

The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

FYS 129

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Various Quotes

These slides contain a collection of some of the quotes largely from the musicians that are studied during the course.

The idea is to present “musicians in their own words”.

Susan Alcorn

**American
Pedal
Steel
Guitarist
&
Composer
(b. 1953 -)**



Alcorn on Where the Music Comes From

KMB: Your work crosses genres and categories; indeed, it seems to be in a category of its own...Could you discuss some aspects of your creative/improvisational/compositional methodologies?

Alcorn: When I write (or when I improvise, which, to me, is very similar), it is usually when something just sort of seems to come to me, and I almost feel like it's cheating when I put my name to it, because it's not something that I "came up with"; it's more like something from outside that comes briefly into my head. That said, though, much of it is related to what I've gone through in life and the places I've been in my musical journey, whether it's country music, Messiaen, nueva cancion, Ornette Coleman, Alice Coltrane, Indigenous music, or whatever. In this way the music is grounded – it has roots in music that has been around as long as there have been human beings and birds.

Alcorn on Preparation

KMB: A unique aspect of your work is the way you explore and exploit the technical possibilities of a particularly complex instrument while expressing what seem to be very intense emotions. Are there specific techniques or preparations – musical, physical, psychological, or spiritual – that help enable you to do this so effectively?

Alcorn: Well, yes, there are, though some of this is rather personal. Musically, I practice constantly so that my technique on the instrument is sufficient to be able to say what I want to say when the time comes. But really, that's of secondary importance because if you have nothing to say, all the technique in the world won't help. So to prepare for a performance, I try to do whatever I can to be in the right place when I play. There is a lot that goes into this, and I do different things at different times. Usually before I perform, I try to find a quiet space to sit, and if I can hear the audience while I'm sitting, that's not so bad. I want whatever I do to reach my audience, and I want to be in a space where they can reach me.

Interview with Kevin Macneil Brown:, *Dusted Features [New Directions in Pedal Steel Guitar: Three Conversations]*, 2011.

Alcorn on the Appeal of the Pedal Steel Guitar

KMB: To many people, steel guitar is a striking instrument, both visually and sonically. What, in particular, was it that drew you to steel guitar?

Alcorn: Ever since I was young, I have always been drawn to slide instruments – I guess it's something about the instruments and their ability to play the notes in between the notes. Before I played the pedal steel guitar, when I was a teenager, I played slide guitar, dobro, and Hawaiian guitar. However, what drew me to the “pedal” steel guitar was just what you described – it is both, visually and sonically, a gorgeous instrument. The first time I saw someone playing it live, I was hooked – the way the metal bar just seemed to float over the top of the instrument, the strangely beautiful sound it made. I knew that I had to get one, and I knew that my life would never again be the same. I also liked the comparative ease in which more complex musical ideas could be expressed.

Interview with Kevin Macneil Brown:, Dusted Features [New Directions in Pedal Steel Guitar: Three Conversations], 2011.

Alcorn with an Anecdote

Alcorn: At the end of the last song, the singer announces, “Last Call for Alcohol,” and then tones into the microphone, “You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.” The club owner starts flashing the lights. At 2 AM we are finished and begin the fun part, tearing down. The guitar player, who is the bandleader, leans over to me and announces that I play so well that he’s in love and wants to marry me. I ask him what his wife would think of that. He shouts to his wife (the drummer) standing behind him, “Rita, you heard me, get lost!” I chuckled all the way home.

Alcorn on her Shift to Improvisation

SG: You initially began playing in traditional and country bands before venturing into improvisation and extended technique, what precipitated that move?

Alcorn: To tell you the truth, I've always loved music that was left field and have always been fascinated by extended technique; this predated my interest in the pedal steel guitar, and it never left me. But it's a passion that's had to share space with the traditional country style, especially when I played live in Texas. The musicians I fell in with were musically very conservative, everything had to be just so. There's a lot of improvisation in country music, but it's in small doses, and, like other tradition-bound forms of music, if you go too far out, you lose people, and soon find your way out of a job. I don't think that this is necessarily bad – it's like haiku; it has to be in a certain form, or it's not haiku. The same goes with traditional forms of music. There's a lot of self-discipline and respect for the roots that goes into developing and holding onto that shared language, and there's beauty in it like there's beauty in any language. However, not everyone fits into that mold which is good also – they help the music to branch out and grow. I guess I fit into the latter category; I couldn't play things the same way every time. Towards the end, I'd be playing note for note what everyone else played, but there was something about my phrasing that the other musicians (and the audiences) noticed that had escaped me and I was told, in no uncertain terms, that I had to play "correctly" or find somewhere else to play. Though I loved, and still love, playing traditional country music, I had to find something else more in line with what I felt I personally had to express. This led me, on a bit of a winding road, to where I am now.

Awaiting The Resurrection Of The Pedal Steel Guitar, interview by Spencer Grady, The Quietus, 2010.

Alcorn on the Virtues of Improvisation

SG: What are the pros and cons of improvisation?

Alcorn: To me, free improvisation is a liberating experience, and it can be an invigorating experience to listen to, if the musicians performing respect the music and the audiences they play for. To respect an audience is not selling out, it's what, I think, all artists aim to do – to communicate a sense of beauty. For free improvisers the beauty is that of freedom. Freedom and honesty.

Alcorn on What is Expressed in her Improvisation

SG: Can you explain the influence of spirituality on your music?

Alcorn: Hmm... well I try to be a good person, try to be kind, patient and to love. Since music is such an integral part of me, I hope this is expressed in my music. I think, though, that one's approach also has to be "real" – pain, sadness, and suffering are part and parcel of the human condition, and I think, that these also have their necessary place in music.

Alcorn on the Influence of Oliveros' Deep Listening

SG: Can you explain the influence of “deep listening” on your music?

Alcorn: "Deep listening" often refers to Pauline Oliveros and her way of approaching music, so, in a way, it's a loaded term. I've a lot of admiration for Pauline, and try to listen deeply when I play. Hearing, of course, is, for most of us, natural, but listening is something we can cultivate – be conscious and attentive of the sounds around you – the wind in the trees, the traffic, your daughter in the next room brushing her teeth, the traffic, your fingers tapping on the keyboard. Before and during a performance, I try to listen to the very subtle things going on around me in that particular space and in the audience. I try to hear what they might be hearing. . . this is hard to put into words. . . what they may want or need, and what I may be able to convey with my music.

Awaiting The Resurrection Of The Pedal Steel Guitar, interview by Spencer Grady, The Quietus, 2010.

Alcorn on the Many Tongues of Music

Alcorn: "In one respect, music is a single tongue - a universal language. That is true, but in another respect, there are many tongues in music, each with their own vocabulary and grammar. Though I can speak some of these tongues, I could never settle on or completely devote myself to any one language - to my ear, there was always something missing. So, along with my closest friend, the pedal steel guitar, I had to invent my own language with its own grammar, its own idioms and aphorisms. And am I actually accomplishing something with this? Maybe yes and maybe no, but this is what I feel compelled to do."

personal correspondence, September, 2017

Alcorn on her Philosophy

DK: Do you have a philosophy or some way of looking at life that you would be willing to share? (Questions inspired by Lloyd Peterson.*)

Alcorn: My philosophy of life is not really different than that of most people. On my better days, I hope that I am kind, compassionate, and loving; respectful of the world around me. In life I've always tried to follow my muse wherever it takes me and try to be real with myself in that context.

from "You Haven't Seen Everything Until You've Seen a Woman Playing Pedal Steel Guitar: An Interview with Susan Alcorn", *International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living*, Issue 11, 2017.

*Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde by Lloyd Peterson, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2006.