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## Vibrating Notes and Noise

### A Short Conversation between Susan Alcorn & Reuben Derrick

**RD:** Thank you for taking the time to talk with me about your music, Susan.

**SA:** Thank you, Reuben!

**RD:** Let us start with a question which is not so easy to answer – for you, what *is* music?

**SA:** Well, 'what is music?' I guess there are a lot of ways to look at music. Music can be thought of, in some respects, as not the music itself. Something can be very musical without it necessarily being music. What seems to me is that music is those vibrations that our ear and body pick up. There can be a crazy amount of vibrations emanating, from the tiniest to the most intense sounds. In some ways our brain sort of decides for us what music is, and what it is not. Sometimes I think that we humans, like birds, react to certain vibrations. So maybe that's why humans seem to prefer certain scales. Although what someone from another part of the world may like is not necessarily that same as what someone in the United States or New Zealand may like. We as humans have developed, hopefully, to a point where we can actually sort of decide what we like in music. In other words, maybe we can educate ourselves to find out about music that we perhaps might not know much about otherwise. Much of this has to do with logic and recognising patterns, which is a very human experience, and perhaps also for every living thing, I guess.

**RD:** What you say really resonates with me, especially when you talk about noise in music. I think a lot about where those two things, noise and music, meet for me. And that point where they do meet is probably very different from person to person. Much music, including popular music, has elements of noise and atonality so as you say, it's what we choose to learn about and tune into.

**SA:** I think we perhaps hold a predilection for noise also. For example, somebody standing at the bottom of a big volcano that's blowing its top might think, "Wow, that feels kind of cool!". Or big church bells or the sound of ocean waves; this is all noise. But it is also music. So maybe music is what we call noise that we enjoy listening to. Sound.

**RD:** So I guess noise becomes part of a musical vocabulary that musicians can use as they wish.

**SA:** Yes! and some people like a lot of noise. And others don't like very much noise; they just prefer notes.

**RD:** And noise can become notes and notes can become noise, which is an interesting 'thing' to play with.

**SA:** Yes! But when I think of music, it's something to communicate. I think we can't say music is just a spiritual thing, because it's also used to march people into war to kill each other. Or, it can be just for entertainment, like drinking music, or to get you to root for your favourite sports team, or whatever. But for me, it's about communication, and sharing with an audience, and without it being necessarily like Moses coming down with the tablets from the mountain! It's not, "This is the music I'm gifting you!" It's more like we're sharing this experience, and we're building this together as we go along. I'm sitting at my instrument, and something's coming through that instrument, maybe me, or maybe something else. Those in the audience have their own instrument which is their ears. And they're making music from their sense of logic or their memories or whatever. I think of the instrument not so much as a tool but as a fellow traveller in this exploration of what music is and what it can be. When I look down at the strings on my guitar, I visualise these little communities of sound, of vibration, and some of them are so tiny that you need you need more volume so they can be heard for what they are. I think that these vibrations have stories to tell, although what kind of story is a whole other

conversation! The way I sometimes look at it is that our stories take place and evolve over time, which is slower than Saturn rotating around the sun! Well actually, it's pretty fast, but it seems slow to us! These little communities of vibrations, which are so small, I mean, sub-atomic, consist of stories to be told in time – even for a millionth of a second!

**RD:** I think a lot of musicians who would consider themselves to be somewhat experimental, or improvisers, who do find these vibrations or stories in their instruments by using them in ways that they weren't designed to be used, can relate to what you are saying; discovering these very tiny little areas where something quite magical happens sometimes. When you were referring to the audience's ears being a kind of instrument, I am wondering if you think that there is any distinction between composer, performer and listener?

**SA:** In many ways, I think they're all the same. But at the same time, in terms of praxis or performative versus composed, there can be differences. For example, as a composer, you're winnowing things out. Maybe you have an idea and it's like, "Oh, I'll work with this, and maybe this will sound a little bit better over there". But with improvising, there's an immediacy. You don't have time to consider whether you should be playing playing a C sharp instead of a C at a particular moment, because you're too busy actually doing it. That is the beauty of the immediacy of improvised playing. However, at the same time, there's an element of composition which takes place because if you play long enough, and you practice in certain ways, then you are inevitably making decisions about what works for you – for example, you might become less random as you know from experience that a C sharp might sound better than a C after a certain note. So, composing and improvising are related. They're not exactly the same thing, but they in some ways can be similar. And for the listening, I am thinking that logic is a big part of that experience. There's feeling and there's logic, and the listener, in order to hear music, I think, needs to have some sort of logical basis in which to approach it. In other words, putting two and two together to make four is the same as listening for sound, such as ocean waves. But maybe we insert too much meaning into things. Much of how we conceive music is based on some of our preconceptions. And I think musicians listen to music differently than most others because when you hear a diminished scale, you're thinking, as a musician, "Oh, that's a diminished scale", or you're just thinking more critically listening to the music than somebody who's just listening and responds with, "oh, that sounds great!". Especially with free improvisation, there are those who listen and respond, "Yeah, that sounds cool. I like it, but I don't know what you're doing. I don't

understand it". Often when people say that they don't understand, I respond, honestly, "Fuck, I don't understand it either!". Sometimes music goes beyond what you know, how you might think about logic and what you can put into words. I prefer this and try to approach music this way. Language comes first, then comes the logic, rules and forms we put to it.

**RD:** So for you, composition is a praxis and can bring music into thinking or not thinking, that is acting with spontaneity. Would you say that this spontaneity is an aesthetic approach for you?

**SA:** Yes, aesthetics not as a branch of philosophy (which I don't know that much about), but aesthetics in the sense of what you like or prefer. For me, that's everything because preference is a certain something that you can't always put into words and yet you still want to communicate. And some music just *sounds* good; when I listen to Olivier Messiaen, it feels good to my bones – some of those big weird chords! That aesthetic he is trying to convey, I think is the same space I am in, and you also, I'm sure! So, we have to develop our aesthetic, which is our view of what sounds good, or not. Of course, for the listener, that's even more important.

**RD:** Yes, like yourself I think about aesthetic in relation to not only preference, but what is affecting for the artist and listener. And perhaps I suppose you could think about particular aesthetics we associate with different genres, or different record labels, or a particular flavour or mood, or function...

**SA:** Oh, yes I know. Marketing certainly appropriates and exploits aesthetics! But at the same time, preference allows us to make decisions about what we prefer to hear. If a friend says to me, "let's to go hear a performance!" I might reply, "Oh, sure, what shall we go and hear? Some experimental stuff?" And if they reply, "No, it's a polka festival...", I might say, "maybe not!". For me this is where aesthetics play a more personal role. Sure, one can like polka, but that's not what I listen to when I want to get "closer to God" or something else!

**RD:** Ha! Thanks again for taking the time to talk with me, Susan.

**SA:** Thank you, Reuben!