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Music and Mindfulness:

A Case for Adopting Mindfulness into Music Practice

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By

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ABSTRACT

The ever-growing field of mindfulness suggests that there must be benefits derived from training in and keeping a mindfulness practice. Mindfulness has been used for decades in the west as a health intervention to reduce stress and to cope with pain and anxiety. Mindfulness techniques have also been adapted and used to increase performance in other areas such as sports, the corporate world, and to help with creativity. In addition, government-funded research conducted by universities has been and continues to be done to study the efficacy of numerous mindfulness-based interventions. Because of this in mindfulness and from personal experience, this paper will argue that musicians should integrate mindfulness practices into their musical practice.

To make the case, this paper will first look to define mindfulness in order to understand on a theoretical basis of what mindfulness is, how it works, what it is doing, and the objects of what we are trying to be mindful of. Then the paper examines the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training and describes its foundations and formal and informal techniques to cultivate the skill of mindfulness. In chapter 4, we will take the knowledge from the previous chapters and describe how musicians can integrate a mindfulness practice into their daily musical routine. This paper will present not only hard evidence to support the call for musicians to adopt mindfulness training; this paper will also use personal anecdotes to explain certain concepts from a musician's point of view.

It is my reasoning that musicians should benefit greatly from the addition of a mindfulness practice and that these benefits will help musicians in many aspects of their musical lives.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This goal of this paper is to examine the practice of mindfulness and to make the case that musicians, composers, music teachers, etc. should be trained in and adopt a mindfulness practice and integrate the learned techniques into their daily musical routine. As with music, developing “mindful awareness” is a skill that takes practice. Because musicians have a regular practice, I feel that the musician is in a unique position to benefit greatly from integrating mindfulness into their routine to reduce stress associated with performance, gain better focus and attention during practice and performance, to enhance creativity, and to develop better interpersonal skills.

Over the last decade, “mindfulness” has become popular and has been seen to do many “miraculous” things. This is evidenced by doing an Internet search with just the word “mindfulness” to see that it has entered the mainstream where it is purported to be a “miracle cure,” as a way to help make your kids smarter (or you), or as a way to greater wealth. Mindfulness is pervasive, and there are many people teaching mindfulness in various capacities and with various skill levels. Because mindfulness is becoming entrenched in popular culture, it seems obvious that there must be some benefit from a mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness is not a new meditative practice, but one that originates from contemplative traditions in the East that use meditation to develop the “skill” of mindfulness. In the west, these practices have been secularized and continue to be

adapted for various groups like teachers, preventative health, sports, etc. Currently, the most studied mindfulness programs are interventions to help reduce stress in populations such as veterans, teachers, students, and healthcare patients and practitioners. Most of the mindfulness programs and research considered in this paper are ones that have been or are being studied scientifically to show efficacy.

If we look at groups using mindfulness to gain some benefit, the fields that are using it are fairly diverse. Mindfulness is used to enhance the performance of athletes, for example.¹ The military is looking into mindfulness as a way to help soldiers reduce PTSD from combat, while businesses are using mindfulness to reduce stress and get ahead in the world of capitalism.² But, the most studied and funded area using mindfulness is in healthcare to reduce stress and chronic pain stress and for interpersonal relations.³ In the above examples, we can identify a general trend for adopting a mindfulness practice – performance enhancement and stress reduction, and these are the two main reasons why I believe that musicians would benefit from mindfulness practice integrated into their music practice.

¹ Mitchell Plemmons, “The Role of Mindfulness in Sport,” *The Sports Mind*, (updated January 4, 2014): www.thesportinmind.com/articles/the-role-of-mindfulness-in-sport, accessed April 20 2015.

² Joyce P. Brayboy, “Mindfulness Study Explores Way for Soldiers to Manage Stress,” U.S. Army Research Laboratory (June 10, 2014): www.army.mil/article/127523, accessed April 20 2015. Schumpeter, “The Mindfulness Business: Western Capitalism is Looking for Inspiration in Eastern Mysticism,” *The Economist* (November 16, 2013) www.economist.com/news/business/21589841-western-capitalism-looking-inspiration-eastern-mysticism-mindfulness-business), accessed April 20, 2015.

³ Wendy Leebov, “The One Skill That Can Transform Health Care,” *Hospitals & Healthcare Daily*, (January 21, 2014): hnmag.com/display/HHN-news-article.dhtml?dcrPath=/templatedata/HF_Common/NewsArticle/data/HHN/Daily/2014/Jan/012114-article-hospital-patient-experience, accessed April 20, 2015.

One of the first adaptations of Eastern mindfulness was in the area of stress reduction by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. He developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program to help patients with a number of health and psychological concerns such as chronic pain, anxiety, stress, and depression, and heart disease.⁴ Since then, MBSR and other interventions have been implemented and tested with positive results from the mindfulness practices. Research into the effects of mindfulness is a fast growing field and since 1980, the number of published articles about mindfulness has steadily increased (see figure 1-1). In 2014 alone, there were 105 grants funded by the National Institutes of Health Evidence health that contained the word mindfulness in the abstract.⁵

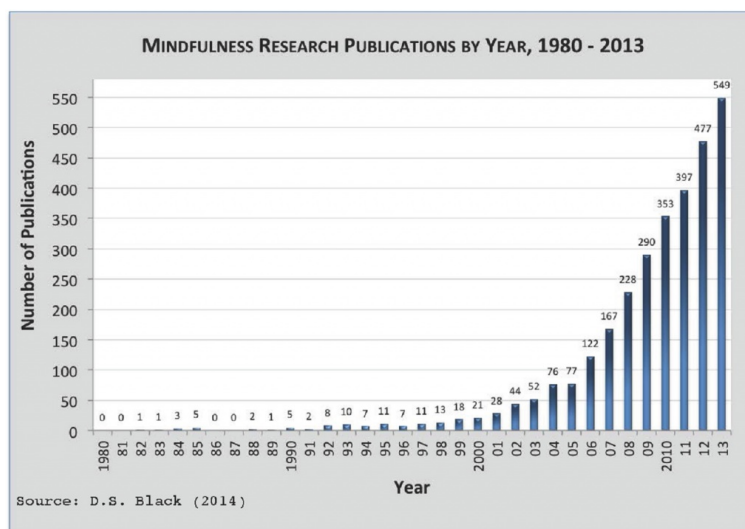


Figure 1-1: Mindfulness Research Publications by Year 1980-2013

⁴ Paul Grossman, Ludger Niemann, Stefan Schmidt and Harald Walach, "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Health Benefits: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 57, no. 1 (2004): 35.

⁵ Search tool link, <http://projectreporter.nih.gov/reporter.cfm>.

Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has so far funded research with awards of \$10 million dollars to study mindfulness-based interventions in the last six years.⁶ Obviously, the field of education is has far fewer grants awarded to study mindfulness but, it is worthy note, that the Pennsylvania State University seems to be at the forefront in mindfulness education research with three awards totaling about 5.5 million dollars.

The last reason why I believe a mindfulness practice should have a positive effect for musicians is a personal one. As a bassist and composer, I use mindfulness to help alleviate my performance anxiety and to help maintain focus while playing music and composing. I have found by practicing mindfulness and integrating it into my musical life has helped me in overcoming obstacles in my personal journey as a musician. I believe it can help and enhance other musicianship as well, and I hope to persuade make the case as to why musicians should adopt and integrate mindfulness practice into their lives as well.

With the above in mind, this paper will propose that because musicians have a daily musical practice, integrating a mindfulness practice into one's musical practice should be effective in alleviating a number of problems from which musicians suffer while enhancing the musician's practice, performance, and creative process.

In presenting this argument, chapter 2 will present material that will examine definitions and the mechanics of mindfulness. In addition, this chapter presents the concepts of mindful awareness, our automatic reactive tendencies, and the triggers that cause us to react in ways that may not be appropriate. Chapter 3 will examine the foundations of mindfulness and the meditative techniques used to cultivate mindfulness.

⁶ Search tool link, <http://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/>

Chapter 4 will first examine a few of the benefits from mindfulness practice before discussing how to integrate mindfulness into one's music practice. Finally, chapter 5 will briefly draw conclusions and ask for research to be conducted to study the effects on a population of musicians.

Chapter 2

What Is Mindfulness

Introduction

In this chapter, this paper will look to gain a better understanding of what “mindfulness” is by examining definitions of mindfulness. This chapter considers the mechanics of mindfulness and discusses the concept of mindful awareness and how it leads to the self-regulation of emotions, thoughts and habitual patterns of reactivity. Next, this chapter discusses how both internal triggers can cause a habitual response and shows how being mindful can bring one back to the present moment and help one become aware of one’s reaction to internal and external stimuli. Finally, this chapter will look at “scripts” and emotional triggers to gain a better understanding why and how we fall into our unconscious habitual patterns.

Defining Mindfulness

First, we must have an understanding that humans have the capacity to be aware and are able to attend to their thoughts and feelings through training of the mind and enter a state of mindful awareness by being in and experiencing the present moment as it is.⁷ The standard definition of secular mindfulness is: “paying attention in a particular way:

⁷ Virginia Anne Farnsworth-Grodd, "Mindfulness and the Self-Regulation of Music Performance Anxiety" (Ph D. Diss., ResearchSpace: Auckland, 2012), 24.

on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”⁸ If we examine this definition closer, the above definition appears to be a set of skills that could truly benefit the musician. Musicians need to pay attention while performing or rehearsing with the intention to make good music, without distractions (either internal or external) that may draw a musician’s attention away from the music, and with openness that makes the musician, other performers, and audience more open to the music as it experienced. I will explain this concept using my past experience as an example.

My primary mentor as an undergraduate student in jazz studies used to say to me in lessons and in rehearsals that “awareness cures.” He was quoting from Barry Green’s book *The Inner Game of Music* where Green was quoting Fritz Perls’ well known saying: “trying fails, awareness cures.”⁹ It took me a few years to figure out what he meant, but he was talking about being mindful or having mindful-awareness while playing. Being in a “mindful” state is experiencing the present moment and everything in that moment in a non-judgmental manner with intention. That is we do not place a value on or judge what is happening in the here and now. While performing, I want to be in the present moment to brush off a mistake I just made without having an internal dialog about it, or to lessen the fear of future mistakes in that ubiquitous hard passage I am about to play because, I have made it my intention to have a fun and give an expressive performance. As soon as we as performers begin to judge the moment with our thoughts, we have left the present moment and are reflecting on the past or are projecting our thoughts onto what might

⁸ Jonathan Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 4.

⁹ Barry Green and W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Music* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 30.

happen in the future instead of attending with focus to the music either in practice, rehearsal, or performance. Mindfulness is a metacognitive process. As Bishop et al state, mindfulness can partly be defined as “ the self-regulation of attention, which involves sustained attention, attention switching, and the inhibition of elaborative processing” – all of which I think are beneficial to musicians.¹⁰ What does this really mean and how does mindfulness work to keep one in the present moment to help with self-regulation and attention?

How Does Mindfulness Work?

Shapiro et al. have proposed a theory of how mindfulness works and break down mindfulness into three components: (1) intention, (2) attention, and (3) attitude. These components or axioms correspond with aspects of Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness: (1) “on purpose,” (2) “paying attention,” and (3) “in a particular way.” They also note that these axioms are not stages but a cyclic process that happens simultaneously as mindfulness is a “moment to moment process.”¹¹ They go on to posit that these axioms with other mechanisms of mindfulness, like self-regulation and cognitive, behavioral, and emotional flexibility, lead to a shift in perspective in that one is not caught up in one’s own personal life narrative but just witnesses that narrative as a separate phenomenon from the mind contemplating it.¹²

¹⁰ Scott R. Bishop et al, “Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition,” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11 (September 2004): 233.

¹¹ Shauna L. Shapiro, Linda E. Carlson, John A. Astin and Benedict Freedman, "Mechanisms of Mindfulness," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 62, no. 3 (2006): 375.

¹² *Ibid.*, 377.

Bishop et al. propose a model with two components that involves the (1) “self-regulation of attention” on one’s immediate experience and having (2) a “particular orientation of toward one’s experience in the present moment” with “curiosity, openness and acceptance.”¹³ If we look at Bishop’s definition, we see that his components seem to correspond with axioms two and three in Shapiro’s model.

Let us now look at a quote by Daniel J. Siegel, MD that elegantly defines mindfulness, while giving reasons as to why cultivating mindfulness is beneficial?”

Mindfulness is a way of being aware of what is happening within us and around us with a clear focus of attention on moment-to-moment experience that enables us to be fully present for life. In many ways, cultivating mindfulness means we develop the ability to sense life deeply and also to observe our experience as well.¹⁴

Siegel goes on to say that mindfulness is an “integrative practice” that helps us in regulating the executive functions of our thoughts, emotions, attention, and behavior. Furthermore, he states, “Mindfulness cultivates an interpersonal way of being integrated with others as we become more empathic, compassionate, and connected to those around us.”¹⁵ Over time as we cultivate mindfulness, we are developing a way of being aware that is called “mindful awareness.”

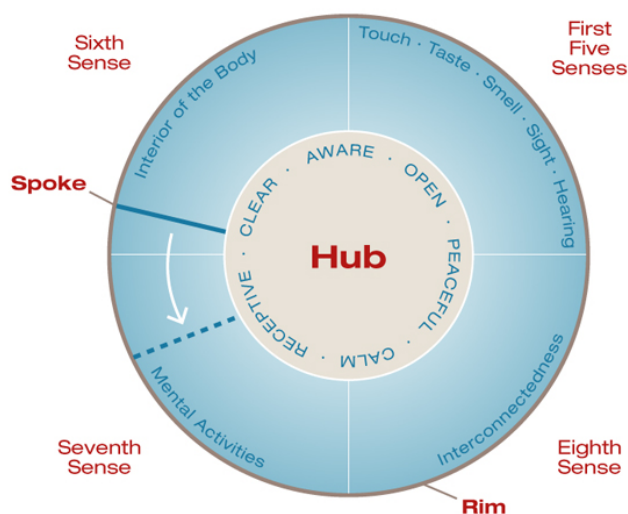
¹³ Bishop, “Mindfulness,” 234.

¹⁴ Patricia A. Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), xi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

Mindful Awareness

Mindful awareness is the ability to observe and sense our internal states of mind, feelings and emotions without reacting in an unconscious way.¹⁶ We become more receptive and non-judgmental to our life experiences rather than reactive to it, we become better able to see, hear, and feel what is actually happening both internally and externally to ourselves. In 2007, Siegel proposed a “wheel of awareness” that describes that which we are capable of being aware. It contains eight senses that include the standard five senses in addition to three more that are: (1) interior of the body, (2) mental activities, and (3) interconnectedness (see figure 2-1).¹⁷



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Figure 2-1: Dan Siegel’s Wheel of Awareness

¹⁶ Ibid., xi.

¹⁷ Daniel J. Siegel, “Wheel of Awareness” (Rev. 2014) http://www.drainsiegel.com/resources/wheel_of_awareness/, accessed April 20, 2015.

Upon examination, we see the five senses with the additional three senses. The hub represents our awareness and the outside or rim contains everything that we can be aware of. The first five senses give us input from the outside world, the sixth sense is input from our body (feelings and sensations), the seventh sense is input from the conceptual mind (thoughts, images, beliefs, attitudes, etc), and the eighth sense is the ability to be in “tune” with other people.¹⁸

By being aware of these sensory inputs and with practices described later, we can learn to react to events in our awareness with an open mind instead of reacting with autonomic “pre-programmed responses from our own neural processes.”¹⁹ Bishop states that through training, one’s thoughts and experiences are “observed as events in the mind,” and by not identifying with them, one does not slip into “habitual patterns of reactivity.”²⁰ Let us look at an example of a habitual or reactive pattern.

Again using my experience as an example, I can get very frustrated at slow drivers and, inevitably, I get stuck behind one when trying to get somewhere in a hurry; or at least I think I do. When I am not in a mindful state and get behind what I perceive as a slow driver, without knowing it, I begin to feel anger and become impatient. I also feel the need to pass this person as quickly as possible as I begin to ruminate on the thought that the slow driver is there to thwart my attempt to get to my destination on time (which is ridiculous). Upon noticing this reactive state of mind and the stress it induced, I begin to notice my elevated heart rate and breathing begin to return to normal. My anger and

¹⁸ Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid, xii.

²⁰ Bishop, “Mindfulness,” 232.

rumination lessen, and I realize that I will get to my destination at basically the same time.

When I am mindful and aware of my surroundings and situation, I may still be behind the slow driver, but I am less reactive to the situation, and I do not get angry and impatient nor do I ruminate over the experience. This shift in perspective of experiencing the moment as it is (non-judgmentally), instead of being reactive to the moment, leads me to accept the situation which usually leaves me in a better mood as well.

As an exercise, I ask you to think of something that makes you feel a little bit angry, sad, or that sets off an emotional response in you almost every time – like a pet peeve. Do not just think about it; try to feel how it felt when it happened. After a while, observe how you feel in the moment and observe your thoughts. Did you feel somewhat agitated? Did your heart rate go up at all and did your breathing pattern change? What were your thoughts like? Was there a change in your body like clenched fists or tension in your face? Most likely there was some change and it was your mind that created this response.

As you can see, we can induce feelings, emotions, and thoughts from our past experience by just thinking about them. Conversely, by bringing our awareness to the present moment by becoming aware of and observing our thoughts and feelings, we can shift our perspective and begin to see that by not over-identifying with the events, thought, and feelings, we can lessen the negative effects of our habitual reactive patterns through the development of “mindful awareness.”

Emotions and Scripts

In the car example earlier, one of the main components of my habitual response was the emotion anger. Emotions are involuntary responses to our environment that are preprogrammed and are influenced by life experience i.e., we have the emotion of fear but we can learn what to be fearful about.²¹ Emotion researcher Paul Ekman divides emotions into seven universal emotions: (1) anger, (2) fear, (3) surprise, (4) sadness, (5) disgust, (6) contempt, and (7) happiness. He explains that these basic emotions exhibit characteristics such as being capable of quick onset, of brief duration, have distinctive physiology, have distinctive thoughts, memories and images, and distinctive subjective experience.²²

Along the same line as the pure emotions above, we have “conditioned emotional responses” that were created in response to past emotional experiences that trigger automatic responses from us as well.²³ Ekman calls these patterns “scripts” and explains that emotionally charged past experiences distort our current view of reality, because, when something triggers a script, we react in with a conditioned response.²⁴

For example, when I think about my performance anxiety, it most likely stems from my father’s dislike of noise when I was growing up. I developed an emotional pattern that is a fear of being yelled at and criticized because my father would get angry

²¹ Paul Ekman and Daniel Cordaro, "What Is Meant by Calling Emotions Basic." *Emotion Review* 3, no. 4 (2011): 364.

²² Ibid., 365.

²³ Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, 82.

²⁴ Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* (New York: Owl Books, 2007), 45.

with me for making too much noise in addition to telling me how music was not in my best interest as a profession. I began to practice when he was not around and I quit inviting him to my concerts. Over time, this developed into performance anxiety and self-doubt. These were learned responses on my part and are based in the emotions fear and sadness. Using mindful awareness, I was able to observe these conditioned responses and as well as my reactions to the emotions I was experienced growing up and let them go.

Another example of reactivity from a learned script can be a fear of dogs after being bitten by one as a child. We must keep in mind that certain scripts we have may have developed when we were too young to remember and are sometimes difficult to become aware of.²⁵

Like in music, we get better with practice. It takes practice to become more mindful but we can learn to observe our automatic responses and, with time, develop the skill of mindful awareness to be more present in the moment and become less reactive to our environment in an unconscious way. Let us now turn to the mindfulness methods and practices to get an overview of training to become mindful.

²⁵ Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, 61.

Chapter 3

Components of Mindfulness Practice

Introduction

In this chapter, we will look at the foundational attitudes that are key in being successful in the MBSR and the meditations that comprise training in mindfulness. This section will draw from the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR): Standards Of Practice document produced by the University of Massachusetts Medical School and from other sources to present a general overview of mindfulness training.

In mindfulness, as in music, achieving proficiency takes time. Like music, mindfulness is a discipline; with continued practice, one can become better at being “mindful.” A typical MBSR training is delivered in a group format of eight weekly sessions for about three hours per session with the sixth week being a silent retreat for about eight hours. There is training in both the formal and informal meditation methods and practices that will be explained later in this chapter. In addition, there are daily home assignments of forty-five minutes of formal meditation methods and fifteen minutes of informal meditation practices that are done six days a week for the length of the course.²⁶

²⁶ Saki F. Santorelli, ed., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR): Standards of Practice,” *Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care & Society* (University of Massachusetts Medical School, Rev. 2014), http://www.umassmed.edu/PageFiles/63144/mbsr_standards_of_practice_2014.pdf, accessed April 20, 2015.

During the class sessions, a key component of the training is that the students and teachers have dialog and inquiry about the homework to look at and discuss any problems the student may encounter while developing and integrating mindfulness-based self-regulatory skills. This is an important feature that mirrors training in music in that you have a teacher who is proficient and skilled in mindfulness that can guide you through obstacles during training.²⁷

Foundations

It is important before discussing the methods and practices of mindfulness training that we should examine what Kabat-Zinn describes as the “foundations of mindfulness practice” which are: attitudes and commitment. He states that the attitude in which one comes to the practice of mindfulness is important. Kabat -Zinn finds that people that come to practice mindfulness with preconceived notions about the training and exhibiting the attitude of negativity or with the attitude of a “true believer” tend not to do well in the training. He has found that those coming to the practice with a skeptical but open attitude toward the training usually do best. It is important for the student to be open and be receptive to the idea that the training will have a positive effect. Being skeptical also helps the student because it drives curiosity and understanding about the process and can help keep the student on track and to remember why they are taking the training in the first place.²⁸ In effect, attitude is everything. Let us read Kabat-Zinn’s

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

explanation of the “attitudinal foundation of mindfulness practice” in the context of MBSR training.

Seven attitudinal factors constitute the major pillars of mindfulness practice as we teach it in the stress clinic. They are non-judging, patience, a beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. These attitudes are to be cultivated consciously when you practice. They are not independent of each other. Each one relies on and influences the degree to which you are able to cultivate the others. Working on any one will rapidly lead you to the others. Since together they constitute the foundation upon which you will be able to build a strong meditation practice of your own, we are introducing them before you encounter the techniques themselves so that you can become familiar with these attitudes from the very beginning. Once you are engaged in the ways you might continue to fertilize this attitudinal soil so that your mindfulness practice will flourish.²⁹

As one can see from the passage, these pillars are not separate but intertwined, and successful development of these attitudes attention to their interdependency. Let us now look at each of the pillars briefly.

Non-judging: This is the ability to step back and witness our own experience and see how we react to our mind judging internal and external phenomena. We tend to view the world as good, bad or neutral and, most of the time, we are not aware that we are

²⁹ Ibid.

constantly judging. By becoming aware of our judging, we can step back and just watch our judging taking place. Also, we should watch out for our judging our judging.

Patience: Patience demonstrates the wisdom to understand that things unfold in their own time. Developing this attitude is important because we need to be patient with ourselves and others and to be open to the idea that it takes time to see growth and change. Being impatient is our judging the present moment with our needs, wants and, expectations instead of being content with the here and now.

Beginners Mind: This is the richness of being in present from moment to moment and seeing things as they really are – like seeing something new for the first time and not through the reflection of our past experience. Again, Kabat-Zinn explains this concept with clarity:

...we should bring our beginner's mind with us each time we practice so that we can be free of our expectations based on our past experiences. An open, "beginner's" mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does. No moment is the same as any other. Each is unique and contains unique possibilities. Beginner's mind reminds us of the simple truth.

Trust: Trust in this sense means having trust in yourself, your feelings, your experience and your wisdom. Trusting yourself and your intuition is important in meditation training. Also, trusting in your body sensations is good as well. For example, if you are fatigued and tired from practicing your instrument and feel that you may hurt yourself if you go on, you should trust that your body and mind are giving you a sign to stop and take a break.

Non-striving: Paradoxically, striving to be better at meditation is an Obstacle.

Meditation, when it comes down to it, is an act of non-doing that involves paying attention to whatever happens in real time and not doing something about it. For example, if you are trying to play a hard passage and keep *striving* to get it right, you are focused more on getting the passage right and criticizing your performance than on the act of playing the passage without obstruction from your mind. Adopting the attitude of non-striving simply lets things happen in the present moment.

Acceptance: Simply, this means that you accept what is happening in the present moment and are willing to accept it. This is important because one can be in denial of or not accepting of how of events are happening in the present moment and this can cause a cycle of frustration and rumination that is not productive. It does not mean you don't like or are a passive witness to events as they happen. It also does not mean that you abandon your morals and values. By accepting things as they are, you have a better picture of reality that is not veiled by your fear, prejudice, and desires.

Letting Go: Letting go means letting things be as they are without our mind grasping or pushing things away occurring in our inner experience. When we get carried away with our thoughts, feeling or actions, usually we want to lengthen pleasant experiences in addition to wanting more of them. Conversely, we want to get rid of those that are not so pleasant as a protective mechanism. If we observe either the mind judging by wanting more of or pushing away of thoughts and feelings. We need to just let them be and let them do what they do as you just observe and let go of the judging, pushing,

and wanting come and go like waves on the water or wispy (and sometimes stormy) clouds.³⁰

Setting Intention

As in music, cultivating the attitudes above takes commitment, self-discipline and intentionality. If we remember the three axioms from earlier, intention was a key element in Shapiro's definition of mindfulness. Research shows that by having intentions, mindfulness practitioners were able to accomplish their what they wanted to do. Research also has found that intentions are dynamic and change over time depending if the practitioner's intentions were met. This is similar to reaching musical goals in practice and moving onto another goal.³¹

Jennings feels that setting intention is "realizing your sense of purpose" and is a powerful tool in aiding the transformative process of the mindfulness practice. She explains that goals and intentions are different because goals have a conclusion and that one can get caught up in a goal and become disappointed if it is not reached. Intentions are a course of action that can be modified or changed even throughout the course of a day – hence dynamic. One can also have more than one intention as well.³² So having and setting intention is an important factor in mindfulness and helps with long-term outcomes of mindfulness training and other goals.

³⁰ Santorelli, "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction," Appendix A.

³¹ Shapiro, "Mindfulness," 376.

³² Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, 23.

Mindfulness Methods and Practices

In this section we will look at the meditative components of mindfulness training. So far this paper has studied at the definition of mindfulness, gained a theoretical understanding of how mindfulness works, and has looked at how our emotions and scripts can be used as triggers for automatic reactions. In addition, we have explored the foundational attitudes and how intention can greatly benefit the cultivation of mindful awareness. Before we continue, let us examine another definition of mindfulness.

Shinzen Young poses the question, “What is mindfulness?” Young uses the analogy of fitness training to explain mindfulness training. People use physical exercise to increase baseline strength and flexibility to become physically healthier, whereas, the goal of mindfulness training is to increase “baseline clarity” and “baseline equanimity” to develop a “healthier” mind. One needs to practice mindfulness exercises regularly to make the effects noticeable and permanent for the long-term. Young also notes that unlike strength and flexibility, which decrease due to age, illness and injury, *clarity* and *equanimity* are usually not subject to the effects of old age.³³ Let us examine what clarity and equanimity mean in the context of mindfulness.

Clarity can be regarded as the ability to be aware of your moment-to-moment experience of the senses, emotions, thoughts, feelings, internal dialog etc. In our earlier definitions, this would correspond with attention. Equanimity as defined by Young is an “attitude of matter-of-factness” about the sensory input you are aware of as listed above

³³ Shinzen Young, “What is Mindfulness,” *Shinzen.org*, (Rev. May 24, 2012), <http://www.shinzen.org/Articles/What%20is%20Mindfulness.pdf>, accessed April 20, 2015, 2.

in clarity. This is being non-judgmental and not being reactive to from the input of your senses. Young goes on to describe equanimity this way: “equanimity becomes a radical non-interference with the sensory circuitry of your own nervous system.”³⁴

We must remember that mindfulness training is the training of the mind. With practice one can achieve mindful awareness where “we can both sense and observe our internal states” in addition to being open to our external world without being reactive to it like being on auto pilot.³⁵ In Young’s summation: “Mindfulness practice trains your nervous system to know itself better and interfere with itself less.”³⁶

Now that we have a basic understanding of the foundations of mindfulness practice, lets us now look at the practices of mindfulness – formal mindfulness meditation methods and the informal meditation practices as outlined in the *MBSR Standards of Practice*.

Formal Mindfulness Meditations Methods

Focused attention

This basic meditation is a sitting meditation and has been taught and practiced at about every retreat and meditation session I have attended. It involves directing and maintaining attention on an object (usually the breath), maintaining good posture, focus,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, xii.

³⁶ Young, “What Is Mindfulness,” 2.

as well as becoming aware of being distracted. This exercise helps relax and calm the mind of the meditator and helps increase the flexibility of focus and attention.³⁷

The meditation starts by sitting with good posture on a chair or mat in a relaxed manner and while focusing on the sensation of the breath. We breathe normally and make sure we are not controlling our breath, but just experiencing it as it occurs naturally without effort. Once our mind begins to calm, we begin to notice our thoughts, feelings, and other sensations. Inevitably, we will become aware that our focus has not been on the breath but on thoughts, feelings, and sensations – like we were whisked away on an unplanned journey. The thoughts may have been about anything such as an upcoming performance, a sore back, a car going by outside, etc. (distractions, in other words). When that happens, we bring our attention back to the breath. This will happen many times during the meditation and is normal because we are learning to become aware of how our mind works and how the body feels.

One thing that should be clarified is that we do not stop thinking and feeling – even during meditation – and this is a natural occurrence. Try to stop thinking! Did it stop or were you just thinking about not thinking? With practice, eventually the mind begins to settle more quickly during meditation as we begin to develop an increased awareness of our feelings and thoughts and they will become like environmental background noise. I equate the distractions to being in a practice room with others practicing next door. We know how annoying that can be at times, but like the noise in the other practice rooms, once we become settled into the meditation, our thoughts, feelings, and other distractions will begin to fade into the background as we become focused on our breath. With

³⁷ Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, 22.

practice, it will become easier to let go of distractions and keep our awareness on the breath and keep our focus on it for longer periods of time.

Just remember, once we notice that we have been following our thoughts instead of focusing on our breath, just bring attention to the breath without judgment.

Body Scan

The body scan is a method to deepen the mind-body relationship and help bring us to the present and by directing our attention to the body and how it feels. The goal of this exercise is to get in touch with the body and to notice sensations like the pressure of clothing or blankets on you or the weight of our bodies, any aches and pains we might have, or stress and tension in the body. Again, as in the focused attention exercise, the object is not to judge these feelings and sensations, but to be in the present moment and observe them. As an added benefit, it has been observed that people who do this meditation before going to bed report that it helps them sleep better.³⁸

This exercise can be done either sitting or lying down and begins by focusing on our breath and being aware of the sensation of breathing as in the focused attention exercise. After calming the mind, we move your attention to our feet and work our way up throughout the entire body just observing how each part feels. We may notice tension in certain places and may notice that the tension becomes less as we draw our attention to it. Again, we do not try to do anything in reaction to becoming aware of how the body

³⁸ Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, 79.

feels (like lessening tension or thinking of how you need to go to the chiropractor), but we are only to observe the sensations in the present moment.

Walking Meditation

The walking meditation is another standard technique to bring one into the present moment. It involves nothing more than walking and being aware of the step of right foot, left foot – but, it is not really that simple. As we get more proficient in the meditation, the steps become slower and more deliberate as we begin to break down the steps into more components: like lifting the foot, moving it forward, moving it down, and placement on the ground. We will also begin to observe and feel sensations like weight on the foot, how the ground feels, etc. After becoming proficient at observing the mechanics of walking, we may begin to notice the mind becoming aware of the movements. This is good and is a sign of a metacognitive act in that we become aware of becoming aware.

If we examine the above mindfulness meditation methods, we see that they involve using the body as the focus of the meditation to facilitate training our minds to develop increased attentions and focus to ultimately develop mindful awareness. These meditations are done with the purpose of training the mind to become aware of itself and the body in order for us to observe how we become reactive to our internal and external world and to understand how these reactions unfold over time. With practice we can take these skills and apply them in the “real world” of everyday activities and interactions. Let us now get an overview of the informal practices.

Informal Mindfulness Meditation Practices

The informal mindfulness practices are about bringing mindfulness to everyday life. After all, this is the purpose of training in mindfulness. As we become aware and learn to observe how we react to common events that are either pleasant or unpleasant, we can notice and bring attention to our present moment to override our habitual reaction to our everyday experience. We can be aware of our breathing at any given time and use our breath as a way to instantly bring us to the present moment. We can also use everyday activities as a substitute for the walking meditation. I use driving as a mindfulness practice in addition to playing music or while standing in line at the store. If we remember from earlier, we want to bring the benefits of meditation to our everyday lives. Below is a classic example of an informal mindfulness practice you can use to increase awareness and one you can practice everyday – mindful eating.

I can't remember when I first learned this exercise, but I do know it is modeled after Kabat-Zinn's raisin exercise used in MBSR. This is an early introduction to informal meditation practices that demonstrates how we can become aware of our body sensations and feelings in addition to thoughts we may have about eating. In this meditation, we hold, touch, see, and smell our food in the non-reactive and non-judgmental manner and notices the sensations and thoughts as they occur. Next we notices how it feels as the food is brought to the mouth and how it tastes as the food is chewed. Before swallowing, we should notice the automatic response of swallowing the

food as it arises and then swallow. After, swallowing we should then be aware of how it feels once the food has been eaten.³⁹ I personally find this way of eating enjoyable.

Again, if we look at the informal practices, all we need to do bring our awareness to the moment and notice our thoughts and feelings as they arise during our everyday actions. Eventually, the practice of mindfulness will become habit and second nature.⁴⁰ Like practicing music fundamentals and etudes, after a period of time we do not think of playing certain patterns that we recognize from our practice – we just play them. It is the same with mindfulness. As we develop greater facility of becoming aware of our thoughts, feelings and reactivity, we are better able to be mindful of these thoughts and actions and to not be affected by them to curb our undesirable automatic reactions.

In the next chapter, we will explore the benefits of mindfulness and how we might integrate mindfulness into our musical practice.

³⁹ Mark G. Williams, *The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 55-6.

⁴⁰ W. Robert Roeser and Philip David Zelazo, "Contemplative Science, Education and Child Development: Introduction to the Special Section," *Child Development Perspectives* 6, no. 2 (2012): 145.

Chapter 4

The Mindful Musician

Introduction

As stated earlier, I have long suffered from performance anxiety. This anxiety was not limited to the stage but happened during lessons and ensemble rehearsals. I am sure a number of the symptoms I suffer from will be familiar to many: nervousness, lack of concentration, increased heart rate, sweating, shaky limbs, and the ever present chatter of the mind thinking of “things” that are either a negative in nature or of things not related to music.

When I have composed music, I have been very critical of my work during the compositional process and this has contributed to having many hard drives littered with folders of compositions that are in various states of completion. As a teacher, students frustrated me and I was impatient and often harsh with them (script?). I actually gave up teaching for many years because I did not want to be “the teacher” that discouraged a student from the joy of music.

I began to use mindfulness in conjunction with my instrumental practice routine a number of years ago. At first, I would use a breathing exercise to calm the mind before warm up exercises such as scales. I then began to use sustained notes and breathing to bring awareness to the tone produced to observe my technique, posture, and to quiet the mind much in the same way as I use a walking meditation. Later, I began to use orchestra

rehearsal as a way to check my reactions to such things as constantly stopping and starting, counting rests, and anxiety in hard passages.

Over the years, my initial practice has expanded to most aspects of my musical life where I am more aware of what I am doing musically in the present moment. In addition, It has helped decrease my anxiety and fear of performing, has made practicing more efficient, has helped my creativity, and has made me a more patient and accepting teacher.

Before getting discussing how to integrate mindfulness practice with music practice, let us briefly examine evidence that shows some of the benefits from a mindfulness practice that should be of interest to the musician.

Stress Reduction, Anxiety, and Health

It is common knowledge that musicians use beta-blockers and other anti-anxiety drugs to reduce stress for performances and auditions.⁴¹ As the name implies, MBSR and other interventions are have been used to reduce stress as well as other ailments such as pain, psychological stress, immune system functioning and to help treat depression.⁴² Besides treating people for problems, there are positive outcomes in practicing mindfulness. Research has shown that these interventions also promote flexibility in

⁴¹ Kumar Krishnan, "The Musician's Steroid: The Controversy Surrounding Beta Blockers," *The Triple Helix Online* (June 5, 2015): <http://triplehelixblog.com/2013/06/the-musicians-steroid-the-controversy-surrounding-beta-blockers/>, accessed April 20, 2015.

⁴² Alberto Chiesa, Raffaella Calati and Alessandro Serretti, "Does Mindfulness Training Improve Cognitive Abilities? A Systematic Review of Neuropsychological Findings," *Clinical Psychology Review* 31, no. 3 (2011): 449.

thinking, helps with emotional reactivity and self-reflection, and improves learning and memory.⁴³

In the area of creativity, it seems that developing our ability to keep our attention focused and being open to experience, affects cognitive functions. These effects are linked to divergent thinking that helps with creativity in that it can facilitate “the generation and consideration of multiple ideas and solutions critical to situations that require a high degree of creativity.”⁴⁴

It seems that becoming more mindful should enhance our musical lives by reducing our stress, increasing our mental capacities and by fostering creativity – all positive and helpful to a musician. Let us now look at the concept of “flow.”

Flow

We have all heard about being in the “flow.” In the area of sports it is known as “the zone.”⁴⁵ I am talking about the “flow” of being in the present moment where all activity becomes effortless and natural. Here is a composer describing being in a flow state:

⁴³ Britta K Hölzel and others, "Mindfulness Practice Leads to Increases in Regional Brain Gray Matter Density," *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 191, no. 1 (2011): 36.

⁴⁴ Lorenza S. Colzato, Ayca Ozturk and Bernhard Hommel, "Meditate to Create: The Impact of Focused-Attention and Open-Monitoring Training on Convergent and Divergent Thinking," *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (April 2012): 1.

⁴⁵ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 91.

You yourself are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist. I've experienced this time and again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching in a state of awe and wonderment. And it just flows out by itself.⁴⁶

This above quote describes not being attached to an outcome and letting things unfold without intervention in a state of self-forgetfulness that Goleman describes as the opposite of rumination, which is what we do when we focus on our mind chatter and other distractions. When in flow, we are in a state where our actions are “merged with awareness” and we are better able to let the fruits of our practicing or creative endeavor come through us without hindrance from ourselves.⁴⁷

By practicing mindfulness, we are in effect training to be in a state of flow while practicing, performing, creating, or doing anything for that matter. Being in flow, in essence, is free from emotional distractions while being highly focused with intense concentration with an ease of effortlessness in whatever creative task is at hand. If we are too attached and emotionally involved with our work, the emotions strive to take over the limbic system and remove us from flow, which can be frustrating and immediately takes us out of the present moment.⁴⁸

As an example, let us imagine we giving a great performance and are feeling excitement and joy from the experience because the first movement went so well. We may begin to react to our emotions and begin to identify with the experience. We may

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 92.

lose our concentration and mistakes might occur thus setting off a chain of emotions and thoughts and take us out of the flow. It is important to remember, in learning to maintain flow, that we should do whatever activity we are engaged in and not judge our actions. Being in flow is an ideal state for a musician and mindfulness helps cultivate qualities that are conducive to being in that state and to enhance our musical lives.

Integrating Mindfulness with Music

As one might guess, integrating mindfulness into one's musical life is about being mindful of our actions in the present moment without being reactive in a negative or positive way to what we are doing musically at any given moment. We just let the moment be and let the musical task at hand unfold from us effortlessly. As alluded to earlier, bringing mindfulness to music practice is about being aware of our state of awareness while we practice in a non-judgmental way. As in the walking meditation, we are aware of what we are feeling and thinking, and of our body sensations. We use the act of "doing something musical" as the focus of the meditation while being aware of our internal reactivity and just let the thoughts and feelings come and go without judgment and without reacting to it. With this in mind, let us look at how we may benefit from bringing mindful awareness to our music practice.

Improved Practice

I used to dislike doing scales and other music fundamentals, which is not very conducive to being a good musician. However, they are part of every musician's life and we need to do them. Once I began to bring mindfulness to my music practice, I noticed that my mind would constantly comment on the warm up exercises and how I needed to move on to what I "needed" to practice. I thought of practicing fundamentals as a chore instead of an integral part of my daily routine. I would rush through the warm up and move to the main focus of the day's practice and the distractions would continue. This was not an efficient way to practice and I never truly made good use of my time. At least I became aware of my own thoughts.

Next, I began to notice that I was uncomfortable much of the time that led to fixing problems with my posture. I also began to really hear the quality of my tone, my articulation of notes, how in tune I *really* played, and my tendencies to rush and slow down. Of course, I was self-critical for a long time, but as I became more aware of my tendencies and I became able to curb the thoughts without reacting to them and focus more on technique, posture and on the notes themselves.

To be sure, thoughts still come and go and I still play out of tune and rush when I am excited and lose my focus – albeit less so. One thing has changed with lessened internal distractions, however: I am able work through a problem area and make adjustments in my technique more quickly, thus lessening the time it takes to get a passage worked up or in keeping that C major scale in tune.

Because I brought the self-observation skills and intentionality I learned from mindfulness techniques to music practice, it has become easier for me to observe my own practice objectively. Also, practice is much more fun as I do not judge what is being practiced – I just do what needs to be done. Overall, the best benefit is the added time I have to work on music because I am not spending time thinking about how it is going or how bad I sound; I just get into a flow and, with awareness and letting go vs. being reactive, things just get done in a more efficient manner.

Everyone has heard about the 10,000 hours it takes to master something. Imagine how being mindful of our thought and actions may lower these hours as we become more efficient and focused during practice.

Performance and Flow

We all want to sound good while performing. Stress, self-doubt, fear, how one feels physically, and other factors can lead to a bad performance if they take you out of the moment and, ultimately, away from the music while performing. All we need to do is bring mindful awareness to our performance. As I know, it is not so easy to do.

Barry Green, in his book *The Inner Game of Music*, has a chapters dedicated to coping with such problems such as letting go and how to overcome both internal and external obstacles.⁴⁹ He also gives advice and exercises on how to refocus attention and some strategies to minimize the effects of anxiety like taking breaths to lower the heart

⁴⁹ Based on Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (New York: Random House, 1974), a book written before mindfulness became popular.

rate, drinking some water if your mouth is dry, and changing posture if your body is stressed or in pain.⁵⁰

By becoming aware of your obstacles while performing and using strategies to cope with them, you can alleviate a number of problems that can hinder your performance and disrupt your flow. The work that we do in practice while being mindful can help alleviate stress, keep the mind chatter down, and can keep us in the moment for longer periods of time while performing. But how do we learn to stay in a flow state as performances occur less frequently than practice? That is what rehearsals are for!

I use rehearsals to practice being mindful for an upcoming performance. If we think about it, we are in effect performing for the conductor and for the others in our ensemble during rehearsals. If we are performing solo, we are usually performing for our teacher and, if being backed up by an ensemble, for the other players as well. The rehearsal is a great time to practice being mindful before performing for an audience as mistakes don't matter as much. As for the performance, we hope that all of our practice and rehearsing will bear the fruit of passionate and creative performance.

Creativity and Improvisation

As we learned earlier, mindfulness practices help develop our creativity and open our minds to new solutions to problems, just as being attached to perceived outcomes can hinder our openness to new experience and dampen our creativity. Understanding these relationships is important because the goal of being creative is to be in a flow state to

⁵⁰ Green, *The Inner Game*, 119.

harness musical ideas or to play what you hear in the moment while creating or improvising. Again, our minds and bodies can be a hindrance to the goal of being in and maintaining flow.

Jazz pianist Kenny Werner has an anecdote about musicians being too attached to outcomes because they “care too much” about the results of a creative act instead of the “doing” of the act. We want to sound good, perform well, write masterpieces, or land the next gig. The reason why does not matter. Werner goes on to explain that having these wants and desires are detrimental to our envisioned outcomes (intentions) because we try too hard (strive) to it happen instead of letting go and having the creative endeavor unfold and bear witness to the arising and execution of a musical idea while improvising, to capturing a musical thought on paper, or to just let the muse take over and perform the piece that we may have worked so hard to prepare.⁵¹ When we bring our awareness to our creative work, we can get out of our own way and just let it happen.

Music is a creative endeavor that is not limited to just improvisation and composition and we can bring creativity to many aspects of our musical lives. As stated earlier, mindfulness practice helps developing creativity and promotes ways of thinking that helps find multiple solutions to various problems. We can be creative in our practice to come up with different solutions for fingerings, bowings, and other techniques. We can be creative in how we approach a composition for performance. As teachers, we need to be creative in our pedagogical approach to fit the needs of individual students. Being receptive to the needs of students in the present moment is important because it can lead

⁵¹ Kenny Werner, *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within* (Book + Cd Set) (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold, 1996), 39.

to the “ ah ha” moment. This brings us to the final section of this chapter – interacting with others.

Interacting With Others

So far this paper has focused on how we as individuals can use mindfulness to help ourselves become better musicians and, I hope, better human beings. Musicians generally do not live in a vacuum (except in the practice room) and usually interact with others in ensembles, lessons, and with colleagues. We must remember that others experience life in much of the same way we do as we all have moments that are challenging.

As with being mindful of how you feel, think, etc., we can apply mindfulness in how we relate to other people. This is called interpersonal mindfulness.⁵² Jennings and her colleagues have developed a definition of interpersonal mindfulness that she uses when working with teachers. This definition, more like guidelines, should apply to interactions with most people and groups as well. Their definition is as follows:

- Listening with full attention to others
- Present-centered awareness of emotions experienced by oneself and others during interactions
- Openness to, acceptance of, and receptivity to others’ thoughts and feelings
- Self-regulation: low emotional and behavioral reactivity and low automaticity in reaction to the everyday behaviors of others
- Compassion for oneself and others⁵³

⁵² Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*, 7.

⁵³ Ibid.

The above follows what was outlined earlier in this paper but with an emphasis on with relating to and being accepting of other's situations. I find this way of being and working with others helpful because I feel more present while rehearsing or performing with an ensemble. I am also able to be open to other's ideas while communicating with a student or colleague because, I listen to them instead of judging or trying to find a solution to what they are saying while they are saying it. Another outcome of being mindful of others is that I tend not to fall into reactive patterns because of how someone acts, speaks, or plays music. All of the above guidelines should make for better teaching and personal interactions when playing music.

If we look at the final part of their definition, we see it involves having compassion not only for others, but for ourselves as well. If we can have compassion for our own situations and are forgiving to ourselves for our states of mind, our feelings, and our reactive patterns, then we can develop true compassion and empathy for others because we share a universal human experience. Music is a shared experience that brings people together as performers and audience members to be part of something that is universal to all cultures.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusion

This paper began as an attempt to make the case as to why musicians should adopt a mindfulness practice and integrate it into their daily musical routine. It is hoped that by giving an overview of what mindfulness is and how it works on theoretical, foundational, and practical levels, I have motivated musicians to take an interest in and practice mindfulness to enhance their musical lives and creativity.

Another purpose of this paper is to generate interest for developing musician specific mindfulness trainings and to study the effects of such trainings. Any mindfulness training should be feasible in a university setting and should be done in conjunction with other departments and disciplines with both students and faculty. My hypothesis is that musicians are better equipped to do well in a mindfulness course because of their experience and discipline in maintaining a music practice. In addition, there should be positive benefits to all participants of such a study as evidenced by material presented in this paper.

Beyond MBSR and other clinical interventions, there is plenty of literature about mindfulness in addition to mindfulness programs and workshops to explore as the field of mindfulness continues to grow and work its way into our society. There are also mindfulness-based books and workshops targeted to the arts and musicians specifically. I

wish point out that a mindfulness program is only as good as the person teaching it.⁵⁴

When searching out a program to evaluate and/or practice, one should look for a respected and experienced teacher. As musicians, we should be able to understand this as we all have probably had both good and bad teachers. Also, it is best to study with more than one teacher because everyone has a different perspective on the material and a different teaching style.

To conclude, I hope that this brief overview will generate interest among musicians to in using mindfulness to help not only the individual become a better musician, but to help raise the level of quality and creativity of music itself. Music is a beautiful thing and I truly believe that getting out of our own way and letting the muse flow through us will make music a more enjoyable experience for everyone.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 281-2.

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