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



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

Your evaluation of THE AMBIENT CENTURY will depend on what you're looking for. I expected serious analysis, and by that criteria would give it 1 star. If what you're interested in, though, is an eclectic encyclopedia of interesting 20th century musicians, loosely grouped by the theme of "ambience," which is never defined, then you might think this is great. (I can't comment on the

fact-checking criticism, but to me it's a secondary point.) Prendergast moves from "high art" composers including Debussy and Stockhausen, to "minimalism," to rock, broken into categories such as psychedelic, krautrock and synthesizer music, to the '90s techno/house/drum&bass/ambient trend. However, his definition of "ambient" involves "music being deconstructed" by Mahler and Debussy (sounds really "postmodern," but what does it mean?), and developments in technology/electronics, along with an "interest in pure sound." He pronounces: "[T]he bleeding heart of electronic progress had by its very nature rendered all recorded music, by definition, Ambient." (4) Given this sort of cosmic perspective Prendergast could have included all music, and what he does include seems to be more or less "cool stuff that I like." Harsh, I know, but does Bob Dylan's "Knocking on Heaven's Door," by any stretch of the conceptual imagination, belong on a list of the Essential 100 Recordings of 20th Century Ambient Music? If so, our author fails to offer any explanation. How about Led Zeppelin IV (ie, ZOSO)? I'm at a loss. If the book was appropriately titled, I would have much less to criticize. But when you title a book "The Evolution of Sound in the Electronic Age," you lead the reader to expect some sort of theoretical analysis -- what sort of evolution? In what direction? What mechanisms are involved?

The title alone ought to be enough to suggest the daunting scope of Mark Prendergast's exploration of sound in the 20th Century. Prendergast argues that an "Ambient" tendency links together most of the musical output of the century, from Debussy to Derrick May and beyond. Rather than a single narrative, *The Ambient Century* is pieced together out of biographical segments and overviews of genres. And he squeezes it all in, beginning with the electronic pioneers (Theremin, Stockhausen, Subotnick) moving through Minimalism, "Ambience in the Rock Era" (encompassing the Beach Boys and the Stones but also the Dead, Krautrock, New Wave and even Enya), and ending with 100 pages on house, techno, and the broader scope of popular electronic music. While the earlier chapters may provide interesting background for readers interested in the 20th Century avant garde, the book ultimately proves a disappointment. For anyone immersed in house, techno, drum'n'bass, or any other form of contemporary electronic music - commercial or experimental - the reading seems cursory at best. Prendergast sticks to the big names - in drum'n'bass, for instance, he dwells on Goldie and LTJ Bukem, ignoring less famous originators and more recent developments. To devote a page to DJ Rap at the expense of more influential producers seems short-sighted at best. House and techno are both treated as dead genres, barely breaking out of the historical contexts (early 90s Chicago and Detroit) with which they're associated, and with little insight into the subsequent fragmentation of genres and subgenres.

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