

INTRODUCTION

Notes on New Age Music

by Steven Halpern

Halpern is an internationally acclaimed authority on the use of sound and music for health and well-being, as well as one of the first audio pioneers creating New Age music. He is the composer, producer, and principal recording artist of over forty-five recordings, including his world-famous Anti-Frantic Alternative series for relaxation and pure listening pleasure. Halpern is founder and president of both Halpern Sounds and Sound Rx recording companies. A popular lecturer and seminar leader, he is the author of several books, including Sound Health and Tuning the Human Instrument, the music editor for New Frontier magazine, and contributor to numerous other magazines and journals. Halpern is a member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and a charter member of the New Age Music Network. He has received both an M.A. and Ph.D. in the Psychology of Music.

For thousands of years, people around the world have honored and acknowledged the healing, ceremonial, and uplifting role of music. From this perspective New Age music is really a return to roots, to a belief in the primordial power of sound. It is music that provides, as Lee Underwood has said, "emotional, psychological, and spiritual nourishment. It offers peace, joy, bliss, and the opportunity to discover within ourselves our own highest nature."

For many the New Age represents an explosion of human curiosity and creativity, of unlocking the undiscovered potential within each

person. This spirit infuses New Age music as well. Those of us who were involved with the rock scene of the sixties may recall the insights of such premier music theorists as Robert Palmer, Michael Ventura, David Walley, Ben Fong-Torres, and Nik Cohn, who helped articulate the consciousness of the era. In jazz, too, we saw the high-energy explorations of such artists as John Coltrane and Pharaoh Sanders chronicled by such writers as Amiri Baraka, Charles Kiel, and Frank Kofsky. Here was community and dialogue, with music as a medium of cultural exchange.

In the same way New Age music was born of a shared consciousness. At such events as the San Francisco Festival in Honor of Comet Kohoutek in 1973, many composers/performers, meeting for the first time, discovered that they were all hearing "spacey" music. We had a sense of sharing in the birthing process of a new sound vision, of becoming the vehicles or instruments through which this new (hitherto unmanifested) form of music became audible. For such artists as Joel Andres, Iasos, and myself the process was the expression of our own meditative disciplines. Other explorers whose personal visions were formed by their meditative disciplines and who helped lay the groundwork for what we now term New Age music include Kitaro, Andreas Vollenweider, Vangelis, C. H. Deuter, Klaus Schulze, Paul Horn, Suzanne Doucet, Brian Eno, and Paul Winter. Although we received inspiration independently (since we all composed in isolation and all of our works were different), we found more in common with each other than with artists creating any other form of pop, rock, jazz, or classical music. And so a movement was born.

But what, exactly, *is* New Age music?

Traditionally musicologists define a form of music based on several stylistic criteria, typically involving harmony, melody, rhythm, timbre, and texture. Let's examine each of these.

Harmony. Most true New Age music is based on harmony and consonance, rather than dissonance. Consonance doesn't mean just using syrupy major chords (as opposed to minor chords), but it does mean that many of the favorite voicings found in rock and jazz, such as a C7 #9 or a C7 b5, are conspicuously absent. Grating chords have more tension in them and thus tend to engender more stress in the listener. In fact, researchers have recently determined that mice exposed to discordant music developed difficulties in learning and memory, even incurring structural changes in their brain cells. They suffered disruptions in the levels of their messenger RNA and their neurons showed

signs of wear and tear from stress. Dr. Gervasia Schreckenber, a neurobiologist, and Dr. Harvey Bird, a physicist, suspect that disharmonious music might affect any mammalian brain, including the human brain. Further research awaits funding as of this writing, but clearly offers an extraordinary opportunity that begs to be explored. Hence, dissonant harmonies, which strain rather than uplift, are consciously avoided in New Age music.

Melody. Most everyone who hears someone sing or play a scale—*do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti . . .*—knows what's "supposed to" come next: the final *do*, the culmination of that pattern. And yet it's precisely this melodic inevitability that keeps us locked into predetermined states of awareness when listening to music. Indeed, we've all been culturally conditioned to respond to particular patterns in sound whether we are aware of it or not! Our cultural expectations are fulfilled by most music that has been heard on this planet—until New Age music, that is.

Listen to some of the classic New Age recordings, such as *Inside*, by Paul Horn, my own *Spectrum Suite*, or *Interdimensional Music* by Iasos. Even after repeated listenings, most people cannot remember the sequence of sounds in these works. Clearly they represent a totally different approach to composition. Their compositional style leaves them without the sound "hooks" that characterize virtually all popular music. When we eliminate the straitjacket of predetermined patterns, we open up new ways of organizing and experiencing sound for ourselves. Such music makes us feel good, for as Stephen Hill so eloquently states in the book *Music from the Hearts of Space*, it "creates a way to enter a space that is always there, as close as the heart, a slightly different frequency . . . a breath away. We enter the space by allowing it to enter us. . . . Such music takes us beyond ourselves and through ourselves." This is obviously not a description of standard format radio fare.

Rhythm. Perhaps the most striking aspect of New Age music is its use of rhythm—or, more accurately, its lack of it. Since long before recorded history rhythm has been the backbone of music. From Cro-Magnon man pounding on skins and bones to rock drummers programming today's digital drum synthesizers, the mathematical subdivision of time into discreet building blocks or measures has been a key organizing principle of composition and performance. Most popular music listeners expect this timekeeping function to be handled by the percussive sounds of a bass (kick) drum, snare drum, tom-tom, or cymbals.

Classical music aficionados may rarely encounter a drum kit, but they still note the presence of a dominant pulse.

By radical contrast New Age music is *not* based on a pulse. Granted, one subgenre pioneered by Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Klaus Schulze relies heavily on pulse to create very potent and powerfully hypnotic effects. But many other recording artists have opened up the space-time continuum in the rhythmic domain, in some cases actually doing away with the pulse entirely. This shift has created an extraordinary sense of timelessness for the listeners, who no longer have the same perceptual and contextual cues to help them to anticipate the next beat. No longer are music or musicians slaves of "the time machine."

New technology has made it possible to create sounds that can be sustained almost indefinitely. Consider the limitations of composing on a harpsichord. It's a wonderful instrument, but with its very crisp attack, short sustain, and rapid tone decay it can only produce music based on notes of brief duration, such as quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes, rather than notes of longer duration, such as half notes—never mind whole notes tied together over several measures. The musical instrument itself is incapable of affording those compositional options. Similarly, a trumpet or woodwind player can sustain a tone only as long as breath allows.

Now consider the options a composer has today: unlimited sustain at the flick of a switch (of the electronic reverb and echo device), plus an ever-expanding palette of sounds generated by keyboard synthesizers. Technology has become an active partner in the creation of the new music.

Existing acoustic instruments have benefited from this technology as well. Even without electronic enhancement, through certain artists, the venerable grand piano has found a new voice because they learned to listen "with different ears" and to play with a different touch. They came to hear the symphony in the overtones, which could then be enhanced by certain pedal and microphone techniques. In these subtle dimensions of sound the spaces between the notes often speak as eloquently as the primary notes themselves. (This, by the way, is an important point. Some writers have tried to establish a false distinction between acoustic and electronic music. Certainly there are differences, but at the fundamental level of reality it is all one order of vibration. Thus, it's what and how you play, plus what comes through, that makes the music what it is, or isn't.)

From the time New Age was born, much of what set this new genre

apart was its lack of traditional, riveting rhythmic core. The compositions were more spacious and open-ended. According to the musicians who invented the music, "If it features a big beat, yes, you can dance to it—but no, it isn't New Age music."

Timbre. The fourth component of our paradigm is timbre. Because harsh or shrill sounds tend to increase stress and tension, certain instruments and tones are specifically eschewed in New Age music. Not coincidentally these very sounds are some of the most popular features in Top 40 music and in some classical compositions as well. In the pioneering research of Dr. Hans Jenny, documented in his book *Cymatics*, we can actually see photographs of the effects of sound on solids, liquids, and gases. The harmonic attacks and overtones of violins, trumpets, heavy-metal electric guitars, and synthesized percussion are clearly disruptive—and so not suitable for the New Age music genre. By contrast, electric piano, harp, flute, bells, and "eq'd" string ensembles are soothing—indeed, for millennia instruments have been revered for their healing potential.

Texture. "Space" is a vital dimension of New Age music; so much so that one of the early appellations for the genre was simply "space music," referring both to its texture and to the state that it tended to evoke in the listener. By "space" we mean the electro-acoustic enhancement of instrumental tones, through reverb and echo; in New Age music such enhancement is not simply a "special effect," but rather an integral part of the music itself.

It is this aspect that directly links New Age music to the most traditional uses of sound. In the caves where the same Cro-Magnon hunters painted exquisite figures of animals on the walls there is a huge room, deeper within the cave, that archaeologists have identified as a music room. Ancient shamans, priests, and yogis at every age since, well aware of the awe-inspiring capacities of certain natural sound chambers, have used them to amplify the ceremonial and consciousness-raising aspects of music. Special acoustic properties were incorporated into the ziggurats of Mesopotamia as well as into Christian cathedrals. The phenomenon of echo, whether organically or digitally derived, gives us a glimpse of the world beyond our senses. Echo and reverberation thus carry strong religious or otherworldly symbolism. This awareness of the primacy of psychoacoustic space is one of the characteristics that distinguishes New Age music. When you listen to a recording made

this way, you feel as if you are listening inside one of the magnificent structures such as the Taj Mahal, the Great Pyramid, or a Gothic cathedral.

Beyond these conventional criteria there are other distinguishing features of authentic New Age music, the first being the psychic state of the composer. Research conducted by Psychotronic Research Group, John Diamond, M.D., and Patrick Flanagan, among others, has shown that the "vibrational" (emotional or physical) state of the artist when composing or recording can affect our response to the music. We react differently to music an artist plays from a state of balance and love than to sound arising from a wish to glorify the ego, or, worse, from anxiety. I noted earlier that a high percentage of New Age musicians are into various forms of meditation/holistic health/cosmic awareness, which offer a special kind of collective unconscious. A composer who has "composed" him/herself through meditation, yoga, communing with nature, et cetera, has raised his/her own vibrational rate. And it is to this state, as well as the notes of the music itself, that the listener resonates.

The second distinguishing feature is New Age music's effect on the listener. Simply ask yourself how the music makes you feel. If you feel speeded up, hyper, aggressive, saddened, depressed—or if you experience no change at all—you're probably listening to music that is actually pop, rock, fusion, jazz, or Muzak, rather than New Age music. True New Age music will take you out of yourself, evoking a different spectrum of responses than other music. You won't necessarily see colors more vividly or hear more acutely (although some listeners have experienced this), but your body may feel lighter and your general mood will be uplifted and refreshed.

These effects come from actual, measurable physiological changes that New Age music produces. True New Age music can deepen and regularize the breath, improve digestion, lower blood pressure, and balance the two hemispheres of the brain. It also can enhance learning and induce deep relaxation. Brain-wave measurements through electroencephalography (EEG) and biofeedback equipment have shown that true New Age music can induce an effortless alpha state (8 to 12 cycles per second) with potential for deeper relaxation, going into the theta state (4 to 7 cycles per second). Electrical conductivity (GSR) tests on the surface of the skin show similar effects, consistent with the specific physiological coordinates of relaxation. It is this healing power that has brought New Age music into common use in both hospitals and

executive boardrooms—representing a long-overdue reversal of the trend that limited the role of music to "entertainment" or as backdrop for dancing or as a soundtrack for movies or ads.

As a listener try to approach New Age music on its own terms. Don't try to force traditional left-brain constructs and modes of analysis on this right-brain phenomenon. Some New Age pieces are equally adaptable as background or foreground music. Some music is intended exclusively as ambient sound—the kind some derisively (and unfairly) term "aural wallpaper." (Speaking as a composer I can attest that it is actually quite tricky to create music interesting enough to withstand attentive listening yet not conflict with or distract from the primary activity.) But other recordings are so powerfully engaging that the listener has no real choice but to surrender to the music. I would include in this category several of the selections on Iasos's *Interdimensional Music*, Constance Demby's *Novus Magnificat*, and Michael Stearns's *Chronos*. Indeed, to attempt to read a book, write in a journal, or carry on a casual conversation while listening to this type of music is futile. Such music grabs hold of the nervous system as surely as the "heartbeat" rhythm of rock, but it takes you to a different place.

Try listening with your eyes closed. With a good set of headphones listening to this music becomes a meditation in itself. Try lying down with your feet pointed toward the speakers. Our entire body responds to sound, and this technique opens up a whole new dimension. When listening with a close friend or lover, position yourselves back to back. Our bodies act as amplifiers and speakers for the music. Don't be surprised if the music sounds and feels different, depending on who you are with. Use the music to enhance any life activity: dining, studying, meditating, driving, brainstorming, working, walking, and lovemaking.

More than artists in any other genre New Age musicians are consciously aware of the concept of "the music of the spheres." They see themselves as working with the concordance of harmonies that underlie the orderly processes of the universe. This belief is grounded in physical rather than metaphysical law. In fact, our bodies do function as human instruments, producing an electromagnetic field that resonates with the electromagnetic field of the Earth itself. Science confirms the fact that the dominant resonant frequency of our planet—approximately 7.83 to 8 hertz (cycles per second)—is also the natural resonating frequency of a human body at rest or in a "balanced" state. Few

means for achieving "balance" are as easy or enjoyable as listening to beautiful, uplifting sound. That is the most important function of New Age music—to keep our human instruments in tune, so they can play more harmoniously in the symphony of life.

Stay tuned!

THE NEW AGE MUSIC GUIDE