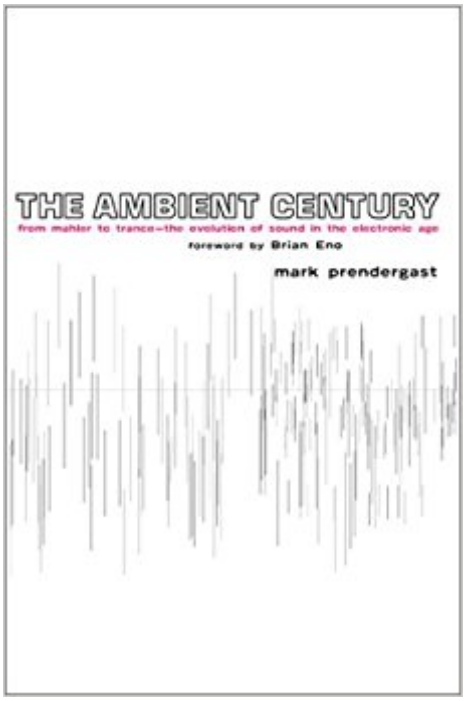
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The Ambient Century: From Mahler To Trance: The Evolution Of Sound In The Electronic Age



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Synopsis

A comprehensive and absorbing look at the music of the twentieth century, with an introduction by Brian Eno. The 20th Century saw two revolutionary changes in music. First music was deconstructed from its previously strict form, moving from formal constraints to more accessible melodies. Second, the way in which music was generated radically changed as new electronic equipment inspired experiments with sound divorced from traditional acoustic instruments. More and more, innovative musical ideas became intertwined with technological change. Multi-track recording, editing, and improved microphones allowed for quieter, experimental elements to gain prominence. And with the advent of digital synthesizers, new music could be made by anyone and sound like almost anything.The Ambient Century is the definitive chronicle of a century of musical change. It reveals the drift from composers to non-musicians, from the single note to the sample. Encyclopedic, yet with a strong narrative, The Ambient Century covers hundreds of artists, including such diverse artists as Gustav Mahler (the pioneer of modern music), Phillip Glass, New Order, and Moby. Lively, compelling, and authoritative-and boasting an unmatched discography. The Ambient Century is a treat for music lovers of all kinds.

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Customer Reviews

Just as anything evolves when its setting changes, 20th-century music mutated as it moved beyond the confines of concert halls and into listeners' everyday environs. Thanks to car stereos, headphones, even computers, people now move within their own soundtracks. In this chronology of

compositional innovations, Prendergast, an internationally published music writer, details the widening of sonic possibilities with advancements in recording, amplification and electronic instruments, and with the creative talents of hundreds of bold, brilliant composers. He credits Mahler with first evoking the hypnotic "ambient experience of landscape and emotion," kicking off the century of "repetitive conceptual music." Prendergast describes how, after a four-day fast, the sound of a single piano tone proved revelatory for Karlheinz Stockhausen; how sitarist Ravi Shankar influenced everyone from minimalist Philip Glass to the Beatles; how Donna Summer "merged Germanicity with black music’s long history

Here, Irish music critic Prendergast makes an admirable and largely successful attempt to build bridges between the worlds of contemporary classical and rock music. But as the author never clearly defines or describes the term ambient, the reader is left to infer the connections among composers and genres. Prendergast divides his subject into four large sections: "The Electronic Landscape," "Minimalism, Brian Eno, and the New Simplicity," "Ambience in the Rock Era," and "House, Techno, and Twenty-First Century Ambience." The first is the most problematic section, as many of the observations here are simplistic and the listening lists too quirky and subjective to be useful. Prendergast is on much surer footing in the three subsequent sections, however. The text is packed with a wealth of detailed information and cogent observations on minimalist composers, rock personalities, technological innovations, and movers and shakers in the various worlds of contemporary music. Prendergast has an astonishing grasp of the global scene in popular music and writes with authority and conviction. Despite its flaws, this is an important addition to libraries with holdings in cultural and popular studies.DLarry Lipkis, Moravian Coll. Bethlehem, PA Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The "family tree" of 20th Century music that Prendergast draws is deep in thought, yet lacking correctness on the minutiae. These failings leave the reader at times frustrated with these inaccuracies. Hopefully, a second edition can be drafted to allow the mistakes to be corrected. It seems that they slipped through the cracks, simply because the book is so encyclopedic, that tiny (yet important) facts get left either unsaid, or misstated.Intellectually, it’s a masterpiece meal, but unfortunately, the detail and factual wine’s been kept next to the oven, and the bread is burnt. Fortunately for the book, its breath of fresh air in insight makes up for this. If the facts were fixed this book would be off the scale.

Mark Prendergast’s THE AMBIENT CENTURY is an encyclopedia of the biggest names in "ambient music", a style that’s never defined, but which might be a) music that the author digs, and b) music that the author doesn’t like so much but which lends respectability to later figures.Prendergast starts off all the way at the beginning of 1900s with innovative classical music figures such as Debussy, Mahler, and Ravel. There is little that these figures have in common with what came later, but Prendergast seems like he has to start early and so comes up with these guys. His inclusion of Schoenberg and the other Viennese composers is just crazy, since most of the minimalists (who have a better claim to be the inspiration of techno, house, and drum & bass in the 80s and 90s) were trying as hard as possible *not* to write like that. Ditto for the inclusion of Pierre Boulez, although his friend Stockhausen merits inclusion.Passing over the rock era (I’m not competent to comment much on this genre), I must take issue with his treatment of electronic music, which is somewhat US-centric. Sasha is presented as a minor figure that didn’t achieve much until 1999, when his Ibiza compilation came out, when he had really be earning praise since 1990 (when the British press was calling him "The Man Like God"). The book then says that Sasha left the U.K. entirely for Australia, which is simply false. Frequent collaborator John Digweed is called "The James Brown of DJing", leading me to suspect that the author has never seen Digweed live.This is a really disappointing and often-wrong book, and a bit of an odd duck because, expect for the "coolness" of it all, the people mentioned here have little in common. If you are interested in innovative classical music in the 20th century, try Griffith’s MODERN MUSIC AND AFTER: Directions Since 1940 (Oxford University Press, 1995). Similarly, those interested in electronic music would do well to find a more focused guide.

I’ve read this book many times over. Not because it’s a great work, but because it’s a pleasant one. Though constructed (sometimes with a heavy hand) as a more-or-less narrative history of 20th century music that Prendergast found notable at the time, it comes off more as an encyclopaedic reference on an idiosyncratic list of artists, lumped together around a seed of whatever makes "ambient" music what it is (the exact definition, as others have mentioned, remains nebulous - is it too many whole tone scales? atonal electronic texture? compositional styles emphasizing timbre over tonality? the fact that it sounds good playing in airport lounges? who knows).That doesn’t devalue the work, and when I first got the book in 2001 (my freshman year of college) it helped fill in a lot of gaps in my playlist. It’s not an academic reference. It’s not particularly good criticism. It’s not incredibly accurate history... but it’s readable and engaging, and responsible for both broadening my own tastes and introducing me to a lot of new music.

When this book came out, it was the first one I was aware of that didn’t entrench itself in either a "classical only" or "pop only" vision of modern music. Musicologists used to ignore all popular music save for a chapter on Jazz. As for the modern media, "music" always meant - and still means - popular music only, and only from the 50’s onwards. So it was quite refreshing to see a book which tried to make sense of all 20th century music, and find common thread, joining the dots of the most stylistically diverse era of all. If the 19th century could be called the Romantic Century, then could the 20th be called anything at all?Mark Prendergast took the challenge: He calls it the Ambient century, and the point can be convincingly argued, although the sheer diversity of the era means that important figures - notably in Jazz, such as Duke Ellington, Frank Zappa or John Coltrane, must be left out of the main entries. Even so, Pendergast’s effort is valuable and it is an impressive undertaking.The book is divided into 4 section, each section :1) Classical & avant-garde composition from Mahler to Sariaho. this includes Messiaen, Ligeti and... Miles Davis!2) New non-gloomy composition: Steve Reich and all, and a visit to ECM Jazz- well done!3) Rock.4) Electronica.Each section has several artist entries, and references to other artists always present: Debussy, DJ Shadow, Stockhausen, the Beatles, Cage, The Orb... Like so many electrons from atom to atom they constantly pass from musician to musician. They reveal a stylistically connected world where there seemed to be only disparity. The entries are informative, with information on how the music is generated, and the work of every artist is approached sensitively, with generosity and discernment. Every fan will see their favourite artists in a broader context (Pink Floyd fans will be pleased: perceptive writing on the band’s output and influence is rare in the UK press). Prendergast’s enthusiasm is infectious: The first thing you want to do is to check the music discussed in this book.The nature of modern music is so that even educated and musically minded people are only aware of a fraction of it: this book opens all the doors as it looks across all the musical genres. Rockheads will hear of Cage, Ligeti and Stockhausen; and classicalheads like myself will be able to navigate on the nearly infinite ocean of electronica. You don’t have to share the author’s taste or enthusiasm for the artists in question to see the validity of his work: I for one wouldn’t take Orbital, Jean-Michel Jarre, or Erik Satie for that matter, on my desert island. Yet it is all brilliantly exciting, and you can pick one entry at random and simply read through - and checking out the music has become easier than ever with so many Youtube uploads.The notes at the back of the book speak of the "drift in 20th Century music from composers to non-musicians" , a subject of social, political and philosophical significance, with aesthetic implications, which could have been elaborated in the book but isn’t discussed in any depth. The claim that ambient is "the classical

music of the future" is a very arguable one indeed, and one which demands debate. Nevertheless, in spite of that occasional "hype" vocabulary, it is altogether a very stimulating work.

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