

Craft and the Non-Musician

If Eno rejects much in the way of traditional artistic conventions, he also rejects many conventional ideas about musicianship. A full understanding of his often-quoted assertion that he is “not a musician” is crucial to a grasp of his music. Before discussing what this assertion really means, we must allow that Eno is in fact a talented and versatile, if intuitive and marginally skilled, multi-instrumentalist: he has played synthesizers, piano, organ, other electronic keyboards, electric guitar, electric bass guitar (which he called in 1985 “the only instrument I have the remotest hope of learning to play before the end of my life – though I don’t know what I’ll do with it once I’ve learned”),¹⁷ and assorted traditional and “found” percussion instruments such as ashtrays and flexible plastic pipes. His technical capabilities on all of these instruments are limited: on keyboards, he stays within a small range of keys around C major, in his guitar playing, he sticks with a limited number of bar chords and simple, slow melodic lines, his bass work tends to consist of single long sustained notes. In his singing, he typically uses only the middle and lower registers of his chest voice, without much dynamic flexibility, he does, however, consistently sing nearly perfectly in tune with no vibrato. Thus although Eno’s manual and vocal skills may be limited in depth, they are broad in scope, furthermore, his sense of rhythm and timing, prime constituents of any definition of musicianship, are, while not exceptional, completely adequate for the type of music he has been interested in playing.

Eno’s knowledge of traditional music theory is at least as limited as his manual skills. Lester Bangs asked him in 1979, “Have you ever had any formal music or theory training at all?”

“No.”

“Have you ever felt the pressure that you should get some?”

“No, I haven’t, really. I can’t think of a time that I ever thought that, though I must have at one time. The only thing I wanted to find out, which I did find out, was what ‘modal’ meant, that was, I thought, a very interesting concept.”¹⁸

On another occasion, when an interviewer said, “You don’t know music theory and things of that sort,” Eno responded, “No, I don’t. Well, let’s say I know many theories about music, but I don’t know that particular one that has to do with notation.”¹⁹ By this “notation theory,” we can probably assume that Eno is referring music theory as taught in school: the fundamentals of notation and the principles of harmony, counterpoint, and voice-leading found in the so-called “common practice” period of music history, essentially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When we look at Eno’s music, particularly his progressive rock albums, we shall see that, like many if not most popular musicians, he uses standard major, minor, and seventh chords in sometimes traditional, but equally as often unpredictable, “empirical” ways – ways that ignore the statistical tables of “common,” “less common,” “strong” and “weak” chord

¹⁷ Jensen, “Sound of Silence,” 23.

¹⁸ Lester Bangs, “Eno,” *Musician, Player & Listener* 21 (Nov. 1979), 40.

¹⁹ Aikin, “Brian Eno,” 52.