

MINDFULNESS FOR MUSICIANS: RECLAIMING ATTENTION IN TODAY'S MULTI-TASKING WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness meditation has received extensive recent press as a way to enhance mental focus, improve brain health, and relieve stress in today's digital, multitasking world. Mindfulness has been widely applied in the fields of business, K-12 education, psychotherapy, holistic medicine, and athletic training, but has received less attention from music educators.

Music is a ripe application for mindfulness practices since the present moment is the canvas on which our art unfolds. Present-centered awareness is a necessary condition for peak musical performance. This presentation explores what mindfulness is, how it is practiced, and why it is valuable for music teachers and students. Participants will practice techniques to awaken students' attention and musicality during lessons and individual practice. Daily practices will be offered to help musicians increase focus, be calm, and maintain present-centered awareness in their musical and non-musical activities.

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What is “mindfulness”?

“Mindfulness is deliberately paying full attention to what is happening around you and within you—in your body, heart, and mind. Mindfulness is awareness without criticism or judgment. “ (Bays, 2011, 2)

“...I define mindfulness operationally as *the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.* (Kabat-Zinn 2013, xxxv)

“Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness.” (Ibid, xlix)

What obstacles to mindfulness do we encounter in today’s world?

1. The Myth of Multitasking
2. Allowing digital media to “divide and conquer” our attention into sound bites, blurbs, and blinks
3. Worrying about product before process

Why is mindfulness particularly crucial for musicians of today?

1. The sounds and silences of music unfold on the canvas of time.
2. Music uplifts us in proportion to our present-centered awareness as it unfolds. Musicians need their minds as well-tuned as their instruments and playing technique.
3. In mainstream society of today, mindfulness is not our brain’s default setting. We live in an age of divided attention. Mindfulness practices can help musicians keep their attention spans sharp despite the distractions of our digital age.

I. HOW CAN WE ENHANCE MINDFULNESS THOROUGH PRACTICE?

Formally: Meditation

Requires some time (ranging from a few seconds to one or more hours) allocated to daily practice. *As little as 10 minutes per day works wonders!*

Hint: It's like taking your mind to the gym

Informally: Single-tasking

May be incorporated into your existing daily schedule. This is awareness while executing common daily tasks. Hint: Your mind takes the stairs rather than the elevator.

Intensively: Retreats

Requires an extended break from your daily schedule. Disconnect from routine of life for a half or full day. Hint: A spa or resort for your mind.

II. WHAT ARE THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF MINDFUL PRACTICE?

A. Physical: induces *relaxation response*, the antidote to the effects of stress (Benson, 2000)

1. Decreases: blood pressure, body temperature, heart raise, muscle tension, oxygen consumption,
2. Increases: muscle range of motion, sense of well-being through production of dopamine, efficiency and depth of breathing
3. Lessons oxidative damage to cells when reacting stress (Dusek, 2008)
4. Enhances other treatments for chronic pain (la Cour 2015)

B. Immune system & genes

1. Enhances effectiveness of drug therapy for psoriasis (Kabat-Zinn 1998)
2. Enhances antibody response to influenza vaccine (Kabat-Zinn 2003)
3. Mindfulness is associated with longer **telomeres** (DNA strands essential for cell division) which shorten as we age and experience stress (Kabat-Zinn 2000)

C. Psychological: less anxiety, anger, and loneliness; improved stress management, confidence, social relationships, mental focus, emotional intelligence (Ibid.)

D. Brain Health

1. Improves brain function: habitual meditators have more activity in the left prefrontal cortex (PFC) than the right, resulting in improved moods and more positive awareness and engagement with life activities. (By contrast, individuals who feel habitually anxious depressed or hypervigilant have more activity in the right PFC.) The amount of left PFC activity was proportional to the amount of time spent meditating, ranging from Tibetan Monks with 10,000 to 50,000 hours of experience, to office workers who completed an 8 week course in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. (Davidson 2003)
2. Improves brain structure: meditators show less loss of gray matter with age than non-meditators. Resulting in greater ability to sustain attention. (Pagoni 2007). Meditation produces measureable changes in a section of the brain stem involved in production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that promotes positive moods. (Siegel 2010, 36)

III. FORMAL MEDITATION PRACTICES

General suggestions

Sitting Practice

1. Begin with a minute or two of gentle stretching and movement covering head to toe.
2. Determine the amount of time you will allocate for your mediation session. Set a timer to alert you when you are done, so you won't need to follow the clock.
3. Assume a comfortable and noble seated position.
 - a. Sit at front of chair or on a cushion with legs crossed.
 - b. Spread sit bones out.
 - c. Let spine release into length and alignment:
 - i. Shake head "yes and no" to find balanced position. Head over neck
 - ii. Neck over shoulders
 - iii. Shoulders down and wide
 - iv. Spine long over pelvis
 - v. Feel chair supporting your sit bone
 - vi. Feel floor supporting your feet and legs
4. Eyes: start with eyes closed. As your attention stabilizes try opening your eyes and glancing softly down 45 degrees toward the floor 4-6 feet in front of you.
5. Don't force your attention, just let it rest gently on the focus of your meditation
6. If your attention wanders to other thoughts or feelings, gently accept them, say "later", and return to the object of meditation.

7. Don't judge yourself. If your mind wanders and you recognize that, you are growing in mindfulness. Be an impartial observer of your own mind and body know that by your act you are connecting with a community of people joining you in a journey to your best self.
8. If you sense discomfort, adjust your position just enough to continue (e.g., wiggle toes or fingers, rock sideways or foreword, adjust your gaze)
9. When you are done, take a moment to settle in to your surroundings. Reflect on your experience. What did you enjoy? What was difficult? Consider making a journal entry. How can you act today upon your insights?

Breath Awareness

1. Begin by emptying your lungs with a slow deep exhalation.
2. Four-part breath: inhale—gently hold—exhale-gently hold
3. Continuous breaths: merge inhalation and exhalation seamlessly while observe the motions and sensations in your abdomen and nostrils
4. Breath counting: 3 breaths-5 breaths-10 breaths-20 breaths
 - a. Count at the end of each exhalation.
 - b. If you lose count, start over or make your best guess and the next number and continue—it's all good.
 - c. When you can maintain your desired count, shift to another focus (mantra, body scan, listening)
5. Breathing with mantra: (adapted from Naht Hahn 2015):

INHALE	EXHALE
Breathing in.	Breathing out.
Breathing deep.	Breathing slowly.
Feeling calm.	Feeling ease.
Smile.	Release tension.
Resting in the present moment	This is a wonderful moment

Body Scan

1. To begin, stabilize your attention by counting 5, 10, or 20 breaths. Then proceed to step 2 or 3 below.
2. Full body scan: direct your breath to each of the following body parts in turn. If you have trouble feeling an area, scratch it gently with your hand: top of head, face, back of head, neck, etc. down to toes.
3. Partial body scan: identify a part of your body that feels tense or sore. Direct your breath there. Inhale softness, exhale and release into length.

Mindful Listening

1. To begin, stabilize your attention by counting breaths, and or complete a partial or full body scan.
2. Let your breath and body sensations rest in the background of your attention as you listen to sounds in your surroundings.
3. Listen to prominent sound. Listen to the quietest sound you can hear. Enjoy the different pitches and timbres, like you would a piece of music.
4. Can also strike a piano tone with pedal or a bell or other decaying sound and listen until you cannot hear the sound anymore

Walking Meditation

1. Find a private room or outdoor area.
2. Walk as slowly and silently as possible. Focus your attention on any or all of the following:
 - a. Your breath
 - b. Four-part movement of each foot: lift, swing, place, roll
3. Walking practice can be especially helpful when you need to change your level of energy. You can use it to calm yourself down after an active or stressful experience, or to rouse away your “blahs.”

Loving-kindness Practice

1. To begin, stabilize your attention by observing and counting your breath.
2. Wish happiness and health to yourself, to one or more loved ones, to a friend, to an acquaintance, to someone you don't know, someone you don't like, to all beings.
3. Adaptation for religious observers: mentally recite or chant an original or liturgical prayer as you sit and breathe calmly.

IV. USING FORMAL MEDITATION DURING MUSIC LESSONS AND INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE

Formal mediation practices can be used in miniature to refocus the mind before during and the end of the session.

SEGMENT	MUSIC LESSON	INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE SESSION
Beginning	Post sign in entrance: Count 10 breaths. Have students practice mindful breathing or body scan if they arrive early. Begin lesson by taking 3 to 5 mindful breaths with the student.	Devote 5-10 minutes to stretching, breathing and partial or full body scan before you warm-up on your instrument or voice.
Transition	Ask student: "What have you learned from what we just did? Let's take three breaths as we think about that." Now close your eyes as I strike the bell/tone. Erase your mind to make room for our next task	Reflect/ write down insights. What did you learn for the next practice session? Breathe. Sound bell or long tone to clear you mind for next piece/task.
When a challenge arises	Breathe into body part that appears tense or strained. Take a mindful breath together. What can we do next?	Same
Conclusion	Name something important you learned today. Breath it in. Now breathe out with a smile. Take that smile with you!	Same!

V. INFORMAL MINDFULNESS PRACTICES FOR MUSICIANS

“We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”
-Aristotle

Three Guiding Principles

Neuroplasticity

- The brain can change its structure, function, and neural networks in response to illnesses, injury, life experiences, and daily habits.
- Numerous research findings supporting neuroplasticity over the past twenty years have created a paradigm shift in neuroscience. Although the brain of a child is remarkably malleable, the brain can change its physical structure and hardwiring long into adulthood.

“The brain devotes more cortical real estate to functions that its owner uses more frequently and shrinks the space devoted to activities rarely performed. That’s why the brains of violinists devote more space to the region that controls the digits of the fingering hand...In this sense, the very structure of our brain—the relative size of different regions, the strength of connections between one area and another—reflects the lives we have led. Like sand on a beach, the brain bears the footprints of the decisions we have made, the skills we have learned, the actions we have taken.” (Begley 2007, 8-9)

The Myth of Multitasking

- Multi-tasking is actually task switching. Neural activity can change in tenth of a second as we shift our attention from one task to another.
- **Overloading the brain with too many competing stimuli creates stress that shrinks the gray matter in the pre-frontal cortex.** The amygdala then takes over, flooding the brain with neurotransmitters that give rise to fear, aggression, and anxiety. (Zack 2015, 46)

Process Before Product

- While engaged in any task, let go of thoughts of self judgement about your progress and worries about the results. Don't rush to finish. Focus your awareness on each step you take. Set your goal, and get out on your own way.
- This process of **single-tasking** will allow your brain to build new neural networks for the skills you acquire from your focused actions.

HABITS FOR A MINDFUL LIFE

Here are some lifestyle habits to nurture a stable mind for your art and non-musical life.

1. Stop, Breathe, and Be: several times throughout your day, take 10 to 30 seconds to stop, breathe mindfully, and observe your present experience impartially without trying to change yourself or external surroundings. This is a core practice in MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reaction).
2. Mindful Chores: Choose one or more utilitarian daily tasks as a chance to rest attention fully on your present experience. As you do the task, don't rush to finish. Concentrate on PROCESS BEFORE PRODUCT. Observe your sense impressions, body movements, breath, and the sights and sound connected with doing the task. Examples: washing dishes, shaving/bathing, cleaning your desk, putting on clothing....
3. Mindful Travelling: Turn off radio, TV, computer, and other devices while driving, walking, or travelling to your next destination. Don't think about what's next: enjoy the journey.
4. Mindful Socializing: Be fully present in social settings. Put away the phone or laptop during meals or meetings, and don't look at your watch. When someone is speaking, let go of your desire to respond and instead, observe the person's voice tone, body language, and message. Can you imagine being in that person's shoes? Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.
5. Mindful eating: turn off devices, put away work and reading materials. Focus on enjoying the sight, smell, taste, and texture of your food. Feel gratitude for all of the people whose hard work brought the food to your table. Savor every bite slowly. Listen to your body, not your cravings: when you no longer feel hungry, stop eating!
6. Parking Lot: during any activity, if your attention shifts to concerns about the past or future, write your thoughts in a book, and set a time to reflect and act upon them later (Ibid, 48-50). (Think of Beethoven and his copious sketchbooks!)

7. Use technology mindfully and intentionally
 - a. Turn off cell phone and computer alerts (except for loved ones in case of an emergency)
 - b. Check messages, email at predetermined times instead of interrupting your work. Your responses will be more skillful and thoughtful
 - c. Avoid multitasking! Work on one project at a time.
 - d. Use technology as a tool to solve one particular task at a particular time. Don't organize your life around it!
8. Mindful listening: avoid listening to music or television while you do unmusical tasks so that you do not develop the habits of an inattentive listener.
9. Set an Intention: before you begin your day or your next activity, set an intention to practice some aspect of mindful behavior.

Use one of the seven attitudinal factors in the exhibit on the following page as your guide. An intention is not a desired output but a desired input. It represents an attitude you will adopt to enhance your present centered awareness.

THE ATTITUDINAL FOUNDATION OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Adapted from *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), pp. 18-30.

1. Non-Judging

- Be aware that the mind has a habit of rushing to judgement about experiences (e.g., “I like,” “I dislike,” “I feel neutral about.”) and about ourselves (“I’m no good, I’m better/worse than that person”)
- Be willing to suspend judgment so you can be an impartial judge of your experience
- As Yogi Berra said, “You can observe a lot by watching”. See before you think; you may discover a perspective that is greater than the sum of your biases.

2. Patience

- Don’t rush—allow events to unfold in their own time, particularly when some forces are beyond your control.
- Practicing patience with ourselves. “Why rush through some moments in order to get to other ‘better’ ones? Each one is your life in that moment.” (13)

3. Beginner’s Mind

- Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we ‘know’ stop us from seeing things as they really are. “In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” (Suzuki 1970, 1)
- Cultivate a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time.
- Be receptive to new possibilities in this moment—don’t not get stuck in a rut imposed by your expertise. Be open to the unknown—every moment is a new opportunity for growth.

4. Trust

- Honor your feelings, intuition, and intrinsic goodness, even if you err along the way.
- Don’t have blind trust in the authority of someone else. Have an open mind, then decide what is right for you.
- “The more you cultivate this trust in yourself, the easier you will find it will be to trust other people more and to see their basic goodness as well.” (16)

5. Non-Striving

- Don’t focus on striving or results (such as “enlightenment” or “wisdom”); just let your attention rest in the present moment, moment by moment. *PROCESS BEFORE PRODUCT.*
- [Don’t just play the music—let the music play on you.]

6. Acceptance

- “Acceptance means seeing things as they are in the present. If you have a headache, accept that you have a headache...My working definition of healing is *coming to terms with things as they are.*” (27)
- Accept that both suffering and joy are necessary parts of our existence.
- We often waste a lot of time and energy denying what is fact. We are trying to force situations to how we would like them to be. This creates more tension and prevents positive change from occurring.
- Acceptance is not passive; it does not mean you have to like everything and abandon your principles and values. Instead, it requires us to investigate how things actually are so that we can respond with skill and wisdom.

7. Letting Go (Non-attachment)

- Letting go is a way of letting things be, of accepting things as they are, and then moving on.
- If we have trouble accepting something, we can direct our attention to what our clinging feels like, and “we can become an expert on our own attachments” and the consequences that result from keeping them and letting them go. (30)

VI. APPLYING MINDFULNESS TO PRACTICING AND TEACHING MUSIC

SET AN INTENTION BEFORE YOU PRACTICE

Before you make your first sounds, identify your objectives (intended outcomes) and the time duration for your practice session. Then commit to an intention to guide your process. Here are some suggestions that apply Zinn's attitudinal foundations to different stages of learning.

Learning Stage	Intention
Sight reading a new unfamiliar piece	Maintain a beginner's mind . (What can this piece teach me?)
Early stages of practicing a difficult passage.	Practice with patience .
Playing through a piece while recording it to assess your progress.	Practice non-striving . (Let the music breathe through you and see what happens.)
Listening to a practice recording	Practice acceptance . (Accept your current level of preparation without wishful thinking so you can be objective and identify next steps

SHIFT MENTAL FOCUS WHILE PRACTICING A PASSAGE

- **Massed or blocked practice:** mastering a task or skill through focused single-style repetition.
- **Problem:** for music, can build short-term muscle memory at expense of long term memory needed for memorization and peak execution in performance conditions (Svard 2016, 104).
- **Solution:** vary mental focus between kinesthetic, visual, and aural factors among multiple attempts. Alternate between playing, singing, audiating, fingering, visualizing, and combinations of these actions. Doing so can also provide rest for your voice or hands.
- Addressing a variety of learning styles builds a variety of neural networks to reinforce encoding to and retrieval from long term memory (Ibid, 106)

MODELLING NON-JUDGMENT AND COMPASSION FOR STUDENTS

“...when we speak of *mindfulness*,...we equally mean *heartfulness*. In fact, in Asian languages, the word for “mind” and the word for “heart” are usually the same. ...It is more-than-conceptual-knowing. It is more akin to wisdom, and to the freedom a wisdom perspective provides. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, xxxv)

- After hearing a student play or sing, your first words don't have to be praise or critique. Instead ask a question. “What are your thoughts?” “Where did challenges occur?” “Why were they challenging?” “What could we do next?”
- Use Socratic methods to help your student assess the current level of learning objectively without judging themselves.

CULTIVATING TRUST FOR PERFORMANCE

Before you perform, trust that you have something valuable to share because your lifestyle choices are connecting you to your best musical self.

“...When we know how to *be* peace, we will find that art in a wonderful way to share our peacefulness. Artistic expression will take place in one way or another, but the being is essential. So we must go back to ourselves, and when we have joy and peace in ourselves, our creations of art will be quite natural, and they will serve the world in a positive way. “

--- Naht Hanh (1991)

VII. RESOURCES FOR PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

Check www.jdflowersmusic.com for forthcoming resources throughout the summer, plus guided meditations, and new blog.

Basic Introductions to Mindfulness Practice

Gunaratana, Bhante (2014). *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Boston: Wisdom Publications. [A clear and thought-provoking introduction to the “whys” and “how tos” of meditation by a leading Sri Lankan Buddhist monk.]

Kornfield Jack (2008). *Meditation for Beginners*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True. [A brief and accessible introduction by a leading American psychologist with a Buddhist perspective. Includes a CD with guided meditations.]

Nhat Hahn, Thich (1976) *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Boston: Beacon Press [The first book written for a Western audience by the revered Vietnamese Zen monk, peace activist, and past Nobel Peace Prize nominee. A life-changing classic.]

More detailed surveys of mindfulness practice

Kabat-Zinn, Jon (2013). *Full-Catastrophe Living. Revised and Updated Edition*. [Comprehensive account of the research base, principles and procedures of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), the most widely practiced mindfulness program in the USA. A standard reference.]

Siegel, Ronald D. (2010). *The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices to Everyday Problems*. New York: Guilford Press. [Thorough account distinguished by its helpful journaling articles, companion website with guided meditations, and summary of numerous styles of meditation and scientific research.]

Informal Mindfulness Practices

Bays, Jan Chozen (2011). *How to Train a Wild Elephant & Other Adventures in Mindfulness*. Boston: Shambala Publications. [An engaging and succinct compendium of 53 mindfulness practices to incorporate into your existing daily schedule. Includes suggestions for starting a sitting meditation practice and suggestions for further reading. Author is a physician and leading American Buddhist nun.]

Nhat Hanh, Thich (1991). *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. New York: Bantam Books. [Profound essays that capture the essential attitudes of mindfulness in so few words.]

Nhat Hanh, Thich (2011). *Peace Is Every Breath: A Practice for our Busy Lives*. New York, Harper-Collins. [A compendium of tiny meditative poems or *gathas* to be meditated upon before performing daily chores and activities. Uplifting and inspiring.]

Nhat Hanh, Thich (2015). *How to Relax*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press. [A pocket-sized pamphlet that says so much in so few words]

Zack, Devora (2015). *Singletasking: Get More Done One Thing at a Time*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers. [Summarizes recent neurological research and provides lifestyle suggestions in a funny, informal tone. Author is a business consultant.]

Internet Resources

www.mindful.org A monthly magazine of mindfulness practice and research with a mostly secular orientation.

Mindfulness. An app available for Android and Mac OS. Logs your daily practice time for meditation. Includes guided and silent meditations.

Studies Applying Mindfulness to Music

Madeline Bruser (1997). *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music From the Heart*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

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

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Pagoni, G. & Cekic, M. (2007). Age effects on gray matter volume and attentional performance in Zen Meditation. *Neurobiology of Aging*, 28 (10), 1623-1627.

Siegel, R (2010). *The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Zenner, C., Herrnleben-Kurz, S., and Walach, H. (2014). Mindfulness-based interventions in schools - A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 5, no. 00603
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