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Airport congenial for Bang on a Can

First performance of Brian Eno's classic 'Music for Airports' in a US airport



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Brian Eno. (Courtesy photo from Warp Records) *Warp Records*

As Bang on a Can All-Stars guitarist Mark Steward put it, you could either listen to Brian Eno's "Music for Airports" as you would Schubert's "Death and the Maiden," or you could let your mind wander. Given the ambient nature of the music, I decided to let my mind wander (not that I really had any choice). Here are a few of the places my mind ventured to during the All-Stars unusual performance Tuesday at the San Diego International Airport Terminal 2:

- "Music for Airports" is that rare work that when it was released in 1978, almost singlehandedly defined an entire genre, ambient music. Several decades later, Bang on a Can co-artistic directors Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe (with some help from Evan Ziporyn) took what Eno had painstakingly assembled with synthesizers, samplers, and tape machines and arranged it for live performance.

What happens when live performers play take on roles originally performed by machines? Seeing Steward and his colleagues pianist Vicky Chow, cellist Ashley Bathgate, bassist Robert Black, clarinetist Ken Thomson and percussionist David Cossin not only delight in this music, but also struggle with it, added an unexpected layer of humanity and nuance.

- The most surprising aspect of hearing it performed live, however, especially in this space, was while the original version takes you inward, the live version it brings you outward. Eno's original recording has accompanied innumerable meditation and message sessions, sexual encounters, and perhaps, if ArtPower executive director Jordan Peimer is any indication, people going about their daily business or even walking through airports. You lose yourself in the music.

It was hard to get lost Tuesday. The music re-contextualized everything around it. Announcements over the airport PA that are normally mildly irritating sounded downright whimsical. People seemed to dance to the counters, or even to the bathrooms. It was like the airport, with its characteristic sounds and routines, became the seventh member of the six-piece ensemble, and a very lively one at that.

- But before calling it a John Cage dream, where everything around you is part of the music, consider the work's opening movement, when a very loud, low-pitched hum, the bane of every audio engineer, forced its way into the proceedings (it was absent in the final three movements).

Could you consider that hum just part of the experience? Or, even when "everything" is music, are there still some things excluded?

- It seemed a considerable risk for UC San Diego's ArtPower to take arguably the best-known new music ensemble in the world and put it in the San Diego International Airport, playing a work that a stoner could love, even if it was the first time "Music for Airports" had been performed in a U.S. airport.

But the far north end of Terminal 2, with a huge glass mural as a backdrop, proved a very congenial venue. For the 7:30 p.m. performance (the first of two), the seating area was nearly full and the cross-generational audience was attentive and appreciative. It makes you hopeful about the possibility of audiences embracing the music of our time.

- Having flown out of Terminal 2 several times over the last year, I'd heard every robo-announcement countless times before. But on Tuesday, somewhere in the middle of the second movement, it struck me in a way it hadn't before: Security really is everyone's responsibility.

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