

The Silent Ballet (UK):

In a recent [posting](#) on The Wire magazine's blog, Tony Herrington highlighted the number of avant-garde music festivals being held in churches - in short, he was not particularly in favour of the idea, preferring that curators and artists look a bit harder for suitable spaces rather than just rolling up at the local cathedral, laptop under the arm. However, one can understand the bonds that have developed between experimental music and churches - for the latter, it is a few more pounds in the kitty, a useful source of income in the face of dwindling congregations. For the organisers, even though the shock factor has now faded, it is a space with good acoustics, often in a central location, and for the artists themselves it is a chance to play in a different environment in front of a quiet, even reverential audience. One of the key benefits of performing in a sacred space is that the crowd will behave itself, without the constant hubbub of chatter that blights many venues. Perhaps it is years of unconscious conditioning, but people behave themselves in churches whether or not they are believers; one is guaranteed a quiet few minutes in the middle of a busy, noisy city by slipping into the nearest chapel.

Of course, the larger and more popular the building, the more people there will be, so a cathedral or church can often find itself home to tourists shuffling around, looking at the architecture and the memorials and pondering how many people have trod here across the centuries. It's that atmosphere **Pietro Riparbelli** captures on *4 Churches*, the fourth in Touch's Spire series of downloads, although how much is intention and how much is accident is hard to judge - the sleevenotes suggest he was looking for pure silence yet the results say otherwise. On the opening piece "The Dome, Orvieto", he attempted to record in the morning when the church was quietest, and even so it is dominated by the sound of shoe on stone, low whispered conversation and the ambient rumble of the resonating acoustics. On "The Cathedral Of Saint Germain, Paris", Riparbelli is accosted by a tourist he tries to record - so the sound of punches being thrown by this 'crazy English woman' is included, acting as some sort of focal point for the quartet of recordings. (As an aside, the woman's accent sounds more American than English; her words about assassination seem to channel Marlon Brando from *Apocalypse Now*.)

The recordings on *4 Churches* are treated by Riparbelli so that the drones created by the spaces themselves are leavened by samples of choirs singing, making full use of the acoustics of the buildings. They are not, in the end, field recordings, but sound paintings - perhaps, in the case of the 'crazy woman', Riparbelli is making an audio equivalent of *cinéma-vérité*. His canvas is the acoustic resonance of the space recorded, coloured in with swathes of crowd noise and delicate touches of choir and organ. It is an extremely effective way of capturing the spirit of these buildings, distilled into ten-minute pieces.

Riparbelli's work is often to be found in art galleries and installations, places that - like cathedrals - require peace and contemplation to appreciate the subtleties. It is because of his work as a sound artist that *4 Churches* makes similar demands upon the listener. If played too quietly, the pieces slip by unnoticed, the fragile detail lost amidst the sounds of everyday living. Yet when played at a decent volume (headphones recommended), the quartet of pieces become living, breathing spaces. One can walk around in them, hear what Riparbelli hears, see what he sees, and be equally disturbed by confrontation. As one would spend time in a church or a gallery in quiet meditation, one must approach this album in a similar frame of mind - not everyone will be able to make this commitment, but those who do will reap great rewards.

-Jeremy Bye