

textura (USA):

It was a bit of a stroke of genius on Pietro Riparbelli's part to exploit the vast sonic potential of church and cathedral settings in a field recordings-based project. The Livorno, Tuscany-based sound artist brings four such spaces to life in recordings originally made between 2005 and 2010 in Orvieto, Assisi, and Paris. Like all works based on field recordings, his *4 Churches* (a download only release in Touch's *Spire* series) provides the listener with an out-of-body experience, such that one is able to immersively inhabit the space without physically visiting the locale. But instead of focusing primarily on church organ playing and choir singing that are the conventional focal points one associates with the architectural contexts in question, Riparbelli instead brings to life the spaces themselves and the incredible reverberance of the huge architectural structures.

In “The Dome, Orvieto,” Riparbelli recorded within the space—a gothic church located in the Etruscan city of Orvieto—during the early morning in order to avoid tourists, but even so ample ambient noises of people milling about abound—shuffling, doors closing, whispers, a child's laughter—as accompaniment to the choir singing and the church's organ (the latter actually a sample). Reverb rumbles throughout the piece in a manner that suggests a low-flying plane is passing overhead in slow-motion. To produce “The Basilica, Assisi,” Riparbelli spent a week within the cavernous interior of the Basilica where the prized relics of Saint Francis are kept, and encountered dark passages and stairways leading to the crypt as well as frescoes by Giotto. What results in sonic form is a shimmering meditation where evidence of a human presence is still audible—voices, the clump of footsteps, and muffled announcements are clearly heard—and that is countered near the piece's close by the heavenly murmur of chanting nuns.

In “The Cathedral of Saint Germain, Paris,” whose focus is the first church built in Paris (around 500 A.D.), pitched organs appear augmented by the words of a seemingly unstable woman whom we even hear say to Riparbelli, “Now, I know you plan to assassinate me, and it's no good. You are going to die, not me, and you're halfway to being a ghost...” before she attacks and punches him. Such incidents are

reminders that so-called sacred spaces are also—despite the presence of security guards—spaces that still allow for the unexpected and irrational to appear. In this setting, too, more than in any of the others, interventions by Riparbelli are most conspicuously present, in this case in the form of a rippling drone that escalates in volume and intensity during the piece's second half. Given how much human traffic moves through it on any given day, one naturally would expect “Notre Dame, Paris” to be one of the most intensely active of the four pieces, even if each is filled with activity of one kind or another. Church organ, ambient echo, people noises, and choir mass singing combine to make it a non-stop stream of mutating sound.

Though Riparbelli's recording results in a less direct musical experience, the results are arresting nonetheless: if one hasn't actually walked through the spaces, listening to the four pieces provides a convincing simulation of the experience; if one has, on the other hand, visited the settings, listening to the material enables one to easily project oneself back into the locations.