

Suk-Jun Kim

Time felt and places imagined in my compositions

In this short text, I want to talk about two subjects that I continue to explore in my compositions—temporality and the sense of place—and let me start it with a typical, Reader's Digest-like, beginning.

Why does a clock tick?

There are two types of people in the world: those who mind a clock ticking and those who don't. I belong to the first category. I find it obtrusive no matter how soft it may sound. Once registered in my perception, the ticking resonates, reverberates, and amplifies itself, and it takes considerable effort for me to remove it from my listening mind. I just asked Ross, who was in the same room when I was writing this. He said he didn't mind it; he belongs to the second category.

Why does a clock tick? An obvious answer would be that it does because of its mechanical design. The phenomenon—what we experience from a clocking ticking—however, is not something that can be easily explained or understood. What is happening, or how we experience, in this phenomenon is that as it ticks, time also, somehow, ticks away.

Let us stop at this moment and observe this mysterious phenomenon I have just described. What is extraordinary for me is that when we feel time ticking away, there seems to exist, in our experience of this phenomenon, a link, a simultaneity, which appears to be immediately established between the mechanical—the clock—and the conceptual—the time; between the tangible and perceptible—the hands of the clock and the sound of ticking, etc.—and the intangible and imperceptible—time felt, or temporality; between the countable—the scale, or the marking of the clock—and the uncountable—again, time felt or temporality. Further observations on the link may reveal that its apparent establishment is not the result of the equal effort of its two constituents; rather, it is the clock's peculiar design, the mechanical, which results from

our desire to grasp time, that extends and establishes the link. How then does a clock's design attain such a feat? By making use of the concept of movement and of simultaneity: its parts are meticulously designed and put together in such precision that its movement *now* is the same as its movement *before*. In other words, a clock's design is based on three conjectures: first, in every second, the movement made by the parts of a clock *ideally* replicates itself; second, in doing so, it is posited that each second (and each minute, each hour, and so on) is a replication of itself; and finally, it is assumed that this process of replication, and *not time itself*, is perpetual.

I said earlier that the peculiar design of a clock is the product of our desire to grasp time. But we should not submit to the idea that the link is complete, and our desire has been sated; the clock's design, the mechanical, never meets the other side, the conceptual understanding of time felt. When I am looking at my wristwatch, for example, I may posit that I have successfully wrapped time on my wrist, which has been measured in units of hours, minutes and seconds, and having been "sliced" as such, it appears graspable and available to my examination. What I can examine, however, is neither the time felt nor understood, but simply, and exactly, that time appears to have been sliced. In fact, with a clock, we are facing another phenomenon that further complicates our goal. For a clock is not a device that measures time; it is a device that generates the phenomena of time felt. Thus Fraser argues that a clock is simply a metaphysical device:

The point is that any process that consists of countable events may be employed as a clock. But finally, what makes a clock a clock is *our* conviction, based on a web of philosophical, aesthetic and scientific reasons that its events follow each other uniformly, according to intelli-

gible principles. No clock can tell us what to mean by the passage of time or how to distinguish between past and future with respect to the present.¹

The fundamental problem of a clock is that being a metaphysical device, a product of our desire and conviction toward time, it epitomizes our specific process of thinking about the world, over which the concepts of space, such as movement and homogeneity, predominate. As Whitrow, in *The Natural Philosophy of Time*, says:

Although the peculiarly fundamental nature of time in relation to ourselves is evident as soon as we reflect that our judgments concerning time and events in time appear themselves to be 'in' time, whereas our judgments concerning space do not appear themselves in any obvious sense to be in space, physicists have been influenced far more profoundly by the fact that space seems to be presented to us all of a piece, whereas time comes to us only bit by bit. The past must be recalled by the dubious aid of memory, the future is hidden from us, and only the present is directly experienced. This striking dissimilarity between space and time has nowhere had a greater influence than in physical science based on the concept of measurement. Free mobility in space leads to the idea of the transportable unit length and the rigid measuring rod. The absence of free mobility in time makes it much more difficult for us to be sure that a process takes the same time whenever it is repeated.²

Having been implemented with the concept of movement and of simultaneity, a clock fails to measure time, let alone elucidating and allowing us to understand time felt. Thus, Fraser asserts that there is nothing about time that clocks reveal.³

But I wonder: if Fraser's assertion is true, and clocks reveal nothing about time, why do I feel agitated by a clock ticking? More precisely, what are the phenomena that emerge while I listen to a clock ticking? Do they have nothing to do with time? How

can I explain them without considering that they are somehow related to time felt?

A clock as a listening device

Indeed, a clock cannot tell time. But its ticking does. To tell time, we should consider a clock as a listening device whose every tick can reveal the mechanism of time felt, just as St. Augustine, criticizing Aristotle who explained time with motion and its spatial associations, turned to his attention solely to the "temporal phenomena—auditory rather than visual—such as the reading of a poem and the sounding of a voice":

'Thus measure we the spaces of stanzas by the spaces of the verses, and the spaces of the syllables, and the spaces of the long by the spaces of the short syllables; not measuring by pages', [St. Augustine] significantly comments, 'for then we measure spaces, not times, 'because it may be that a shorter verse pronounced more fully may take up more time than a longer pronounced hurriedly'... Clearly, before the sound begins we cannot measure the time it is going to take, nor after it has sounded can we measure the time it has taken, for it is then no more. Can we then measure it in the present, while it is being sounded? This will not be possible, he points out, so long as the present is regarded as truly momentary and without duration. Therefore, any stretch of time, however short, necessarily involves something of either past or future. St. Augustine thus came to the conclusion that we can measure times only if the mind has the power of holding within itself the impression made on it by things as they pass by even after they have gone.⁴

Through the examination of the sounding of a voice, St. Augustine recognizes the capacity of our mind that can create a temporal span, which starts from the *now*, the center of our temporal focus, and expands toward both *protension*, "the onset of features coming into perception," and *retention*, "the phasing and passing off of features fading out of presence"^{5,6}. And to me, it is such a power of sound, which reveals to us

the workings of time felt, that I find most fascinating and want to explore in my compositions.

Listening 1 - *Corresponding* (2006)

Corresponding (2006),⁷ one of my compositions that concern temporality discussed above, makes use of the sounds of a clock or clock-like sounds, and its many variations, to bring out the operation of the temporal span that listeners, upon facing these sounds, set in motion. Particularly, sounds that tick, pulsate, swirl and twirl in the work keep the listeners in the play of temporality, accentuating the very mechanism of our mind—our desire—that expands and contracts according to the rhythm of the sounds.

[*Corresponding* (excerpt) – Play]

In *Corresponding*, a temporality is formed in listening as a product of our desire that dwells in and leaves various “places”. These places in *Corresponding* are either as transitional and fleeting as those in which pulsating sounds stop and in which our temporal focus rests for a moment. Or they are as stationary and real as the room with a clock from which all those fantastic sounds of ticking might have sprung. It is in this place where the operation of listeners’ temporal span finally arrives at a prominent sound-image framework⁸ by which it acquires a significance, a meaning.⁹ And more importantly, it is in this sound-image framework where my, and hopefully, the listeners’ desire to grasp the phenomena of time felt is, although only for a short time, fulfilled.

Sense of place as the phenomena of being in and out of place

As you can realize, the temporality in *Corresponding* is intrinsic to the sense of place, *the phenomena of being in and out of place*. In this work you have just heard, and in many of my compositions, temporality is experienced through the sense of place, and the sense of place through temporality. Over the years of composing with sound, I have now come to realize and become convinced that the two are inseparable. Gradually, my compositional process has ultimately

become about being sensitized to, and bringing into play, the various instances and forms of this relationship between temporality and the sense of place. Describing his experience in listening to my compositions, Smalley also agrees:

Perhaps the sounds I find the most interesting are the families of iterations—rapid, repeated pulsings and pulsations. For me, the many different types of iterative sounds are the principal signature of [Suk-Jun’s] music, and they permeate all pieces, crossing over all the types of sound-world already discussed. They represent both diversity and unit.... Iterations grouped and composed into rhythmic figures are frequent, and we also find the loop—a literal, mechanical repetition, stuck in a groove, which has a history dating back to the beginning of acousmatic music. We may be reminded of mechanisms and mechanical sources, but for me the loops in [Suk-Jun’s] music have a structural role: they seem temporarily to halt the music, locking us into a place in time and space.¹⁰

But I should admit that the deep-rooted connection between temporality and the sense of place was not immediately evident to me when I was working on *Corresponding* and even for a couple years after having completed it. While I was aware of the importance of the two issues in the piece, I never understood why they were together. In this regard, it is revealing to read the program note for the piece that I wrote just after completing it:

How can you experience place — or rather, how can you experience the experiences of place? By longing, I say, and by suspending doubt, too. Wanting to return thus will haunt you.

It is evident from the program note that it was the sense of place that the piece was mainly concerned with. But without me realizing it, I already knew the phenomena of being in and out of place had everything to do with the sense—the pain—of longing, and of suspending doubt, both of which were greatly exploited in *Corresponding* by means of the temporality

that I discussed above. And my innate understanding of the relation between temporality and the sense of place has been at work even earlier.

Listening 2 - *Kotmun: A Gate of Flowers*

The connection between temporality and the sense of place is also manifest in *Kotmun: A Gate of Flowers* (2005).¹¹ The main idea of the work is based on the image of the shadow of a door decorated with the patterns of flowers and that of a man sitting in the room watching the shadow gradually moving as the sun or the moon shifts.

[*Kotmun: A Gate of Flowers* (excerpt) – Play]

As you can hear, the work, just like *Corresponding*, represents a strong sense of being in and out of place through many “scenes”. Familiar or recognizable sounds or places in *Kotmun* allow the listeners to designate their temporal focus, the point in which the listening mind operates its temporal span of expansion and contraction.

To me—as a listener—however, one thing sets *Kotmun* apart from *Corresponding*: the orientation, or direction, of the temporality. In *Corresponding*, the time felt, or the temporality almost always seems to be moving forward, whereas in *Kotmun*, it often seems to be falling backward. This is an interesting observation, which had been made by quite a few listeners when I played the piece, and which I have become increasingly aware of. And as a composer, this sense of temporality is revealing as I think it really shows my peculiar way of composing, particularly here with *Kotmun*, and many of my other compositions.

Longing for a place: the process of inscribing and caving-in

One can say that *Kotmun* is through-composed, meaning that it was composed from the beginning to the end chronologically. I think it is partly true, as I often start a piece from the beginning (that’s why, there always seems to be a certain, decisive, beginning gesture in most of my composition), and follow the

‘thought’ of composing chronologically without a pre-compositional formal plan per se. But that is the only the beginning, or I should say, only my habit of starting composing something. Once (really) started, my compositional process operates in a way which can be called “inscribing” or “caving-in.”

The process is inscribing because my composing and listening to a piece in development concentrate on what I currently have: I compose a piece by discovering something interesting to tease out from what I have composed so far and by commenting on, expanding, criticizing, even dismissing it through putting more sounds, not after (or before) it, but *in* it. For example, I would cut in half some bits of composition that I had and place in it some totally different sounds, to which I would perform this “inscribing” operation again. And this repeated inscribing operation continues in various places of the piece in numerous times. Then the result would be that, while the piece may grow and expands, the piece does not seem to be moving forward; rather, most often than not, it falls back and caves in; it collapses from within.

To me, and to many listeners who have commented on the composition, listening to *Kotmun* offers such a feeling of caving-in, or collapsing-from-within more than any piece of mine. Listeners feel the piece falling back not just because of the distinctive wave-like gestures of the sounds, but more because of such a caving-in process of composing that effectively puts listeners in a stasis; everything we hear suggests moving, passing, and in transit, but in fact, nothing does. Thus, the sound of a door opening, the key sound-image in *Kotmun*, which you hear four times, really suggests that after you open this door, you will be in the same room. Four times.

Listening to the clocking ticking, again

I should say that I am not a believer that time can be understood. My mind does not work like a scientist. Reasoning is the least of what I have and am proud of. But I can accept that we have a desire to understand time. No, in fact, it is much more than that: *we are helplessly bound to time felt, which we have an inevitable desire to understand*. Time felt is ontological, and it is not time, but time felt that has a binding

power in our being. That is why Fraser stresses, “Not that time may be associated with different concepts but—it is important to repeat—that it comprises of qualitatively different temporalities.”¹² By attending to temporalities in various forms—listening and composing with the phenomena of time felt, in my case—we are not looking at time from different angles; such an observation is an impossible task because time is not that which is a complete whole, not an essence in itself; we could even argue that time, recognized as such, does not exist. Rather, we are looking at different temporalities that comprise time. In other words, what we are attending to, what I have attempted with my composing and listening, what we are listening to when a clock ticks, each of which is an essence of time.

Endnotes

1. Fraser, Julius Thomas (2007), *Time and Time Again: Reports from a Boundary of the Universe* (Supplements to the Study of Time), Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, p. 102.
2. Whitrow, Gerald James (1980), *Natural Philosophy of Time*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 2.
3. Fraser, Julius Thomas, (2007), p. 101.
4. Whitrow, Gerald James (1980), p. 49.
5. Husserl, Edmund (1991), *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893–1917), Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
6. Ihde, Don (2007), *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 89.
7. Kim, Suk-Jun (2006), *Corresponding* [Electroacoustic Music].
8. Kim, Suk-Jun (2010b), “Acousmatic Reasoning: an organised listening with imagination”, *Les Journées d’Informatique Musicale*, pp. 1–11.
9. Kim, Suk-Jun (2010a), “Imaginal Listening: a quaternary framework for listening to electroacoustic music and phenomena of sound-images”, in: *Organised Sound* 15(01), pp. 43–53.
10. Smalley, Denis (2011), “On listening to the music of Suk-Jun Kim: imagined places, imagined spaces”, in: Suk-Jun Kim, *Hasla*, Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, pp. 9–10.
11. Kim, Suk-Jun (2005), *Kotmun: A Gate of Flowers* [Electroacoustic Music].
12. Fraser, Julius Thomas (2007), p. 259.

Abstract

This short essay examines the two subjects that the composer explores in his compositions, temporality and the sense of place, first, by considering the phenomenon of a clocking ticking, and second, by discussing his two compositions, *Corresponding* (2006) and *Kotmun: A Gate of Flowers* (2005), which are available on *Hasla*, a book/DVD that has recently been published by DAAD and Kehrer Verlag and catalogs Kim’s compositions and installations.

Author

A Korean composer and sound artist, Suk-Jun Kim (born 1970 in Taebaek, South Korea) studied theology, music technology, and composition. His music has received a number of international awards and commissions from various institutions. Kim has been a resident composer at Bourges, France, Visby International Centre for Composers, Sweden, Atlantic Center for the Arts and MacDowell Colony, USA, DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program, Germany, and Leverhulme visiting research fellow, Scotland.

Title

Suk-Jun Kim, Time felt and places imagined in my compositions, in: kunsttexte.de, Auditive Perspektiven, Nr. 2, 2011 (5 pages), www.kunsttexte.de.