

# CHAPTER SIX: THE COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

## Equipment

Composer/non-musician Brian Eno's domain or arena of operation has always been that of the recording studio and tape recorder, both of which he has referred to as his "real instruments." As we have seen, many of his comments on other pieces of music hinge not on what a musicologist might be inclined to call their "purely musical" qualities – melody, harmony, rhythm, and so on – but rather on aspects of production and engineering, on how the recording studio was used to produce a particular kind of sound texture.

As Eno himself has pointed out, his musical work is so heavily dependent on technology that it could not have existed in any previous age.<sup>1</sup> When he speaks of himself in terms of being a painter with sound, or a constructor of sonic landscapes, he is being more than metaphorical: for in a very real sense, magnetic tape is his canvas, and he applies his sound-substances to that canvas, mixes them, blends them, determines their shape, in a specific "painterly" way. He has just enough instrumental technique to give him his "pigments" to begin with, in the previous chapter we saw how he finds it much more difficult to work with initial recorded materials that already have a complexity of their own. His claim to be not so much a composer as a sound-painter is reinforced by his statements to the effect that the way he works with light in his video pieces is identical to the way he works with sound in his music.

Eno wrote a lecture called "The Studio As Compositional Tool" which he delivered at a number of places in England and the United States in the late 1970s and which was eventually published in *Down Beat* magazine in 1983.<sup>2</sup> The first part of the lecture presents an informal, sketchy history of sound recording, while the second part presents an overview of the structure and components of the modern studio, with examples of how Eno has taken advantage of this layout in his own work. But even when Eno is talking about the nuts and bolts of history, his point of view – his interpretation of history – is clearly evident. A philosophical point on which he lays particular stress is how the act of recording has radically changed the nature of music. Before the advent of sound recording,

The piece disappeared when it was finished, so it was something that only existed in time. The effect of recording is that it takes music out of the time dimension and puts it into the space dimension. As soon as you do that, you're in a position of being able to listen again and again to a performance, to become familiar with details you most certainly had missed the first time through, and to become very fond of details that weren't intended by the composer or the musicians. The effect of

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<sup>1</sup> Eno, "Pro Session – Part I," 57.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Eno, "Pro Session: The Studio as Compositional Tool – Part I," lecture delivered at New Music New York, the first New Music America Festival sponsored in 1979 by the Kitchen, excerpted by Howard Mandel, *Down Beat* 50 (July 1983), 56. "Part II" of this lecture appeared in the next issue of *Down Beat* (Aug. 1983).