, namely “working with and recording performers, electronically manipulating sounds, looping tapes, and mixing tones to establish a sonic field, to name four” (p. 65), though his knowledge of new technologies also “furthered his ability to work with sounds (and rework them) in a painterly fashion, adding textures” (p. 69). After leaving Roxy Music, Eno collaborated with Robert Fripp in the album \textit{(No Pussyfooting)} (1973), which features many of the musical characteristics of his later ambient albums, as Lysaker acknowledges in observing that “Eno’s atmosphere-setting efforts are no longer buried in songs but assert themselves as soundscapes” (p. 69). Yet, the author prefers to stress the album’s importance in raising Eno’s understanding of the studio “as something like a musical instrument” – an understanding that he continued to develop in his solo debut album, \textit{Another Green World} (1975),\footnote{in his collaborations with Bowie on \textit{Low} and \textit{Heroes}, in his work as producer for bands like Ultravox, Devo, and Talking Heads, and in the time he spent improvising and recording with the German band Harmonia in 1976 (p. 72-73). Even if these musical activities, as Lysaker admits, are “steps toward \textit{MFA}'s release in 1978”, he chooses not to cover them in detail because they “are documented in several good books” (p. 74).} the third record released on Obscure Records was Eno’s \textit{Discreet Music} (1975), “a clear predecessor to \textit{MFA}”, which Lysaker bizarrely presents as evidence of “the transformation of the non-musician into the studio impresario” (p. 78).
Chapter 4, “Ambience”, begins with the famous episode, told by Eno himself, where he started to think of “environmental music” while recovering from an accident (p. 81-82). Then the chapter reviews the notion of a “music that explicitly addresses and engages its social-sonic environments” (p. 82), going back to Erik Satie’s *musique d’ameublement*, which is mentioned in the liner notes to Eno’s *Discreet Music*, and which was also the object of a 1958 essay by John Cage, included in the collection *Silence* (1961). Yet, as Lysaker observes, Eno’s notion of “ambient music” accommodates many different levels of listening attention (p. 85), and this would allow to draw a continuum between, at one extreme, Cage’s ‘4’33”’ total openness to contextual sounds, next Satie’s “furniture music”, then Eno’s *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* as “music that works its way into the situation, tuning it” (p. 86), and further towards the immersive extreme, Eno’s *Ambient 4: On Land* (1982), until the meditative exercises of, for instance, Pauline Oliveros’s “deep listening” (p. 88). Nevertheless, the author recognizes that the “ambient” character of music also depends on its interaction with the spaces where it is played, the volume at which it is played, and the activities that take place while it is playing (p. 90) – a reflection that introduces different notions of listening, which will be developed in Chapter 5. Even considered as a genre, Lysaker concedes, “ambient” is “a loose” one (p. 93), accommodating such diverse pop musicians as Aphex Twin or Moby, along contemporary composers as Robert Scott Thompson or Max Richter, among others (p. 91-92). After noticing how “ambient music” tends to blur the line between art and the everyday, the author then addresses the second standard narrative on the concept, “outside the avant-garde”, that is the history of the Muzak company (p. 94), which he links to the emergence of “mood music” LPs in the 1950s (p. 95), and the availability of film scores on LPs, which prompts a reference to Eno’s collection *Music for Films* (1976) as “proto-ambient”, as it was not produced for any film (p. 96). There isn’t even a passing mention to the role of radio in creating environments, though it is also true that this research line has not received much attention so far.

Generally speaking, Lysaker downplays the role of the mediality of music in accounting for the emergence of “ambient music”, subscribing to the idea that, while intended to be played as background, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* “doesn’t remove uncertainty and doubt”, unlike Muzak, but “introduces a kind of uncertainty amid calm”, opening thus a space to think (p. 98), though it remains unclear what listeners are supposed to think about. A second important point is that, as Lysaker observes, in spite of being purportedly intended “for airports”, “MFA is an album, an LP” (p. 99), and thus made for personal listening, though his assertion that “in 1978, airports were unlikely to project LPs or cassettes throughout terminals” (p. 100) remains to be proved. Through a consideration of *Oblique strategies*, a stack of cards designed by Eno and the painter Peter Schmidt “to reorient creative activity” (p. 101), Lysaker arrives at the notion of “reverie” as the most apt definition of what Eno’s album intends to do with listeners’ minds, pulling them away “from the habits and order of the day”, to place them “in the wake of that suspension, but amid calming musical successions” (p. 102). He associates that state of reverie with Anahid Kassabian’s notion of “distributed subjectivity”, though he is reluctant to portray listening as a way to stage different identities (or “senses of self”, the term he prefers). Instead, he describes reverie as a way to stay, in words borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaux*, “in the middle, between things, *intermezzo*, out of any musical narrative (p. 106-107).

In Chapter 5, titled “Between hearing and listening: *Music for Airports* as conceptual art”, Lysaker makes the case for Eno’s *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* to be considered as
conceptual art, that is art that “assesses its own occurrence relative to the concept of ‘art’” (p. 110). For that purpose, he describes Eno’s alleged absence from his own album as a form of “artistic agency” that can be traced both in the tracks and in the manifesto accompanying the album (p. 112). Yet, Lysaker mainly draws on the notion of “generative music”, which Eno elaborated in the 1990s (explicitly connecting it to the reviewed album), as Eno’s particular way of conceptualizing the function of “ambient music” between nature and art, linking it to some of the avant-garde concepts and figures explored in Chapter 2 with reference to the “sonic turn”. Yet, the “ecology of interactions” at play in Ambient 1: Music for Airports does not only imply the artist and the spaces where the sounds are played, but also includes the listeners. At this point, the questions asked by the author in the Introduction (“To what should we listen? And what should we have in mind as we do?”) turn into another question: “How should I listen to this?” (p. 122). After some comments on some Eno’s experiments in visual art where the notion of ambient may be traced (p. 122-125), Lysaker returns to the question of listening elaborating a review of different listening modalities proposed by other scholars: “background listening”, “ubiquitous listening” (Kassabian), “performance listening”, Joanna Demers’s “aesthetic listening”, Ola Stockfelt’s “adequate listening”, and even, maybe inevitably, Adorno’s “regressive listening”, which prompts the author to ask whether accepting Eno’s album as music is not “giving in to a culture that increasingly invites people to listen distractedly” (p. 130). While sharing Adorno’s concern about “regressive” or “narcissistic” (his term) listening, Lysaker argues that Eno’s album is “just one way to introduce music into various social settings”, and thus does not rival music meant to be properly listened to (p. 132, emphasis added). Considering the different levels of music that the album allows, “as background music, as music for reverie, and as conceptual art” (p. 133), Lysaker coins the notion of “prismatic listening” (“a listening that knows the genre but is also capable of hearing particularities, especially where the activity of sounds is concerned”) as the most rewarding for that particular work, even if he does not exclude that it may be listened to immersively (“deep listening”) or “with self-conscious scrutiny of the music’s sonic character” (p. 134-135), which he associates with “performance listening”. Whether these remarks would help listeners to understand how they should listen to Eno’s Ambient 1: Music for Airports remains an open question. To me Lysaker’s observations on modalities of listening, and especially his coinage of “prismatic listening”, work as weak pretexts for the nobilitation of Eno’s album by its inclusion in the Oxford Keynotes series, which the author himself seems to regard as “too high” for the album’s transgressive intentions and popular pedigree. The chapter closes with interesting observation about how the sounds of Ambient 1: Music for Airports change when they are played in different ways, “from a vinyl source in a stationary stereo system to a CD in the same system to earbuds connected to a portable playback device to a Bluetooth player in a car” (p. 136), which lead, however, to an examination of a performance of the album by the contemporary ensemble Bang on a Can, who argued that it deserved “to be listened to like you’d listen to a great piece of music” (p. 139).

The Afterword, titled “Crossroads”, gives again voice to the author’s reluctance towards his subject, as he comments that “[s]ome will think I’ve overstated the achievement of MFA, just as many, including collaborators, were put off by Eno’s purported non-musicianship” (p. 145). A very odd affirmation to open the last chapter of the book, indeed, and a cue for the author to insist again on the album’s ties to
avant-garde music, completing thus the circle. While this does not detract from the book’s worth as a source of valuable information on Eno’s album, and as an introductory reading for listeners of all kinds who want to understand its importance for music history and aesthetics, its reading may be uncomfortable, and occasionally sad, for those who, as this reviewer, do not share the author’s regard for (high) art and suspicion of anything popular.

Last but not least, this reviewer has spotted a few mistakes that give a poor impression of Oxford University Press’s editorial standards. While Pierre Schaeffer appears as “Schaefer” when mentioned for the first time (p. 33), David Sheppard, author of On Some Faraway Beach: The Life and Times of Brian Eno, is mentioned at least three times as “Shepherd” (p. 53, 67 and 99; though mentions in the Notes chapter are correct) and is not even listed in the meagre Index. Since I haven’t read this book through proofreading glasses, I am afraid that other errata may probably be found on its 165 pages.

NOTES


2. Interestingly, in his book about American minimalism, Robert Fink juxtaposed a section of these same drawings with a sample media plan from an advertising textbook, raising different issues within a wider social context; see **FINK Robert**, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, p. 143-144.


4. This characterization of *Another Green World* seems to follow the lines of Geeta Dayal’s monography on that album in the 33 1/3 Series, where it is presented as the first Eno album “to be composed almost completely in the confines of a recording studio”; see **DAYAL Geeta**, *Brian Eno’s Another Green World*, New York-London, The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009, p. 28.

5. A recent publication that takes an important step in that direction is **SZABO Victor**, “Pacifica Radio’s Music from the Hearts of Space and the Ambient Sound of California’s New Age”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2021, p. 43-90.

6. The point that the dominant mode of reception of Eno’s album is “selective personal consumption, not public administration” is discussed at length in **SZABO Victor**, “Unsettling Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports*”, *Twentieth-Century Music*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2017, p. 305-333, which Lysaker does not mention.
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