

Throughout his creative life, Eno has been fascinated by different kinds of processes and systems. In a statement whose implications have been vigorously debated, he summed up his attitude in 1975: “Since I have always preferred making plans to executing them, I have gravitated towards situations and systems that, once set into operation, could create music with little or no intervention on my part.”⁴ Though this might seem to imply a relatively passive role for the artist, Eno has been tirelessly active in the creation and investigation of the properties of different systems of composition and music-making, and in his choice of specific limitations has typically determined the outcome to a fairly high degree. His craft is widely acknowledged and admired, and the product or residue left by his “self-regulating or self-generating systems” includes a body of music of compelling beauty and originality.

It seems to me that it is not really the point to ask point-blank whether Eno’s music is “art music” or “popular music,” yet a discussion of what is meant by such terms can help to situate his music in the contemporary scene. In recent years considerable scholarly and polemic energy has been expended on the subject of the difference between, and relative social and aesthetic positions of “art music” and “popular music.” (For the truly interested, the Bibliography at the back of this book includes a variety of writings on this topic.)

In his recent book *Analysis and Value Judgement*, the German music historian Carl Dahlhaus, expressing a viewpoint that is widely shared among musicologists and classical music critics, writes that “A listener capable of doing justice to a Beethoven symphony is generally equipped to cope with the musical issues of a pop tune, but the reverse is not true.” This seems to me patently false: the musical issues raised by the Beethoven symphony and the pop tune are simply not comparable, and there is no point or meaning in pretending that they are. The generic prejudice displayed in Dahlhaus’s statement is made outrageous by the sting in the tail of the disclaimer that follows: “Arrogance of the initiated must not be defended, but that nobody has the right to blame musical illiterates for being illiterate does not change the fact that illiteracy provides a weak foundation for aesthetic judgements.”⁵ For Dahlhaus, and for those who share his extreme view, apparently the eye is more important than the ear when it comes to appreciating music: if you can’t read it, you can’t really understand it. And woe to the music that is not even written down to begin with! The substantive problem with this line of reasoning is that reliance on notation as a foundation for aesthetic judgements inevitably leads to the ignoring, by traditional analysts, of aspects of musical style extremely important in popular music, but difficult or impossible to notate, such as overall “sound” (or what are known as “production values”), timbre, vocal quality and nuance, and ornamentation.

A broader view of the art/popular dichotomy is found in the discipline of ethnomusicology, whose history, however, can be read as a tale of predominantly Western scholars slowly coming to terms with their own ethnocentricity and genre preferences. Over the past century, ethnomusicologists have suggested various ways of classifying the musics of the world. Bruno Nettl summarizes:

At one time [in the late nineteenth century] there was a tendency to recognize only two classes, Western art music in the one and everything else in the other. Soon, recognition of the fact that Asian cultures had a stratification of music not unlike that of Europe led to a tripartite

⁴ Brian Eno, liner notes to *Discreet Music*, Editions EG EGS 303, 1975.

⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Analysis and Value Judgement* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1983), 6.