

# Furniture Music for Airports: Erik Satie and Brian Eno reflect on the music that best suits everyday life.

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**Abstract:** This paper considers ambient music in a comparative perspective. Taking the 1950s as a mirror time axis, I suggest comparing Erik Satie's ideas on *Furniture music* (1920s) to Brian Eno's notions of ambient music (1970s onwards). Both of them are closely related to the visual arts and that is why ambient music's theoretical foundations can be compared to the functional art of the Bauhaus school and to American Minimalist and environmental art. This is an attempt to study the artistic side of ambient music, which has a wide scope of applications beyond the art sphere. In this respect, I will try to state the differences between ambient music as an art intermission in our everyday life and ambient music as a control device over human behaviour.

Avant-garde music since the 1950s is the key concept of this conference. Had this event taken place then, the main topic of this paper would have probably been halfway between popular music and avant-garde. Fortunately, these two categories have by now blurred, and therefore avant-garde and popular are no longer useful concepts to describe contemporary music or musical practices. Neither is avant-garde exclusively in the domain of the academy and nor does popular music mean superficial listening or experience. It is in this context that I shall present ambient music as an example of a complex flux of ideas between composers coming from different backgrounds.

As a starting point we should keep in mind that ambient music, or music functioning as a background, is not new to the second half of the 20th century: music has probably been used like this since it came into existence. Nevertheless, from the 1970s onwards there is a specific way of thinking about background music that could not be understood in previous contexts. Composers creating aural backdrops to our everyday life can only exist when the natural soundscape is already too noisy for musicians to create music pieces which would require all of our full attention. In fact, as Murray Shaeffer has explained, the concert hall only appeared in urban spaces when these became too noisy for outdoor performance<sup>1</sup>. We can consequently think about ambient music as a strictly contemporary musical practice. Ambient compositions go beyond the mere acknowledgement of a natural soundscape (as John Cage did with *4'33* for example), as they ignore and respect it. Ambient music provides us with a pleasant and restoring alternative to the hustle and bustle of public spaces and at the same time it allows us to be aware of it, should we want to. By definition, ambient music rejects the idea of the concert hall, since it does not need an aseptic silent space to be produced, it accompanies life wherever life takes place, "the home hi-fi, the gallery installation, the walkman, the supermarket aisle, and the unexpected public space are all equally interesting"<sup>1</sup>. According to this point of view, ambient music is an aural accompaniment to our everyday tasks, in perfect balance with the natural soundscape, none of them bothering the other.

Some scholars consider the Paris 1899 Universal Exposition the birthplace of ambient music. It was here where some French composers, notably Claude Debussy and Erik Satie, together with foreign musicians who were in the capital at the time, first listened to non-Western music. This would have encouraged some of them to compose music pieces with exotic overtones or to

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Eno, foreword to *OHM+: The Early Gurus of Electronic Music*, Ellipsis Arts (2000).

rely on non-Western scales. However, over two decades had to pass before the piece for which Satie is considered as the father of ambient music was first performed. It was *Musique d'ameublement* (*Furniture Music*), composed along with Darius Milhaud, for piano four hands, trombone and three clarinets, and created as an intermission music for Max Jacob's play *Ruffian toujours, truand jamais* (1920). But this is not Satie's only achievement, as according to Mark Prendergast "his interest in symmetrical repetition is the essence of Minimalism"<sup>2</sup>.

A year before, far from Paris, in the Weimar Republic, Walter Gropius had founded the Bauhaus, where the students learned to create objects of everyday use affordable to the greater society. At the same time, Satie, the author of *Sonatine bureaucratique*, was about to encourage everybody "not to go to bed before listening to furniture music", which he described as being "basically industrial"<sup>3</sup>. The fact that these breakthroughs in 20th century art history – of design on the one hand and of music on the other– were contemporary does not necessarily mean a close connection between them. Nevertheless, and despite the exotic experiments of French composers, I consider this chronological parallel as a relevant fact for the study of the birth of Satie's functional music, especially if we take into account that except for *Gnossiennes*, Satie was never interested in orientalism<sup>4</sup>. Satie did not create, but did continue, an ancient tradition of composing a music which aim was that of providing listeners with an aural decor for their meetings, banquets, parades, film screenings, etc. He was probably also the first composer that, having achieved wide renown and respect for such pieces as *Parade* or *Sports et Divertissements*, was ironic enough as to suggest to the public they should not pay attention to his oeuvres. His goal was to put an end to the bourgeois representational function of music.

In his essay *Bruits. Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique*, Jacques Attali postulates that music is prophetic and that form anticipates function. According to the French author, this had occurred many times throughout the history of music, one of the last expressions being rap, which in his view forecasted the explosion of urban violence<sup>5</sup>. Attali's thesis implies that form can secretly contain future functions of music, and that these might be revealed to attentive and expert eyes. However, it is relevant to recall that the Bauhaus founder had thought rather differently, following American architect Louis H. Sullivan's (1856-1924) maxim "form must follow function"<sup>6</sup>, to such an extent that the idea would become predominant over the different stages of the school. Here lie the reasons for which the repetitive music in Satie's furniture composition *Vexations* did not prophesize a repetitive consumer society but rather confirmed its existence in the modern cities of the 1920s. This shows that it might be interesting to consider Satie's oeuvre according to the theories of his contemporaries. Either way, this piece can be analyzed from different points of view: it consists of a musical phrase which is repeated 840 times, thus becoming a kind of musical mantra which makes the listener enter a new way of reception where sound perception is altered. This is to say that the "gradual process" that Steve Reich<sup>7</sup> likes to listen to in music happens in the mind of the listener of *Vexations*. On the other hand, the first performer of this piece, along with eleven other pianists, was John Cage, whose career reflected on, among other interests, the impossibility of silence, evidently due to ambient natural sounds. It is perhaps because Cage followed Satie's ideas in the postwar period that the French composer is venerated as the first one to have consciously thought about music being always, and inevitably, impregnated with ambient sounds.

Satie, in his *Mémoires d'un amnésique* referred to furniture music as being designed against those music pieces used as a backdrop to other activities but without any connection to the context they were intended for<sup>8</sup>. Furniture music has thus an advantage compared to baroque or classical music, when played as background music<sup>9</sup>: it has been composed for the contemporary public/consumers, to "fulfill people's useful needs". The fact that Satie himself never listened to *Vexations* fully performed is quite a paradox, and may well support the theory of music being prophetic, along with the fact that when the ensemble for *Musique d'ameublement* started playing the public stopped their conversations in order to pay devoted attention to the music, "much to the creators' dismay"<sup>10</sup>. I would like to believe that if the

Bauhaus had also had a music department, the students could have probably invented furniture music contemporarily to Satie, considering the driving forces behind them were so close.

Anyway, Satie died in 1925 and thus his lifetime lies out of the scope of this conference. We will refer to him as a pioneer. Let us consider the 1950s as the time axis for this study. If some thirty years before Satie had been reflecting on functional music, it was in 1978, almost thirty years onwards when Brian Eno created his own label, named Ambient Records. It came to give its name to a music genre that existed already but did not yet have a widely recognizable name. The music this label was created for had at least one point in common with Satie's *Vexations*, it had to be "continuous, a surrounding"<sup>11</sup>. According to Alex Ross, in Cage's performance of the piece in 1963 only one of the listeners stayed for the almost nineteen hours it lasted, and hence got a refund for the price of the entrance<sup>12</sup>. Eno, just as the Bauhaus members, had the purpose of creating objects, aural in this case, which would improve our everyday experience. As he puts it "in fact, it has often been painters and writers - people who use music while they work and want to make for themselves a conducive environment- who've first enjoyed and encouraged this work"<sup>13</sup>. The Satie's Archives director Ornella Volta explains that the French composer's aesthetic was inspired by his visual artist's colleagues, such as Picabia, Russiñol or Picasso, rather than by his contemporary composers and thus "it had always been in pictorial terms that his admirers referred to him, even musicians"<sup>14</sup>. But a continuous quality does not exclusively belong to music. After listening to *Vexations*, Andy Warhol conceived the idea of an "ambient film", *Sleep*. Viewers were not supposed to watch it in a single day but rather to be constantly switching to other activities. This notion is closely related to the fact that minimal artworks are intended to be understood at a glance. This is a film for which the real experience can be replaced with an explanation or description of the work.

Actually, it should be highlighted that the authors of ambient music do not employ the verb *to listen to* when they think about their work, and rather tend to take for granted that consumers *use* it. Eno's label was intended to "enhance the atmospheric idiosyncrasies of our environment" as it is explained on the sleeves to his record *Music for Airports* (1978)<sup>15</sup>. He compares listening to ambient music to Chinese Whispers, which is definitely a gradual sound process as well. In "The Studio as a Compositional Tool"<sup>16</sup> the British composer explains that his working method allows him to take sound from the time dimension and put it back in the space dimension thanks to the recording technology. This continuity of music in the time-space dimension was what Satie was seeking with *Vexations*. This goes along with his "detachable concept", which deals with the fact that any live recording keeps the environmental sound of the performance. When a concert is recorded and then played somewhere else, the listeners of the record may pay attention to that soundscape which was part of the venue, just as recorded music does. The concept could be considered to be Eno's own vision of Anahid Kassabian's "distributed tourism"<sup>17</sup>. Nowadays, music can take us anywhere on the planet, no matter how far it may be. We can listen to far away soundscapes from anywhere we are, making the souvenirs we used to collect in the past now pointless. In Eno's studio "there is no transmission loss between you and the sound - you handle it. It puts the composer in the identical position of the painter"<sup>18</sup>. And the recorded sound stays unaltered through time.

Eno's consideration of ambient music being so close to painting has led him to several experiments and to creating multimedia oeuvres in which painting has an influence on musical composition and vice versa. The software *77 Million of paintings* is an example of this. It creates concerts/exhibitions which randomly combine some of Eno's paintings and music. We would need more than a lifetime to witness every possible combination. As opposed to sound recordings, which allow us to listen to the same piece as many times as desired, the juxtaposition of image and sound offered by this software can hardly be repeated unless the user prepares it to do so. As it was the case with ambient music, light and sound spectacles

are not avant-garde practices of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let us remember that Satie was contemporary to Georges Méliès (1861-1938), the cinema-magician that performed in Magic Lantern shows, which Satie would accompany at the piano in the Chat Noir café in Paris. After all, *77 Million of paintings* is, like cinema, a light and sound show. As Eno puts it, the software can be used to give some atmosphere to a dinner taking place in a room with a big screen, for example<sup>19</sup>. This way, the users would not only have an aural backdrop, but also an audiovisual combination to achieve an environment perfectly tailored to their needs. Eno is therefore one of the pioneers of ambient music just as much as a background artist. After all "conceptual art can never be background art because it requires a certain amount of intellectual effort on the part of the viewer and aesthetics are considered insignificant. However, some Minimalist art, often considered extremely academic, is acceptable because of its "tasteful", decorative quality"<sup>20</sup>. This assertion seems to me quite controversial, since if the media is the message, the former can as well distort the latter. Minimalist art should function as a decorative background if it is used in a decorative way. However, if given the appropriate context, it can become unexpectedly profound and complex; as Robert Morris says "simplicity of shape doesn't necessarily equate simplicity of experience". In the same way, any music piece becomes mere background music when heard in public spaces, under normal speech level, or distractedly. In our contemporary society we have attained such a level of noise pollution that we are probably going to need "anti-noise" devices to achieve the lost calm and peaceful silence, as for example Paul Lueg's "ambient silence" system. In fact, Attali thinks that in the future silence will be hard to obtain, and therefore a scarce and highly valuable good.

We can now go back to the Bauhaus once more. We have pointed out some of the similarities between Satie and Gropius, but the latter has also a lot to do with minimalist art of the post avant-garde period. The Weimar school chose to follow a reductionist path, that is to say, to make the maximum out of the minimum material, as it is explained in the famous maxim "less is more". One of the main aims of its renewed language was precisely to give birth to an art in balance and harmony with the modern world, with the urban ambience of the democratic Republic of Weimar. Thus, Bauhaus art, as other historical avant-garde movements, had a very powerful social dimension, by which art was to be reintroduced into everyday life. In the postmodern context, minimalism of artists such as Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Robert Morris or musicians of the likes of Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Terry Riley, to quote only the most reputed ones, continued the path of European experimentation, without the historical avant-garde consciousness "that social change and transformations in everyday life were at stake in every artistic experiments"<sup>21</sup>. Minimalist visual art is, as music, repetitive and modular; so that the viewer seizes and understands the object quickly ("what you see is what you see"). When listening to ambient music, we perceive both the composition and the soundscape at the same time, which is exactly what happens in the case of *site specific* artworks: the artist places the sculpture in relation to other chosen objects so that the viewer might link them all and establish a general idea of the whole. Ronald M. Radano states that Muzak Corporation's ambient music "accomplishes what John Cage, father of American postwar vanguardism, hoped to achieve with a highly radical musical language since it rejects the notion of the artist and autonomous artwork language"<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, there must be a clear distinction between art and business. As Nicola Bernardini asserts Satie was "making culture" whereas the Muzak Corporation "produces entertainment", that is to say, the former encourages individual perspectives while the latter satisfies the mainstream<sup>23</sup>. In this respect, Muzak, understood as an entertainment corporation (as its directors consider it, actually, rather than an art institution) would represent a "consensus music", pieces which would have achieved the broadest approval of the public<sup>24</sup>.

This leads us to consider the negative effects that ambient music might have on our behaviour which can give rise to non desired reactions. One of the key concepts of ambient music for it to really function as a backdrop, is not to produce an identification with the listener so that it

does not draw our attention away from other tasks. This non-identification is key to the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, as Jonathan Stern explains<sup>25</sup>. It is intended to create undesirable environments so that potential criminals are deterred from joining together in groups. The aim of ambient music as part of this design is to create divided uses of public spaces so that people belonging to different social classes do not coincide. We should not forget that music as a backdrop may not always be used as a suitable décor to everyday life routine. In a similar way, Tia de Nora quotes Joseph Lanza in relation to Eno's *Music for Airports* being played at the Pittsburgh Airport<sup>26</sup>. The composer of this album explains that it had to be "interruptible (because there'll be announcements), it had to work outside the frequencies at which people speak, and at different speeds from speech patterns (so as not to confuse communication), and it "has to be able to accommodate all the noises that airports produce". And, most importantly for this study, it "has to have something to do with where you are and what you're there for – flying, floating and, secretly, flirting with death". This music is intended to induce calm in the sense that it "makes you say to yourself "actually, it's not a big deal if I die", it is a music that "prepares you for dying"<sup>27</sup>. Perhaps passengers at Pittsburgh Airport had understood Eno's intentions only too well, and the music was quickly cancelled due to the passengers' demands. According to La Monte Young, "repetition demonstrates control", the listener is submitted to the musical process and therefore it exercises power over the listener's perception. Eno was continuing the quest for a specific music of the 20th century, as, according to Debussy, "the century of aeroplanes deserves a music of its own"<sup>28</sup>.

Through this brief text I have tried to show some of the social, aesthetic and historical implications of the intervention in the natural environment provided by some artists. Nowadays it seems that ambient sound goes side by side with ambient image. Our everyday life consists in constantly coping with environments half way between the natural and the artificial, it consists in learning to distinguish what is a result of a creative act and what was given by nature. Thanks to environmental artworks we learn that the natural sound and visual surroundings can be as beautiful, moving and interesting as the most brilliant of artworks.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Murray Schaeffer, *The Soundscape. Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Prendergast, *The Ambient Century. From Mahler to Moby—The Evolution of Sound in the Electronic Age* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Satie, *Memorias de un amnésico y otros escritos* (Madrid: Fugaz, 1989), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Orledge, "Satie & America," *American Music* 18 (vol. 1) (2000): 78.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Attali, *Bruits. Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (Paris: Fayard / PUF, 2001), 14.

<sup>6</sup> See Louis H. Sullivan, *The tall office building artistically considered*, 1896. <http://academics.triton.edu/faculty/fheitzman/tallofficebuilding.html> (accessed, 10 May, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> See Steve Reich's 1969's manifesto *Music as a Gradual Process*. <http://www.columbia.edu/ccnmtl/draft/ben/feld/mod1/readings/reich.html> (accessed 9 May, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Erik Satie, *Memorias de un amnésico*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> See Robert Fink, "Who Cares if You (Don't) Listen? (Toward a Defense of Repetitive Listening)" in *Repeating Ourselves. American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 195-207.

<sup>10</sup> See Nicola Bernardini, "Erik Satie's Musique d'Ameublement, some ninety years later" in *Furniture Music* (Venice: Compuservice Poligrafica Venezia, 2008), 22-29.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Eno, "Ambient Music" in *Audio Culture. Readings in Modern Music* ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 94.

<sup>12</sup> Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise. Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 526-527.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," 96.

<sup>14</sup> Ornella Volta, "Erik Satie: del Chat Noir a Dadá" in *Erik Satie: del Chat Noir a Dadá* (Valencia: IVAM, 1996), 9-43.

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- <sup>15</sup> Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," 97.
- <sup>16</sup> Brian Eno, "The Studio as a Compositional Tool" in *Audio Culture. Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 127-130.
- <sup>17</sup> See Anahid Kassabian, "¿Quiere un poco de música con su cortado?" in *La música que no se escucha. Aproximaciones a la escucha ambiental*, ed. Marta García Quiñones (Barcelona: Orquesta del Caos, 2008), 73-97.
- <sup>18</sup> Brian Eno, "The Studio as a Compositional Tool," 129.
- <sup>19</sup> See Michael Brunton, "Light Years Into the Future" in *Time*, 27 November, 2006, World section, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1542767,00.html> (accessed, 3 April 2010).
- <sup>20</sup> See Mike Brown, "Muzak" in "Hyperreal Music Archives", <http://media.hyperreal.org/zines/est/articles/muzak.html> (accessed, 10 May 2010)
- <sup>21</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "The Search for Tradition: Avant-garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s" in *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 33.
- <sup>22</sup> Ronald R. Radano, "Interpreting Muzak: Speculations on Musical Experience in Everyday Life" in *American Music* 7, no. 4 (1989): 458.
- <sup>23</sup> See Nicola Bernardini, "Furniture Music," 23.
- <sup>24</sup> See Radano, "Interpreting Muzak," 455.
- <sup>25</sup> See Jonathan Sterne, "Música programada y políticas del espacio público" in *La música que no se escucha. Aproximaciones a la escucha ambiental* (Barcelona: Orquesta del Caos, 2008), 39-53.
- <sup>26</sup> Tia de Nora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14.
- <sup>27</sup> Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," 96.
- <sup>28</sup> Mark Prendergast, "The Ambient Century," 9.