



the alien kin is an ongoing sound  
and research project that  
approaches collective musicking  
and mimicking through handmade  
instruments: bird calls,  
percussions, whistles and flutes.  
it is curated by diane barbé.  
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# the alien kin



## Excerpt

'I Call, You Respond? Game Calls, Hunting and Sound Mimicry in the Black Forest'

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I had been out in the hills near Sankt Georgen im Schwarzwald, in the northern parts of the German Black Forest, since the middle of the afternoon, equipped with a pair of stereo microphones, a tripod and a recorder. I was listening to the intermingled voices of blackbirds, jays, redstarts, blue tits, song thrushes and collared doves, along with the inescapable drone of the departmental road 33 a few kilometers down the Brigach valley. An occasional airplane dragged a slow swoosh of white noise above our heads, long minutes of lingering engine exhaust. The hiss of a breeze intermittently rattled the frosted needles of the tall spruce trees, the only kind of tree planted on these hills. My plan was to record some general environmental sounds before and during dusk, and when the night would settle, to try to locate a tawny owl I had heard in my last visit a few days before, if she called again. In the vespertine transition toward the

darker, colder, quieter night, I noticed how the constant stream of traffic seemed to increase and penetrate even further through the trees, steady, palpable.

The night indeed brought with it a change in awareness, listening becoming more acute and directly connected to muscular reactions, as sight became less reliable. The sound of the traffic on the road down the valley seemed to become louder, more insidious to me, a noise but also a very clear orientation marker. I stood still and in the fuzzy sphere of sounds that seemed to touch me, I was able to actively identify the idiosyncratic call of the tawny owl, transcribed perhaps as “huhooo...hu-hu-hooo.” I started walking again and came across a gravel path, hard and efficient, made for firetrucks and forest management lorries; immediately as I stepped on the infrastructure, it revealed who and what I was. The particular sound of the plastic soles of my shoes, crossing the limestone pebbles, carried with it a story of stone quarries and heavy trucks carrying gravel and pouring mineral rivers onto the road. Workers in orange uniforms had flattened the ground here, terraforming. The gravel crunched under my feet as I moved, when suddenly —



image credits  
p 1 jessica garfield  
p 4 diane barbé  
p 6 jessica garfield  
p 8 diane barbé

# material assemblages

extra black clay wigt  
'steinzeugmasse' (origin:  
unspecified, germany)

arundo donax river cane  
(origin: septèmes-les-vallons,  
france)

arundo donax river cane  
(origin: blanca, spain)

botz liquid glaze no. 9582,  
9607, 9104 (origin: germany)

hobbytime nylon string  
Polyamid PA 6 ø 0.6mm  
(origin: unspecified)

df player micro chip amplifier  
media player (origin: china)

sanwu SW Digital HF41 stereo  
amplifier (origin: china)

visaton fr10 loudspeaker  
(origin: unspecified)  
lsf-15m/s miniature  
loudspeaker (origin: china)

SeKi CCA speaker cable  
2x0,50mm with PVC cover  
(origin: unspecified)

voltomat 6.3mm flat pin  
connectors (origin: unspecified)

intenso micro sdhc memory  
cards (origin: china)

multi usb port 2A 220V  
charger (origin: china)

—someone got started in the bushes nearby—the shrubs were alive with a big rustling and jumping and jerking! I froze, squeezing my tripod, wondering who could be there, hoping to avoid a face-to-face with a boar. But something in the sound already described a creature much lighter than a boar. The shrubs cracked in high-pitched, delicate snaps; the stomping wasn't heavy. And she, the creature, also seemed to have frozen, so she must be a prey animal, whose ancestors managed to survive through discreetness and agility, through not being seen or heard; a herbivore. I will come back to this chain of signs and interpretations later on in the article; spontaneously, physiologically, I knew that animal to be a non-threat to me. And conversely, the sound of my bipedal walking on gravel was interpreted by someone else as a potential threat indeed.

The two animals both held still, in shock. Lines of question and attention were flying in the air, waiting for another sign. One of us ready to dart off in the undergrowth, the other slowly finding the way to the record button and lowering the tripod to the ground. This suspended moment of relation lasted a long minute; the

intention of recording barely brought me, human, back to my human perspective. I was shaking; I wanted to know; without much forethought I yapped out a single bark, almost a yelp, woody like a dog's voice; an instinctive attempt to establish communication, a question, a hello. What was that call? Was that a human call? It felt like borrowing a voice, a friendly voice, an animal voice.

[...]

In the liner notes of a recent release of commercial recordings of bird imitators, a popular form of performance art documented in North America and Europe at the turn of the 20th century, the music researcher Ian Nagoski ponders: "At what point did imitative calls of other species assist our ancestors in hunting? ... and when exactly was it that a person was so adept at producing a call during a hunt that [they] were asked to do it again for the entertainment of others or taught it to children as a life-skill? How many of those phonemes entered into the repertoire of vocalizations that became language?" (Ian Nagoski, *Ecstatic & Wingless: Bird-Imitation on Four Continents*, ca. 1910-44, October 2016, Canary Records).

