

# REVIEW

**By Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stefka Venkova-Mosheva**

Institute of Art Studies – BAS

On the dissertation of **Angel Dimitrov Simitchiev**

Regular doctoral student at the Institute of Art Studies – BAS

On the subject:

## **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. DSc Christina Yapova

Angel Simitchiev, after successfully passing the exam, was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in the research group "Music Modernity", Music Department, Institute of Art Studies - BAS for the period 1.10.2017 - 1.10.2020. On 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2020 he was dismissed with the right to defend his dissertation. In connection with the subject of the dissertation he has five publications - three papers in the academic peer-reviewed journal "Bulgarian Musicology", one of which is in print, and two articles - one in "Art Studies Readings" 2020 and one accepted for publication in PM Press. The dissertation contains 142 pages. It has been preliminary discussed at the research group "Music Modernity" at the Institute of Art Studies – Bas on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020. The recommendations made by the participants in the meeting have been taken into consideration by the author in the final version of his work. The Scholarly Council of the Institute has selected and voted the scientific jury and the procedure without any objections. From a formal point of view the text is in line with the minimal national requirements for such work as well as it meets the requirements of

the Rules of the IAS-BAS<sup>1</sup> regarding the volume of the text and the number of publications.

A. Simitchiev's dissertation is dedicated to a not that well researched field not only in our music science, but also in general in the world - the question of ambient, its roots, history and modern development, its musical specifics and prospects for development. I find the subject very interesting and excellent for a dissertation not only from the point of view of the fact that its development fills an existing gap, but also because of its relevance - focusing on music, pulsating in the rhythm of modernity, which is growing in popularity among the general public of listeners as well as among music researchers. It is this emersion in ambient today that presupposes to the dissertation the need to follow it not only in the music itself or in what is published about it, but also in the space of free sharing of opinions and information offered by the global Internet space, the new forms of communication in forums, of what is shared in personal professional conversations. Often this information in the research of older music seems to be left in the background, most often due to the impossibility of already discovering it, as it has not been preserved for generations. But all this undoubtedly reveals a different layer in the attempts for musical reconstruction and in the search for authenticity.

The text is having a clear and logical structure with an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The object and the goals of the dissertation are formulated in the Introduction. It is dedicated to the study of ambient as a "contemporary musical phenomenon, which in just four decades has managed to build around itself a diverse community of musicians, composers and listeners" (p. 3). The main goal is "to outline a complete and modern idea of the genre, to explore in detail the ways of creating this music, its diversity of sonorities and moods, as well as to reflect on its future potential" (p. 4). The complex approach chosen by the author of the dissertation corresponds to the specifics of the object of study.

Like any work in a relatively poorly studied musicological field, A. Simitchiev's dissertation faces the question of terminology. On the one hand, due to its coming entirely from English and the need to introduce into use in Bulgarian a set of concepts, and on the other hand, its correlation with already established terms. Therefore, I would like to note that the dissertation offers a precise terminological apparatus, which is adequately intertwined with the musicological specifics of the text.

Chapter 1. *An Attempt at a Theoretical Research of Ambient Music* examines the preconditions for the emergence of ambient, synthesized by A. Simitchiev as "Satie's musical fitting out, the silence of Cage, classical rock minimalism and synthesizer music in one" (p.13). The direct and indirect predecessors of the genre are sought, sometimes quoting unexpected authors and compositions. The connections with the

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<sup>1</sup> Rules for the Conditions and Order for Acquiring academic degrees and academic positions at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS, p. 13

phenomena from the musical avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and with different trends in rock music are traced, as well as the important role of the technological progress, which has greatly influenced the new sound models, is taken into account. Emphasis is placed on the contribution of Brian Eno, who coined the name "ambient" and his first iconic compositions.

Chapter 2. *Sources of Sound Material and Means for its Treatment* pays special attention to the technical and compositional features that make up ambient - musical instruments and their use. Here the in-depth knowledge of the author of the specifics of music, on which he theorizes and analyzes in the whole exposition, is evident. I think this is one of the reasons why his study of ambient is so convincing, thus achieving the ease with which he changes the levels of the study. The aspect of treating the recording studio as a musical instrument is very interesting and important, with the focus on "different types of audio technologies, production and performance techniques. Tracing the connection between instruments, studio practices and the various sound results that this creative exchange leads to is key to the differentiation of intra-genre dynamics and directions" (p. 6).

Chapter 3. *Genre Interactions and Diversities* discusses a very important for the development of ambient music specificity - its "segmentation into many subgenre and niche branches" (p. 6). As A. Simitchiev accurately notes: "Each of them has not only a specific sound, which depends not only on the choice of instruments, but also on the subcultural affiliation of the composers, their inspirations and individual searches. Each ambient subgenre - better known or just emerging - unites around itself not only a narrowly specialized core of composers, but also a very specific audience" (ibid.). Thus, the ideas behind the different subgenres and the specifics of their musical realization are revealed to us, as well as the listener circles that are recognized in them. The internal branches of the genre are one of the reasons for its vitality. The other is the gradual penetration of elements of ambient into other musical territories - jazz, country music, extreme metal, even extending to new searches in the field of contemporary academic music. According to the author, it is these "meetings" and penetration into new stylistic spaces that are the reason for ambient to develop. Which in turn opens up the question of the growing use of electronic sound in music today.

Chapter 4. *Directions, Criticism, Potential* reveals the in-depth understanding of the world of contemporary music by A. Simitchiev. Thus he discovers one of the reasons for the vitality of ambient, paradoxically, precisely in the critiques and contradictions they discover, which form the basis of its new branches and sequels: "The different points of view push forward ambient towards new sound and theoretical territories and widen its presence in contemporary audio-visual art, concert music, festival life and the field of mobile applications" (p. 105). Regarding the different opinions about the term "ambient" and the association of its music mostly with "long" or "long-delayed" sound (p. 111), as well as its other most specific qualities, I would

note that this by analogy, refers me to the music of the twentieth-century French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992). In some of his compositions he uses constantly (ostinato) sounding musical material, in which small changes gradually appear, and the dimensions of the musical form significantly exceed those we know. Also of interest are modern software capabilities in which music applications to various mobile computing devices allow each of their users to generate their own music space. Regarding the new possibilities for performing ambient live, A. Simitchiev notes that it is "adaptable and applicable on different scales" (p. 120).

The conclusion summarizes the main lines of research set out in the individual chapters. Regarding the bibliography, it contains 81 titles - 3 in Bulgarian and 77 in English. As can be seen, A. Simitchiev's research will have its own, I would say, fundamental place in the literature on the issue of ambient music in the Bulgarian cultural space. Not only because it collects and lays the historical and musical foundations of the genre, but also because building on the close knowledge of "making" this music, he manages to create a theoretical framework in which to lay the scientific foundations in its perception and interpretation. I recommend the dissertation to be published.

The abstract presented by A. Simitchiev is 16 pages and corresponds to the main work, presenting in a synthesized form clearly, accurately and correctly the main points of the dissertation text, as well as the contributions and publications on the topic of the author. I accept the reference for the contributions in the dissertation work, as it reflects the main scientific achievements of the doctoral student. I would like to congratulate the doctoral student for the good language culture, for the pleasant to read and perceive style of the text. I would also like to congratulate the research supervisor Prof. DSc Christina Yapova for the professionally done work.

I highly appreciate the long-term research, systematization and the achieved scientific results of the dissertation author. Based on the original and contributive nature of the dissertation of Angel Dimitrov Simitchiev "Ambient Music from the Periphery to the Center - Function, Typology and Genre Interactions" I give my **positive assessment** of it. I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award Angel Dimitrov Simitchiev the *educational and scientific degree "Doctor"* in the scientific specialty *Music Studies and Music Art*, professional field 8.3. *Music and Dance Art*.

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