

Windows Start-Up Chime--Brian Eno (1995)

Added to the National Registry: 2025

Essay by David Sheppard (guest post)*



Brian Eno

Everyone Receiving: Brian Eno and Microsoft's Windows 95 Startup Sound.

Among the many illuminating propositions in Gaston Bachelard's "*The Poetics of Space*," the French *penseur's* celebrated phenomenological disquisition on the relationship between human feeling, buildings and "primal landscapes," first published in 1958, are his deliberations on the miniscule in architecture. "Passing through a narrow gate opens up an entire world," Bachelard suggests, before going on to echo William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" and its glimpses of "a Heaven in a Wild Flower":

The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness.

It's not certain that Bachelard's tome is among the many on the groaning shelves of Brian Eno's west London studio library, although it seems probable (it may even rub up against an anthology of Blake's poetry), given that the ambient music *éminence grise* has long been interested in the architectural possibilities of music and the relationship between the auditory, the spatial and the emotional. It's a curiosity whose most renowned manifestation remains the soothing, immersive 1978 album "Ambient 1: Music for Airports," and it also materialises elsewhere in the artist-composer's many "atmosphere-tinting" works such as 1992's "The Shutov Assembly," a collection of enveloping, tremulous synthetic drones originally composed for art installations, many of them exhibited in architecturally significant spaces, or his 2012 album "Lux," containing four elongated, befittingly glimmering essays commissioned to enhance an exquisitely sunlight-suffused Baroque colonnade in northern Italy's stately Reggia di Venaria Reale.

Indeed, Eno's engagement with environment-complementing composition and the concept of "sonic landscapes" had long-tended to produce works of extended length – his influential tape loop-based piece "Discreet Music" takes up an entire side of the so-named 1975 vinyl longplayer, for example, while his 1985 album "Thursday Afternoon" consists of one shimmering, uninterrupted sound field lasting 60 minutes, exploiting the format parameters of the then-then novel compact disc. Moreover, Eno's co-founding of the San Francisco-

based Long Now Foundation, dedicated to long-term thinking and “slow” cultural ideas (including the sponsoring of something called the Clock of the Long Now, designed by American inventor Danny Hills to tick once annually for the next 10,000 years) suggests a predisposition not to transcendence in the minute but to contemplation of the cosmic and the infinite.

Thus, it could have been considered counterintuitive when in the early 1990s, burgeoning computing giant Microsoft sought to acknowledge a significant redesign of its operating system, featuring a more intuitive graphical interface, that it was to Eno that they turned to compose an infinitesimally brief, bespoke machine startup “jingle” that would, according to the company’s proposal, “capture the spirit of innovation, feel contemporary, and convey a more approachable, human side of the brand” every time the “on” switch was depressed on a Microsoft PC. Eno, at this point somewhat unfamiliar with the latest evolutions in still-nascent personal computing, found the commission surprising, challenging and amusing, as he revealed in a 1996 interview with “San Francisco Chronicle” music critic Joel Selvin. “The thing from the agency said, ‘We want a piece of music that is inspiring, universal, blah-blah, da-da-da, optimistic, futuristic, sentimental, emotional,’ this whole list of adjectives, and then at the bottom it said, ‘and it must be three and a quarter seconds long’.”

Nonetheless intrigued, Eno set about the assignment, recalibrating his creative purview from the macro to the micro so that the compositional process became akin to “making a tiny little jewel.” Working, ironically, on a Macintosh computer (“I’ve never used a PC in my life; I don’t like them,” he admitted to BBC Radio 4 in 2009), Eno would eventually fashion more than 80 such sonic miniatures, passing through the narrowest of gates, as it were, in pursuit of an entire digital world. “I got completely into this world of tiny, tiny little pieces of music,” he admitted to Joel Selvin. “I was so sensitive to microseconds at the end of this that it really broke a logjam in my own work. Then when I’d finished that and I went back to working with pieces that were like three minutes long, it seemed like oceans of time.”

The “tiny, tiny” piece that would be selected by Microsoft, all 3.25 seconds of it, boasted a bright, analogue bell-like timbre with a soft initial attack followed by an iridescent, quickly decaying electronic piano ostinato--harmonic synth pad layering lending an ethereal, optimistic feel and an ineffable sense of calm and readiness. Heard today, Eno’s brief sparkle of music feels delightfully guileless, almost childlike--another kind of “augury of innocence,” if you will, and for those old enough to have been Windows 95 users, its Proustian charge is no doubt still substantial.

Whether or not Eno’s sonic ident fully fulfilled Microsoft’s demandingly imprecise brief, it was certainly distinct from other contemporary startup signatures such as Apple Macintosh’s rather clinical equivalent (essentially a C major chord essayed by its composer, Jim Reekes, on a Korg Wavestation synthesiser), and for the ensuing three years, as Microsoft systems permeated an increasingly cyber-connected globe, Eno’s bijou opus would become one of the world’s most oft-heard musical compositions (another Bachelard aphorism comes to mind: “The cleverer I am at miniaturising the world, the better I possess it.”), until superseded by an upgrade for the Windows 98 operating system.

By associating themselves with Brian Eno, at this point reaching a new zenith of fame both as an always-quotable public intellectual and as the much-heralded producer of multi-million-selling albums for the likes of Irish rock superstars U2, Microsoft had achieved a veritable coup in terms of strategic brand positioning. At once imbuing hitherto utilitarian computer

sound design with hip cachet and cerebral playfulness, employing Eno also rendered their system upgrade positively newsworthy beyond the confines of the tech cognoscenti. Linking home computing with popular music might have seemed somewhat paradoxical in 1995, but with the onset of the download revolution imminent, perhaps Microsoft's commercial prescience deserves greater acknowledgement.

That said, the successor to Eno's startup accompaniment, Windows 98, the handiwork of Microsoft sound engineer Ken Kato, would be a longer, slicker, vaguely ominous and more inherently "corporate" composition than Eno's bright, ingenuous effort for the '95 iteration, as if signaling the inexorable evolution of the internet from a thing of sanguine, libertarian potential towards its subsequent incarnation as a ubiquitous portal for unregulated surveillance capitalism and brittle culture wars. Indeed, Kato's seven-second-long crescendo drone was the kind of sonic avatar more commonly deployed, now as then, to signal expensive technological inexorability in screen advertisements for high-end automobiles, with hints of the overweening, near-triumphalist salutes that film businesses regularly deploy to accompany the pre-movie revelation of their company logos.

Thus, the amiable optimism of Eno's conception was replaced by the banal, technocratic tropes of the managerialist world, mirroring, it could be argued, the inexorable evolutionary journey of digital tech companies like Microsoft--whose initial vision of "a computer on every desk and in every home" reflected a belief that widespread access to personal computing would lead to greater freedom, decentralisation and individual agency--toward the company's current status, alongside other once idealistic tech behemoths such as Google, as facilitators of Western military-industrial hegemony. While Google's initial informal motto, "Don't be evil," now feels very distant given phenomena such as 2017's Project Maven, which saw the company working with the US military to develop AI for drone surveillance footage analysis, Microsoft is nowadays a key cloud service provider to the country's Department of Defense and a strategic partner of the likes of Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman, providing foundational technology for weapons systems, logistics and command/control infrastructure. Enabling military dominance certainly feels far removed from the egalitarian mission statements found in Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates' 1995 manifesto-like treatise, "The Road Ahead." "We are all created equal in the virtual world," Gates evangelised in the book, "and we can use this equality to help address some of the sociological problems that society has yet to solve in the physical world."

This dispiriting ideological mission creep would be acknowledged, and very publicly critiqued, by Brian Eno in the spring of 2025 when news emerged of Microsoft's provision of AI and cloud services to Israel's Ministry of Defense, with the artist accusing the company of complicity in alleged war crimes during the ongoing Palestinian conflict. Eno has long been an outspoken critic of the Israeli state over its controversial regulation of Gaza and the West Bank, and is a prominent supporter of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement which seeks to pressure the country into adhering to international law and end its occupation of Palestinian territories. Seeking to underline Microsoft's drift from its principled, utopian roots, in a statement, Eno announced he would donate his original Windows 95 composition fee of \$35,000 to Palestinian aid, emphasising his stance against Microsoft's involvement in the conflict, remarking that his early '90s work for the company "represented a gateway to a promising technological future... I never would have believed that the same company could one day be implicated in the machinery of oppression and war."

Before his intellectual calling took him elsewhere, Gaston Bachelard had once been a humble postman, the same vocation enjoyed by Brian Eno's father, grandfather and uncle ("Well, I did go into communications, didn't I?" Eno once joked when asked about his failure to follow the family's vocational calling--although as a youth he was known to undertake Christmastime shifts in the local sorting office in Woodbridge, Suffolk, where the Enos resided). Perhaps there is something in the way this predilection for the benign, responsible couriering of messages about the world and the people in it chimes with an egalitarian philosophical outlook and a belief in the poetic, emancipatory potential of places, communities and networks. If that is the case, then it is hardly surprising that Brian Eno has become so disillusioned with the much-altered remit of the digital platforms in which he, like many others at the close of the 20th century, had invested so much naïve optimism. Today, Eno argues for a return to those earlier principles, advocating for a revamped internet that works as a shared public space or digital "commons," as opposed to a malign, fragmented series of, as he describes them, "fenced-off camps" based solely on the maximisation of profit. "As long as the thing is connected to the profit motive--the profit not of society but of the individuals who own these platforms--then it doesn't work for me and it will only get worse," he told the "Los Angeles Times" in 2024.

Those hoping for a brand-new computer startup sound from Brian Eno are probably in for an infinite wait.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.