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AMBIENT MUSIC AS SONIC AMBIANCE: Space, Atmosphere and Sound

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Introduction

Questions of how environments are perceived, felt, and experienced have, in recent years, come to the forefront of scholarly debate. Central to this shift is the recognition that spaces are not only defined by their physical or visual properties but are equally shaped by their atmospheres and ambiance, those diffuse, often intangible qualities that affect perception and experience. Sound, in particular, plays a decisive role in this process: it mediates how we relate to spaces, how we inhabit them, and how they affect us emotionally and bodily. The growing field of ambiance and atmosphere studies has thus developed at the crossroads of architecture, urban studies, philosophy, human geography, and sound studies, offering fresh perspectives on how environments are produced and lived through sonic experience. It is within this expanding landscape of inquiry that the present study is situated, turning to music, specifically ambient music, as a way to explore the complex entanglements between sound, space, and atmosphere.

The aim of this study is to explore the concepts of ambiance and atmosphere, which have only recently begun to gain ground within musicological research, and to consider the genre of ambient music through the framework these concepts provide. The article, more specifically, advances an original tripartite conceptual model that brings together soundscape, atmosphere, and sonic ambiance as analytically distinct yet interrelated dimensions of spatial listening. While each of these concepts has been extensively theorised in its own right, their integration allows ambient music to be approached not simply as a musical genre but as a mode of sonic world-making that operates across environmental, affective and embodied registers. This study, rather than claiming to offer a comprehensive theory, instead attempts to open a space for reflection on how ambient music, with its emphasis on mood, spatiality and immersion, might be understood through the lens of sonic ambiance. The article, in this sense, focuses on the atmospheric qualities of ambient music in relation to space but also on how these qualities are produced, mediated and ultimately experienced as auditory phenomena by listeners. By doing so, the study not only positions ambient music within a broader discourse on ambiance but also invites further consideration of how sound itself participates in shaping spaces, experiences and embodied perceptions.

In the initial part of this study, we explore the concepts of soundscape, atmosphere and ambiance, which form the foundational framework of our research. While the distinction between ambiance and atmosphere can be somewhat ambiguous, it is essential to introduce the concept of soundscape when discussing sonic ambiance. The soundscape can be understood as the auditory landscape of a specific place or space, establishing a connection between the terms 'ambiance' and 'atmosphere'. When soundscapes are intentionally designed to shape emotional responses in a space, the interplay between soundscape and ambiance becomes evident, as in outdoor installations that add subtle sonic textures to public areas, merging with wind, footsteps and traffic to recalibrate how the space is perceived and felt. Within the scope of this study, therefore, we view the concept of soundscape as a means to gain a deeper understanding of ambiance and atmosphere, particularly in terms of their auditory dimensions.

In the second part of the article, after clarifying our usage of the concepts of soundscape, ambiance and atmosphere, we discuss the concept of sonic ambiance, which is relatively new in the literature. This concept appears in the works of Jean-Paul Thibaud. Jordan Lacey (2022) considers it within the framework of his theory of Sonic Rupture. Although a clear definition of sonic ambiance has not yet been established, its central idea, as articulated by Thibaud, emphasises the auditory experience of a space, with sound as the focal point. Thibaud further notes that ordinary, behavioral, and often unidentifiable sounds, integrated into daily life and typically overlooked by conscious perception, constitute the everyday sonic ambiance (Thibaud 2017: 228). When addressing issues related to environmental sounds or the auditory environment, therefore, it becomes essential to employ the concept of soundscape in order to engage meaningfully with sonic ambiance.

Finally, this research evaluates ambient music through the lens of several interconnected concepts: soundscape, ambiance, atmosphere and sonic ambiance. While ambiance and sonic ambiance are often discussed in Francophone contexts, particularly in fields like landscape architecture and urban studies, they are intricately linked to soundscape, embodiment, auditory experience and spatial perception. Understanding ambient music, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses these concepts. The final section of this article explores the emergence of ambient music and the musical and philosophical ideas that have influenced its development. Additionally, we analyse the intellectual background of ambient music production in relation to the concepts of ambiance, atmosphere and sonic ambiance, as presented in the existing literature.

Soundscape, Ambiance and Atmosphere

This section addresses the first component of the article's tripartite conceptual framework, soundscape by situating it in relation to ambiance and atmosphere. The concept of the soundscape has become one of the central notions in sound studies (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2004: 642), valued particularly for its flexibility in capturing and describing the diverse sensory and atmospheric qualities of auditory environments. Emerging prominently in the 1970s through the work of R. Murray Schafer and *The World Soundscape Project*, the term was initially employed to examine the rise of noise and its impact on everyday life, but it has since expanded to encompass a much broader understanding of how sound shapes experience and perception (Brooks et al. 2014: 30). Schafer (1994: 7) defined the soundscape broadly as 'any acoustic field of study', including musical compositions, radio programs and environmental sound, thereby linking auditory phenomena to spatial, experiential and atmospheric dimensions. Conceptually related to landscape, the soundscape is understood as 'the acoustic environment as perceived, experienced and/or understood by a person or people, in context' (ISO 12913-1 2014: V-1), emphasising the role of sound in shaping perception, mood, and the character of a place. Researchers within *The World Soundscape Project*, such as Hildegard Westerkamp, further developed the concept of soundscape through creative and experiential practices, including soundwalks and compositional reworkings of environmental sounds, which highlight how listening can reveal the expressive and atmospheric qualities of auditory environments (Westerkamp 1988; 2002). This experiential orientation resonates with ecological aesthetics, by which acoustic environments can be understood not merely as objects of measurement but as atmospheric conditions that demand aesthetic and ethical consideration. As Gernot Böhme argues (Böhme 2017a: 175), modern music and sound practices have rendered sound itself as an environmental element, shifting attention from decibel-based evaluation toward questions of how acoustic spaces should feel and what kinds of atmospheres constitute a human environment. The soundscape, understood through this lens, is not only an acoustic field to be analysed but a lived and malleable atmospheric space the character of which can be preserved, altered or designed. By focusing on how sounds are organised, foregrounded or backgrounded, the concept of soundscape provides a framework for describing how environments carry distinct atmospheres and affective qualities, offering a productive bridge to the study of ambient music, which similarly manipulates sound to create immersive, enveloping sonic experiences.

The conceptual flexibility of the soundscape provides a valuable framework for understanding ambiances, as it allows for multiple interpretive perspectives on how sound shapes perception and experience. In terms of flexibility of the soundscape, for instance, Schafer did not approach soundscape as a neutral or purely descriptive concept but as a qualitative and evaluative field. Defining the soundscape as 'any acoustic field of study' (Schafer 1994: 7), he nonetheless consistently framed it in terms of Hi-Fi and Lo-Fi environments, foregrounding questions of balance, degradation, and care (Schafer 1994: 43–71). In this sense, the soundscape is always meaningful: it invites judgements about the quality of sonic environments and their effects on human life. He utilised it, accordingly, to engage with various concerns, including environmental awareness (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2004: 642), critiques of urban auditory environments (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 6–7; Schafer 1994: 71–7), sound as a social and meaningful phenomenon (Kelman 2010: 213–5), histories of mediation, changing technologies and noise pollution (Samuels et al. 2010: 330–1) and the physicality of auditory space (Sterne 2013: 182). Soundscape consequently extends beyond merely describing the auditory environment: it encompasses how listening is influenced by specific ideas and how space is experienced through sound. This flexibility in the concept of soundscape also offers a rich foundation for interpreting ambiance, as ambiances can be understood through various interpretive lenses and perspectives, especially concerning sound.

The concepts of ambiance and atmosphere provide a broader framework for understanding soundscapes. Critics like Tim Ingold (2007) and Stefan Helmreich (2010) argue that soundscapes cannot be confined to just auditory elements. Ingold identifies four main issues: firstly, environments should be explored through the entirety of sensory experiences, not just sound; secondly, ears do not simply replay sounds and attempting to re-present soundscapes often strips them of their context; thirdly, soundscapes are not external phenomena but are instead spaces we inhabit; and, finally, sound should be viewed as a dynamic force, illustrated by Ingold's kite and wind metaphor. These critiques indicate that the concept of soundscape is limited on its own and is better understood when connected to the broader ideas of ambiance and atmosphere.

According to Jean-Paul Thibaud (2021: 672), ambiance is a spatio-temporal experience that encompasses sensory elements such as sound, light, smell and temperature. Tim Ingold's critique of the soundscape concept supports the idea that soundscapes can be perceived as forms of atmosphere or ambiance, as he argues for the consideration of the full range of senses rather than sound alone. Thibaud also highlights that ambiance engages all perceptual modalities, activating the entire sensorium. Both soundscape and ambiance possess, in this regard, a multisensory dimension. As noted by Ulrik Schmidt (2023: 6), key terms such as 'environmental sound', 'auditory environment', 'soundscape', 'ecology', 'atmosphere', 'ambiance', and 'ambient sound' are frequently used interchangeably. The discussions surrounding the scope, limits, and potential of the soundscape concept demonstrate the necessity of situating it within broader conversations about ambiance and atmosphere, where listening is recognised not merely as an auditory act but as part of a multisensory and affective experience of space. In this context, Jordan Lacey's 2021 study, which establishes a connection between soundscape and atmosphere, is particularly noteworthy. In his work, while addressing sound installation, he explores how an atmosphere can be intentionally created through sound art. Lacey views sound installation as a means of designing soundscapes. According to Lacey (2021: 318), 'the purpose of sound installation is to create an atmosphere. Atmosphere is the domain that emerges between environments that produce ephemera (sound) and human perceptions of that environment'. Thus, producing sound with a specific intention and purposefully placing sounds within a given auditory environment constitute an act of creating atmosphere.

The relationship between soundscapes and ambiance is crucial in understanding how auditory experiences shape our perceptions. While the term 'soundscape' has various definitions, this study focuses on its connection to ambiance and atmosphere. Recent perspectives emphasise aspects of soundscaping, which refers to the practice of individuals using headphones to transform their auditory environment by overlaying it with personal music (Hagood 2011: 575). This intentional alteration of the sonic field demonstrates how soundscaping can create specific moods or perceptions. Soundscaping, by intervening in the sonic environment, serves as a method for generating ambiance, aiming to evoke an emotional state or affect [*Stimmung*] that is experienced through the body [*Leib*] (Schmitz 2020: 64).

The interplay between ambiance, atmosphere, and acoustic communication is essential for understanding soundscapes. Barry Truax (Truax 1984: xii) emphasises the significance of acoustic communication in soundscape analysis, defining soundscape not just as the auditory environment but as the communicative processes through which individuals and communities interpret it. This concept is closely linked to atmosphere, as acoustic communication involves the relationships, mediations and structures that are fundamental

to atmospheric conditions (Riedel 2020: 5). By examining how individuals perceive and engage with auditory environments, we can understand soundscape as an integral part of the same experiential framework that encompasses ambiance and atmosphere. Soundscape read in this way provides the environmental and perceptual grounding upon which atmosphere and, more specifically, sonic ambiance can be analysed.

From Atmosphere to Sonic Ambiance: Böhme, Thibaud and the Embodied Experience of Sound

The concepts of atmosphere and ambiance have become central to contemporary discussions of sound, space and perception, offering valuable tools for understanding how environments are experienced and interpreted. Within the tripartite framework proposed in this article, atmosphere functions as a mediating concept that links the environmental logic of soundscape to the experiential specificity of sonic ambiance. Both terms foreground the entanglement of sensory modalities, affective states and spatial conditions, and they resonate closely with the ways in which sound shapes our everyday encounters with place. Thinkers, such as Gernot Böhme and Jean-Paul Thibaud, have each developed distinctive approaches to these concepts, emphasising their aesthetic, embodied and auditory dimensions. Their insights, together with the more recent articulation of sonic ambiance, provide a framework for analysing how listening practices generate meaning and affect. In what follows, we trace key theoretical perspectives on atmosphere and ambiance and show how these concepts converge toward the concept of sonic ambiance, which provides a more precise lens for understanding how sound shapes experiential and affective spaces.

The production of atmosphere provides an important entry point for understanding sonic ambiance, since both concern how environments are shaped to evoke particular affective experiences. As Böhme (2017a: 20) observes, the tradition of stage design teaches us several lessons about atmosphere: it can be deliberately produced, it exists independently with a quasi-objective quality and it emerges through mediating factors such as sound, lighting, spatial geometry, signs, and images. These elements reveal that atmosphere is not incidental but actively generated through the arrangement of environments. Music and sound, in particular, play a decisive role in this process, as they can define or evoke specific moods and thereby shape how a space is felt. In this way, the production of atmosphere through sound highlights the intimate connection with what scholars describe as sonic ambiance, the capacity of auditory elements to organise perception, affect and spatial experience.

Böhme (2017b), in his book, *Atmospheric Architectures*, emphasises the close relationship between atmosphere, aesthetics and what he calls the 'new aesthetics'. According to Böhme (2017b: 13), the term, 'atmosphere', is not a mere impostor of aesthetic discourse: rather, in many cases, speaking of atmosphere inevitably invokes it. For instance, phrases such as 'a good atmosphere' or 'the development of atmosphere' unfold within aesthetic registers. He explains:

> Atmosphere denotes at once the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics and its central object of knowledge. Atmosphere is the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence, and it is the reality of the perceiver to the extent that he or she is bodily present in a particular way through grasping the atmosphere (Böhme 2017b: 23–4).

Böhme also addresses the function of atmosphere in relation to aesthetics, for example, when a certain spatial condition is expressed and interpreted in terms of mood or aesthetic perception. A given place or reality thus emerges as atmospheric through the perceiver's embodied interpretation, which usually takes shape through an aesthetic framework.

Atmosphere has also been applied in ethnomusicological studies, where it often shares conceptual commonalities with the concept of ambiance in its emphasis on mood, space and embodied listening. Andrew McGraw, in his article, *Atmosphere as a Concept for Ethnomusicology: Comparing the Gamelatron and Gamelan* (2016), explores how atmosphere can be understood as a relational phenomenon produced through the convergence of sonic, spatial and material elements. He contrasts the technologically mediated resonances of the Gamelatron with the embodied communal dynamics of live gamelan performance, showing how each generates distinct atmospheric conditions. For McGraw, atmosphere is not reducible to sound alone: rather, it emerges in the affective environment created by the interplay of music, bodies, and place. This understanding resonates strongly with the concept of ambiance, which likewise

emphasises how sound envelops listeners, shapes sensorial orientations and structures shared affective experience. Both concepts thus foreground the immersive and relational qualities of sound, drawing attention to the ways musical environments are inhabited and collectively felt.

Atmosphere and ambiance, as noted earlier, share many commonalities and are often used interchangeably. In this sense, a definition of atmosphere can often function equally as a definition of ambiance. Yet, Jean-Paul Thibaud, whose work at CRESSON in France has particularly focused on the concept of ambiance, suggests that there remains at least a subtle distinction between the two. Thibaud is less concerned with atmosphere in general and more with the specifically auditory dimensions of ambiance, seeking to conceptualise its experiential qualities. According to Thibaud (2011: 1), ambiance can be defined from a perceptual perspective as the characterisation of a space-time quality. In this way, ambiance relates to the felt and sensorial presence of a place. Each ambiance belongs to a particular mood or affective state and is tied to its material existence and embodiment. Thus, ambiance is perceived both subjectively and objectively.

Thibaud has approached the concept of ambiance from various philosophical perspectives, including phenomenology and post-representational approaches, thereby bringing out different aspects of the concept. In his definition, he highlights three essential features of ambiance. Firstly, ambiance must achieve a concrete attunement to a particular place. Without such attunement, closely linked to embodiment, there can be no phenomenon that qualifies as ambiance. Secondly, this attunement must be grounded in the specific qualities of a local spatial configuration. Finally, ambiance arises from the creation of affective states, which are closely tied to atmosphere. Only when these three features converge can a situation be identified as ambiance (Schmidt 2023: 7; Thibaud 2021: 671–3).

The discussion moves, at this point, towards sonic ambiance, the third and most explicitly auditory component of the tripartite conceptual framework advanced in this study. It is particularly Thibaud who has elaborated the concept of sonic ambiance and, during his tenure as director of CRESSON, he reoriented the institute's focus from the study of sound effects towards that of sonic ambiance. This concept shifts attention away from the environmental conditions of ambiance towards the emotional and perceptual experiences of the body. Much like ambiance more generally, which encompasses attunement, the qualities of a particular place, affect and mood, sonic ambiance also integrates these dimensions but with a much stronger focus on auditory-embodied experience. One of its most important assumptions is that sound is the most powerful sensory medium in shaping our experiences (Lacey 2022: 11–12).

Sonic ambiance becomes manifest through the act of listening to a place, through embodiment and through the materialisation of auditory experience. One of the central concerns of the concept is how diverse auditory experiences are created in different geographies and soundscapes. Listening bodies are, in this regard, at the heart of sonic ambiance. By listening to a city or a place, listening bodies generate affective impressions about it. The study of sonic ambiance has also considered how such impressions are modulated and attuned by embodied listeners (Lacey 2022: 12).

Sonic ambiance can be understood as the way sound generates and sustains atmospheric experience, shaping how environments are perceived and felt. Rather than being limited to musical form or linear development, sonic ambiance emphasises the spatial and affective qualities of sound, its capacity to fill, permeate, and transform a setting. In this sense, ambiance is not reducible to background sound but arises through the dynamic interplay of tones, textures, and reverberations that orient the listener within an environment. What makes sonic ambiance distinctive is its immersive quality: it creates a surrounding field of experience in which the distinction between background and foreground dissolves, and sound becomes inseparable from the atmosphere of place.

A second defining feature of sonic ambiance is its adaptability across environments and modes of listening. Sound does not act as a fixed object but as a phenomenon that interacts with other sensory elements, bodily presence, and spatial conditions. This adaptability enables sonic ambiance to mediate between the material environment and the subjective experience of listeners. For instance, reverberation and drones may construct an imagined expanse of space through the ubiquity effect in which sound seems to emanate from 'everywhere and nowhere', producing a spatial uncertainty that transforms how a place is felt (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 130–1). Field recordings, by contrast, frequently function through the niche effect, taking advantage of specific spatial or temporal conditions to emerge within an environment and anchor sound to a particular landscape (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 78–83). Ambiance is produced, in both cases, not only through the sonic material itself but also through how it is situated, experienced and blended with the auditory and sensory context

of a place. Sonic ambiance therefore highlights the relational nature of listening: sound gains meaning by shaping and being shaped by the environments in which it unfolds.

Finally, sonic ambiance must be understood as an embodied and multisensory phenomenon. It does not operate solely through hearing but engages the body through vibration, resonance and affective immersion. In this respect, ambiance encompasses more than auditory perception, it extends to how listeners physically inhabit and move through spaces shaped by sound. The layering of sonic textures creates atmospheres that fold listeners into an affective ecology, where spatial, emotional and sensory dimensions converge. This embodied dimension demonstrates that sonic ambiance is not only an aesthetic concept but also a lived experience, one that actively configures the relationship between sound, space and human presence.

Soundscape, atmosphere, and sonic ambiance, taken together, form an integrated conceptual framework that enables ambient music to be understood not only as a musical practice but as a mode of spatial, affective and embodied experience. This is primarily because it treats sound as the most effective medium of experience and directs attention not only to space but also to auditory perception as it unfolds across soundscape, atmosphere and sonic ambiance. The production of ambient music, in fact, is directly bound up with all the phenomena encapsulated in the integrated tripartite model. Ambient music, through this interplay, weaves together diverse sound elements in order to explore the spatial and affective dimensions of particular environments.

Ambient Music as Sonic Ambiance

Ambient music has often been described as a genre that resists conventional musical hierarchies, prioritising atmosphere over structure and presence over progression. The term, ‘ambient music’, was first coined by Brian Eno in 1978. It refers to music designed to play in the background, creating a specific atmosphere or mood (Biswas et al. 2019: 39). This genre emphasises enhancing the listener’s auditory experience rather than focusing on traditional musical elements like melody, harmony and rhythm (Siepmann 2010: 174). Schmidt (2013: 182–3) highlights that, while ambient music often serves as background sound, its true immersiveness occurs when the distinctions between background and foreground disappear. For ambient music to be effective, all layers of sound within a space should blend seamlessly, allowing listeners to perceive the overall ambiance rather than individual elements. In this sense, ambient music is less a composition in the traditional sense than an environmental design in sound, that is, a mode of shaping perceptual conditions by arranging sonic materials in ways that modulate how a space is felt, an auditory atmosphere that emerges through the blending of tones, textures and layers into an enveloping whole. This shift in orientation, from musical form to experiential ambiance, makes ambient music a particularly fertile case for considering the concept of sonic ambiance.

Beyond canonical works, such as Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports and Ambient 4: On Land*, the relevance of this conceptual framework becomes especially clear in contemporary ambient music practices that explicitly engage space, environment and listening conditions. Labels such as ‘12k’ and ‘Room40’, for instance, foreground minimalism, field recording and site-responsive composition, often presenting works that blur the boundaries between environmental sound, musical texture and spatial atmosphere. Similarly, releases on labels including Kranky, Dronarivm, and Audiobulb frequently emphasise sustained drones, spatial diffusion and immersive sonic textures that function less as foregrounded musical narratives than as affective environments.

These practices exemplify how ambient music operates across soundscape (through environmental reference and recording), atmosphere (through mood and affective modulation) and sonic ambiance (through embodied and spatial listening). Rather than serving merely as stylistic variants within a genre, such works demonstrate how ambient music can be understood as a practice of shaping experiential space through sound. In this sense, contemporary ambient production provides concrete illustrations of how the tripartite framework developed in this article may be applied to a wide range of musical contexts, as can be seen in works such as Taylor Deupree’s *The Inland Sea* (12k), Lawrence English’s *Wilderness of Mirrors* (Room40) and the sustained drone compositions characteristic of artists associated with Dronarivm and Kranky.

A notable aspect of ambient music is its connection to visual art. Brian Eno, who coined the term in 1978 and is a pioneer in the genre, aimed to create a link between music and visual arts (Marshall and Loydell 2017: 104–7). Ambient music, like visual art, can be linked

to the five senses, emphasising its immersive, atmospheric, and multisensory qualities. In a 1982 interview, Brian Eno argued that his recordings have an ontological status similar to visual art objects being self-contained works that do not require performance, so that listening to them can be as rich and meaningful as viewing a painting (Sun 2007: 135). From this perspective, ambiance arises through the interaction of sound with spatial, bodily, and sensory conditions. This becomes especially clear in outdoor sound installations that introduce ambient or low-intensity sonic materials into existing environments. In such works, subtle drones, filtered textures or processed field recordings are designed to blend with wind, footsteps, traffic noise and other environmental sounds, gradually transforming how the space is perceived without masking its sonic identity. These ambient interventions, rather than operating as foregrounded musical objects, merge into the soundscape, shaping affective qualities such as calm, attentiveness or spatial openness. Ambient music functions, in this way, as a sonic articulation of ambiance itself, contributing to an experiential field in which sound, space, and embodied perception are inseparably intertwined.

Ambient music is frequently imagined as a kind of landscape or environment, a metaphor that resonates closely with R. Murray Schafer's concept of the soundscape, in which listening and music-making are understood as embedded in place (Toop 2019: 5). What distinguishes ambient music, however, is not simply the presence of sound in the background but the intentional design of music to shape the atmosphere of a space. In this sense, the purpose of composition becomes central: it is important to distinguish between music intended for general listening and sounds designed for a particular place (music created specifically to be heard as part of an environment, audible yet not demanding focused attention). When composed for a specific environment, music functions as site-specific sound design, shaping the perception of that space and contributing directly to its atmosphere. By contrast, ambient music in general may achieve a similar effect more flexibly: it can blend into the auditory background of diverse environments, influencing mood without being tied to a particular location. Framed as a sonic landscape, both ambient music and place-specific sound design align with the concept of sonic ambiance, since they describe how sound structures spatial experience and mediates how environments are perceived and felt, whether intentionally composed for a site or adaptable to multiple contexts.

The ambient music genre is related to Chill-out, Muzak, Electronic Dance Music Culture, New Age and various mid-20th-century movements. Its historical roots can be traced to composers who explored the relationship between sound and environment. For example, Erik Satie's concept of furniture music aimed to function as background sound, while John Cage created compositions that drew listeners' attention to ambient sounds in their surroundings. Minimalist composers such as La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass further developed approaches that emphasised repetition, gradual change and texture, all of which influenced the emergence of ambient music. Eno also helped define the genre's conceptual and aesthetic framework (Till 2017: 327–32).

Various earlier works may also be considered to fit within the genre of ambient music. Victor Louis Franco Szabo's (2015) dissertation, *Ambient Music as Popular Genre: Historiography, Interpretation, Critique*, focuses on the diverse styles of ambient music across different periods. In this study, Szabo includes not only Eno's and post-Eno works but also early recordings that might be described as pioneering ambient pieces alongside experimental avant-garde practices that can likewise be seen as part of this genre. This perspective emphasises that ambient music is not limited to a single origin or style but is instead a historically layered genre that includes both popular and experimental contributions.

In his research, Szabo (2015: 6) asked participants to define ambient music, and their responses revealed a wide spectrum of associations: 'experimental', 'introspective', 'spatial', 'electronic', 'arrhythmic', 'formless', 'slow', 'static', 'mood-enhancing' and 'ego-free'. For some, ambient music was simply 'relaxing music', while for others it was described as 'music that takes you on a journey' or 'the soundscape of a particular feeling or environment'. Scholars have also emphasised these qualities. Till (2017: 327), for instance, highlights that ambient music provides moments of stillness within an ever-moving world, while Field (2019: 25) characterises it by its slow tempos, tonal or modal frameworks, fragmented melodic lines and frequent use of drones, elements that collectively generate continuity and atmosphere. Crucially, the stillness created by ambient music can be understood as more than a musical feature: it actively shapes aural space, allowing listeners to inhabit sound as environment. In this sense, ambient music resonates with the concept of sonic ambiance, as both are concerned with how sound structures and transforms the experience of spatial and emotional atmospheres.

By listening to and experiencing ambient music, individuals may detach themselves from the physical space they occupy and mentally construct their own sonic ambiance. This occurs, without doubt, through the listener's immersive engagement with a particular sonic environment. At the same time, the imagined environment created through ambient music can be thought of in terms of an all-encompassing surroundability and experienced accordingly. In this way, ambient music enables listeners to realise an imagined environment through sound. Thus, it can both displace the listener from the physical space and generate an alternative spatial experience. Ambient music can, conversely, also be incorporated into the auditory setting of a given environment, shaping and situating its soundscape around a particular mood.

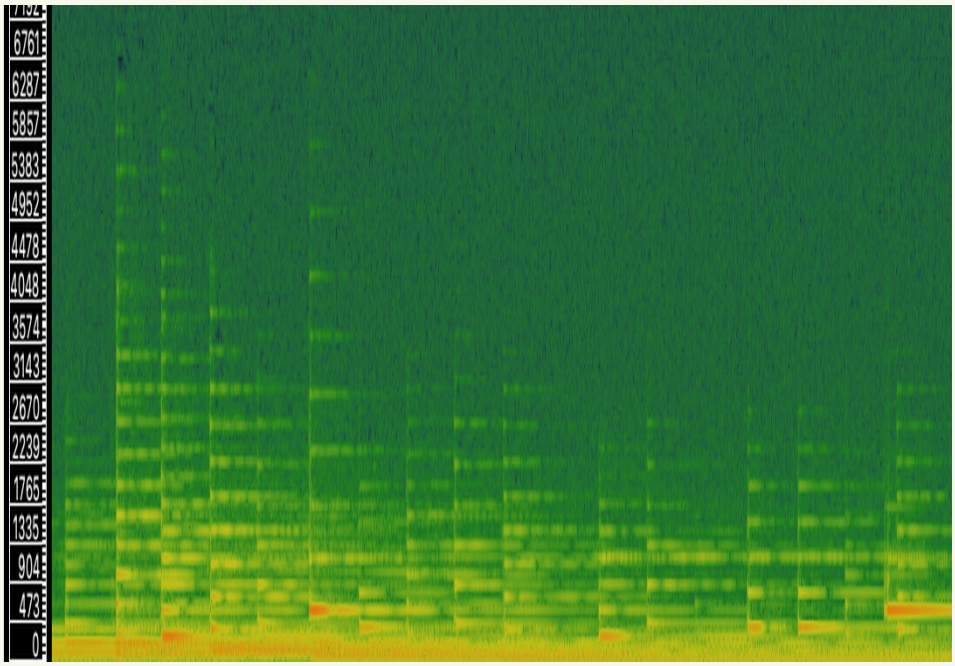
Ambient music can be understood as a sensory and spatial experience, raising questions about how musical performance is defined when sound is mediated through playback. Rather than centering performance on live execution, ambient music foregrounds listening as a situated practice embedded in specific environments. In this sense, ambient music operates through forms of situated listening that acknowledge the partial and contingent position of the listener while enabling a porous and transformative attunement to the multiple presences, temporalities and histories embedded within a given environment (Loveless and Zinovieff 2023). While Eno described ambient music as designed for background use and defined ambiance as an enveloping atmospheric effect (Eno 1978), scholarly approaches to sonic ambiance emphasise how recorded sound participates in the shaping of spatial perception and affect. From this perspective, the playback of ambient music functions as a performative act insofar as it actively engages with an existing soundscape, contributing to how an environment is experienced. Recorded ambient sound does not operate independently of its surroundings but interacts with environmental noises, architectural acoustics and bodily presence, producing a composite auditory field. Ambient music is consequently best interpreted not as a fixed musical object but as a relational practice that unfolds through its integration with sonic ambiance.

One of the most fundamental points to grasp regarding the production of ambient music is the creation of sonic ambiance. In fact, the very purpose of producing ambient music is to generate sonic ambiance. Its goal is to evoke a specific mood, state, mode or mentally imagined space (such as a seaside or forest). To achieve this, ambient music is often produced through the use of background sounds. Some of the most effective uses of background sounds in ambient music can be found in Japan. This is partly attributable to traditional Zen meditation practices and Japanese garden aesthetics [*nihon teien*] but also to a conception of nature and philosophy within Japanese culture that differs greatly from Western traditions (see Watanabe 1974). Japanese ambient works provide clear examples of music that incorporates both background soundscapes (field recordings) and the evocation of a specific mood or imagined space. Examples include Masayoshi Fujita's *Bird Ambiance*, Yoshiaki Ochi's *Anywhere*, and Shiho Yabuki's *The Light of the Moon*. For example, Ken-ichiro Isoda's *Meditation of Clammbon* (2024) stands out as a striking example of the unaltered use of recorded natural sounds. The piece begins with the sound of a flowing stream and birdsongs, presented exactly as captured. This natural introduction lasts for 48 seconds. At the 48-second mark, the harmonic foundation of the piece emerges in the form of an arpeggiated chord progression. By 1:57, the field recording, which had already begun to fade out gradually, disappears completely and the main melody, performed on the oboe, enters. Thus, in this piece, the listener begins by hearing and experiencing the sounds of a natural environment, but gradually these are replaced by composed musical sounds. What emerges is a transition in which the natural soundscape gives way to music, yet in such a subtle and seamless manner that continuity is preserved and the connection with the sounds of nature is sustained. When I (the first author) first listened to the piece, for instance, I did not immediately notice the point at which the soundscape recording diminished and eventually disappeared. This experience can only be explained by the carefully crafted smoothness of the transition between these auditory realms, which is central to the creation of sonic ambiance.

The main goal of producing ambient music with careful attention to detail during recording is to create a rich atmospheric experience. This involves layering different sonic elements to build a more immersive sound. Once combined, these elements are balanced and refined during the mixing and mastering stages. Field recordings are also crucial in ambient music production. Composers collect sounds from various environments and reimagine them to evoke specific moods or experiences. The use of reverberation, layering, drones, and the transformation of field recordings all contribute significantly to the final composition. A notable example of this process is Zegar De Vos's (2017) master's thesis, *Narrative Through Texture: Shaping Sound Through Abstract Painting in My Practice of Ambient Music.*

In ambient music, reverberation is commonly used to create the impression of a sound coming from farther away or to evoke the sense of being in a wide, open space. This can be compared with the use of a full-length mirror in a small room or shop: just as the mirror makes

Figure 1. Spectrogram of Brian Eno's '1/1', showing reverb, delay, echo and drone features.



the space appear larger and more comfortable, reverberation in ambient music generates a similar effect in the auditory field. The use of reverberation, along with drones, tonal structures and small, often repetitive motifs, allows ambient music to adapt to different listening environments and to be perceived in relation to the surrounding soundscape. In this sense, the spectrogram of a given piece of ambient music can vary depending on the environment in which it is heard or performed. For example, in Eno's *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, tracks 1/1 and 2/2 illustrate these techniques (see Fig. 1).

Ambient music can create specific atmospheres through two distinct listening approaches, the first of which involves masking an existing environment in order to enable listeners to imagine themselves within a transformed auditory space. In urban and outdoor contexts, ambient music can transform perception by redirecting attention away from environmental noise and creating a coherent artificial soundscape. Listening in such settings is often passive, and mitigating unwanted sounds, such as traffic, requires shifting the listener's focus unconsciously toward the ambient sound environment. Achieving this effect involves energetic masking, where factors such as loudness, as well as the inclusion of diverse auditory and sensory elements, ranging from structures and artifacts to activities, help guide attention (Hellström et al. 2014). Lacey and his team (2017: 23) showed that combining ambient music composition with algorithmic design and audio engineering can produce immersive soundscapes that both mask environmental noise and enrich the auditory environment. Valerian Fraisse, Cynthia Tarlao and Catherine Guastavino (2024) provide further evidence through four sound installations in public spaces, demonstrating that well-designed ambient soundscapes enhanced overall evaluations of the environment and distracted listeners from other non-dominant or undesirable sounds. Together, these studies indicate that ambient music can actively transform how listeners perceive their surroundings, allowing familiar spaces to be experienced as entirely new auditory environments.

The second approach to experiencing ambient music involves listening to it together with the existing soundscape of a place, allowing the music to become part of the environment and shaping a new auditory setting imbued with a particular mood. Michael Bull's landmark study, *Sounding Out the City* (2000), illustrates how the use of personal stereo devices enables individuals to curate their own sonic environments within urban spaces, effectively blending private soundscapes with the public auditory environment. Bull's (2000) work highlights how personal listening through mobile media allows individuals to curate their own sonic environments, and this suggests that ambient music, when experienced in similar ways, can interact with environmental sounds to enhance immersion and alter the perception of familiar spaces. Lacey, Pink, Harvey, and Moore (2019) describe noise transformation as an approach to environmental sound management that shifts the focus from simply reducing noise levels to altering its perceptual impact. Applied to ambient music, this means that music can be combined with environmental sounds not merely to mask them but to transform their effect on listeners, creating

auditory experiences that are more pleasant, engaging or meaningful. For example, when ambient music is combined with the sound of waves, typically via audio technologies, at a seaside location, the experience does not simply layer sounds: it produces a reconfigured sonic environment in which the interaction between music and environmental sound heightens immersion and reshapes the listener's perception of the space. In this way, ambient music becomes an active participant in the soundscape, capable of transforming ordinary auditory environments into richly textured, emotionally resonant spaces.

Creating a specific sonic ambiance involves making sensory choices that align with the intended goal and concept. When producing an atmosphere, it is crucial to consider not just how sound is used, but also how other senses come into play and how the environment is experienced. Therefore, the selection of appropriate visual and auditory elements depends on the desired type of environment. Ambient music plays a significant role in this context, as it is closely related to the idea of sonic ambiance. Like sonic ambiance, ambient music focuses on the environment and space, and on the ways sound is physically experienced through spatial perception. The goal of ambient music is to create a spatial environment and influence how sounds are perceived by individuals in relation to a specific mood.

Richard Talbot (2019), in discussing the spatiality of ambient music, also highlights crucial points about its production, which can be fruitfully read through the concept of sonic ambiance. He identifies three important manifestations of space that together reveal how ambient music generates particular ambiances: composition, text and psychological space. The first is the listening space, where music creates the conditions for an auditory environment in which experience can unfold. This space reflects sonic ambiance as an experiential field, establishing an atmosphere that surrounds and orients the listener, regardless of genre. The second is the manufactured space, which emerges through effects such as delay and reverberation that construct an imagined environment. Sonic ambiance here is technologically produced, showing how sound can simulate spaces and generate affective immersion. The third is the figurative space, where representation and simulation intersect. This form of space demonstrates how sonic ambiance carries symbolic weight, allowing sound to not only fill a space but also to signify one, evoking moods, images, or entire environments. Talbot's three spaces, taken together, reveal how ambient music operates as a practice of sonic ambiance, shaping perception, emotion and meaning through its layered spatialities (Talbot 2019: 67–73).

Just as the manifestation of space is essential for the production of ambient music, so too is the field recording (or soundscape) that shapes how this manifestation takes form. According to Sun (2007: 136), an ambient recording, unlike much of Western art music, does not represent just one of the potentially infinite interpretative variations of a pre-existing written score. Nor, as in some popular genres, does it become a fixed post-performance text that others might imitate and against which performers are compared. In this sense, ambient music, in its foundational conception, does not depend on a pre-designed composition or on performance in the conventional sense, even though ambient works have been subsequently arranged and performed by jazz ensembles, orchestras and other interpretive formations such as Contact and Bruce Brubaker. Rather, the nature of the soundscape recording itself remains one of the most crucial factors determining how ambient music takes shape.

Given its relationship with the soundscape, ambient music can be understood as indirectly or directly connected to the landscape. When regarded as the sonicity of a place and environment, the connection between ambient music and landscape becomes evident. Sonic ambiance, however, points more to a practical act, since sound is less an object than a phenomenon produced through specific movements and experienced within a particular environment. In this regard, ambient music's aim of filling a given environment in order to create a mood or atmosphere clearly demonstrates its link with landscape. For example, Chris Watson's Weather Report (2003) engages landscape through field-recording practices that foreground environmental processes, spatial depth, and climatic temporality. Rather than representing place symbolically, Watson's work allows landscape to emerge through attentive listening, in which wind, weather and spatial resonance collectively shape an immersive sonic ambiance.

The relationship between ambient music and sonic ambiance is most evident in how both foreground the space of musical sound. Ambient music is designed not to dominate but to permeate environments, shaping the perception of space through sonic qualities such as reverberation, drones and subtle repetitions. In this sense, ambient music operates as a form of sonic ambiance: it produces a spatial field in which sound is no longer restricted to foregrounded musical structures like melody or rhythm, but instead generates an atmosphere that merges with the environment. The distinction between background and foreground becomes blurred, and the music

functions as a spatial extension of the setting itself. Sonic ambiance, similarly, is concerned with the immersive qualities of sound in space, pointing to the ways in which auditory environments structure how places are felt and experienced.

The experience of musical sound in ambient music also resonates with the experiential dimension of sonic ambiance. Ambient music invites modes of listening that range from passive immersion to active imaginative engagement. As listeners encounter ambient sound, they are not necessarily directed toward linear musical development but are instead enveloped in atmospheres that allow for drifting attention, daydreaming or affective attunement to place. This reflects what scholars of ambiance describe as the capacity of sound to infuse environments with moods and tonalities, producing experiences that are both deeply subjective and environmentally situated. In this sense, ambient music and sonic ambiance converge on the idea that listening is less about decoding musical content than about inhabiting a temporally unfolding affective environment. Many ambient works, particularly those employing sustained textures, low-intensity dynamics and environmental reference, operate by situating listeners within mutable experiential fields that heighten awareness of both sound and space.

Finally, the intersection of ambient music and sonic ambiance becomes most tangible when considering embodiment and the presence of bodies in space. Ambient music does not simply create sonic environments in abstraction, it actively shapes how bodies inhabit, perceive and move through space. The layering of drones, echoes, and delays produces a surroundability that immerses listeners and reconfigures the spatial relationship between sound and body. Sonic ambiance theory emphasises precisely this bodily attunement to atmosphere: sound is not only heard but also felt as vibration, resonance and spatial presence. In ambient contexts, listeners' bodies are folded into the sonic environment, participating in an affective ecology where physical, emotional, and environmental dimensions converge. Thus, ambient music reveals how sonic ambiance is always embodied, generating spaces that are experienced not only through hearing but through the full sensory and corporeal engagement of listeners.

Conclusions

The concept of sonic ambiance focuses on how we experience sound in different spaces. It helps us understand how sounds shape our perception of an environment, considering the listeners present. When we think about ambient music through this lens, there are two main ways to experience it. Firstly, ambient music can mask the sounds of an environment, allowing listeners to imagine themselves in a different space. Secondly, it can be listened to alongside the natural sounds of a place, creating a new auditory experience that matches a specific mood. This immersive listening helps the listener feel enveloped by the sound environment. Sonic ambiance is therefore shaped by the relationship between music and the surrounding soundscape. To create a sonic ambiance with music, we must analyze its functions, production, and how it is experienced.

The practical aspect of sonic ambiance concerns the production of sounds within an environment. In this context, sonic ambiance transcends the traditional concept of soundscapes and aims to provide an understanding of the generation of sounds and their intended purposes. Ambient music, whether as background music or as a means to influence an environment's mood, is closely linked to sonic ambiance. It is important to highlight that ambient music not only transforms an environment as background sound but also shapes a space by evoking specific emotions. The connection between ambient music, soundscapes and landscapes is thus evident. This article posits that experiencing sonic ambiance requires listeners to be immersed in a sound field, adapting to it and being guided by its immersive qualities. Consequently, the role of ambient music is to facilitate this immersive experience and maintain its flow.

Taken together, the analysis of ambient music through the framework of sonic ambiance reveals how this musical practice extends beyond aesthetic form to encompass embodied, spatial and affective dimensions. Ambient music is not merely an art object to be listened to but a mode of sonic world-making that situates the listener within an environment, often blurring the line between musical sound and environmental sound. Its role is to produce and sustain atmospheres that are lived as much as they are heard, shaping not only how space is perceived but also how bodies dwell and move within it. As such, understanding ambient music as sonic ambiance underscores its capacity to reorganise the everyday through sound, offering both an analytical lens for musicology and an experiential framework for listening.

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9. Figure 1. Spectrogram created by the author using Sonic Visualiser.

Abstract

The terms 'ambiance' and 'atmosphere' are often used interchangeably to describe affective states of space that engage the senses, yet their implications for music have only recently become a focus of scholarly attention. Sound plays a central role within the practical

production of ambiance, shaping how spaces are felt, experienced, and imagined. From this perspective, the genre of ambient music, originally conceived as background music, can be understood as a deliberate practice of filling environments with particular moods. This article contributes to this emerging conversation by advancing an original tripartite conceptual model that brings the concept of sonic ambiance into dialogue with soundscape and atmosphere, offering a framework for understanding ambient music as a spatial, affective, and embodied mode of sonic world-making rather than as a closed musical genre. The analysis suggests that the experience of sonic ambiance requires bodies to be enveloped within a sound field, to adapt to its presence, and to be drawn into its affective captivation. In this sense, ambient music is not merely background sound but an auditory mode of shaping spatial experience, generating collective feelings, and fostering environments of tranquility and absorption.

Keywords: ambiance, soundscape, atmosphere, sonic ambiance, ambient music

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