

# **REVIEW**

By Prof. Dr. Simo Lazarov

On the dissertation of

**ANGEL DIMITROV SIMITCHIEV**

**AMBIENT MUSIC FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE CENTER –  
FUNCTION, TYPOLOGY AND GENRE INTERACTIONS**

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

**ACADEMIC SPECIALTY MUSIC STUDIES AND MUSIC ART,  
PROFESSIONAL FIELD 8.3., MUSIC AND DANCE ART**

scientific supervisor: Prof. D.Sc. Christina Yapova

Angel Simitchiev is a Bulgarian musician and composer with an MA in "Media Composition and Electroacoustic Music" at the National Academy of Music "Prof. Pancho Vladigerov". His teaching activity dates back to 2013 and is realized at the National Academy of Arts. Since 2017 he has been a doctoral student at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The music composed by him has an applied character and has been realized in the field of video art, art installations, advertising, fashion, theater, contemporary dance and performance. He is a member of the band and label for experimental electronic music Amek.

The dissertation contains 142 pages, denoted in the preface, 4 chapters and a bibliography with 80 sources. He has five publications. One participation in a scientific forum, three participations in projects, one lecture and one citation were also noted. Discography and videography of musical works are attached. The discography reviewed and cited includes over 100 musical examples, including studio and concert albums by composers from around the world.

The study on "Ambient Music from the Periphery to the Center - Function, Typology and Genre Interactions" is extremely relevant due to the fact that today's music is influenced by the expressive tools of aggressively entering electronics, which obscures the musical horizon with new sounds, new genre and stylistic challenges to which every contemporary electronic music composer is called to respond.

The author of the dissertation determines the relevance of the subject in the introduction by focusing mainly on those factors of the modern media environment that have a direct impact on the modern expression of sound products. This presupposes the analysis of specialized scientific literature which finds great application in the dissertation. This is also one of the proofs that from a musicological point of view, the topic of the dissertation is necessary in the current period of constant changes and development of electronic music.

**The aim of the research** is the analysis of the overall modern idea of *ambient* as a modern genre and post-genre concept in accordance with the observed changes in the product realization of sound in the environment, as well as the reasons for its existence. The condition for this is the detailed study of the musical-technological ways of creating this music, its interactions with other musical directions. The analysis of the wide selection of musical examples is necessary in view of the research approach for framing the future potential of the *ambient* style within the boundaries of musical art, as well as through the application of new software and hardware solutions for music distribution and creation.

**The methodological framework** consists of several analysis tools, each of which has been used as a thematic center. The doctoral student combines the music-theoretical, composition-analytical method with the use of academic texts, biographical books, publicist and journalistic articles, interviews, music reviews, internet discussions and forums, video sources, music discography from studio and concert albums.

It would be appropriate to define and describe the **object of research** and the **subject** of analysis.

**The first chapter**, entitled "An Attempt at Theoretical Research of Ambient Music", describes the foundations and origins of the contemporary musical landscape in accordance with the cultural context of the emergence of *ambient* music as a consequence of the emerging new musical environment. The narrative nature of the exposition does not diminish the value of the study. The special attention with which Brian Eno is surrounded gives added value to establishing him as a pioneer in the *ambient* genre. The nature of the media environment are presented, emphasizing the creative and aesthetic potential, with an emphasis on the ways of interaction with the environment.

In support of what was written about the graphic scores of each of the compositions on the album "Ambient 1 (Music for Airports)" it would be interesting and useful to

present them in the exposition as evidence of "the complex, albeit random, configurations in which the individual musical phrases fall in order to form the music in the album." The four albums of the "Ambient" cycle are described in sufficient detail to draw the general conclusion made by the doctoral student about the aesthetic and musical frameworks that give rise to *ambient* – the music that does not follow the musical canons of form, structure, rhythm and harmony. What mainly distinguishes it from our familiar music is the refraction of ideas about time.

This chapter analyzes in detail the problems related to other genre nuances such as *industrial*, *noise music*, *dark ambient*, *isolationism*, *post-industrial*, *cold ambient*, *black ambient*. Joanna Demers has not been missed and her academic analysis of *drone* music with the specifics of its ostinato tones.

These different aspects of the emergence of a changing consumer environment are also the reason for the existing trends towards change. The changing technological and aesthetic side are also the reason for the changes in the distribution stage of the genre, a fact that the doctoral student advocates, albeit indirectly, in his exposition.

In this chapter special place is dedicated to the historical preconditions for the emergence of different directions starting from classical music, the classical avant-garde of Eric Satie, passing through John Cage and reaching Steve Reich. Although with a distant touch of the essence of the *ambience*, the works of these authors pave the way for avant-garde, the trends of electronic and electroacoustic music by Irv Teibel and the minimalist musical style of contemporary music. Rachel Elkind's definition of Wendy Carlos' Sonic Seasonings record is perhaps the first of its kind to define her music as a *sound ambience*.

The doctoral student has not missed to note the definition of *sound texture*, "which brings out a wide specter of moods - from calmness and melancholy to tension and unrest" in the atmospheric electronic music of Wendy Carlos.

It escapes the researcher's eye, however, the exact definition of *ambient*, but this is partially compensated by the detailed survey of its stylistic features. In the next sub chapters **Charge and Subculture** and **Studio and Composer** Brian Eno continues to be in the spotlight of *ambient* music, and some other cult representatives of the trend are not missed as well.

**Chapter Two** examines the most common musical instruments for creating *ambient* music. The overview character is made on the basis of an analysis of an extensive selection of author's albums. Here we also find the characteristic features of *ambient*, that to some extent sheds light on the problem of precisely defining the concept. I would say it sheds light on the problem with abundant light, a statement that stems from the fact that the exposition is now moving on to serious musicological analysis.

The doctoral student does not hesitate to enter the depths of the essence of sound extraction and the sources of sound material, which is a fundamental element. *Time* in

its physical essence acquires philosophical dimensions, well analyzed in the context of the creation of a musical composition. Last but not least, in view of their capabilities, the musical instruments as well as the audio effects used to create the *ambient* are considered. In this chapter the doctoral student offers rich facts in descriptive form, but also with the necessary analytical approach.

The conclusions look for and indicate the reasons for the adaptation of the sound product in the modern environment. They treat the *timbre requirements* defined as sound categories to the described sound recording products of the indicated authors.

In the **third chapter** a comparative analysis is made between *ambient* and other musical genres and trends. The main structural determinants are a function of the choice of instruments, the subcultural affiliation of the composers, the audience with a specific attitude. Angel Simitchiev brings out these dependencies to the fore on the basis of socio-contextual, economic, institutional and technological aspects. The stated position has a positive attitude towards these elements in the context of the established practices. The text in this chapter is extremely comprehensive about the problems of modern sound space and society.

A comparative analysis has been made between the directions in background music such as *ambient* and *muzac*, *ambient* and *new age*. The observations of the doctoral student on the presence of natural music and *easy listening* in the rich world of today's musical phenomena are interesting. The great number of performers quoted by the doctoral student and the conclusions drawn in an analytical aspect prove the depth of the research in this specific area. He refers to both sound and literary sources, which confirms the academic nature of the overall study.

Not so much in a descriptive aspect, as with a research characteristic, the "polar extremes of the then electronic sound" *chill out*, *ambient chaos*, *ambient dub* and *illbient* and *dark ambient* are considered.

This time, The Orb and The KLF – "the bearers of the energetic club sound and pioneers of *chill out* music" - are in the spotlight. Simitchiev makes another comparative analysis, which sheds light on the changes and attitudes that had a musical impact on the audience during these years. The organization of media presentation, the ways of determining the product value in these media markets are presented with the features and opportunities, the different ways in which this sound market copes with the challenges.

This chapter also focuses on some of the pioneers of electronic music, such as Klaus Schulze and the group Tangerine Dream, who may have been undeservedly treated as representatives of the *dark ambience*. Regardless of that their importance for the "minor sound, which is "all-embracing" remained for a long time in the harmonious characteristics of many future electronic musicians, for whom the minor and the slow development of musical dramaturgy remain a priority.

Black ideas are enhanced in the description of the sound atmosphere associated with *ambient* and *black metal*, the description of which can be seen in the academic research. The presence of more concise conclusions related to the socio-cultural situation at that time and the need for new branches in the respective ambient directions and the need for new branches in the *ambient* trends could be strengthened.

Interesting for this period of development is the essence of the consumer in the context of the sound environment. The advantages and disadvantages of the different ways of influencing the sound market on consumption are outlined. The audience profile is determined by paying attention to the peculiarities of media consumption.

*Ambient* and *jazz* is a unique combination in view of the improvisational possibilities and their development in unlimited time. The doctoral student skillfully and boldly picks up this difficult matter to prove that hybrid micro-genres find their place among the nuances of the *ambient*, even in the music market niche.

The micro-genres *lowercase*, *power ambient* are not missed either. Surprisingly, *ambient* and *country* are present in the complex *ambient* - I would call them *collages*, because realistically, what the doctoral student suggests is the "universality" of the style. Can this be scientifically proven - maybe the future will show. Here we observe a comprehensive approach in the chronologically accurate presentation of information about the phenomenon.

The numerous analyzes of world publications in this chapter is sufficient to put the contributing ambitions of this part of the dissertation at the forefront. A serious analysis has been made, which includes the elements of the *ambient* and their influence, authenticity and originality.

The **fourth chapter** examines the present and future of the genre. The detailed review of the literature where the idea of the *ambient* style is formed is useful and although the exposition does not carry specific scientific justifications, what is written in this chapter speaks of the in-depth entry of the doctoral student into the territory of the new.

Speaking about the materials published in the press, the doctoral student summed up: "They consider atmospheric, unobtrusive music as a necessity to deal with the high-stress life of the individual in the capitalist world. They look at ambience not as a form of niche entertainment typical of a particular socio-demographic group of music lovers, but as a means of overcoming noise pollution, the intense work environment and, in general, a buffer between the intense modern lifestyle and man." This statement is true, and although deservedly the focus is again on the definition that Brian Eno gives to the genre, Simitchiev's reasoning is comprehensive, and the many different opinions given of the creators of the genre expands the boundaries of impact and reaction.

The distribution practices in the Internet space as something modern is hinted by the doctoral student, who in this case aims to cover from different points of view the problem of the institutional aspects of modern distribution. The changes in the modern

environment for distribution, the use of the socio-cultural as a substitute and as an adaptation of the genre differentiation to the modern sound environment appear as a tendency in the research, pursuing a critical focus on the problems.

This chapter also discusses the problem of presenting live *ambient*. Here the topic expands the issues, reaching generalizations related to the presentation of the unlimited as genre electronic music to an audience. The doctorate presents a new problem related to the contradictory meaning of live presentation of the "new for the 90's" electronic music. Or, as he writes: "It is increasingly unclear and difficult to formulate who exactly is the "live element" in a live performance, which can be completely devoid of a performative gesture that reveals the relationship between performer and instrument."

It would have been quite useful and interesting if in the dissertation work were presented some graphic materials such as scores and a graphic presentation of the creation of the composition form in view of the unusual character of the creation of the *ambient* composition itself. In order to give a solid academic look, it would be appropriate to number the subchapters of the study. It would be useful to specify the concepts of *niche art* and a *portable wire tape recorder* to clarify the relevant terms.

The open ending and the conclusion of the dissertation, is a kind of "coda" having the character of conclusions, summarize what was written.

In the materials attached to the doctoral dissertation there is no table with the required points according to LDASRB.

It is quite surprising that clearly formulated contributions are missing – a technical omission, that creates the impression of a really "open ending".

The contributions, formulated in the abstract, highlight the detailed overview of the genre made in Bulgarian and the fact that "the connection between the means, the different nuances in the sound and mood of the music, as well as the various subgenres and interactions between *ambient* and other trends precede or are contemporary to it." The doctoral student emphasizes that the comprehensive description of the early years of the genre and the discography of its creator Brian Eno will contribute to a full understanding of the genre and will serve as a basis for future even more specialized studies.

The dissertation is an in-depth study carried out with in-depth knowledge of the difficult matter, unexplored so far, a study implemented with great taste and knowledge of the problem. The scientific conclusions, sometimes obscured by the facts of the exposition, do not reduce the importance of what is written and this fact is not a reason to underestimate the huge work done on the dissertation. As a recommendation, I can highlight the idea of presenting a publication with a cognitive nature, an edition that contemporary musicians need.

Given the above arguments, ignoring the above remarks, I believe that Angel Simitchiev meets the requirements for obtaining an educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.3. "Music and Dance Art", scientific specialty "Music Studies and Music Art" under the Law for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria and I propose to the scientific jury to award it.

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/Prof. Dr. Simo Lazarov/