

CHAPTER TEN: THE AMBIENT SOUND

To John Cage, ambient sounds were the sounds of the environment one happened to be in. To the editors of Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, "ambient" meant "surrounding, encompassing on all sides, investing, as, the *ambient* air." Ambient could also be a noun, meaning "that which encompasses on all sides."¹ Ambiance today commonly means the quality or qualities of the surroundings in a specific place, and carries certain almost musical connotations – "the totality of motives, patterns, or accessories surrounding and enhancing the central motif or design."² The concept of ambiance is associated with the decorative arts, with places where people gather, with the planning and architecture of urban and suburban spaces. Adding commercial dimension to the content of the word "ambient," the Japanese electronics company Panasonic began, a few years back, advertising their "miracle ambient sound," an effect which added an aural illusion of spaciousness and depth to music coming out of the small stereo loudspeakers of portable radio/cassette players, by allowing the listener to shift the left and right channels slightly out of phase with each other. "Ambience" has a specific meaning in the recording studio:

What sound engineers call ambience is a spatial dimension conferred on sound through some degree of echo delay or reverberation. Virtually all recorded and broadcast music is enhanced by some artificial ambience. It is what makes Luciano Pavarotti sound like he's grabbing you by the collar and singing into your face, it makes a Van Halen record sound like it was recorded in St. Paul's Cathedral.³

The word goes back to the Latin: *ambiens* is the present participle of the verb *ambire*, to go around, from the prefix *amb-*, around, and the verb root *ire*, to go. The *amb-* prefix is used in words like ambiguous, ambit, ambidextrous, and – a word Eno might particularly relish – ambitendency, "the state of having along with each tendency a countertendency."⁴

When Eno chose the term "ambient" to denote the kind of quiet, unobtrusive music he began making in the early 1970s, the word's rich connotations must have been prominent in his mind. It was music that could tint the atmosphere of the location where it was played. It was music that surrounded the listener with a sense of spaciousness and depth, encompassing one on all sides, instead of coming *at* the listener. It blended with the sounds of the environment, and seemed to invite one to listen musically to the environment itself, instead of getting annoyed at people coughing or rustling programs during the slow movement. It had a central motif or design, which, however, could be surrounded and enhanced by a glimmering pleni-

¹ Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged, 2nd ed., s.v. "ambient."

² Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. "ambiance." The dictionaries I have checked do indeed spell it this way. "Ambience" with an "e" has not only a different pronunciation (*am-bience* vs. *ahmbiance*, but somewhat different connotations; read on.

³ Rod Smith, "What Is Spacemusic!," *FM 91 Public Radio* (Feb. 1987), 6.

⁴ Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. "ambitendency."