INTERVIEW WITH JI YOUN KANG

[Transcribed from the recording realized in The Hague, October 17th, 2012]

Ángel Arranz: What was your background as a composer and sound artist?

Ji Youn Kang: I studied composition in the university in Korea; at the moment I was only studying acoustic music, not electronic music. After my graduation I started to study electronic music by myself, searching for some materials here and there and trying to be involved in any kind of community in Korea. And then I came to The Netherlands studying more in the electronic music field at the Institute of Sonology, and also studying a master in composition for two years in Amsterdam Conservatory, but more focused in electronic music.

AA: What did you discover around the electronic music world there in artistic, musical and social terms? What did you gain?

JYK: Well… [*expressive pause*] a lot! Somehow I made it clear what I really want in my music. I had a very vague idea about this type of music, the direction of my composition, but I think it became firmer in The Netherlands by listening to others. It is like a very small community there, but at the same time very deep in and out the school. So, I think that was it: there were many different types of electronic music that I did not really know about before and this was the opportunity to see what were the people are so interested, what kind of things were there, so I actually could make choice of my own. I think sonology made me choose what I like about. Of course I really gained a lot of knowledge. Also I became friend with many people and that is also what I gained.

AA: There you developed an interesting thesis about implementing holomovements in music, revolving around these theoretical and practical ideas about sound.

JYK: The idea of holomovements was actually to create a metaphorical explanation of what I am doing with Korean music, but it does not have something to do with the hologram. Holomovement has something to do with hologram theoretically; it talks about causality: what is the cause of something. I tried to connect this concept with Korean ritual music and the electronic music I make. People can find that these totally different backgrounds and theory can match together. So, that is what I was doing.

AA: And technically, what did you want to develop in those days? What was your main interest for your own music? What kind of ideal of your music did you want to project?

JYK: I know what I do not want now, first because I do not want anymore to use Korean traditional instruments. Classical instruments like a violin, cello or oboe feels to me that we are bringing very new language and still we are like wearing clothes from 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. I feel a little bit bother by it. They sound great, but still very old. It bores me; it feels not right, like we are using totally different languages. You have the example of a violinist who comes on stage and still plays in a very traditional way. Sound is exploited in no way that could fit into this modern language, which I think still is very old, because when I see the violin, I see the violin. So, I do not like traditional instruments anymore. It does not mean I have not a respect for it. I like for instance Sibelius's *Violin Concerto* very much. I like all this old music that has been written for all traditional

instruments and I know that still I need to use them too. But this is something I would like to avoid. I would like to use the instruments of now. What could be the instruments of now? That is probably something that can be explained a hundred years later: *'Ah, 2012 people were using iPhone!'* It is kind of symbol, of course I am not really a big fan of iPhone. I think that musical language should develop together with their physics, the environment and the behavior on stage, or it even should think about if a stage is needed. What is the current generation? Why do we still need to deal with this old fashion ways of presenting music? Why do we use very old objects that you cannot even touch them very well, because if you scratched them, then you need to pay probably ten times back what you get for the commission? That is something I am really seeking for: the sound of the current situation, the current society. That is why people are probably more focused on creating noise, because noise is a very familiar sound of these days. As soon as you go out, you hear noise in a very natural way. So, that is something I would like to do, searching for the sound of now, since I am not from 18thcentury.

> *AA: So, you touch different aspects I would like to develop a bit further. Starting to center now on the WFS, how were your beginnings? When did you start to work with thee Game of Life Foundation and what is your role in the organization?*

JYK: I started in 2007 during my second year of sonology master, just at the moment they were requesting people and promoting more students to use the system. I was very interested in spatialization itself inside the composition, so I tried one piece. And then, the piece was quite successful; many people liked it, I have a quite positive feedback that make me push a little bit more into using the system. I have personally nothing to do with the Game of Life. I am just a composer who works a lot with the system and also volunteers myself to do some jobs, because they give the opportunity to use the system without paying or anything like that. Although, they always perform my piece wherever they go. So, we are really close friends.

> *AA: So, since five years ago you have been working in the Game of Life as a composer and you develop a lot of projects. You created and presented your own music. During these years, what has supposed to you to work with such a WFS system? What does this system offer to you as a composer in technical, musical, artistic terms?*

JYK: What it was so exciting about using this system is to bring more excitement of listening to tape music. Tape music is fixed. I have heard a lot myself; sometimes I have a problem of listening to tape music. It is not because we do not see anything on stage. I actually prefer not to see, even if I was listening to live music. But, somehow tape music is like only about making the perfect mastering. It is just a perfect fixed piece that you know that there is not a single change. There is no dangerous moment, because all these things have been already touched. So, they have been perfectly saved. When you know they are saved, then our own tension disappears: there is not mistake, except this mixer person who is pushing the wrong button. So, I have a sort of problem when I listen to tape music, because it is so surreal for me! It is too perfect and you do not have any tension. But, when I listening to WFS, it gives me a different dimension of listening: sound comes to you, directly touches you. And you have this missing excitement that you do not where it comes, you do not when it will come, you do not know what happens, because it gives you different gestures inside the tape music. And I found that is the most interesting part, even though you would know it is not moving so much or it would not mean that perfectly match together with the musical context. It moves around you. It gives you extra tension. It multiplies the tension of the music. And that is why I find this the most interesting part of the listening to the music: you are really involved by the listening.

> *AA: Somehow do you feel a kind of disassociation between the compositional phase of the electronic piece, exclusively focused on creating sound and timing for that part, respecting to*

creating the space for that piece? Or, on the contrary is it a sort of process that you could make at the same time?

JYK: I made it at the same time. Well, you cannot really make it at the same time; you need to touch space later. But when you are, let us say, making some sounds of the piece, then you know how it could be moved or how it would stay in space. So, it comes together.

AA: But what is first for you?

JYK: [*long pause*] It depends, I do not know. I think sound is first most of the time, and then the sound somehow tells me *'OK, I need to be there or I need to move'.*

AA: So, it probably implies that you think sound by moving it.

FYK: Yes, sound could be speedy or animated; you are imagining moving sound. Actually it was the question when I was graduated in Sonology. There was a question from Kees [Tazelaar]: *'How do you make this spatialization? Do you imagine it?'* So, I explained that I could see how this sound is moving. And then, Kees said: *'Yes, but Ji, you know: you cannot see sound'*. I said: *'Oh yes, it is right'* [*laughs*]. But somehow I can imagine it, like also its color. People describe it as a color: like browny sound. Color is a character, like speed. When I listen to a sound, I can see it.

AA: Let us go a bit into the WFS_Collider. What is it?

JYK: That is the software you can make spatialization for the system with. I do not really know much about the very beginning state, but I think Wouter [Snoei] knows it much better. He developed it together with the collaboration of Marije [Baalman] and Jan [Trützschler]. It has been developed until now, so the interface has become much better, in the sense that, because is made on SuperCollider, they are many limits. But, it has been fixed really a lot: you can draw things, you can make a point and you can really watch where the sound goes and moves. You can also use the software for different pieces, other than WFS.

AA: How do you feel with this tool?

JYK: Personally I think it can be better, to be honest, if had been developed by a very professional programmer who knows about spatialization and artistic aspects, because of the limits of SuperCollider. But, I have much less doubts about it, because it has been really optimized and it is really lucky that Wouter made the software, because he is also a composer. He knows what artists need and want. That is, most of the time, the problem of software design: that a lot of software is developed by programmers who do not really know about music. They often miss a lot of parts. But Wouter knew about it, he knew what is needed and what should be optimized. He developed the interface further and I think it is now a very powerful software, because you can also do it live in the real-time. In turn, WFS_Collider has these modular boxes, which also give different perspectives in composition itself. You can add or remove by piling up different movements and effects, timings and et cetera. I think it is really powerful. Years ago it was so difficult and very annoying to handle it, because it crashed so much and had bugs. I even developed my own way of making backups, in order to avoid the destruction of three hours of work and start from scratch again. That is not happening so much these days. I was quite surprised about it and considering that is made on SuperCollider, it is even more amazing.

AA: Tell me about your last works for WFS. You did a big series of pieces for instruments and electronics. Even you devoted a whole series of electronic pieces for the WFS system.

JYK: At the beginning, my project in Sonology was about one series of electronic music, two live electronic pieces and three pieces for WFS. But the last piece of this series was combining those four pieces, literally; it consisted on four different tracks that are played together. So, a piece for cello and a piece for recorder and jing plus two different tape pieces were started at the same time. Of course, the recordings of the instrumental pieces initialized together. And then you only do spatialization. At the final part you can hear these four pieces at the same time, so that was the last piece of the series. From there on, I did not really make series, but I continuously worked on several pieces. There were like two tape pieces that was called *Enfolding Plane I* and *Enfolding Plane II*, which were more studies on spatialization and musical development. There was a tape piece that it was called *SiNaWi*. I think this piece was performed the most; it has been performed really a lot with the system. It is the popular piece of the system, people really like this piece.

AA: Did you play it last week, did not you? Was it the last one?

JYK: The last one. Also I have a piece for organ and WFS. I found this piece very problematic, because at the moment I had a broken leg. At the same time I could not rehearse, because we needed to go to church with the system. We never tested together; the piece should have been made at least once before the performance. In some parts it was really good and in other parts was like problematic.

AA: What has been you technical contribution within the Game of Life Foundation, if were any?

JYK: I was probably the one who uses the system the most. I have given a lot of feedbacks: what is not working, what is actually better, what should be needed and this kind of things. Of course I did not program anything there, but I was using the system a lot and giving the feedback OKs. I think it can be a contribution: I just work really a lot with the system.

AA: Should be the system up-to-date frequently?

JYK: Well, because the system is mobile –people bring the system somewhere else-, it means also that it cannot go wrong: cables, connections; something can loose, something can be broken… So they really need this constant maintenance and care of the system. I think that software so far has been very big change for last couple of years. And maybe we should see now, for one year at least, what it is needed more for this software. I think now is that moment.

AA: Are there some projects about implementing live processing, are not there? Now it seems to be rather finished. It seems also that there is something more: there is an idea, according with the information some of your colleagues told me about it, which is the 3D sound environment.

JYK: Also directional points.

AA: Directional sound is about the harmonic components of certain sound depending on its location, or taking into account the position of the listener?

JYK: Yes, exactly, that sort of things. That is something that Wouter is really looking for, although it does not really matter for me: if I have a piece of cake, then I have a piece of cake; if there is a chocolate Zero on the top of it, I can also have a chocolate Zero on the top of if. But it is also OK without the chocolate Zero! [*laughing*] I appreciate it as it is; I do not really need something from there. But if it changes, it is like *'Oh, there is something new to try!'*

> *AA: In some occasions you work with the spatial adaptation of works by other people, composers, mostly alive people, but many others and big figures such as Xenakis. I remember specially a kind of recreation of the routes of the* Polytope de Cluny*. How was that project?*

JYK: I tried to reconstruct the original T-shape of the sketch. At the moment that I was working, there were many materials about how light moves in the polytope. But there were very few materials about how sound should move. My collaborator Sophoklis Arvanitis, and I were not sure at all about it. We were even not sure if that was about sound movement or not. And then, I received the sound materials from Kees. Originally it was originally a 7-channel piece. So, I checked the three papers from the sketch, matched them with one of the tracks and what I found, maybe it is just coincident, is that the length of the trajectory was long and the sound file was also long. And if the length was short, the sound file was also short. So I said: *'Aha, maybe all the sound was all the time moving in the same speed, because if the sound is long, we can go further, but if sound is short, we can go short.'*

> *AA: It was a sort of roller coaster, but it did not accelerate or decelerate.*

JYK: Yes, exactly! There are not speed changes, just very static changes, all the time slowly moving. So, that is why I tried to do based on the WFS system. From these three pages of the sketch, I made the other tracks movements in the same speed, inasmuch as a long sound source is moving further way from an edge to the other edge. That was my interpretation of sound movements from the sketch. It was made of big clouds of sound moving together. Sometimes one cloud combined with another at one corner and becomes a very big mess; sometimes it was totally spread around. This piece was a very nice experience.

> *AA: I was at that concert; it was superb. Somehow, when sound adopts some ideas, all ideas that were there, you need to really make a short investigation on it. And when this is produced, it is magnificent, incredibly alive. It remained to me clearly that such a performance of the Xenakis'* Polytope of Cluny *was completely alive music; even more than some Xenakis's orchestral pieces I heard. Did you work also the* Concret PH *piece? I remember a concert in Leiden in which this short piece, made of burned charcoal sounds, was exposed according to certain Xenakis' writing or something like this.*

JYK: That was actually done by Casper [Schipper] and he said that it was performed by using circular motions of the Lecorbusier/Xenakis' Philips Pavilion of the Brussels International Fair in 1958. It was a very simple elaboration based on some Kees's investigations, which were implemented by Casper.

> *AA: And recently you did a WFS project with Trevor Wishart; it was an amazing concert too. It was a long work based on the voice in incredible manners. How was your collaboration?*

JYK: It actually was really easy. I did not really need to do anything, because Trevor brought fixed 8-channel tracks that involved spatialization inside. So, since it was already 8-channel, what we did was just to put eight points: that was all. He is an interesting experienced man. Normally

spatializations that work perfectly with speakers, in WFS could not work. That is a bit weird, because you do not know if it going to work or not, but it creates certain mood. But I discovered that after thirteen minutes, because the space is the same. Probably you would hear it better with eight speakers. Also it was really nice opportunity to meet this person. I made a little mistake; it was really amazing. This piece is like one and half hour. Maybe I put one of the sound files like few milliseconds behind. He pointed it out! [*exclaiming*]. He said: *'Something is wrong'*.

AA: By listening?

JYK: Yes! After 45 minutes he said: *'This part is not right'*. When I saw the sequenced score on the screen it looked totally fine. But when I actually clicked it and check the seconds, it was like a few milliseconds behind. Wow! That was a fun episode.