

cover

this week's essential reading

'Russia's foreign policy is nearing complete failure' by Stephen Sestanovich, *Financial Times*

More than 20 years after the Soviet collapse, Russians have yet think through their new role in the world: 'Mr Putin, unfortunately, keeps putting the answer out of reach'

# Sound affects

From an all-night concert in Krakow, Poland, designed to put you to sleep, to the aggressive studio tunes of Tim Hecker, Andy Battaglia explores the growing popularity of ambient music



Let us now praise music that puts us to sleep. That implies a slight – music can only sleep when it compels an audience to snooze – but what could be a better tribute to art's transformative aspirations than losing oneself so completely as to literally lose oneself in slumber?

Last month, a gathering of music aficionados did just that, en masse. The setting was the Unsound Festival, in Krakow, Poland, and the occasion was a Sleep Concert by the ambient musician Robert Rich. Since 1982, Rich has made a tradition of all-night performances whose premise is to coax restless, attentive states of consciousness from the stressful, distracting world. Or rather, he had the event at Unsound was Rich's first such Sleep Concert for a live audience since 1996.

In more recent years, he sometimes strived for the same effect via overnight broadcasts on radio, through which his sounds could reach listeners already tucked up tightly in

bed. In Krakow, however, the conditions were different. Concertgoers were instructed to bring sleeping bags, pads, pillows – whatever they might want or need to doze off on the floor. The venue was a hotel, but it had been abandoned for more than a decade, leaving its look locked in a Communist-era aesthetic and its lobby empty enough for 300 people to lie down and drift, ever so slowly, into deeper and deeper stages of sonorous sleep.

There are other (more active) ways to respond to ambient music, of course, and many different kinds of ambient music in existence. A swell of recent offerings suggests we have entered a new enlightened age for ambience. A book devoted to ambient pioneer Brian Eno notable albums by the likes of Tim Hecker and Eliane Radigue, and collections of atmospheric sounds with titles such as *Steinroom* and *Air Texture* tell parts of a story already begun and developing even still.

But back to Poland, where the success of the first Sleep Concert in 17 years takes many people by surprise. It isn't certain that the premise will work – maybe the crowd will be too big for the kind of intimacy required, perhaps the festival setting will prove too festive. But total commitment to the project is clear from the moment that concertgoers start filing in, with sleeping bags draped over their shoulders and accoutrements for cosiness on display.

Before he begins, Rich offers the audience a few words of explanation. Sleep is allowed and even encouraged, he says, but the ideal experience would involve paying attention as closely as possible to all the different sounds at play, by way of keyboard, flute and lots of enigmatic electronic gear.

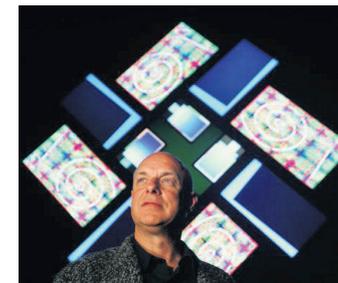
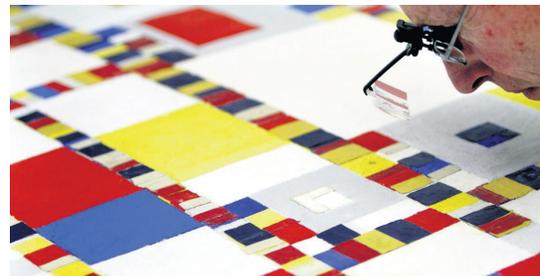
Detaching from worries that surround dozing off in public would make the prospect of paying such attention more probable, and besides, a person asleep is paying close attention. It might be conscious or

unconscious, but the brain never fully shuts down, and sleep is an activity coloured by many different shades. Various stages slot in between the hypnagogic (the state that attends falling into sleep) and the hypnopompic (the state that attends slowly waking up).

Sleep isn't an either/or proposition, Rich suggests. It's not a simple matter of a switch turned either on or off. Once we understand that, and really try to make sense of it, each of us can enter all new worlds.

Rich himself studied sleep at Stanford University, and his original Sleep Concerts took place in the technological stronghold of Silicon Valley in California, where he has lived and worked ever since. But his music owes to art more than science, and his lineage links up with an ambient-music tradition that traces back to ethereal ideas developed decades ago.

Ambient, continued on 6 →



Top left, a light illustration by artist and musician Brian Eno is projected onto the Sydney Opera House during the Vivid Sydney Festival. Eno, above, has been making ambient music and art since the 1970s. Sergio D'Amico / Getty Images

Left, a researcher inspects a painting entitled Victory Boogie Woogie by Piet Mondrian at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. In Brian Eno's book *Visual Music*, which weaves a link between Eno's visual art and his musical endeavours, Christopher Scoates writes that Eno's work echoes the way that modern artists such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Mondrian experimented with the senses. Jan Daniels / AFP

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'Hamas reconciles with Gaza Salafists' by Adnan Abu Amer, *Al Monitor*

The question in the minds of Gazans is: 'What pushed Hamas and the Salafists to trade in their persecutor-persecuted relationship for one of reconciliation and concord?'

Studio work is a kind of mix of dull, bludgeoning, plodding, getting-nowhere feelings of hitting your head against the wall, mixed with these amazingly crystallised moments of epiphany and revelation and vision *Tim Hecker*

Ambient music, at its best, does not shy away from obfuscation or blurring certain boundaries and lines. For some, that comes at a loss, as evidenced by common complaints relating to 'sonic wallpaper' or sounds that slink around a bit too uselessly in the background.

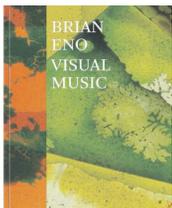
→ Ambient, continued from 4

Brian Eno is the source of much of what we mean when we speak of ambient music in the present age. Sounds that skew toward the slow and low had been favoured long before him, of course. But Eno's notions of purpose and particularity proved new and influential when he introduced them in the 1970s. In his first ambient masterwork, his iconic way of liner notes to his 1975 album *Discreet Music*, he cited a historical precursor in Erik Satie, a French composer in the early 20th century who wanted to make music that could "minge with the sound of the knives and forks at dinner".

Background status need not necessarily be accompanied by a sense of shame. Subtlety and restraint could be virtues with the right change of perspective. Might music actually be even better-situated if made in the service of extramusical pursuits and moods?

With Satie in mind, Eno determined to think about music beyond the medium's traditional bounds, in terms he would expand into other realms of art. As author and editor Christopher Scoates writes in an essay to the new Eno book, *Visual Music*, which contains contributions from Brian Dillon, Steve Dietz and Eno himself, the artist's work echoes the way that modern painters such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian experimented with the senses: "Music, as an inherently abstract form, provided a potent metaphor for artists of the avant-garde in their search for an alternative to prevailing modes of representation." The term "visual music" was actually coined to describe the splashes of colour and arcane networks of shapes and lines conceived by Kandinsky in 1912.

Painting, sculpture, video, sound – each had its differences. But together, they are more similar than different, all of them ineffable and abstract and devoted to strategies for engaging and maybe even transforming time. Speaking in 2008 about his multimedia work, which has included much in the way of video and visual imagery over the years, Eno said: "I've noticed two things: If you make something that is the right slowness, people are very happy to slow themselves down to meet it. And if you accompany that with music which is the right quietness, people are



Visual Music  
Brian Eno  
Chronicle Books  
Dh205

happy to quiet themselves down to listen to it. I dispute the assumption that everyone's attention span is getting shorter; I find people are begging for experiences that are longer and slower, less 'dramatic' and more sensual."

*Visual Music*, in its mix of images and essays, surveys malleable art that ranges from gallery installations to works on paper to presentations connected far musically, and all with a pronounced sense of mu-

sic grounding. Eno's many ambient masterworks – 1978's *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, 1983's *Apollo: Atmospheres and Soundtracks* and last year's *Lux*, to name just a few – move like tectonic plates beneath all that rises artistically above them, slowly but surely shifting and shaking things up in a slow-motion sense of scale.

Going back to the formative years of *Discreet Music*, Eno wrote, in reference to the new method of music-making he had conceived: "I tend towards the roles of the planner and programmer, and then become an audience to the results."

He sat and listened, then reacted in a variety of different ways that diverged from typical ambient stases, familiar to us all, of being mesmerised, chilled, or else simply spaced-out.

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One of the most involving and immersive albums of the year so far is *Virgins* by Tim Hecker. Based in Canada, and increasingly accustomed to large and stately concert halls all over the globe, Hecker has been making a distinctive strain of ambient music for about 10 years, during which time he has developed a decidedly less than tranquil – and more than merely ambient – musi-

cal language.

"I've always had a weird thing with traditional forms of instrumentation – I've always sought to disfigure them," he told *Spin* magazine of his move to making music with electronics and computers, which he employs for uses that are wily and abstract. He went on to equate his creative process with "getting assaulted, mixed with these crystallised epiphanies, like surrender of the body to these waves coming at you".

Similarly, he told the British music website *The Quietus*: "Studio work is a kind of mix of dull, bludgeoning, plodding, getting-nowhere feelings of hitting your head against the wall, mixed with these amazingly crystallised moments of epiphany and revelation and vision."

All such sentiments suit the sound of *Virgins*, which unveils itself as a masterpiece of ambient music, more aggressive and active than familiar floaty hallmarks of the form. *Prism* introduces the album with an assemblage of spinning textures and sounds, all precision-tuned. The result is a kind of expansive sonic splatter, but as with paintings by Jackson Pollock (Hecker has a habit of of-

control to seem so wild and free.

Other tracks follow with sounds that scour, rubbing up against pleasure receptors and playing with different ways to make them react. *Virgins*' ten-lista polyphonic piano part and accessories it with static, sounding like a lost work by the minimalist composer Steve Reich or Philip Glass exhumed from the catacombs of a long-lost church. A pair of tracks titled *Stigmata I* and *Stigmata II* signify something similarly spiritual, but others take disturbingly earthy turns.

The title of *Incense at Abu Ghraib* invokes horrific instances of violence and moral misdeeds, referring to American abuse of military detainees in Iraq. It's a charged and challenging subject to take on, especially in the kind of oblique terms that limit wordless music to suggestions and intimations rather than declarations that can be made clear. But the sense of disquiet it generates, chilling and entrancing and in-trospective by turns, fits into Hecker's aesthetic of rupture and unease.

The album cover, too, alludes to Abu Ghraib, with an image of a figure standing on a pedestal, draped in white cloth. Its origin is mysterious, but there's no mistaking the association. The setting, however, appears to be not a dingy prison but



Tim Hecker on stage at Butlins Resort in Minehead, England. The Canadian musician began making ambient music a decade ago. Gary Wolstenholme / Redferns

instead an ornate church. The figure might be a statue, or a spirit – or a totem for any and all things we can imagine covering under a cloth sometimes, with a quivering mix of fear and trepidation but also comfort and relief for having found, if only briefly, some semblance of cover or protection from everything outside.

That's how Hecker's music sounds and feels, to both bracing and beautiful ends. It's anything but gentle, and gorgeousness follows from all the painstaking ways in which it's sonically flawed. Flayed, too – as if sound were a material to be worked over and shaped, no different than light or paint or clay.

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Éliane Radigue, the subject of a superb new reissue set titled *Adnos F/II*, is a monastic musical figure with a wealth of history behind her. Now 81 years old, she started working with electronic music in the 1950s, and her dedicated studies of sound put her in the company of notable early electronic composers in Paris and New York.

First, she began her research with Pierre Schaeffer, a fellow French native who established the idea of musique concrète, or "concrete music" – music based on the principle of treating samples and slices of

sound as things. They were not representations of other things, nor symbols or stand-ins of any sort – they were things in themselves, distinctly, to be used as building blocks for an unusual musical language.

In an interview in 2010, Radigue called her early years "a quest – I prefer 'quest' to 'research' – for a way to express yourself with sounds which also respects what sounds are themselves". Her work in the service of *Adnos* began later in her career, in 1973. By that point, she had refined her preferences to prioritise simple, subtle, extended electronic tones developed over extended durations (each of the three parts of *Adnos* is more than an hour long). It wasn't affiliated at the time with anything classed as ambient, per se, but her music shares a tendency towards remarking the atmosphere of any space in which it plays. Or maybe it makes the atmosphere more clear, as happens when invisible sounds assume changing shapes and suggest mass attached to musical matter that, technically at least, has no mass at all.

In the liner notes to the new *Adnos* set, an old press announcement gives voice to some of the composer's mystical thinking at the time. Invoking the conch shell – significant to anyone who has ever held

such a shell to his or her ear and listened to the sea – Radigue wrote: "In the conch formed by sound waves, the ear filters, selects, and emphasises some areas of hearing, just as one's eyes would look at the shimmering of water."

The shimmering of water – Radigue's music really sounds like that.

She goes deeper, too, delving in directions both outward and in, to describe that shimmering as "at the same absent and multiple, oriented toward an outside whose image lies reflected in the inner universe".

The kind of meditative, contemplative music that makes up *Adnos* led Radigue, not long after, to an abiding interest in Tibetan Buddhism, which has figured heavily in much of her music since. A later work, *Songs for Milarepa*, was made in tribute to an 11th-century Tibetan poet/musician muse. Her masterpiece, *Trilogie de la Mort*, serves as a three-hour survey of states of consciousness as detailed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, with long drones that strikes different poses without having changed, at least in any way noticeably, during the intervals in between.

*Adnos* predates those but falls very much in line, spreading out horizontally and patiently, probably

making sense of tones that start off sounding elemental but reveal themselves, over time, as entrancingly complex. There is no in-between in any of Radigue's creations, which suggest a sense of constancy that extends beyond the simple contingencies of playing time. They seem to commune with forces less fleeting than those that attend "music" and mere music alone.

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Ambient music, at its best, does not shy away from obfuscation or blurring certain boundaries and lines. For some that comes at a loss, as evidenced by common complaints relating to "sonic wallpaper" or sounds that slink around too uselessly in the background. Often such complaints are valid, as many a bad ambient album favoured at shopping malls or in mindless public arenas can attest. But sometimes, ambient music rewards different ways of listening, or at least encourages expanding the act of listening to include new and different modes.

Jim O'Rourke, a musical polymath who has mastered domains in rock and experimentalism of all kinds, makes ambient music that offers the promise of such expansion as part of its point. Before moving to Japan, O'Rourke was best-known

in the United States for his accomplished work in indie-rock. He made great records of his own, worked as a versatile producer for groups like Stereolab and Wilco, and served for a spell as an official member of the iconic New York "noise rock" band Sonic Youth.

Before then, and all the while, he also conducted studious sorts of experiments with sound – like those assembled in a series of nine *Steamroom* recordings released exclusively online. The first one, *Steamroom I* features a pair of long tracks, near 20 minutes each, that traffic in drone and transcending inclusivity. They play out and warrant examination from different vantage points, none more important than any of the others. In *Steamroom 2*, the story changes to a style a bit more dramatic, with shifts of intensity and emotional cues that rise and fall. *Steamroom 5* derives its sound from strings (violin, viola, cello) and electronic oscillators, all of which can spire together in a drone that grows breathtakingly immense.

That last one might be too dense and intense for anyone's idea of ambient music in the strictest, most limited sense. But strictures and limitations are nothing but obstacles to be overcome.

Other music by O'Rourke also features on a new entry to a compilation series titled *Air Texture*, which is ambient through and through. The third in a series started in 2011, the double-CD *Air Texture Vol III* offers an impressive and inclusive lesson in where ambient music ideas have led, and where they might yet stand to go in the future.

The roster includes lionised old legends like Phil Niblock and Pauline Oliveros (aged 80 and 81, respectively) as well as distinguished younger masters including the Australian Oren Ambarchi and the Austrian Christian Fennesz. There's genuine pulsating ambient techno by Pole and whooshy washes of foreboding sound from Deadbeat, who helped curate the collection.

All of it is hushed enough to sleep to and captivating enough to pay back good-faith shows of devotion. It's music for questioning, reflecting and making a place in the cosmos that can be ever-present and always accessible in the right state of mind. Keep an ear open and attentive to sounds that might otherwise slip by – and don't forget to feed the texture of the air when you're there.

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