

## TONSPUR 31: Suk-Jun Kim “In Tune, Out of Tune”

I've been asked to make some comments about Suk Jun Kim's work *in tune, out of tune*. Kim currently lives here in Berlin as a guest of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin program, so I've already had the pleasure of getting to know him. From this perspective, I would like to formulate a few thoughts, which I will approach through the analysis of a word.

Because if you go to the webpage of this [TONSPUR](#) project, the first thing you'll notice is the mysterious word “hum”. In Grimm's dictionary, we read (summarizing): “making a low, muted” or also “muffled quavering sound” – which doesn't necessarily get us anywhere ... but let's take a look at the five varieties of this mysterious word “hum” that Grimm differentiates:

1. “humming” once meant “booming”, “pealing” – especially in connection with bells. We Berliners immediately think of the Parochial Church, whose glockenspiel was once called a *Singuhr*, a singing clock.  
Or the word “hum” was linked with “constant industrial noises”, as in Hauptmann's *Thiel the Crossing Keeper*: “.. humming chords sounded .. from the telegraph poles”, which indicates that humming doesn't consist of a single sound or abrupt bursts of sound but of something sustained. And here we recognize the first link to the genre of sound installations that, like this work by Kim, go on making sound for several weeks – or in this case “go on humming”.
2. We most often associate a description of hearing “humming” with the sound of insect wings – which takes us close to the composer's idea. Maybe someone hummed the old children's song to Kim – “*summ, summ, summ, Bienchen summ herum*, buzz buzz buzz little bee, buzz around” –? Do we hear that here?
3. But actual “humming”, though, signifies something having to do with the human voice, a variant of singing – not “full-throated singing” but absorption in a dialogue or communion with oneself or someone very close to us. We say things like: “humming softly to oneself”, “humming the old tunes”, “humming someone to sleep”. And the interesting thing is: this familiar humming isn't perfect – it tends to be out of tune!  
So we immediately grasp the context of the title *in tune, out of tune*: the humming we hear coming from the benches sometimes sounds pretty off-key, but we spontaneously chime in with what we hear, we're “in tune”!!!  
By the way, this is where my initial use of the adjective “mysterious” fits in. There is something mysterious about acoustic intimacy, the murmuring of low voices together (or perhaps just to oneself), where not only words play a role but also the interpersonal relationship, the close communication of direct whisper-contact – that is, being “in tune”.
4. The term “hum” also indicates the hodgepodge of sounds made by an anonymous crowd of people, which conveys a rather muffled, incoherent impression; humming becomes a symbol for a consistent buzz of activity (“the streets hum with people ..”, not to be confused with the insistent murmur of the people of Leipzig: “*wir sind das Volk*, we are the people”). It happens only with multitudes, and more from afar; it

comes across like the sound of big cities with distant trains and highways, an acoustic horizon we are all familiar with.

5. “Humming” can also signify the projection of an acoustic external image into oneself, into one’s own head (“humming in my brain”), generating a possibly perplexing buzzing in one’s ears or a “dazed state”, whizzing through the brain in a mysterious blur.

Maybe the humming of popular songs here at the site where the Berlin palace, and then the Palace of the Republic, once stood should be considered somewhat “perplexing”?

Kim would prefer to have humming associated chiefly with childhood memories, with “humming to someone”. This brings up a link that seems threatened in the media age, because the humming that comes from an mp3 player is nothing like the humming of a mother, who does so spontaneously, tenderly, somewhat unprofessionally. The mp3 song has been professionally produced (I would hope) for the market and thus lacks all the so-called “mistakes” – the typically “bad intonation” of humming, the right “breathing” – everything, in fact, that is so plainly and simply voiced by each person who hums. And that’s why this idiosyncratic humming does not get recorded and is certainly not being uploaded straight to the Internet! The simple act of humming is a non-public declaration of belief in the non-commercial. It is, as it were, the opposite of our music industry, the opposite of Muzak and all its derivatives, including the constant streams coming through millions of headphones.

But how does something I’ve just thoroughly castigated get from there to here, how does it come to be electroacoustic music?

Well, that’s precisely the secret, even somewhat ambiguous, nature of “art”! We all will perceive it on our own and understand and accept it in our own way (or not). We will hear the somehow familiar humming of distant songs, the underlying cheerfulness connected with childhood memories, overlaid by the acoustic horizon of the humming metropolis, and for a brief moment we will pause, find ourselves in an inexplicable world of intimacy, and perhaps hum along now and then, and keep on humming!

Kim, the composer, thought a great deal about how to resolve the apparent dilemma between the “in tune” called for by art music and the “out of tune” heard in this sound installation.

He starts with a spoken situation where we find ourselves in a kind of radio play, and we are informed “before the curtain goes up” that the recordings will now begin. The sounds of bells (sic!: “humming” is connected with bells pealing!!) lead into the approximately 13-minute-long second section; from then on, bells separate the musical events. We hear rather slow melodies and familiar children’s songs, and we also hear (perhaps surprisingly) pop songs, humorous songs and songs from other cultures, layered on top of each other polyphonically (as described in point 4 above, where there’s a bit of a hodgepodge). *in tune*, *out of tune* is composed. The brief last section of the piece, naturally introduced by the familiar tinkling bells, brings us back to solitary voices humming beautiful, soft and familiar melodies – a kind of parting hum or “one last tune”. And at the end, after about 17:30 minutes, someone asks...

Hope you’ll have a contemplative pleasure, humming along!!