

CHAPTER ONE: ENO'S WORK IN PERSPECTIVE

Brian Eno (b. 1948) is a contemporary British musician and artist whose public creative career began in 1972 with his synthesizer playing for the rock group Roxy Music. Through securing a niche in the music industry and by building up an audience for his progressive rock music, Eno has been able to diversify his creative efforts considerably. He is a prime example of a new type of composer who has drawn freely on the resources of many types of music and ideas about music. These include a variety of popular genres such as rhythm and blues and rock'n'roll, progressive rock, punk, and new wave, as well as African, Middle Eastern, and oriental styles. Also notable among his influences are minimalism, experimental new music, post-Cage avant-garde ideas, and electronic music. Eno has combined music with visual art in the form of video and sculptural installations, has lectured on musical subjects extensively, and is the author or co-author of a number of written materials. Although he has performed live, his primary arena of operation is the recording studio, which he has called his "real instrument." In addition to the knobs and switches of the mixing board and multi-track tape recorder, Eno plays keyboards (primarily synthesizer), guitar (primarily electric), electric bass, and a variety of percussion instruments, he is also a singer.

The scope of Eno's musical activity is impressive.¹ Between 1972 and 1988 he released eleven solo albums that range stylistically from progressive rock to what he has called "ambient" music – a gentle music of low dynamics, blurred edges, and washes of sound color, produced primarily through electronic means. As a songwriter he developed a technique of lyric writing based in part on the procedures of phonetic poetry. It is on his solo albums that we may observe the unfolding of Eno's musical personality in its purest form, in the role of composer he has been keenly interested in working with the traditionally neglected or at least downplayed realms of timbre (tone color) and texture, and in the process of pursuing that interest has been of seminal importance in the development of the "new age" or "space music" genre. Timbre is a term that refers to the color of sound itself: it is what makes the same note played on a violin, a trumpet, or a xylophone sound different. This aspect of musical sound can be thought of as "vertical," since it depends to a large extent on the harmonics, or barely audible frequencies, that are stacked up "vertically" on top of the primary heard note itself. The vertical harmonic spectrum determines the color of the sound, and the way our ears and mind interpret the harmonic spectrum determines whether we hear the characteristic sound of a guitar or a flute, or whether we hear the vocal syllable "ooh" or "aah," for example.

¹ Eno himself has published a comprehensive, though not exhaustive list of his works, categorized as solo albums, singles, album productions and co-productions, primary collaborations, secondary collaborations, selected commissions to score music, selected uses of *Music for Films* and other compositions, video works, audio-visual installations, and publications. See Brian Eno and Russell Mills, *More Dark than Shark*, commentaries by Rick Poynor, designed by Malcolm Garrett, photography by Martin Axon, additional photography by David Buckland (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 138-9. See also the "Eno Discography" in "Sources" below, 337.