

ON THE EDGE JOHN L WALTERS

Where has all the music gone?

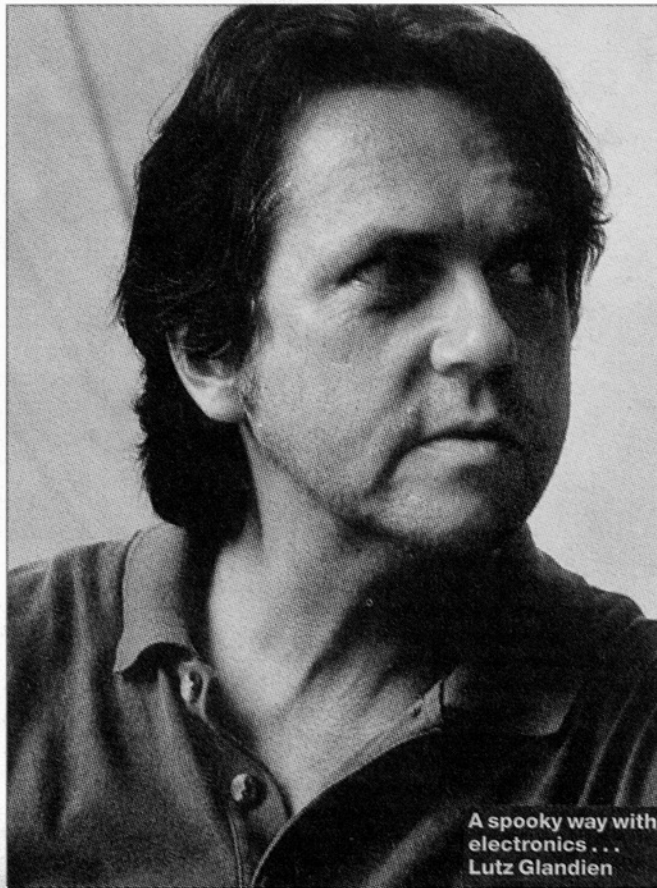
Sometimes all you have to listen to is the sound of your stomach rumbling

Plenty of audio CDs on the market veer towards a sound aesthetic that's closer to the worlds of expressive design and art. In other words: conceptual, maddeningly opaque, sexy, elitist, technically innovative, difficult to evaluate, intensely creative and of wildly variable quality and intent. Such pieces of "sound art" encourage a response similar to that of gallery visitors, who can experience the work at a pace of their choosing and react in any number of ways: with abrupt dismissal, mute puzzlement, contemplation, sensuous pleasure or none of the above.

Lutz Glandien's album **Lost in Rooms** (ReR, £12.99) is in part a contemporary soundscape album, but it is closer to being music than many. Glandien's source material includes memories of a Canadian childhood, recited in a delicate setting of quiet electronic noises and evocative samples; domestic details; train noises; an ominous low

hum. It's an intimate, radio-phonetic ballad. This kind of sound design has become commonplace in film soundtracks, but is here treated with great subtlety by Glandien, who also has an interesting, spooky way with electronic rhythms. He is rarely in a hurry to develop his thematic ideas, but he delivers.

Michael Rösenberg's **La Défense Stage Urbain** (Realambient, £14.99), **Spire: Organ Works Past Present and Future** (Touch) and even Tim Brady's **20 Quarter Inch Jacks** (Ambiances Magnétiques) all include stretches of "ambient" sound. Rösenberg assembles into a collage the sounds he recorded while strolling through La Défense – "a hypermodern suburb on the western bank of river Seine" – on a spring evening. Half the album comprises remixes, by Benoît Delbecq, Steve Argüelles and others, that are based on the raw materials (76 sound files) rather than Rösenberg's finished soundscape. Packed in a corrugated card package, it is appealingly, obscurely Cagean.



A spooky way with electronics... Lutz Glandien

John Cage (1912-92) was hard to avoid last weekend, thanks to a celebratory bash at the Barbican: conceptual, maddeningly opaque, sexy, etc. The composer, or at least his ideas, turned up on the Today programme, in the Sun and in the Guardian – from Pass Notes to Smallweed. Much lip service was paid to the "silent" piece 4'33", reverently performed by the BBCSO as the final number in a bizarre programme that included Henry Cowell's Piano Concerto (1928), magnificently performed by Philip Mead, sporting a mean pair of fingerless gloves, and Charles Ives's numinous Central Park in the Dark (1906). By contrast, Cage's own piece The Seasons (1947) sounded like a student work – not that there's anything wrong with that in the relaxed, post-Cagean atmosphere now infusing once-stuffy institutions such as concert halls and broadcasters.

Yet the orchestral 4'33" was notable for its almost complete absence of ambient sound. All I could detect was the rumbling of my stomach and the

distant whine of building services circuitry. You get a better class of silence in an old farmhouse, or a church. (The aforementioned CD Spire, for instance, includes long periods of atmospherics recorded in St Mary's, Warwick.) The busy silence that occurred before the conductor returned to the stage – like the opening moments of Sgt Pepper's – was more to my taste.

And so was Erik Satie's Vexations (1893). I called into the Barbican Conservatory around midnight, as a succession of pianists were gamely working their way through all 840 readings of the piece. The connection was that Cage had come across Satie's manuscript in Paris in 1949 and organised its first performance in 1963, with a team of hip New York-based pianists that included John Cale, David Del Tredici and Joshua Rifkin.

The audience listened intently (or not), strolled among the plants, watched the dozy fish, sipped tea, snoozed, read books: it was quite magical.

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