

The Ambient Odyssey (Part 1)

MARK PRENDERGAST'S EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLUTION OF AMBIENT MUSIC: THIS FIRST PART COVERS THE GROUND FROM MAHLER TO ENO

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Of all 20th Century music movements, the story of Ambient music has to be one of the most colourful, most unorthodox and downright complex: as kaleidoscopic as that of psychedelia, and in its own way as confrontational and divisive as punk rock. To this day there are many who cannot stand the music of Klaus Schulze, Brian Eno or The Orb, to name just the tip of the iceberg. Others swear by it as though it was a religion. As a genre it has mutated and gone through several movements - French Impressionism, English Pastoralism, American Minimalism, German Electronica, Eno's Ambient Series, Post-Punk Experimentation, Post-House Chill, Environmentalism, Sound Art, 5.1 Surround Sound and now 21st Century Ambience, with a whole new collection of artists and styles.

Every few years, Ambient music is pronounced as dead as the vinyl record, and with just as much sheer bloody-mindedness it resurfaces in a new guise in a new place full of new possibilities. At present it's thriving on the West Coast of America, in Northern England and Scotland, and in Scandinavia. The idea of Sound as Art in its own right as taken hold in the art world. So tenacious is its form and so diverse its character that the late Frankfurt practitioner Pete Namlook's famous 20th Century axiom: "Ambient will be the classical music of the future" might well turn out to be the honest-to-God truth.

For years I have been asked to give a specific definition of what Ambient music means. Words like immersive, becalming, atmospheric, environmental, tonal, soporific, placid, serene, tinted, mood-enhancing, spacey, unobtrusive or meditative all come to mind. Some might call it boring. Yes there is a lot of boring music, a lot of badly written, badly played and badly recorded music. Remember those awful 1970s *Top Of The Pops* records with nubile young women on the covers? They all contained appallingly recorded cover versions of chart hits that had sold in their millions and were now consigned to history. Add the millions of budget classical music compilations, and one is only starting to collate the amount of 'bad' music that has been released.

Fortunately, Ambient is one area that has survived because of quality. Its very essence has only been enhanced by what I call the evolution of sound in the electronic age. With greater efficacy in the

studio, coupled with higher resolution LP, CD and streaming replay, Ambient music literally defines late 20th and early 21st Century high fidelity.

The word 'Ambient' has its origins in the late 16th Century French word *ambiant* and the Latin *ambire* meaning literally 'to go around'. Pertaining to surroundings, encompassing the environment including the air and the sky, the idea of Ambient music goes back to ancient times especially the Greeks. Homer's *Odyssey* is full of Orpheus playing his becalming lyre, and nobody can forget the effect of the famous Sirens in that or Joyce's later *Ulysses*. In fact the father of European musical score, Pythagoras, believed in a music of the spheres which emanated around the universe and which one pluck of a harp could tap into. Aiolos, the Greek God of the winds, gave his name to a famous harp which played magically in the air. From ancient Egypt to Rome and downwards through history background music always had its utility. From Medieval plainchant to Purcell and Bach the usefulness of unobtrusive but spiritually satisfying music has always been championed and appreciated. Plus the idea of utility would become Ambient's greatest strength in the modern age.

But first let us go back in time. The late 19th Century was dominated by the Romantic Symphony, a grand *gesamtkunstwerk* which dominated concert halls and exhausted the rich or influential concertgoers. There were no record players or tape recorders, and cities bustled with horses and carriages. The works of Wagner, Bruckner and Mahler dominated Europe, and in Mahler we sense the first stirrings of Ambient music, as cowbells, shepherd horns, folk tunes and nursery rhymes are sprinkled throughout his symphonies, less for dramatic effect than to lend atmosphere to the sound.

Everything would be turned on its head by the Paris Exposition of 1889, and the raft of inventions that led into the 20th Century. Over 32 million attended the grand cultural Exposition, opened to celebrate the building of the Eiffel Tower, then the tallest building in the world. The colonial pavilions, full of the ethnic music of Africa, Arabia, Russia and South East Asia, would stimulate a totally new kind of composition – shorter, more translucent and simpler. Claude Debussy was excited by the elusive

