

CHAPTER TWELVE: ESSENCE, HISTORY, AND BEAUTY

The Music's Essence

“What is music?” is a question that leads off in many directions, and certainly no attempt will be made here to follow through on all of them. I shall perhaps raise more questions than I answer. If earlier generations of Western music theorists and philosophers have found the question hard to tackle, it is no less refractory today, in an age when ethnomusicologists have discovered that “each culture seems to have its own configuration of concepts” revolving around “music,” and that although all cultures appear to have “music,” some have no word that corresponds terribly closely to what we in the West understand by that term.¹

If one of the thrusts of Cage's thought on the subject was that “Everything we do is music” (implying that at the least, music is a form of human activity), the development of recording and playback technology has produced an opposing idea: nowadays, it seems, we do not have to do anything to participate in music, other than put on a record and take in the sound passively – and such passive listening is certainly one level of activity for which Eno's music is intended.

What is the ontological status of what may seem to be increasingly non-human forms of music – music that is neither performed nor heard actively in any conventional sense? At what level is the human element operative? In much of Eno's music, deeply ingrained notions of competence, practice, and virtuosity (or “athleticism,” to use Nettl's term) do not apply – or do they? Eno may have been eager to admit his instrumental incompetence, but in the studio, he sits at the center of a sophisticated body of music-making machinery, just as the traditional composer does when writing for an orchestra, and in both cases what the mind is able to conceive and the ear hear is the result of training and discipline as well as imagination.

Recording technology has made all musics seem equal: you put your LP, cassette, or CD on to the stereo, and there it is. But is that all there is to it? What went into the making of this or that music? And with the results coming out of the loudspeakers, does it matter? If for some people it does not matter, there are certainly many for whom it does. Bryan Ferry, the leader of Roxy Music, with whom Eno had collaborated between 1971 and 1973, was to say years later (“with a polite sniff,” according to the chronicler), “You see, Eno is a very clever fellow, but he's not really a musician. He doesn't know how to play anything. All he can do is manipulate those machines of his. What he does, he does very well, but it's necessarily limited music, I think.”²

¹ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-nine Issues and Concepts* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 21. “The Art of Combining Tones,” the chapter from which this quotation is taken, is a masterful and exhilarating treatment of the ontological question – which is also a semantic question – with as close to a global point of view as may be possible at the present time.

² Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker, *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone/Summit, 1986), 490.