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Creativity through Silence: Exploring the Use of Meditation in Musical Performance

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INTRODUCTION: SELFLESS CREATIVITY

THE GOAL OF THIS ARTICLE is to outline the uses of meditation as it relates to musical creativity. Thanks to the now extensive list of scientific studies that support meditation as a way to significantly lessen the experience of performance anxiety, the musical and psychological worlds have accepted meditation gladly as an effective technique in stress reduction.¹ However, meditation gives more to musicians than just the positive benefits of relaxation; indeed, some would argue that too much relaxation can negatively affect a performance. Several recent studies have begun to show how meditation can boost the creative process as well. In their book *Mindful Learning*, Hassed and Chambers write,

Stillness only comes from nonattachment to all that is moving, such as the mind, emotions, and senses. It connects us with the quiet intelligence beneath the mind—this is where our creativity really springs from.²

This stillness can seem quite paradoxical, because the intentional quieting of our inner life and nonattachment to its contents might appear to leave us with few tools with which to create. However, while researchers are still discovering the neurological processes at work during meditation, we can understand this seeming paradox through actual practice and experience with meditation techniques ourselves. This is perhaps where meditation counters the scientific bias of the modern age the most; when we meditate, we rely on direct, first-person experience, rather than relying on an outside authority. We can, of course, use third-person research to support our findings, but our knowledge must come from our own experience, as teacher, student, or musician first, rooted here in the present moment. Therefore, if you have not familiarized yourself with meditation before, take every suggestion with a grain of salt, and try them all for yourselves.

We will begin by examining definitions of meditation and other contemplative practices, especially those that have been used in the service and inspiration of music. Then we will consider an overview of the research done on meditation in the domain of creativity. Finally, we will discuss meditation in the context of improvisation and composition to see how it has already

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shaped these fields. These sections also include possible applications taken from meditation techniques used in other disciplines, such as literature and acting.

DEFINITIONS OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES: SILENCE AND SOUND

There is a long-standing belief among music makers that silence is just as important as sound. One of the key markers of a true artist is the ability to balance both efficiently, for silence envelopes sound, being simultaneously the ground from which sound springs and the place to which it returns. How many times have we been mesmerized by the silence just after a concert has ended? Or even were held in suspense by the radiant feeling of spaciousness and timelessness through the course of a performance? These sensations are experienced by both audience members and performers, and they are what initially provoked my feeling that meditation may be a perfect companion to musical practice.

Just as there are many kinds of music, there are many kinds of meditation. Probably the most researched, and best known in Western society, is mindfulness meditation, which typically involves focusing on a single object of attention in a nonjudgmental way. This is not at all an easy thing to do. Try for a moment to observe anything for an extended period of time without judgment. Pick something simple like the sensations in the body. Rather than following your thoughts about the sensations, the names, the associations, the likes or dislikes, try to simply notice them. The mind will inevitably step in and say, “This is useless! What am I gaining from this?” But the more we stick with this experiment, the more we will find that it creates a sense of relaxation and spaciousness. This is the essence of mindfulness meditation, and can be done both formally (while sitting for extended periods of time) and informally (while engaging in other activities, like washing dishes, playing music, or just about anything else).

In addition to a purely secularized definition of mindfulness meditation, we also find its religious roots in the *dharma*, or teachings of the Buddha. Mindfulness was said to have been taught by the original Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama. It was taught that through practicing mindfulness with the various parts of human experience (body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*—meaning

“truth” or “the teachings of Buddha”), one would learn that there is no personal nature within any of them, and that the idea of “myself” is only an idea and not something found in actual experience.³ This realization of “no-self” has been given various names, such as “awakening,” “enlightenment,” and *samadhi*, and has been explored by composers and artists ever since Eastern teachings became popularized in the second half of the twentieth century.

Because of the spiritual (and in many cases religious) implications of these types of meditation, there is an apprehension to approach them scientifically or to teach them in higher education. One person to challenge this is music professor Ed Sarath at the University of Michigan, who uses a particular definition of contemplative practice under what he calls “integral theory,” which is a merging of many wisdom teachings from around the world (including Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism). The goal of all of them, he states, is to “not just enable heightened states of consciousness during the practice itself, but in fact to integrate this kind of experience into life as a whole,” adding that during these states, “there is an experience of profound wakefulness and clarity, even if the mind is extraordinarily silent and the body in a deeply restful state.”⁴ Sarath has used this definition in forming an undergraduate degree at the University of Michigan called Jazz and Contemplative Studies, which we will consider later in this article.

Of the various meditation traditions that aim toward these higher states of consciousness that Sarath describes, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism have particularly captured the attention of many musicians over the years, such as John Cage and Philip Glass. The meditation central to Zen, called *zazen*, involves a more “choiceless awareness” rather than the single-object concentration developed through mindfulness, but its goal is the same: to experience the world fully through the present moment.

RESEARCH: INSIGHT AND PROBLEM SOLVING

So how exactly does this restful state of wakefulness contribute to creativity? Most of the existing research on meditation and creativity concerns the meditator’s ability to problem solve, long known by creativity research-

ers to be a key component of the creative process. In musical performance, for example, the “problem” can be anything from deciding what emotion or story the piece is trying to express to how to shape a particular line in the most effective way.

The first of these studies we will consider focused primarily on the effects of mindfulness meditation on insight versus non-insight problem solving, the former requiring the letting go of traditional, habitual problem solving methods to discover a novel way of approaching a solution. In one experiment researchers noticed how meditation practitioners describe their meditations as involving “nonconceptual awareness” that “does not get hung up on ideas or memories” and “just observes everything as if for the first time.”⁵ By assessing the trait of mindfulness using a mindful attention awareness scale and administering insight and non-insight problems to their subjects, they found that in their seventy-one participants, there was indeed a significant correlation between the trait of mindful awareness and insight problem solving.

Another study demonstrated that meditation leads to less reliance on former knowledge by measuring degrees of mental rigidity and flexibility among mindfulness meditators. They explored this using the water jar paradigm, which is designed to “trap” participants by asking them questions regarding three hypothetical jars needed to fill a certain amount of liquid.⁶ The first line of questions in the experiment required complex formulas to solve, leading the participants to become “trapped” into this way of thinking for a later problem that required a much simpler solution. This is a measure of what is called the *Einstellung effect*, which describes rigid thought patterns that prevent more adaptive solutions to problems, often found right “under the nose.”⁷ The two experiments used in this study (one involving experienced meditators and a control group of nonmeditators, and the other involving two groups of nonmeditators, one that had gone on a mindfulness retreat and one that had not) demonstrated that the meditators in both experiments had significantly lower mental rigidity than the nonmeditators. This further reinforced the idea that meditation leads to less reliance on prior learned methods of problem solving.

A third study measured the effects of different types of meditation on *divergent* and *convergent* thinking, two

opposite ways of thinking that are often compared in creativity research. Divergent thinking is the capacity to imagine many possible answers to a problem or prompt, while convergent thinking is the process of selecting the most appropriate one for the situation.⁸ Both of these are of crucial importance to the creative process. In this experiment, experienced meditators were tested on the difference between Focused Attention (FA) and Open Monitoring (OM) meditations, the former belonging more to mindfulness meditation with focus on a particular object of attention, while the latter is found in variants of mindfulness meditation as well as *zazen* in Zen Buddhism, characterized by an open awareness of any thoughts or sensations. To measure divergent thinking, researchers used the Alternative Uses Task (AUT), and for convergent thinking, the Remote Associations Task (RAT). The results were that the OM meditators showed more flexibility, fluency, and originality to responses on the AUT, while FA meditators (contrary to their expectations) did not perform any better on the RAT than the control group.⁹ Researchers were at least able to establish a connection between OM-type meditations and divergent thinking, but more research is needed to further explore the differences between meditation techniques. What we can understand by this initial group of studies is that links between several kinds of meditation and creativity are slowly but surely being uncovered.

MUSICAL APPLICATIONS: WALKING THE WALK

We turn now to examining creative endeavors in music itself, and will relate them to both scientific research, as well as to the specific meditation techniques that may inspire them. There is, however, a subtle balance that needs to be addressed before we look at these applications.

Of course, for the sake of this article, we are looking at ways in which meditation can help in the process of making music, through practice, performance, composition, or improvisation. But we should never forget that meditation, like music, should be done for its own sake. In fact, if meditation has any goal outside itself, it ceases to be effective. Therefore, in considering the following examples of meditation in music, let us bear in mind

the similar goals they both share. As ethnomusicologist Benjamin Koen notes, when discussing meditation in the process of practicing to master a musical instrument,

I was never surprised to find that two common interests for virtually all students . . . would be: 1) To master their instrument or a piece of music; and 2) To find a transcendent, sacred place where they experience the ineffable in music.¹⁰

Indeed, when technical mastery is absent, the result is a disorganized presentation of the musical material, but when the ineffable fails to shine through, there is an equally grave (if not more grave) mistake of forgetting the purpose of the music. It is with this spirit that we examine these applications, in order to venture deeper into the space of connection, spirit, and joy that both music and meditation give us.

IMPROVISATION AS MEDITATION IN MOTION

A recent study was done on the effects of mindfulness on graduate students in an acting program at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. Acting is a sort of meditation in its own right. One must be fully absorbed in the moment and with the character and story in order to respond to it freshly, even though the lines may have been rehearsed. Nevertheless, student reactions included feelings of more presence in rehearsals and performance, a more available emotional freedom, and even cohesion as a group when prefaced with a short sitting meditation.¹¹

The same goes for musical performance, and especially musical improvisation, as it is typically done in group settings. Improvisation may be the most useful musical vehicle from moving from a purely musical experience to a spiritual one, but it is also a way of sharpening one's tools for listening and reacting while thinking in sound. There are many similarities between this activity and a contemplative state, especially non-genre-specific improvisation. Musician Stephen Nachmanovitch, a follower of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, wrote at length about the subject of improvisation, noting the power of its captivating, in-the-moment focus.

In improvisation, there is only one time: This is what computer people call real time. The time of inspiration,

the time of technically structuring and realizing the music, the time of playing it, and the time of communicating with the audience, as well as ordinary clock time, are all one. Memory and intention (which postulate past and future) and intuition (which indicates the eternal present) are fused. The iron is always hot.¹²

This intense engagement in the present moment, without judgments of the self or other, participant or observer, is the essence of meditation. In Buddhism, this state of complete absorption is called *samahdi*, and according to Nachmanovitch is characterized by “absorbed, selfless, absolute concentration.”¹³

Ed Sarath designed his Jazz and Contemplative Studies program at the University of Michigan based on this absorption and engagement in the present moment, of forgetting oneself in the activity, which is characteristic of *samadi* and other states of consciousness associated with meditation. He writes extensively about the process of improvisation as a tool for transcendence, but also about the effect of contemplative practices on heightening creativity.

. . . because as consciousness transforms an idea that was previously understood solely as a product of its past may, in turn, be also understood as a generator of future moments, different states of consciousness give rise to varying numbers of events that might be perceived within a given unit of time as measurable by the clock. With higher consciousness comes higher frequency of event perception. At this point spontaneity, inventiveness, and interactivity—key facets of improvisatory creative expression and impact—increase.¹⁴

To unpack this dense description, Sarath is commenting on the difference between “ordinary” perception, where a past event is simply seen as beginning and ending in the past, and “higher consciousness,” where there is one continuous beginning and ending. This enables the players to hear the gaps between musical events, and to root their awareness in them, thus allowing for attention to continually settle in the present moment.

Sarath's theories come to life in his Creative Arts Orchestra, begun in 1992, that specializes in group improvisation inspired by meditation which allows for the musicians to relate to each other from a higher consciousness. According to Sarath, the goal of this orchestra is to free students of their habitual ways of improvising

and patterns of playing and join an authentic discourse rooted in the present moment. This relates to the studies previously referenced on avoiding mental traps by relying less on previously learned knowledge and by using divergent thinking to arrive at the most adaptive solution. Here, we really see these theories in action.

Players in Sarath's orchestra begin their improvisation with a meditation, as well as a long period of silence after a performance or rehearsal has ended. Observers have noted how the students gave keen attention to reducing the products of the ordinary state of consciousness in themselves and others, like mindless "chattering" or "noodling" on their instruments.¹⁵ The improvisation, therefore, aims to be less self-focused, and more about the sounds that are being generated, or, as Sarath puts it, dissolving the ego "to give way to whatever music means."¹⁶

This kind of group improvisation activity, framed by meditation, helps students better understand their habitual behavior, in order to create in the moment, based on what is actually happening around them, rather than relying on previously learned patterns to improvise. Not only is this kind of activity beneficial to improvisers, but it also gives the human spirit something which it always desires: play. When describing the Sanskrit word *lila* ("divine play"), Nachmanovitch writes: "Lila, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love."¹⁷

Based on his idea of divine play, Nachmanovitch leads group improvisations across the country, and I was fortunate enough to attend one he "led" at the University of Southern California. I put "led" in quotation marks because all he did was lead us in a guided meditation, and then set us free to improvise. Before long, the fifty participants in the class were all engaged in a massive forty-five-minute improvisation that had no clear beginning or end in sight. Students afterward commented on the way the experience connected them to the feeling of joy that music can give us, when we allow ourselves discovery and spontaneity, completely free of inhibition.

To help generate the mental wellbeing of its students, music schools should consider setting up a monthly "play date," which would help stimulate interest in improvisation, as well as provide this outlet for pure joy and fun in music. Improvisational play of this sort can be considered an application of meditation techniques previously mentioned. Using mindfulness meditation,

one roots oneself in the present moment, ready to react in a spontaneous and creative way to whatever stimulus arises. Writer and artist Ansuman Biswas says of improvisation that

The difference between preparation and performance dissolves, and in practice, as in playing, a flow is released, a motion with eddies and currents within it. Areas of blockage or tension appear and disappear.¹⁸

This is the nonjudgment described in many forms of meditation, the nonattachment to specific forms arising in conscious awareness. It is what the spiritual teacher Adyashanti calls "true meditation."¹⁹

COMPOSING THE PRESENT MOMENT

Just as we can learn about present moment awareness and group cohesion from actors, so too can we learn about mindfulness and spirituality from writers and composers who use meditation to inspire them.

In writing, there is a practice of meditation that comes from the Jesuit tradition, also called "meditation." Like mindfulness, it involves the observation of thoughts, but unlike mindfulness, it involves an active relationship to thoughts as they come and go. This type of meditation has three stages: 1) a "composition of place," where one interacts and reacts to the environment through the senses; 2) an "internal colloquy," where the writer relates to the subject of the interaction by observing the inner connections and associations to it; and 3) a "resolution," whereby the question initially given at the beginning is answered.²⁰ This has much in common with the Zen tradition of *koans*. In this tradition, a question is given to the student to answer, usually a nonsensical one, like the famous riddle of "the sound of one hand clapping." The answer is perceived not through conscious thought processes, but through the act of meditation, through living the answer in one's own experience.

Similarly, author Gertrude Stein spoke of a sort of meditation that involves describing the process of perceiving outwardly as accurately as possible, using nonconventional words whose associations to ordinary definitions are loosened. She would also rarely revise her meditation compositions, as it would "change the perception and . . . make a different composition from the one originally written."²¹

Both of these types of meditations involving writing (one looking inward at one's associations, and the other looking outward at the act of perception itself) have strong common ground with contemplative traditions, and both involve being centered in the present moment by using either one's inner life or the outer world as an object of meditation. In mindfulness meditation, for example, one studies mindfulness of the body first—involving the breath, posture, and more “outer” experiences—then one follows with mindfulness of feelings and thoughts—both are “inner” sensations.²² When we create mindfully, therefore, we need not focus only on the senses, but we can be mindful of imagination and creativity as well.

It is not hard to see the connection between the use of meditative practices to assist prose composition, and musical composition. These practices invite a detachment from the experience, a knowing that it ultimately does not contain any trace of “self” in it, and is therefore “self-less.” Debussy spoke of this when he said, “I wish to write down my musical dreams in a spirit of utter self-detachment. I wish to sing of my interior visions with the naïve candour of a child.”²³ Most notably, the composers of the minimalism movement have taken this idea to its extreme, John Cage being perhaps the best example. Aside from his composition 4'33,” whose original title “Silent Prayer” reflects its spiritual implications, Cage's compositions all aim to “let sounds be themselves.” His advice on composition strongly reflects the non-judgmental attitude of Buddhist meditation traditions: “The wisest thing to do it open one's ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before one's thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical.”²⁴ Similarly, composer Philip Glass, a practicing Tibetan Buddhist, has contributed music highly reflective of meditative states, although he has been keen to dispute any connection between meditation and his music, saying “the real impact of Buddhist practice affects how you live your life on a daily basis, not how you do your art.”²⁵ Glass's music nonetheless reflects a way of listening identical to the practice of meditation when he asks his audiences to “discover another mode of listening—one in which neither memory nor anticipation . . . have a place in sustaining the texture, quality or reality of the musical experience.”²⁶

Finally, let us turn to psychologists Hassed and Chambers, who recommend applying the following mindfulness techniques to the creative process.

- Begin the creative process by practicing some mindfulness meditation.
- Next, gently rest the attention on the topic you wish to address.
- Avoid forcing the process.
- Be patient, open, and settled, simply letting the stream of thoughts related to the topic come and go as they will.
- Keep coming back to this place of openness and presence any time you notice the attention has wandered off.
- Remain patient and wait until an idea comes along that has a spark of inspiration or insight about it.
- Follow the idea and see where it leads.
- If it leads nowhere useful, patiently come back to resting the attention again on the question, topic, or medium.²⁷

We can see how these techniques embrace silence. Rather than treating silence as an experience to be avoided, they actually use it as the jumping-off point for creativity. In the end, all music comes from silence, so making this silence our home, our initial contact with creation, brings us closer to the source of musical inspiration and imagination.

CONCLUSION: MEDITATION BEYOND CREATIVITY

Just as the many facets of music-making can be addressed creatively—listening, practicing, conducting, performing, and interpreting—so too can meditation be applied to all of them. Meditation and other contemplative traditions may play a role in practice, for example, by helping musicians overcome their internal boundaries. Several musicians have developed such methods, like cellist Barbara Bogatin, who leads a workshop called “Tuning Your Instrument: The Buddha, the Brain, and Bach,” in which musicians learn to use mindfulness to increase their powers of observation, critique the sound rather than the self, and to stay concentrated in practice sessions.²⁸ Benjamin Koen has created his own method, called the Guided Attention Practice (GAP), which uses mindfulness techniques to change attitudes

around practicing and teaching.²⁹ Finally, psychologists Steinfeld and Brewer argue for a reconceptualization of playing as a mindfulness practice. They show that viewing practice this way helps to overcome practice avoidance and leads to decreased performance anxiety and increased musical flow.³⁰

I think all of us have come to music in part because we want to experience something greater than ourselves. We all yearn for magic, for something that at once carries us away from our problems, and at the same time gives us the courage to delve straight into them. The same can be said of meditation. How different, really, is the quest for just the right phrasing of a line, for the perfect way to communicate the music, from the silent inquiry into the subtle layers of thought, emotion, and the self? Both quests yearn for truth, be that truth relative or absolute. They both reject the notion that we are simply meaningless bodies wandering through an unfriendly world. They teach us that on a fundamental level, we are all connected, sacred, and free.

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After graduating *summa cum laude* from Skidmore College in 2011, having only begun to play classical guitar in his sophomore year, Aaron moved to Milan, Italy to study with the Italian virtuoso Lorenzo Micheli.

Then in 2013 he was awarded a Teaching Assistantship at the University of Colorado at Boulder for his Master’s in Music. There, studying under guitarist Nicolò Spera, he developed a strong interest in chamber music, performing with talented young artists such as the award-winning Altius Quartet. His passion for art song was also encouraged here while working with renowned German lied scholar Yonatan Malin, and he now performs regularly with singers in various contexts.

Returning to Italy in 2015, Aaron spent three weeks studying with Maestro Oscar Ghiglia at the prestigious Accademia Chigiana in Siena. He is now a Teaching Assistant at USC, where he is pursuing his DMA under guitarist and pedagogue William Kanengiser of the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet. Aaron has performed in master classes with some of the most renowned guitarists alive today, including Pepe Romero, Pavel Steidl, Dimitri Illarionov, and Paul O’Dette.

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