

INTRODUCTION

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This collection of essays has been assembled and developed from papers given at the Ambient@40 International Conference held in February 2018 at the University of Huddersfield. The original premise of the conference was not merely to celebrate Eno's work and the landmark release of *Music for Airports* in 1978, but to consider the development of the genre, how it has permeated our wider musical culture, and what the role of such music is today given the societal changes that have occurred since the release of that album. In the context of the conference, ambient was considered from the perspectives of aesthetic, influence, appropriation, process, strategy and activity. A detailed consideration of each of these topics could fill many volumes. With that in mind, this book does not seek to provide an in-depth analysis of each of these topics or a comprehensive history of the last 40 years of ambient music. Rather it provides a series of provocations, observations and reflections that each open up seams for further discussion. As such, this book should be read as a starting point for future research, one that seeks to critically interrogate the very meaning of 'ambient', how it creates its effect, and how the genre can remain vital and relevant in twenty-first century music-making.

In the past four decades or so, there has been an explosion of thinking around 'ambience'. As well as ambient music, which is our prime concern here, there has been increasing focus on the ambient materiality of our daily environment. Terms such as ambient marketing, ambient media, and ambient

intelligence¹ have all come into common parlance since the turn of the century. Similarly, in philosophy we have seen two significant parallel developments: an aesthetics of ‘atmosphere’ developed by ecocritical philosopher Gernot Böhme,² and the concept of ‘ambient poetics’ from Timothy Morton. In Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature*³ he posits that “the self and the world are intertwined”,⁴ and advocates for “sonic art works that produce a heightened awareness of self and environments”.⁵ Seth Kim-Cohen writing in *Against Ambience* states that:

For Morton, we are living in the Anthropocene, the first epoch of the Earth’s history in which human beings are altering the material reality of the planet. As a result, we have a duty to engage the planet as a discrete entity whose being is owed the same ethical considerations as human beings are. Likewise, all entities command equal status. For Morton, ambience is a state of awareness and conduct, a kind of immersion in, and with, other entities, and with the entity of all the entities together.⁶

Morton himself considers that “The *atmosphere* in which the message exists – its ambience – is a significant element of its meaning. In fact, its context *is* its

1 Ambient intelligence describes ubiquitous networked devices in our everyday environment. See Diane J. Cook, Juan C. Augusto, Vikramaditya R. Jakkula, “Ambient intelligence: Technologies, applications, and opportunities,” *Pervasive and Mobile Computing*, vol. 5(4), (2009): 277-298.

2 See: Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics*, trans. David Roberts, Thesis Eleven (36), (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1993), 119 and Kate Rigby, “Gernot Böhme’s Ecological Aesthetics of Atmosphere” in eds. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

3 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

4 *Ibid.*, 69.

5 Jon Dovey, “Ambience and Eco Critical Awareness,” accessed May 11, 2019, <https://research.ambientlit.com/index.php/2018/01/30/ambience-eco-critical-awareness/>.

6 Seth Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience and Other Essays* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 30.

meaning”.⁷ Extrapolating such thinking to ambient music we can propose that the ‘meaning’ is not to be found in an understanding of its sonic components as in traditional musical analysis, but in its creation of atmosphere. Another theoretical consideration of how we engage with our ambient environment is to be found in Luke Jaaniste’s *approaching the ambient*. Jaaniste proposes the notion of the ‘ambient mode of being’ which,

[...] involves a way of engaging with our urban surroundings that eschews the typical logic of foreground and background that grounds our daily and aesthetic lives. Instead, the ambient mode is an altered state in which we attune to the all-around-everywhere materiality of the surroundings [...] There are four complementary ways of arriving at the ambient [...] (i) *by way of concepts* – developing a theory of ambience and the ambient mode based on Heidegger’s realms of world and earth; (ii) *by way of example* – charting practical shifts towards the ambient mode via minimalist [emptying], situationist [drifting] and serialist [patterning] strategies; and (iii) *by way of making* – experimenting in the various moments of creative practice, from in situ making to documenting, presenting and discussing. Most importantly, we also arrive at the ambient mode (iv) *by way of experience* – discovering our surroundings anew through ambient creative works.⁸

This diversity of thinking around musical, conceptual and environmental approaches to ‘ambient’ and ‘ambience’ is reflected throughout this collection of essays and demonstrate some of the ways in which consideration of these topics has developed since Eno’s *Music for Airports*.

7 Morton quoted in Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience*, 31.

8 Luke Jaaniste, *approaching the ambient: creative practice and the ambient mode of being* (PhD dissertation, Queensland University of Technology, 2007) accessed, May 11, 2019, <https://sites.google.com/site/lukejaaniste/writings/phd>.

The quartet of releases *Ambient 1–4* (1978–82)⁹ presented a ground zero for ambient music challenging ideas of both compositional method and musical listening and perception in relation to our environment. Although its musical origins are often cited as stemming from Erik Satie’s ‘furniture music’, John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952), as well as early minimalism and the proto-ambient *kosmische musik* of Tangerine Dream, these four albums presented a fertile ground from which various aesthetic directions and musical trajectories have emerged. As with so many genres, there has been a clustering of activity around certain key proponents of the genre, Eno included, and certain practices and stylistic tendencies have emerged that have come to characterise much of the music produced under the ‘ambient’ label. At its best, ambient offers a rich musical experience that not only tints our environment but fundamentally changes the way we listen and engage with our surroundings. Lawrence English in his *12 notes towards a future ambient* writes that “Ambient is never only music for escapism. It is a zone for participation in a pursuit of musical listenership that acknowledges sound’s potential values in broader spheres (the social, political, cultural etc.). It is a freeing up, an opening out and a deepening, simultaneously”. For English, “Ambient is never only music. It is a confluence of sound, situation and listenership; moreover, it’s an unspoken contract between the creator, listener and place, seeking to achieve a specific type of musical experience”.¹⁰ In its ‘tinting’ of the environment ambient engenders an individuated listening experience on each hearing.

However, in the forty years since Eno’s release of *Music for Airports* our understanding of ‘ambient’ has developed and changed, musically, sociologically and environmentally. How we engage with sound has also

9 The albums in the Ambient series were: Brian Eno – *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*; Harold Budd and Brian Eno – *Ambient 2: The Plateaux of Mirror*; Laraaji – *Ambient 3: Day of Radiance*; Brian Eno – *Ambient 4: On Land*.

10 Lawrence English, “12 notes towards a future ambient,” *FACT Magazine*, accessed May 11, 2019, <https://www.factmag.com/2018/02/04/ambient-music-at-40-lawrence-english/>.

radically changed in this intervening time. Since *Music for Airports* and the exponential growth of releases that, to this day, shows no sign of abating, ambient music has, at times, been dismissed as musically deficient and merely functional. It has been seen as socially disengaged, and offering a false panacea of transcendence in an increasingly complex world. Seth Kim-Cohen in *Against Ambience* writes that “Ambience is an artistic mode of passivity. Its politics, that is, the kind of relation it fosters with the world in which it exists, is content to let other events and entities wash over it, unperturbed. Ambience offers no resistance”.¹¹ Such critique is not helped by the ‘subtle piano and soft electronics’ blueprint of *Music for Airports* “1/1” and “1/2”, used so effectively for ambient pieces as diverse as Deadmau5’s “Luxuria”¹² and Ben Lukas Boysen’s “Nocturne 4”,¹³ as well as being the staple format of manufactured Spotify mood lists.¹⁴ Spotify’s purported licensing of tracks by “fake artists” from Epidemic Sound to fill key playlists such as ‘Peaceful Piano’¹⁵ and ‘Ambient Chill’ at the expense of named artists has left many with a sour taste, and the concomitant feeling that this music has been devalued to the status of a corporate-designed mood sedative – a kind of tranquillised Muzak – rather than exemplifying Eno’s original definition of what ambient could be.¹⁶

However, the fact that there are over five million subscribers to ‘Peaceful Piano’ and almost one million to ‘Ambient Relaxation’ on Spotify

11 Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience*, 32.

12 Deadmau5, “Luxuria” from *Where’s the drop*, (USA, Mau5trap Recordings – MAU50164V, 2018).

13 Ben Lukas Boysen “Nocturne 4” from *Spells* (London: Erased Tapes Records – ERATP085CD).

14 See https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/8xab3/spotify-fake-ambient-artists-essay-free-radicals.

15 The ‘Peaceful Piano’ playlist has over 5,300,628 followers, with “false artists” such as Karin Borg’s “Norrskén” having 60,130,570 streams as of May 13, 2019.

16 According to streaming analytics site ChartMetric, the biggest losers in all of this were non-fake ambient/electronic composers. For example, in February 2017, Spotify swapped out 16 tracks on its Ambient Chill playlist by the likes of Brian Eno, Jon Hopkins and Bibio for 28 songs connected to Epidemic Sound. See <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/fake-artists-still-dominate-spotify-chill-playlists-now-real-artists-are-fighting-back-with-apple-music/> accessed May 13, 2019.

demonstrates a significant audience for such work. Anecdotal references to ambient decreasing anxiety or aiding study is borne out by academic research that demonstrates the effect this music can have. Of one study examining ambient music and well-being, Michaela Slinger writes that: “A study at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge determined that ambient music therapy had a positive effect on postoperative patients’ recovery by improving pain management and decreasing the negative effects of environmental noise”.¹⁷

Despite research that demonstrates the therapeutic benefits of ambient music and the obvious popularity of such online playlists, Christopher Fox, writing on fragility and resistance in contemporary instrumental music, notes that “[t]his is music which attempts to change the world not through the noise it makes but because, in making so little noise, it requires a change in the way the world pays attention”.¹⁸ Listening to a performance by Taylor Deupree and Ryuichi Sakamoto at St. John’s, Hackney,¹⁹ certainly seems to exemplify this.

Much of the ambient music produced today, whilst drawing on aspects of the blueprints outlined in *Ambient 1–4*, has little to do with music that occupies the threshold of the listener’s attention. It is not a music that “foregrounds a devaluation of foregrounding”.²⁰ Its recording and production quality, and depth of frequency content, demonstrate that this is a music that often aims at immersing the listener in sound. The sense of what ambient music is and its function has shifted in the intervening decades.

17 See <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/ambient-music-eases-pain/> accessed May 15, 2019.

18 Christopher Fox, “Fragility and Resistance,” *Tempo* 71(281), 3–4.

19 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nJ3iKx2AMo> for a recording of this concert.

20 Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience*, 33.

Although there have been a number of books about Eno himself²¹ and the music he has created,²² there are few books that attempt a critical evaluation of the genre. Mark Prendergast's wide-ranging *The Ambient Century* contains over 150 vignettes of composers and artists central to, and somewhat on the periphery of, ambient music in the twentieth century. Rupert Till's essay "Ambient Music"²³ unearths some fascinating insights into the origins of the genre in the context of a general history. David Toop's *Ocean of Sound*²⁴ weaves a poetic narrative of ambient sound throughout the twentieth century. In his book, Toop, who was the keynote speaker at the Ambient@40 conference, writes that ambient music "taps into the disturbing, chaotic undertow of the environment".²⁵ But it does more than that – or at least, perhaps, it should; Toop's chapter in this book poses a blunt question about the way ambient, and our relationship with it, sits in relation to the environment: "Does it supply a perennial refuge for temporarily forgetting the precarity, hysteria and threat of current conditions or can it be a vehicle for engaging with those same conditions?"

The essays in this volume provide a detailed focus on specific aspects of the aesthetics of ambience and ambient music. It is by no means a general reader akin to Mark Prendergast's book or a philosophically informed 'position statement' akin to Seth Kim-Cohen's *Against Ambience*. Although the conference grouped papers under sub-headings, this book is not so rigidly divided. Nevertheless, the reader will observe thematic groupings of chapters that consider 'ambient' from a number of differing perspectives.

21 David Sheppard, *On Some Faraway Beach: The life and times of Brian Eno* (London: Orion Publishing Co., 2015).

22 See John T. Lysaker, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (USA: Oxford University Press - Oxford Keynote Series, 2018).

23 Rupert Till, "Ambient Music," *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, eds. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

24 David Toop, *Ocean of Sound* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2018).

25 *Ibid.*, 36.

David Toop's keynote chapter opens this volume. It proposes an alternative discourse of ambient listening located within literature, notably in women writers and mystics including Margery Kempe, Jane Austen, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf. Toop draws on the work of philosophers such as François Jullien and Byung-Chul Han to argue for "ambient music as a state of mind attuned to inclusivity rather than an industry genre whose aesthetic integrity depends upon withdrawal." Ambrose Field explores the wider implications of ambient listening and what it means today in contrast to 1978. He has proposed that aligned to this change must come a reappraisal of both the soundscape and how listening processes are traditionally defined in order to account for increasing information complexity within ambient information environments. The aim of this chapter is to shift the focus of the discussion from the environment – a previous object of study for ambient music – to the people within it.

Richard Talbot and Ulf Holbrook consider ambient from the perspective of environment. Talbot specifically explores the nature and role of space, with regard to the way listeners inhabit and ambient simulates spatial habitats. Holbrook approaches ambient from its capacity to act in the background and recontextualise our perception of the foreground.

Simon Cummings seeks to recalibrate our understanding and definition of ambient according to the principle underlying Eno's philosophy and musical practice, encapsulated in the 'steady state'. In so doing, Cummings widens the sphere of both the genre's influence and our perceptual understanding of it, to include 'meta-ambient' forms of music-making. Monty Adkins examines atmosphere, fragility and noise as disrupters of this steady state, disturbing the surface prettiness that characterises so much ambient, thereby reintroducing Eno's notion of "doubt and uncertainty".

Lisa Colton and Justin Morey explore sampling in ambient house. Colton's gendered approach is especially revealing, detailing the ways in which female identity and empowerment have been undermined, exaggerated and misrepresented in music from the turn of the 1990s. Morey explores the

extra-musical implications sampled materials bring to bear on a well-known track by The Orb.

Finally, Axel Berndt discusses the technological implementation of ambient music structures within computer game sound. This highlights an aspect of the liner notes to *Discreet Music* (1975) in which Eno describes a system that “once set into operation, could create music with little or no intervention on my part”.²⁶ The generative and algorithmic aspect of this music is both symptomatic of a genre that can be reduced to a set of rules, entering the territory of Lejardin Hiller’s *Illiac Suite* (1957) and more recently the AI musical *Beyond the Fence* (2016) by Nick Collins et al.²⁷ Such models highlight the contrast between ‘lowest common denominator’ ambient that can function well within game environments and more engaging and inventive examples of the genre that continue to develop the genre, and to which we are drawn again and again.

26 Brian Eno, liner notes from *Discreet Music*, (London, Obscure/Island Records – obscure no.3, 1975).

27 See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/dec/01/beyond-the-fence-computer-generated-musical-greenham-common>