

Continuing Cage:
Ambient Music as Listener Indeterminacy

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Preliminary Note: An accompanying composition was created by the author to complement the conceptual angle of the paper. Readers may go to the following link, turn down the volume to a very soft level, and let it interact with their reading experience. <https://youtu.be/bDmXsfi-RE0>

From its beginnings in the 1970s, ambient music by composers such as Brian Eno and the lesser-known Robert Rich has had a conflicted relationship with experimental music. In the liner notes to Eno's album *Ambient 1*, which introduce the term "ambient music," Eno intentionally distinguishes his project from 'muzak' and other commercial musics and argues that "whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities."¹ Even so, the critical reception of Eno's often tonal, often simple music has been complicated by the genre's roots in both contemporary music and popular 'chill out' music, and its undeniable similarities to muzak.² Robert Rich's own (often tonal, often simple) ambient work and early sleep concerts, in which an audience slept to nature tracks and drones, present similar issues. Considering the work of these two composers on the surface, their slow, comfortable, fully-composed music might seem unrelated to the sonic pioneering of artists like John Cage who moved against personal taste and the total control of the composer; however, dissecting Eno's and Rich's music reveals that their projects do engage with indeterminacy and present similar

¹ Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," liner notes for *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, by Brian Eno. PVC Records PVC 7908 (AMB 001), 1978.

² Rupert Till, "Ambient Music," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 333-334. Mark Edward Achtermann, "Yes, but is it Music? Brian Eno and the Definition of Ambient Music," in *Brian Eno: Oblique Music*, edited by Sean Albiez and David Pattie (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 100.

approaches to the “aleatory tradition” of contemporary music.³ Where Cage and associated composers carried out indeterminacy first on the side of composition, and then on the side of performance, Eno and Rich push this further to the listener. Eno’s *Ambient 1* and Rich’s *Somnium* both create aural spaces intended to allow listeners to drift unpredictably between levels of attention and awareness of the music. Drawing on scholarly conceptions of the aleatoric tradition in the western avant-garde, Eno’s and Rich’s writings, and the compositional features of their work, I argue that the ambient approach exemplified by Eno and Rich is a continuation of earlier aleatoric practices in experimental music, where instead of pitches or other musical content, the indeterminacy is enacted over modes of listening.

The Aleatory Tradition

Before turning to Eno’s and Rich’s music, I will first discuss the “aleatory tradition” of the mid-twentieth century as labelled and conceptualised by Frank Hoogerwerf.⁴ In his 1976 article, Hoogerwerf outlined three distinguishing features of this aleatory aesthetic. First, the composer of aleatoric music is not seeking individual expression, but instead “an acceptance of

³ There is considerable variation in the use of the terms chance, indeterminacy, and aleatory, particularly by composers who sought not only effective terms for their music but means of distinction from the work of composers they rejected. Rather than engage with terms in this needlessly complicated way, I will be using “indeterminacy” in its most basic form to refer to indeterministic process, whatever its locus of operation (composer indeterminacy, performer indeterminacy, etc.). My use of “aleatory tradition” follows from Frank Hoogerwerf’s work defining the “aleatory aesthetic” particularly around the work of John Cage (rather humorously, as Feisst notes Cage “vehemently opposed” the term aleatory (210)). For more information on this proliferation of terms, see Sabine Feisst, “Negotiating Freedom and Control in Composition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 2*, ed. George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, (Oxford University Press, 2016): 208-211. Hoogerwerf’s term is used throughout the article Frank W. Hoogerwerf, “Cage Contra Stravinsky, or Delineating the Aleatory Aesthetic,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 7, no. 2 (1976): 235-247.

⁴ Hoogerwerf, “Cage Contra Stravinsky,” 235.

sounds as they are,” and hence is satisfied to relinquish “absolute control of material.”⁵

Secondly, there is an absence of a “syntax” for sounds.⁶ Again, this emerges out of a desire to focus on the sound itself, and not on an artificially imposed system of relationships. As Hoogerwerf describes, such a work of art is “a continuum rather than a clearly defined progression of events,” in which often, “there is really no beginning nor end, other than for pragmatic necessity.”⁷ Rather than creating a system that tries to justify the sequence of events, this music presents listeners with the direct experience of sonic material. The final characteristic of aleatoric music Hoogerwerf describes is the elevation of reality over artifice – by diminishing the composer’s intentions and imposed syntax, the sounds of the composition come to “have everything in common with the sounds encountered in ordinary life” and the aesthetic distance between art and life disappears.⁸

This characterisation of aleatoric music is most clearly drawn from the work of John Cage, whose indeterministic compositions focused specifically on diminishing the role of the composer and performer’s personal tastes and elevating sound as such.⁹ It is also present in the work of other composers like Morton Feldman (who, Cage argued, “changed the responsibility of the composer from making to accepting”¹⁰). Critically, Hoogerwerf’s three features also

⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁶ Ibid., 241.

⁷ Ibid., 242.

⁸ Ibid., 244.

⁹ John Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 50th Anniversary Edition (Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 35-40.

¹⁰ John Cage, “Lecture on Something,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 50th Anniversary Edition (Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 129.

distinguish “aleatoric music” from music that incorporates stochastic approaches into otherwise traditional western art compositions. Iannis Xenakis, for instance, allowed unplanned variation at a minute level in pieces like *Pithoprakta*, but as Gary Potter argued, “Xenakis carefully ‘domesticates’ chance to serve a particular purpose and yield a specific result.”¹¹ Xenakis’ approach focuses not on the direct consideration of sound free from syntax, but on the use of tight, mathematical control at the level of probability.¹² Thus, for this paper, the term aleatoric music will be restricted to Hoogerwerf’s conception, focusing on the music of those like Cage and Feldman with whom Eno and Rich have far more in common.

Within this aesthetic of aleatoric music, there is a further important distinction to be made concerning the locus where indeterminacy arises. In Cage’s earlier works like the *Music of Changes*, compositional elements were chosen using a randomised system, but the performer then plays the given score in a traditional manner.¹³ Other aleatoric music, like Morton Feldman’s graphic scores (used as early as his 1950 composition “Projection 1”¹⁴), provide indeterminacy instead in the act of performance. Potter focuses on this distinction in his dissertation on “chance music” and suggests that the aleatoric tradition can be divided into music that is indeterminate in composition, and music that is indeterminate in performance.¹⁵ Cage makes a similar bifurcation in his writing on indeterminacy, and further suggests that the

¹¹ Gary Morton Potter, “The Role of Chance in Contemporary Music,” PhD diss., (Indiana University, 1971), 63.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³ Cage, “Composition as Process,” 36.

¹⁴ Morton Feldman, *Projection I* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1962). First published in 1950.

¹⁵ Potter, “The Role of Chance in Contemporary Music,” 4.

movement to performance indeterminacy in his work better frees the work from the intentions of the composer.¹⁶ Pierre Boulez in his own writing on aleatoric music also describes the transition from compositional to performative indeterminacy as a further reduction of the composer's involvement in the work and a "glorification of the interpreter."¹⁷ In these cases, one can see that the motion from indeterminacy in composition to indeterminacy in performance is one in which the music comes to embody Hoogerwerf's three characteristics more fully. By granting the performer freedom in the sounds they produce, the composer has relinquished absolute control over the music and must accept a wider range of possible results. Further, if the performer enacts Cage's intention of playing free from personal taste, there is even less of a syntax of sounds, as there is no stable sequence of pitches fashioned by the composer that might develop a sense of internal relations on repeated listening – the audience can instead hear return performances without the structuring involvement of memory or analysis. Thus, the second feature is also strengthened in performer indeterminacy.

Despite this further fulfillment of the aleatory aesthetic, music that is indeterminate in performance still does not fully depersonalise its sounds or attempt to dispel the aesthetic distance between art and life. In part, this arises from the fact that Cage and associated composers maintained a relatively conventional conception of the role of the listener. Audience members still attended concerts featuring indeterminate music, artistic productions framed not by an impersonal environment, but by a composer or performer at the centre of attention in the concert hall. Even in such a work as Cage's *4'33"*, there is still an audience observing a human on stage. The early ambient music of Eno and Rich, however, suggests that the process of

¹⁶ Cage, "Composition as Process," 35-40.

¹⁷ Ibid., 53. Although in Boulez' case, he portrays this negatively as the composer abandoning "every last embryo of craftsmanship." (42)

increasing indeterminacy observed in Cage's work could continue by shifting focus away from human agents.¹⁸ For Eno and Rich, performers and composers are reduced to just one potentially ignorable part of the sonic environment as listener attention fluctuates unpredictably.¹⁹

Early Ambient Music and Listener Indeterminacy

From the first definition of ambient music provided by Eno in his liner notes to *Ambient 1*, the focus on the listener is clear. As Eno famously wrote, "ambient music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."²⁰ Drawing on Cage, minimalism, and defined against homogenising "muzak," ambient music emerged in the late 1970s as a genre "intended to induce calm and a space to think."²¹ It was music emerging from a revived, new-age concern for "meditation, ecstatic states, and stillness"²² and the sonic means by which these could be achieved. Importantly, Eno's portrayal stresses that ambient music allows listener attention to

¹⁸ Early electronic and tape music by composers such as Pierre Schaeffer also effectively reduced the role of the performer by shifting away from the concert stage, although this music still maintained focused listening as an ideal. Even so, Schaeffer's work did influence early ambient music (Till, "Ambient Music," 330).

¹⁹ This idea is not completely foreign to Cage. For instance, in "Composition as Process," *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 50th Anniversary Edition (Wesleyan University Press, 2011), Cage writes that "the mind may be used either to ignore ambient sounds, pitches other than the eighty-eight, durations which are not counted, timbres which are unmusical or distasteful, and in general to control and understand an available experience. Or the mind may give up its desire to improve on creation and function as a faithful receiver of experience." (32) In his work, however, Cage positions ignoring different sounds as a volitional act taking place in a typical concert space, not yet seeing it as a possible locus for indeterminacy.

²⁰ Eno, "Ambient Music," 1.

²¹ Till, "Ambient Music," 330-334. Eno, "Ambient Music," 1.

²² Till, "Ambient Music," 329.

drift freely and that it is just one part of the sonic environment. In the famous (and perhaps fictionalised) origin story for his idea of ambient music, for instance, a convalescing Eno was “too beat to get up and adjust the volume, [and] let recorded harps mix with the rain and his own rising and falling attention”²³ – the music became equally as ignorable as the sound of rain. Eno also, like other early composers in this genre, took advantage of new audio technology to allow listeners more control over listening environments, as he released *Ambient 1* on record and cassette in 1978, emphasising portable technology rather than a framed concert space.²⁴ Thus, Eno’s early work positioned ambient music as a genre focused on the choices and states of the listener.

Robert Rich’s early work similarly characterised ambient music. This is particularly illustrated in Rich’s early 1980s “sleep concerts,”²⁵ in which Rich performed through the night to a resting audience, the music for which eventually inspired his seven-hour-long piece *Somnium*. In his words, the purpose of these concerts was to “let the music incorporate itself into [one’s] perceptual framework” and to create a space for “unique states of consciousness”²⁶ as the listener was drawn in and out of sleep by the music. When he later released *Somnium* for individual listening, he also reinforced the fact that this format would permit “more choices about the way

²³ John Lysaker, "Turning Listening Inside Out: Brian Eno's Ambient 1: Music for Airports," *JSP: Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2017): 158. Accounts differ on how apocryphal this story is.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁵ Joseph Morpurgo and Robert Rich, “Dreamcatching: The Remarkable Story of Robert Rich and the Sleep Concerts,” *Fact Magazine*, accessed 5 October 2022, <https://www.factmag.com/2014/10/10/dreamcatching-the-remarkable-story-of-robert-rich-and-the-sleep-concerts/3/>, 1.

²⁶ Robert Rich, “Somnium and the Sleep Concert,” Liner notes for *Somnium*, by Robert Rich, Hypnos/Soleilmoon Recordings, 2001.

you listen to this music.”²⁷ Further, Rich noted in an interview that he had an early interest in cognitive science and sleep research, and that his sleep concerts were informed by an awareness of the several states of consciousness between waking and deep sleep.²⁸ He saw his music as a way to “surf” these different levels of awareness.²⁹ Finally, Rich also positioned his music as just one sound source in the environment – his drones and tracks sounded alongside snoring audience members (for in-person concerts), traffic sounds, sirens, and the rest of the local soundscape.³⁰

Both Eno’s and Rich’s portrayals of their own music emphasise the variable listening states of the audience. Their descriptions suggest that the musical material creates sonic spaces that do not force any one way of listening, while also offering opportunities for the listener to move unpredictably through different states. For Eno, the states are levels of attention to the music and engagement with the surrounding environment, and for Rich’s sleep music, they are levels of attention and conscious awareness. In either case, ambient music emerges as a genre that plays with indeterminacy but shifts it from the composer and performer to the listener (a possibility not explicitly considered by Potter, Cage, or Boulez). Further, Eno and Rich position the composer’s work as just one sound source within the surrounding environment. As a result, both Eno’s and Rich’s writings suggest an aleatoric characterisation of their music; however, there remains the question of whether their work actually instantiates this view. To demonstrate that their music does effectively create listener indeterminacy, I turn now to the psychological literature on modes of listening.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Joseph Morpurgo and Robert Rich, “Dreamcatching,” transcript.

²⁹ Robert Rich, “Somnium and the Sleep Concert.”

³⁰ Ibid.

Modes of Listening and Ambient Music

Since Pierre Schaeffer's early work on modes of listening in 1966, the literature on this topic has continued to grow in scope and precision.³¹ Schaeffer initially described four modes of listening, but Tuuri and Eerola's 2012 article on a taxonomy of listening increases this to nine main modes of listening in three broad categories: there are three "experiential" modes of listening including direct somatic responses to sound (reflexive and kinaesthetic listening) and "early associations, mental images and feelings pre-attentively evoked in the listening experience"³² (connotative listening); four "denotative" modes, which are different varieties of hearing sound as a sign, whether physically or culturally associated (causal, empathetic, functional, and semantic); and two reflective modes, operating at a higher level of awareness (critical listening, which is thinking about "judging the appropriateness of listening-based interpretations,"³³ and reduced listening, which is when one focuses on features of the sound as such).³⁴ In addition to delineating these categories, Tuuri and Eerola also carry out an exercise of writing about the experience of a sound event (a cell phone ringing during a lecture or a song playing from an iPod) in each of these modes.³⁵ In doing so, they demonstrate how a single sound has the capability not only to elicit cognitive activity in all of the above modes, but that a

³¹ Kai Tuuri and Tuomas Eerola, "Formulating a Revised Taxonomy for Modes of Listening," *Journal of New Music Research* 41, no. 2 (2012): 139.

³² *Ibid.*, 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

listener can quickly cycle through these different modes in response to different cues in the environment and different levels of attention. Further, Tuuri and Eerola suggest that “some sounds may induce the activation of certain modes more strongly than others,”³⁶ thereby indicating the possibility of musical devices that can nudge the listener towards changing modes.

Another important part of Tuuri and Eerola’s taxonomy is the argument that listening experiences in total can be conceptualised on three distinct axes: intentionality (described by the above modes of listening), attention, and disposition (the particularities of the individual’s listening style).³⁷ Following Eno’s and Rich’s descriptions of their own work, it is not difficult to see that their music enacts indeterminacy along the first two axes, intentionality and attention. The listener may listen to the music to varying levels and directions of intentionality, and also be aware of the music to varying degrees as attention is drawn elsewhere by the environment.

Additionally, in a text by Bayne and Hohwy on the modes of consciousness, the authors suggest that cognitive states more broadly (including, for instance, conscious wakefulness, drowsiness, hypnagogia, and light sleep) can also be profitably conceived of as operating on two axes: those of awareness and wakefulness.³⁸ The resonance between this model and that for states of listening is immediately apparent. Awareness, also described as “contents of consciousness,”³⁹ refers to a subject’s cognitive capacity for degrees of thought and, as a result,

³⁶ Ibid., 138.

³⁷ Ibid., 143.

³⁸ Tim Bayne and Jacob Hohwy, "Modes of Consciousness," in *Finding Consciousness: The Neuroscience, Ethics and Law of Severe Brain Damage*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford University Press, 2016), 61, 63. The authors do suggest that this conception is insufficient for the explanation of certain states such as sleepwalking, vegetative states, and epileptic states, but as those states are not (generally) within the field of operation for ambient music, the two-dimensional analysis is effective enough for this discussion.

³⁹ Ibid., 61.

is tied directly to a subject's ability to manifest and direct intentionality. Wakefulness as used by Bayne and Hohwy concerns the degree of a subject's "orientation to [their] environment,"⁴⁰ and thus corresponds to a subject's possible range of attention. Pairing these two sets of axes (awareness/intentionality and wakefulness/attention) suggests that even the more extreme example of Rich's sleep concerts, where audience members drifted between modes of consciousness, might be understood as deriving from the same mechanisms as used in Eno's music: namely, free variability of intention and attention. Lest this talk of modes of listening and consciousness become too abstract, however, a discussion of *Ambient 1* and *Somnium* in light of these modes will help to clarify the concepts and demonstrate that Eno's and Rich's ambient music does enact listener indeterminacy.

Throughout the four parts of Eno's *Ambient 1*, there are several devices for allowing listeners variability on the axis of attention. Particularly in the composition's first part, "1/1," there are extended pauses after notes and phrases in which Eno gives the surrounding environment space to draw the listener's focus (e.g., two of the early, longer pauses are 0:14 – 0:24 and 1:15 – 1:32).⁴¹ The music itself is relatively slow and highly repetitive, and as a result, does not force itself on the listener with anything sudden or any attention-drawing sense of musical development. There is also a relatively small palette of timbres used by Eno, which aids in reducing the potential for a sense of surprise by maintaining the homogeneity of the work.

Further, Eno uses several musical devices in the composition to subtly provoke different modes of listening, while still allowing the accidents of the listener's internal state and variable attention to determine how and what they hear. Most obviously, the tonal and rhythmic features

⁴⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁴¹ Brian Eno, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, recorded 1978, Polydor Records, 1978, accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNwYtllyt3Q>.

of the work suggest the semantic listening mode, as the audience hears gestures fitting conventionalised tonal relationships and a periodic metric frame of 4/4 time. The odd, altered timbre of the piano and human voices in the first and second parts, respectively, might also provoke the mode of reduced listening if one is in the right intentional state and focuses on the timbre alone. Eno's treatment of the various instruments also emphasises their physical means of sound production, and thus could suggest the causal mode of listening. For instance, Eno emphasises the breathy roughness of the voices in the second and third parts and the unpitched 'thud' that accompanies many of the lower piano-like notes throughout the album. In the third section, Eno also makes use of a scattered spatialization of the pitches which, if considered pre-attentively, might serve to activate the reflexive mode. As Tuuri and Eerola describe, the reflexive mode consists of quickly-evoked "action-sound couplings"⁴² operating on an ingrained, physical level. If the listener is attentive enough to notice, for instance, a pitch coming unexpectedly from the far-right field, they will instinctively be drawn to attend to the source location of the pitch as an innate sound reaction. Finally, the use of the altered human voice in the second and third movements might provoke the empathetic mode of listening, as the listener might be drawn to consider (in full awareness or not) what subjective state these ghostly voices are projecting. While other features could evoke additional modes of listening in Eno's album, the above examples are enough to demonstrate that the composition allows listeners to vary over both the axes of attention and intention. *Ambient 1* uses different sounds that might provoke a range of listening modes experienced by the listener, but none of them force the listener into any one mode; instead, the listener moves unpredictably between listening states, enacting listener indeterminacy.

⁴² Tuuri and Eerola, "Formulating a Revised Taxonomy for Modes of Listening," 146.

Rich's *Somnium* also presents musical material that enables listener indeterminacy.⁴³ *Somnium* is a quiet piece intended to be experienced just at the range of perception, and the movement between different sound areas happens in extremely slow crossfades so that there are no sudden changes to forcefully draw the listener's attention.⁴⁴ The musical material also consists of long drones and natural sounds like water or wind, and soft, repetitive wildlife samples that Rich has often spatialised so they seem to come from far away. As a result, the listener can choose to pay attention to the piece's sounds, but the quiet, repetitive, and locally static content also fades easily out of attention. Thus, *Somnium* allows the listener to drift along the axis of attention, not enforcing any one state.

The piece also uses sounds that have the potential to call forth a variety of different modes of listening on the axis of intentionality. For instance, at 0:1:48, Rich uses a soft flute melody that, in recalling concert music, might provoke a mode of reduced listening as the listener attends to the sound of the flute itself, or also provoke the semantic mode as the melody suggests a conventionalised tonal framework (the flute moving first between the root, fifth, leading tone, and third of a minor tonality). Later, at 1:17:00, one can hear birdsong which could suggest a connotative mode if heard pre-attentively, as it might evoke associated images of birds or nature. By 1:35:30, another less identifiable, animal-like sound has slowly faded into the mix, but in this case, the cooing, arching calls seem highly emotive. If the listener happens to find their attention drawn to the sound, they might at some level read into the affects this sound could convey, and thereby activate the empathetic mode. Then, at 1:53:25, after a long fade-in that

⁴³ Robert Rich, *Somnium*, recorded 1994-2000, Hypnos/Soleilmoon Recordings, 2001, accessed 13 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCS4B4W7mXA>.

⁴⁴ Robert Rich, "Somnium and the Sleep Concert." Rich suggests turning the volume down so that the sounds of the piece be "nearly inaudible," soft enough to "hover at the edge of awareness."

masks its arrival, one can hear water moving and lightly splashing. As Tuuri and Eerola suggest, “there is a bias to perceive sound as being intentional, especially if it suggests biologically relevant movement patterns,”⁴⁵ and that is certainly true here if the listener attends to the sound. One might think about the source of the sound, entering the causal mode of listening, or respond pre-attentively in the kinaesthetic mode to the implied actor through the activation of mirror neurons, as sounds of motion produce a reflexive haptic response in the listener.⁴⁶ While this is a small selection of the array of sounds and techniques used by Rich, it demonstrates again that his compositional choices allow the listener’s attentional and intentional state to vary unpredictably over the course of this work; as a result, *Somnium* engages in listener indeterminacy. This will only be the truer if one considers the hypnagogic and sleep-transitional states listeners will encounter if they choose to sleep to this composition. That set of listening conditions, while not covered here, is all the more evocative, in my experience.⁴⁷

Thus, as the above discussion demonstrates, the concept of indeterministic processes over the axes of listening attention and intention applies effectively to Eno’s and Rich’s works as an analytical tool. Both works provide spaces for a variety of levels of attention without forcing one in particular. They also both use various musical devices to suggest different modes of listening, thereby opening the possibility of drawing the listener to states they otherwise might not enter in typical concert music. Just as graphic scores provide a preliminary structure from which the

⁴⁵ Tuuri and Eerola, “Formulating a Revised Taxonomy for Modes of Listening,” 142.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁷ Necessarily, the fragmentary, ineffable qualities of hypnagogic and related states do not dispose themselves to easy description. To readers intrigued by the idea, I can only suggest trying it oneself; however, if others’ experiences are anything like my own, I can say that Rich’s description of surfing states of consciousness is apt. There is a liquid, immersive quality to the cognitive slip-stream drift as one glides and splashes through inner auralities.

indeterminate performance can extend and more easily avoid the pitfalls of convention and personal taste, the prompts for listening modes included in these works provide a subtle underlying structure for the listener to help destabilise conventionalised listening in one mode and support variation in the listener's attentional and intentional state. As a result, the work of Eno and Rich does enact the listener indeterminacy their own descriptions suggested. Given this, the question remains – do Eno's and Rich's works attain to the aleatory aesthetic in Hoogerwerf's conception, and thereby continue the line of thought running through Cage's work?

Ambient Music and the Aleatory Tradition

Hoogerwerf's first characteristic of the aleatory tradition is that it relinquished absolute control over the musical material and reduced the personal expression of the composer. Considering the above discussion, the first part of this characteristic is fulfilled by listener indeterminacy: Eno and Rich intentionally gave up control over how a listener would hear any particular moment of their compositions. The second part of the characteristic, though, may initially seem not to apply particularly well to ambient music – after all, the recordings are stable, composed works that demonstrate the application of conventional frameworks like metre and tonality. A brief consideration of Eno's and Rich's compositional processes, however, demonstrates that both were also interested in diminishing the role of the composer.

In what became a famous characterisation, Eno described himself early in his career as a “nonmusician.”⁴⁸ He lacked conventional musical skills and formal musical training in both

⁴⁸ Lysaker, “Turning Listening Inside Out,” 161.

performance and composition.⁴⁹ Eno also thought that “conventional music theory [could] constrict more than enable creative music making” by creating arbitrary constraints on the possibilities of sound.⁵⁰ But rather than see this freedom from traditional systems as an opportunity to express his personal tastes, he instead attempted to remove his intentions from the composition process. In Eno’s own words, “instead of trying to organise [the music] in full detail, you organise it only somewhat, and you then rely on the dynamics of the system” to produce the rest.⁵¹ He saw his musical task more as a gardener of the “complex and unpredictable processes of nature,”⁵² than an architect enforcing his own will. Even the cover design for *Ambient 1*, scholar John Lysaker argues, marginalises Eno’s presence and suggests that “one should not expect authorial expression to be the principal goal [...] or tracking it to be our principal task.”⁵³ Thus, from Eno’s portrayal of his own music, it is clear that he, like Cage, is interested in diminishing the composer’s role.

Likewise, Rich’s work also moves away from the centrality of the composer. In Rich’s first sleep concerts, the music was completely improvised from simple drone material and long recordings of nature.⁵⁴ Further, Rich describes setting up sonic processes in the technology he was using and letting these guide how the music unfolded over several hours.⁵⁵ Using “digital

⁴⁹ Cecilia Sun, "Brian Eno, Non-Musicianship and the Experimental Tradition," in *Brian Eno: Oblique Music*, edited by Sean Albiez and David Pattie, 29-48 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 30-31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵¹ Brian Eno, 2012, quoted in Lysaker, “Turning Listening Inside Out,” 160.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵³ Lysaker, “Turning Listening Inside Out,” 158.

⁵⁴ Joseph Morpurgo and Robert Rich, “Dreamcatching,” transcript.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

signal processing [or] strange time-stretching algorithms,”⁵⁶ Rich would generate sounds he could not expect. Even more than Eno, Rich’s *Somnium* also largely avoids traditional compositional devices. For instance, after a clear flute melody in the first several minutes of the piece, the majority of the following seven hours consists of field sounds and extremely slow, indistinct drones. There are no obvious features that call attention to the composer, as the natural sounds generally dominate the texture. As a result, Rich’s role is secondary in the work, and so both Eno’s and Rich’s works fulfill Hoogerwerf’s first characteristic by diminishing the role of the composer.

Hoogerwerf’s second characteristic of the aleatory tradition is the rejection of a ‘syntax’ of sounds. Again, in the context of listener indeterminacy, Eno’s and Rich’s music attains this quality. Because the listener’s attentional and intentional state is free to vary, there is no reason to expect any one mode to follow any other mode. As a result, in the listener’s experience, no one sound in the composition will necessarily follow any other. For instance, in *Somnium*, one might become consciously aware of a bird song at one moment, slip to a less aware state, then rise again into awareness say, ten minutes later, into the sound of rushing water. The sequence of sounds of which one is aware is arbitrary and accidental, and thus free of syntax. As a result, this ambient music also fulfils this component of the aleatory aesthetic.

Finally, Hoogerwerf’s third part of the aleatory aesthetic is the affirmation of everyday life. That feature is also present in this music, even to a greater degree than that achieved by Cage’s concert works. Eno’s and Rich’s ambient works were both eventually released in portable listening modes with the understanding that one could turn on the music in whatever tasks one was engaged in, whether walking, thinking, or washing dishes. Because of this, Eno’s and Rich’s

⁵⁶ Ibid.

music is not removed from life by the necessity of a concert stage – it can be experienced as one set of sounds among many in the environment of ordinary life. As Lysaker argues, “Eno [wanted] to break down the barrier between art and everyday life,”⁵⁷ and in positioning music as another ignorable part of the listener’s sonic environment, his ambient music does just that. Likewise, Rich wrote his music with the hope that it would “enhance [his listener’s] experience of life” and recall “fundamental aspects of human experience” that have been lost in the rapid pace of modern society.⁵⁸ For both Eno and Rich, music gives a new way of experiencing everyday life that elevates it to the same status as art (or reduces art to an object of life). Thus, their music demonstrates the last characteristic of aleatory music, and so Eno’s and Rich’s ambient music meets all of Hoogerwerf’s descriptors for what constitutes the aesthetic. As a result, their ambient music exists in the same cognitive space as Cage’s work, while pushing it in a new direction by reframing the role of the listener.

Conclusion

What did you just hear? If you chose to listen to this paper’s accompanying composition while reading, you have experienced the drift of different listening modes that ambient music can stage. One is pulled between centres of attention and ways of listening whose sequence the composer could not have predicted, and one’s variable awareness transforms the track into an irregular patchwork of half-remembered moments. For Eno and Rich, ambient music might tint the events it accompanies, but it does not overtake them. Music remains just one aspect of one’s cognitive environment. In these ways, ambient music continues the aleatory tradition and Cage’s

⁵⁷ Lysaker, “Turning Listening Inside Out,” 168.

⁵⁸ Joseph Morpurgo and Robert Rich, “Dreamcatching,” transcript.

work in particular; the motion from composer to performer indeterminacy already intensified the principles of aleatory, but the movement to listener indeterminacy further strengthened and developed them. Thus, despite its association with muzak and popular 'chill out' musics, ambient music is more than just background noise and sonic filler; it can be experienced as experimental music that provides new ways of becoming aware of our own shifting attention and the soundscapes around us.

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