

## ***The Shutov Assembly***

In this delightfully variegated collection, Eno takes us into his workshop as he plays with the same sorts of musical building blocks that date back to his works of the late 1970s, creating music suitable for establishing a certain background mood, for enhancing creative activities, or for deep contemplation.

As a whole, what sets this collection – recorded between 1985 and 1990 – apart from earlier efforts is the de-emphasis of pitch and mode. To put this another way, Eno was experimenting with atonality.

For example, if the pitch set used in the second piece, “ALHONDIGA,” corresponds to any known mode or scale, it is not readily apparent to me. My mind strains to find a tonic center of gravity, a point at the middle of the galaxy of pitches around which they all revolve and to which they are all logically related; but such a center does not seem to exist. Other pieces in *The Shutov Assembly*, such as “FRANCISCO,” are similar.

The fourth composition, “LANZAROTE,” is a reissue of the *Glint (East of Woodbridge)* flexi-disk first released in 1986. In the original edition of this book, I wrote that “As *Glint* shows, the ambient style is capable of seemingly perpetual variation and extension: beyond the Phrygian mode of *Glint*, the still gloomier tones of the Locrian mode are waiting ... Even an atonal ambient style does not seem beyond the realm of the possible.”

With *The Shutov Assembly*, Eno sticks his toe into the still largely uncharted universe of atonality, the universe that has no up and down, no central point, no gravity. Schoenberg and Webern, experiencing giddy vertigo as they floated in that vast domain, felt they had to invent, through sheer force of artifice, a viable theoretical construct to impose a semblance of order on it: that construct was the 12-tone system.

The “word square” that shows the titles of the individual pieces on the CD's back cover is eerily reminiscent of the kind of 12-tone pitch matrixes I used to pore over in graduate seminars on Schoenberg, Webern, Stockhausen, Boulez, and the later Stravinsky. I do not know whether, or to what extent, Eno used or adapted actual 12-tone techniques in *The Shutov Assembly*. But in a 1992 interview in *Opal Information*, Eno cited Webern as one of his favorite composers. And Eno has always had a penchant for cyclic systems; as I pointed out in the original edition of this book, the serial organization of “2/1” from *Music for Airports* is reminiscent of Webern pieces like the first movement of his Symphony, Op. 21.

(Note: if some of this sounds cryptic, please refer to the definitions of “Atonality,” “Mode,” and “Tonality” in the *Glossary* of this book.)

## ***Nerve Net***

Eno's most adventurous solo release in the 1990s – and perhaps of all time – has been *Nerve Net* of 1992. If I had to choose a single Eno album to take with me to a desert island for the rest of my life, this would be it, because it's got it all: vintage weird Eno vocals; brash, unusual synthesizer textures up the wazoo; tonality, atonality, and just about everything in between; a number of really *sublimely* irritating pieces (notably the two long mixes of “Web”); and hey, you can dance to it too.

Not since 1981's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* had Eno used percussive elements so relentlessly and successfully. On *Nerve Net*, the drumming, electronic drumming, and percussion –