

2021

Music Listening as a Contemplative Practice in the College Classroom

Vanessa Cornett
University of St. Thomas (Minneapolis-St. Paul)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci>

Recommended Citation

Cornett, Vanessa (2021) "Music Listening as a Contemplative Practice in the College Classroom," *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. Vol. 8: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol8/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Contemplative Inquiry by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

Music Listening as a Contemplative Practice in the College Classroom

Vanessa Cornett

University of St. Thomas (Minneapolis–St. Paul)

Music listening, a cultural practice most college students have in common, is well suited to mindfulness because music only occurs in linear time as it unfolds moment by moment. When students learn to listen mindfully to music or other external stimuli, they can begin to listen more attentively and objectively to their own thoughts. Cultivating the skill of external listening can help improve the skill of internal listening, thereby encouraging greater self-awareness. This paper describes the contemplative practices and experiences of students enrolled in two undergraduate liberal arts courses integrating music and mindfulness. The intent is to share, with other college faculty in all disciplines, a variety of experiential activities involving music as a tool for meditative practice. These include techniques for listening deeply, structuring appropriate musical activities for non-musicians, and using music to explore the basic attitudes of mindfulness. The most significant theme to emerge in these courses was the fact that humans can use musical experiences to understand life events. Through music, we can practice navigating dissonance, recognizing bias, suspending judgment, and paying attention to silence or to the spaces in-between.

Music listening is a cultural practice most college students have in common. The United States music industry, which includes concert sales, music streaming, and purchases of recorded music, reached \$22 billion in 2019 (U.S. Media, 2020). In fact, U.S. Americans aged 18-34 represent the largest group of music consumers in the nation, with 68% of them reporting that they listen to music every day (Watson, 2019). Although tastes, preferences, and listening habits vary, the act of music listening unites a diverse generation of young adults.

Listening can be a powerful tool for contemplative practice (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Yet, the use of music listening as a medium for mindfulness practice in the college classroom has not yet attracted attention in the literature. The performing arts are well suited to contemplative practice because of their temporal, ephemeral nature. While we may talk about music, or regard a favorite album or piece of notated music, the act of perceiving music only seems to occur in linear time, as it unfolds moment by moment.¹ As with all contemplative practices, our attention can drift as we listen to music, and can be invited back to notice an unusual or interesting moment. And just as we are likely to become unaware of our own thoughts, or accomplish certain tasks inattentively, we can be surrounded by music without really hearing it.

Music has become ubiquitous in our culture, rendered in stores, restaurants, offices, video games, websites, even on the phone when we are waiting on hold. As a result, much of the music in our environment is not within our control. We often witness music passively, almost unconsciously, and this can become a routine behavior. The passivity of simply hearing something, then, can be distinguished from the act of engaged listening (Kassabian, 2013). We can learn to listen as readily as we can learn any other new skill. When students learn to listen mindfully to music or other external stimuli, they can begin to listen more attentively and objectively to their own thoughts. In other words, cultivating the skill of external listening can help improve the skill of internal listening. Coburn (2013) says,

The crucial person to whom each student needs to learn to listen is, of course, her- or himself. This is no small challenge in a noisy, fast-paced world. This is why mindfulness practice is so broadly distributed within contemplative education. It is one of the most accessible and straightforward means to establish a beach-

¹ There are, of course, alternative philosophies of the temporality of human experience. See, for example, Husserl's theory of internal time consciousness (Horerl, 2013; Reeder, 2010). In the context of this paper and the act of music listening as a contemplative practice, however, it is understood that most of us experience music from moment to moment.

head against the noisiness and distractions of the external world. (p. 8)

For many students, music listening can serve as an accessible and engaging entryway to mindfulness practice. It can facilitate the objective articulated by poet Mary Oliver (1994): “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work” (p. 8).

This paper describes the contemplative practices and experiences of students enrolled in two undergraduate liberal arts courses integrating music and mindfulness. The intent is to share, with other college faculty in all disciplines, a variety of experiential activities involving music as a tool for meditative practice. These include techniques for listening deeply, structuring appropriate musical activities for non-musicians, and using music to explore the basic tenets of mindfulness. The most significant theme to emerge in these courses was the fact that humans can use musical experiences to understand and negotiate life events. Through music, we can practice navigating dissonance, recognizing bias, suspending judgment, and paying attention to silence or to the spaces in-between.

Course Design

The University of St. Thomas is the largest private university in the state of Minnesota, serving approximately 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students each year. This paper recounts best practices from two undergraduate honors seminars, *Music and Meditation: Pathways to Transformative Learning* (2014), and *Mindfulness in Context* (2019).² To complete one of the requirements of the university’s Aquinas Scholars Honors Program, students take three or more interdisciplinary honors seminars over the course of four years. The seminars are half (two-credit) courses that meet once a week for 95 minutes, and are designed to focus on topics that might be perceived as more creative or interactive than most typical university courses. Professors teaching these seminars are encouraged to engage in innovative or experimental teaching approaches. In short, the program provides a rich environment for instructors to intro-

² The first course was taught by the author (College of Arts and Sciences) and Dr. William Brendel (College of Education, Leadership, and Counseling), and the second course was taught by the author alone.

duce contemplative practices without fear of resistance from students or administrators. This paper discusses the most successful activities and assignments common to both courses and appropriate for other college students in a wide variety of disciplines.

The first course, *Music and Meditation: Pathways to Transformative Learning*, was offered in 2014 to interested undergraduate honors students. These students came from diverse backgrounds and degree programs; only two were music majors. Most had little or no previous experience with meditation or mindfulness practice. The course description read:

This course will explore the concept of *deep listening* in a variety of contexts. Deep listening can be defined as focused, mindful attention to the widest array of sounds available at any given time. One may distinguish this sort of intentional listening from the involuntary, passive listening that most people engage in throughout the day. Deep listening may be applied to any type of music, the sounds of daily life, nature, even one's own thoughts. This sort of focused attention is a form of mindfulness meditation, which can be used to foster creativity, self-discovery, and deeper learning. When people are invited to study the nature of consciousness, and to observe when and how their mind wanders, transformative learning can occur. Inclusive, secular meditation practice is a powerful tool for developing awareness. While awareness is most often trained on the breath, we will use music as a focal point for mindfulness practice. Music can be used as a metaphor for life, with its ups and downs, unanticipated twists and turns. Students will be expected to cultivate a short but regular meditation practice throughout the duration of the course.

The second course, *Mindfulness in Context*, was offered to a new cohort of students in 2019. None of the honors students in this course were majoring in music, although several claimed some prior experience

with making music, and one had declared a music minor. The course description was as follows:

What does it mean to be aware? To what extent can we deliberately direct our own consciousness? How does awareness influence our life experiences? Although our modern culture celebrates an endless cycle of planning, striving, and multitasking, those activities do not reflect the fundamental nature of human experience. Regardless, most humans spend most of their waking moments in the virtual reality of their own imaginations. How would life be different if we spent more time in a state of present-moment awareness? Is there any difference between thinking and experiencing? Through contemplative practices, our attention can be directed to foster creativity, self-discovery, and social awareness. This course focuses on the philosophy, psychology, and practice of mindfulness, and how this state of consciousness can influence our personal and professional lives. Inclusive, or secular, meditation practice is an effective tool for developing such awareness. In this course, students will investigate a wide variety of mindfulness practices and consider the research and applications of these in the contexts of other disciplines.

While the first course used music as a focal point for mindfulness practice, the second course incorporated music as one of many practices. In both courses, mindfulness was introduced as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Students distinguished mindfulness, a philosophy of awareness, from meditation, one of many ways to practice that awareness. While this distinction is neither exact nor consistent in the literature, it can allow students to develop confidence practicing traditional seated meditation while also exploring other contemplative practices (Cornett, 2019).

In both courses, students engaged in a variety of contemplative practices, both in and out of class. They were required to meditate for a minimum of ten minutes per day, six days per week, in addition to in-class mindfulness activities. After the first four weeks of class, students were encouraged to increase their meditation time by small increments each week, and to engage in other forms of contemplative practice such as mindful yoga, body scan imagery, progressive relaxations, and walking meditations. Students were given a copy of the *Tree of Contemplative Practices* (Duerr & Bergman) to help them choose diverse mindfulness activities throughout the semester. They were invited to download guided meditations, podcasts, or smartphone meditation apps to use if they wished. Students were also required to maintain a daily meditation journal which they submitted for instructor feedback every week. Other assignments included weekly readings, music listening, online forum interaction, student-led class discussions, and individual research projects.

These courses provided students the opportunity to understand how the process of paying attention deliberately and nonjudgmentally can affect artistic experience. In the fine arts, as in many other disciplines, students are traditionally introduced to the subject in the context of historical, cultural, and/or analytical learning approaches. In a music appreciation course for non-music majors, for example, students typically learn basic terminology for listening to music, some historical periods of music history, and the names and contributions of noteworthy composers or performers. Music listening is guided primarily by the instructor, presumably an expert in the field, as students learn to analyze and understand music by applying the skills they have learned. This paradigm of learning reflects the “jug and mug” analogy of Rogers (1990), who lamented the philosophy that a teacher is a figurative jug full of knowledge, the student is an empty mug, and the teacher simply pours information into the receptacle of the student. Although many instructors work diligently to engage students in diverse ways that contradict Rogers’ analogy, cultural perceptions are slow to change.

Barbezat and Bush (2014) acknowledge that the arts lend themselves well to contemplative experiences: “Higher education tends to focus on abstract, analytical thinking, and yet we also learn much through sense perceptions. Hearing and sight provide powerful ways

for us to experience the world around us and within us" (p. 137). In these courses, students were encouraged to find their own way through a diverse array of music, focusing on the experience of listening rather than the need to analyze or understand what they were hearing. They were asked to consider how they generally engage with music, what biases they bring to the music they hear, and whether a mindful approach to listening changes their perception of the music. They considered the distinct roles of experiencing music and analyzing music; of being present with moment-to-moment sounds as opposed to assessing, categorizing, or passing judgment on various musical styles. The intention was to approach music in a completely nontraditional way, as internal experiences first and foremost. André (2011) suggests:

We must understand that there are two paths: the path of intelligence (acting, intervening, kneading reality with our will, lucidity and effort) and the path of experience (welcoming naked reality and allowing it to cover, inhabit and imbue us, in a movement of intensely attentive letting go). (p. 6)

The practice of experiencing music without trying to assess or understand it was as beneficial for this instructor as it was for the students. Nonjudgmental engagement in one's own area of academic expertise is more than a challenge; it is like stepping into a parallel universe. Since college professors are, in fact, hired to "profess," they can easily sacrifice an open mind by succumbing to pride of expertise (Brendel & Cornett, 2018). Kabat-Zinn (2013) said:

Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we "know" prevent us from seeing things as they really are... An open, "beginner's" mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in a rut of our expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does. (p. 35)

The willingness to suspend this expertise and participate with the philosophy of beginner's mind, or what Seung Sahn (1997) calls "don't know mind," can lead to transformative experiences for student and professor alike. Brown (2014) reminds us:

Mindfulness is not an anti-intellectual approach. It is simply a method of being mindful of our thoughts, rather than blurting them out, or mindlessly running through old intellectual scripts. Being precise about the nature of our inner experiences, we learn to distinguish thoughts from feelings, which provides greater clarity of thought and actually liberates our intellectual life. As academics we are rightly passionate about the intellectual constructs we have developed during our careers. However, we sometimes unconsciously identify with those thoughts. When we equate ourselves with our ideas, our intellectual property can become so intertwined with our identity that any perceived threat to them becomes a threat to ourselves that we must aggressively defend. (p. 273)

This unconscious identification with thoughts is undoubtedly a universal phenomenon. Professors in non-music disciplines will likely experience the same challenges when listening to music with the philosophy of beginner's mind. Everyone is, ultimately, an expert in their own musical opinions and preferences.

Course Activities

Most students had little or no experience in mindfulness before taking these classes, so many of the in-class activities served to introduce them to a wide variety of contemplative experiences. They engaged in a minimum of two mindfulness activities during class, including a guided seated meditation and one or more new experiential practices. The guided meditations included traditional vipassanā meditations, guided imagery activities, loving-kindness meditations, body scans, and meditations based on weekly themes such as patience, nonjudgment, and self-compassion. Hands-on mindfulness activities included movement meditations, free writing, coloring or doodling, and the visual contemplation of images, objects, or the negative space in between objects. To practice beginner's mind, for example, students contemplated an everyday object chosen from a pile of items: paperclips, twist ties, thumbtacks, binder clips, pen caps, rubber bands, and other objects. They practiced

mindful eating first with a piece of dried fruit, then with a piece of chocolate. Students especially enjoyed a ten-minute aroma meditation which involved spending a minute smelling each of ten unmarked aroma vials.³ Normally reticent students were unusually engaged afterwards, eager to talk about their olfactory memories and other experiences with the mystery scents.

Deep Listening

Deliberate, engaged, moment-to-moment listening served as the primary focus of each class discussion. The students first practiced mindful listening of non-music sounds, such as ambient sounds in the classroom, real and recorded nature sounds, and noise in the form of recorded traffic sounds and barking dogs. On one fortunate occasion, we were able to go outside and listen to workers fill potholes in one of the campus parking lots. When asked to bring examples of other sounds to class, students offered recordings of amusement parks, campfires, espresso makers, and various notification sounds and alerts from a wide variety of electronic devices. The latter provided an opportunity to explore our automatic responses to certain sounds, and the challenges related to impulse control.

In class, we performed John Cage's landmark composition *4'33"* (1952), which obliges the performer(s) to sit and listen for four minutes and 33 seconds.⁴ This piece presents a remarkable paradox, because by sitting in silence for several minutes, the performers and the audience realize they are never really sitting in silence. According to Zajonc (2014), effective contemplative pedagogy embraces problems that encourage engagement with paradox or contradiction. As his style matured, Cage became less interested in composing traditional works, and more interested in the philosophy of listening itself (Healey, 2014). The composer allows us to become aware of incidental sounds in the room, even the

3 These vials were part of the author's *Le Nez du Vin* aroma kit, designed to train sommeliers to identify the various aroma compounds in wine. Instructors could easily use essential oils or natural objects to create a similar olfactory activity.

4 More specifically, Cage's original score contains the single musical instruction *tacet*, indicating that the performer's voice or instrument is not sounded.

sound of our own breath or pulse. Wolf (2019) observes, “Cage draws the audience’s attention to the process of listening itself but without a definite object. He is creating a state of awareness in the audience, so that they can be mindful of what they are experiencing in the moment” (p. 191). In the arts world, this one avant-garde composition sparked a philosophical revolution that continues to provoke or inspire creative artists today. For students new to the concept of mindful listening, it can serve as a bridge between sound and music.

Towards the beginning of each semester, especially, some students found the length of the listening activities to be disconcerting.⁵ In class they acknowledged the speed of their lifestyle, and how difficult it is to be immersed in a non-musical sound for several minutes at a time. The Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani declared:

Today we are constantly being solicited, so our mental world is never at peace. There is always noise from the television, the sound of the car radio, the ringing telephone or the advertisement on a passing bus. We are unable to have long thoughts. Our thoughts are short. Our thoughts are short because we are very often interrupted. (as cited in André, 2011, p. 126)

A significant benefit of this course was that it gave students the opportunity to listen, uninterrupted, allowing space for long thoughts.

Music Selections

Mindful music listening challenged students to sustain their focus of attention and remain in the present moment as often as possible. Students followed the listening guidelines established by Barbezat and Bush (2014):

Meditation on Sound Instructions

- Try to sit stable and still, like a mountain. Be relaxed and alert. Close your eyes.⁶

⁵ These activities rarely exceeded ten minutes in length. To a beginning meditator, of course, this can seem like a long time.

⁶ In accordance with best practices in trauma-sensitive mindfulness (Tre-leaven, 2018), students were invited to close their eyes if they wished, but were never required to do so.

- Listen to the sounds as they occur. Do not imagine, name, or analyze the sounds. As names arise, release them, and return to listening.
- Just listen with wide-open awareness.
- Let the sounds come to you and touch your eardrums.
- As thoughts, emotions, memories, and associations arise in your mind, notice them, gently let them go, and return to the sounds.
- Notice how the sounds arise and fall away.
- If there are no sounds, listen, and rest in the silence. (p. 139)

In a course grounded in “deep listening,” no limitations were placed on the types of music that might be appropriate for contemplative practice. Just as we practice observing our wildly varied thoughts in meditation, we can practice observing any music from a place of curiosity and objectivity. In other words, in this context, the practice of contemplative listening examines *how* we listen, not *what* we listen to.

Music listening assignments were selected from Western art (“classical”) music, popular music (including jazz, folk, rock, R&B, and hip-hop), and non-Western music genres. I have included examples of particularly successful musical selections from these courses at the end of this paper. Unsurprisingly, students responded most readily to familiar popular music selections, but also struggled the most with objective, nonjudgmental listening. On occasion, I would deliberately select polarizing (“love it or hate it”) songs by artists such as Justin Bieber, Metallica, Hank Williams, Jr., and Nickelback. Contemplating an unfamiliar Viking death metal song, for example, offered students the opportunity to suspend judgment and practice listening without bias. Many students continued this exercise outside of class, deliberately choosing to listen to their least favorite music as part of their mindfulness practice.

Non-Western music selections such as Indian ragas, Japanese gagaku, and Iraqi dabkes allowed my U.S. American students to notice

and address themes related to unfamiliarity. For example, some of them identified culturally conditioned assumptions and stereotypes about the music and people of various non-Western cultures. These listening experiences prompted robust discussions about recognizing inherent bias, identifying and suspending assumptions or stereotypes, and listening objectively to diverse viewpoints. Instructors are encouraged to consider sensitively the potential of presenting non-Western examples in a way that may be perceived as colonizing the music of “other” cultures. While music selections alone do not reinforce colonialist stereotypes, human teaching methods can unwittingly reinforce these ideas. I found it easiest to present the music without any background information, in the spirit of a beginner’s mind activity. Afterwards, I found I needed to facilitate the class discussion with care, tactfully moderating the comments and observations of participating students. These discussions were sometimes difficult, but always fruitful. For example, both students and instructors can learn to identify some of the coded language we use when speaking about the music of other races and cultures (Bradley, 2006; Hess, 2017).⁷ In fact, Senyshyn (2004) asserts that in some contexts, racial intolerance may be “an unconscious dimension in musical style intolerance” (p. 110). An entire course might be constructed around musical preference and responses related to race, culture, and bias.

Western art music selections ranged from more recognizable styles (e.g., by Mozart, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky) to less-familiar contemporary and experimental forms of music. I discovered that the more challenging and esoteric art music experiences, those that nudged students out of their comfort zones, led to richer in-class experiences. American composer Pauline Oliveros (2005) developed experiential activities around the concepts of deep listening and sonic awareness. Oliveros’ compositions are frequently meditative in nature, often involving the listener in the creation of the music. For example, the score of one of her early *Sonic Meditations* reads: “Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that

⁷ Interested readers are encouraged to seek out the work of Hess (2015, 2017, et al.), who has published widely on topics in music education related to Whiteness, race-related euphemisms, tokenism, and decolonizing music teaching approaches.

the bottoms of your feet become ears" (1974a). Another movement, entitled "Re Cognition," reads: "Listen to a sound until you no longer recognize it" (1974b).

John Cage's *Number Pieces* (1987-1992) are sometimes regarded as perplexing, nontonal "blip and squawk" works of modern art music. Yet, they provide fruitful opportunities for listening to unconventional sounds and the silences that punctuate them.⁸ For many students, the practice of listening to silence as if it had weight and presence, as opposed to being little more than the lack of sound, was a new experience. Listening to the space in between sounds can be transferred to meditation, in paying attention to the pauses in between breaths, or the spaces in between thoughts. Brown (2014) notes, "Tibetan meditators have found, through centuries of meditation practice, that there are spaces between instances of attention. It is said that these gaps are infinitesimally small and very difficult to notice" (p. 274). Nevertheless, young adults and their professors can begin to pay attention to negative space, or the small gaps in between other things.

Navigating Dissonance

Because students seemed to struggle the most with very dissonant varieties of twentieth-century art music, I introduced nontonal pieces by composers such as Pierre Boulez, Elliott Carter, Arnold Schoenberg, and Alban Berg. Cacophonous music facilitated class discussions about embracing uncomfortable life situations with objectivity. Wolf (2019) said it well:

As desirable as finding harmony is, sometimes dissonance can be useful. It can also be very beautiful. Dissonance is also necessary in life. Sometimes it's necessary to raise a jarring voice to pierce mute indifference or complacent acceptance in the face of inequality, unfairness, and social injustice. It's true that contemplative

⁸ For example, *Two*⁵ (1991) for tenor trombone and piano is a 40-minute work featuring extended silences up to five minutes in length. Cage's *Seven Haiku* (1952), a three-minute piece for solo piano, is perhaps a more accessible example for most undergraduate students.

practice encourages equanimity, harmony, and peace. But that doesn't mean that we turn our backs to situations that are not tranquil or harmonious. (p. 66)

In class, students discussed the natural human tendency to embrace pleasant experiences and avoid unpleasant ones. When listening to jarring or discordant music, we practiced sitting with each sound as it unfolded, embracing it while suspending evaluation as much as possible. Afterwards, in meditation, we also practiced sitting objectively with unpleasant thoughts and emotions. Some students developed innovative ways of processing difficult feelings in the same way they might process difficult music. One student shared that she mentally invited some of her uncomfortable emotions to tea, imagining that she was sitting across from these feelings, listening with friendly compassion. Later in the semester, she developed this idea further, and wrote the following in her meditation journal [edited for length]:

The first fifteen minutes I imagined that I went to tea with this feeling that I couldn't identify but I knew it was bugging me. That was a REAL intense fifteen minutes. I was crying a lot of it. For the next ten minutes I tried something else. It didn't really start out as intentional but my mind sort of pictured it and I ran with it. I basically sat there in an imaginary bath with my emotion. I pictured myself physically lowering myself into my emotion, soaking in it, and then when I got out of the bathtub, I was just trying to let it go. I have to say that exercise actually helped me a lot. I think the progression of fully sinking myself into the emotion, to staying in that emotion, to taking myself out of it helped me kind of break it up into segments. It has been a really emotional day, so I think this was just done at a perfect time.⁹

I have since used this creative imagery with students struggling with music that elicits a strong negative response. They are invited to immerse

9 Student journals were uploaded weekly to the Canvas learning management platform, and were viewed only by the instructor.

themselves in the music, as if taking a sonic bath. Afterwards, they may choose to let it go and figuratively walk away.

Lectio Divina

Most of our in-class listening activities focused on the sound of the music itself, although some songs invited special attention to the words. When the lyrics served to focus the meditation, students experimented with listening closely to the words while following along with a printed copy of the lyrics. The practice of *Lectio Divina*, contemplative reading, is easily adapted to text-based music. Wright (2019) articulated three benefits of the secular practice of *Lectio Divina* with college undergraduates: “increased attention to the cognitive and noncognitive reactions to the text, willingness to engage with the material in novel ways, and the opportunity to engage in independent disciplinary practice” (p. 71). Similarly, students can use song lyrics as the basis of their *Lectio Divina* practice. Although not all popular song lyrics are worth contemplating in great depth, many folk-rock, hip-hop, and art songs provide remarkable examples of poetry set to music.

Bob Dylan’s songs frequently serve as paragons of masterfully crafted lyrics.¹⁰ Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” is a particularly effective choice of text, with its use of vivid imagery and bewilderingly nonlinear storytelling. Since students found many passages of the song to be difficult to interpret in a traditional sense, they were obliged to suspend the impulse to uncover a single unambiguous meaning of the song. This extraordinary stanza, for example, invited a subjective experience of imagery and meaning:

Then take me disappearing through the smoke rings of
my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves
The haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow

¹⁰ Furthermore, many Generation Z students are largely unfamiliar with Dylan’s songs, and many are unaware that he is the only musician to have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for “having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” (Nobel Media, 2016).

Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand
 waving free
 Silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands
 With all memory and fate driven deep beneath the
 waves
 Let me forget about today until tomorrow. (Dylan,
 1965)

By releasing their desire to analyze Dylan's meaning, students were able to engage one of the primary benefits of the practice of *Lectio Divina*, the ability to "enter into" understanding of the text rather than dissecting the text (Foster, 1983). In the class discussion following this activity, some students worked through their initial frustration of trying to identify the "correct" interpretation, while others felt impatience towards phrases that seemed nonsensical at first. For some, frustration gradually gave way to a letting go of expectations, to feel thoughts and emotions rise and fall, to observe the rhythm and meter of the text, or as one student put it, to simply "ride the words and pictures as they unfolded."

Improvisation

These courses focused primarily on music listening rather than music making. They differed, therefore, from the leading contemplative practices involving the creation of music through improvisation (cf. Sarath, 2003, 2010, 2013, 2016). Nevertheless, a music improvisation activity can be a worthwhile contemplative experience for undergraduate students if it is thoughtfully structured. Bailey (1992) describes some forms of improvisation as non-academic, because they are "always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description" (p. ix). Students might identify parallels, then, between this sort of improvisation and the nature of the human mind.

Music performance is often misunderstood, especially in contemporary Western society. Adults tend to make a distinction between musicians and non-musicians, or at the very least, between professional musicians and amateurs or hobbyists. Few realize this distinction is culturally adopted. Many indigenous and non-Western cultures do not designate or recognize music-makers, since the assumption is that everyone sings

and dances. As a result, words such as *musician* or *artist* do not appear in many languages around the world (Mithlo, 2012; Nettl, 2015). In our society, students who identify themselves as non-musicians may feel uncomfortable, even anxious, about improvising in front of their peers. Higgins and Campbell (2010) note that as children age, they are taught to venerate composed music over improvised music. These authors urge music teachers to:

reduce the many musical barriers that are inherited in Western societies by the time children reach “the age of reason,” when the natural childhood penchant to sing, dance, and play musically gives way all too soon to the perfect performances of standard repertoire that are preserved in Western staff notation. (Higgins & Campbell, 2010, p. 1)

It may also benefit students to know that some social anthropologists have asserted that since music is a universal human phenomenon, most humans possess the capacity for making music.¹¹

We may broadly consider two main forms of improvisation, idiomatic and non-idiomatic. Idiomatic improvisation is influenced and governed by the rules or expectations of a specific style of music, such as jazz, flamenco, or Baroque art music. Non-idiomatic improvisation is free improvisation, not bound to a specific musical identity, and more appropriate for an inclusive in-class contemplative activity. Educators are therefore encouraged to eliminate improvisational parameters related to melodic/harmonic frameworks or specified rhythmic structures.¹² Nontonal and arrhythmic improvisation invites the mindset that it is impossible to play a wrong note or rhythm. Simpler class parameters such as sound production techniques or duration of the activity may be advantageous.

11 Many scholars have explored early childhood musicality, evidence of music-making in early humans, and societies where all humans are regarded as capable of making music. See, for example, Blacking (1973), Fujita (2006), Mithen (2009), and the work of many other scholars in the fields of ethnomusicology and social anthropology.

12 Instructors are reminded that not all students are able to keep a steady beat or repeat back pitch patterns.

It may help to encourage students to suspend judgment, trust their intuition, be open to experimentation, and allow for a truly immersive and contemplative collaborative experience.

In-class music making activities can be designed to be suitable for all students, including those with little or no prior musical experience. My students participated in an improvisational drum circle using West African hand drums (primarily djembes and kpanlogos) owned by the music department. Students were instructed on proper drum technique, but were given no guidance on rhythmic patterns or tempos. The students participated in one short and two extended free drumming meditations. After each activity, students were keen to discuss their experiences with rhythm and repetition, freedom of choice, the intersection of contemplation and flow, and the concept of trance states of consciousness. This drum circle activity was mentioned most frequently and favorably in the course evaluations at the end of the semester. Of course, instructors with no access to percussion instruments can easily use household or found objects such as cardboard boxes, plastic tubs or buckets, even student desks or tabletops. In a subsequent class activity, for example, students improvised for ten minutes using nothing but a single plastic cup.¹³ Improvisation does not require special instruments or props, although one word of caution might be to advise students to drum softly on hard objects, such as tabletops, so as not to injure their hands.

Music as Metaphor

Through the experience of deep listening, students explored the principles of mindfulness articulated by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), including non-judging, acceptance, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, and letting go. Students were encouraged to find creative ways to use music listening to practice these attitudes outside of class.

¹³ A plastic cup improvisation can include drumming on the base of the cup and tapping, turning, or sliding the cup against a hard surface. This type of activity is frequently used in school music programs, and was originally inspired by "Cups (When I'm Gone)," a song made famous by Anna Kendrick in the film *Pitch Perfect* (2012).

Nonjudgment and Beginner's Mind

To explore the philosophies of nonjudgment and beginner's mind, many students experimented with listening to music they disliked. In their journals, they discussed the process of observing their own thoughts, emotions, and preconceived attitudes about the music, and their ability (or inability) to listen objectively. For example, one third-year student chose to explore with curiosity her hatred of the sound of bagpipes. This student admitted that, despite her father's Irish heritage, the timbre of the bagpipes irritated her. Nevertheless, she chose to listen to a piece of traditional bagpipe music every day for one week. According to her journal entries, the first day was extremely uncomfortable for her, and the second day only slightly better. By the end of the week, however, she reported in class that she had discovered a way to connect with the performer by focusing on the subtle breathing sounds she heard in between each phrase on the recording. During her meditation, she began to breathe with the bagpiper, exhaling for long, sustained periods of time with each musical phrase, then inhaling at the same time as the performer. She said she began to feel as if she were the performer, as if the sound were an extension of her own breath, emanating through and from her. It was no longer something she was simply hearing, because it had become part of her.

This sort of listening activity can serve as a metaphor for the experience of engaging with irritating people, situations, or other minor conflicts. Students challenged themselves to make a connection between listening to bothersome music with curiosity and perceiving negative life events from a more philosophical perspective. A second-year student experimented with listening to Appalachian bluegrass music to explore his own personal biases. He wrote the following observation [edited for length] in his mindfulness journal:

Today I listened to [bluegrass music] and realized I could stand it after all. Yes, it is not my favorite sound, but it is not awful. The one thing I thought a lot about today when my mind drifted was why I hated the sound of bluegrass, and I literally could not come up with a sin-

gle reason. I just simply do not like the sound, so it is hard for me to appreciate this music. I started to realize that I am very big on first impressions. If something does not give me a good first impression, I will not like it for a long time. I am very stubborn like that. This is not my best trait, but it is one that I have had for as long as I remember. I decided that I might need to be more open minded about not only this song, but other aspects of life too. By listening to it again, I realized some aspects of the song I never noticed before. Basically, this meditation hit home with me on how often I make snap judgments that I can no longer justify later.

Student reflections revealing a growing sense of self-awareness were not uncommon, because the practice of contemplative listening can facilitate this sort of personal development. The greater the self-awareness, the greater the ability to navigate the world with increased social consciousness. Keator, et al. (2017) remind us that:

Contemplative listening means listening with a deep self-awareness—understanding that we have been shaped by the influences of racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, socio-political, and economic patterns passed down from generation to generation. Listening without judgment challenges people to plumb the depths of their hearts to identify and uproot the false assumptions, distorted perceptions, and prejudices that were learned and reinforced by those influential patterns. (p. 28)

Through this and other listening activities, students took the opportunity to reflect deeply on how their thoughts are influenced by these assumptions and prejudices, generating emotionally charged personal attachments.

Acceptance and Patience

Students practiced the attitudes of acceptance and patience in the context of musical earworms. A common psychological phenomenon, an earworm (also known as “stuck song syndrome”) is a catchy fragment

of music that tends to loop and repeat in one's mind. Researchers have determined that most earworms are only about 15-30 seconds long, and most often manifest from songs with lyrics and simple melodies rather than from more complex instrumental pieces (Beaman & Williams, 2010). Some students identified nursery rhymes or folk songs as generating earworms for them, while others chose Broadway show tunes or repetitive pop songs. Each student posted one or two of their most "contagious" earworms to the online discussion board. This was a favorite assignment for many students, and some reported that simply reading the title of a classmate's song choice created an immediate earworm for them. Students were instructed to listen to one of the songs from the discussion board and then to meditate in silence, allowing the earworm to take hold, listening internally to the recurring melodic and rhythmic patterns. They were encouraged to listen with curiosity, accepting the repetitions with patience and compassion, and releasing the desire to break free from the repeated song fragments.

The practical application of this activity was to transfer the concept of earworms to one's daily recurring or repetitive thought patterns. Students practiced identifying mental thought loops throughout the week, paying special attention to negative thoughts directed towards themselves or others. They were encouraged to acknowledge those thoughts or self-criticisms impartially and with compassion. Many students embraced the idea of recognizing thoughts as mental events rather than undeniable truths, just as an earworm is a purely psychological event. They were invited to reflect on the statement, "I am not my thoughts." One student chose to meditate and reflect on a passage from the assigned course readings, "There is a difference between being aware of a thought and thinking a thought" (Gunaratana, 2012, p. 70). In class, this student made the connection between observing an earworm and getting emotionally caught up in the repetitions. A topic that emerged during class discussion was the unconscious cycle of thoughts that serve to replay our internal narratives over and over, like a broken record, if left unchecked.

Recommendations

One limitation of these two courses was that, as honors seminars, they were not open to all undergraduate students. I suspect that a version of this course, available to all students, would fill as quickly. Students are attracted to courses and activities involving music listening, even if the music selections are unusual or unfamiliar. In fact, research suggests that mindful listening strategies may increase music listening sensitivity and enjoyment among college students (Anderson, 2012). It should be noted that my colleagues who participated in an unrelated faculty development workshop were equally enthusiastic about music listening as a vehicle for meditation. While music is not exactly a universal language,¹⁴ it is a universally inviting fine arts medium.

Another course limitation was the number of contact hours between instructor and students. Because these were half-course (two-credit) seminars, they met only once per week. Students engaged with their instructor and peers in between class meetings by interacting on the course discussion board, but this is an insufficient substitute for interacting in a group setting. Some of the richest course content emerged from thoughtful in-class discussions. A future course, offering full credits and meeting two or three times per week, would be more advantageous for students just learning about contemplative practices.

Mindful music listening can benefit students in all disciplines. While the instructor would ideally have a strong background in mindfulness and contemplative practices in the college classroom, I do not believe that considerable music experience is essential for facilitating activities such as those described in this paper. As a professional musician and

14 Although music may be a universal phenomenon, Nettl (2015) and other ethnomusicologists have long argued against the cliché that music is, broadly speaking, a universal language. According to Koza (2001), since music cannot be separated from its cultural context, “the culture that produces the music also constructs its meaning. Therefore, rather than sending a universally understood message, the music of a particular culture may sound alien and incomprehensible to an uninitiated listener” (p. 242). Bradley (2015) proposes we consider that the narrative of “music as a universal language” serves to enable color-blind racism.

music educator, I was quickly able to cull diverse and high-quality musical selections, offer helpful historical or cultural contexts when appropriate, and organize meaningful music-based activities in class. However, my years of musical training challenged my ability to engage in mindful listening with my students, maintaining the attitudes of acceptance, non-judgment, and (especially) beginner's mind. This made the music listening activities especially valuable for me as a lifelong student of mindfulness, and it revealed the challenges associated with my ego's pride of expertise in my own discipline. My personal belief is that professors in other disciplines may be in a better position to engage in mindful music listening experiences with their students if they are willing to suspend their own artistic preferences and biases.

Evaluating these courses was a challenge, given that standardized course evaluation forms rarely feature criteria pertinent to contemplative practices. Student feedback was generally positive for these courses, with summative course rankings averaging 4.6 and 4.8 on a 5.0 scale.¹⁵ The objectives rated most highly were "Learning to apply course material (to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions)," and "Gaining a broader understanding and appreciation of intellectual/cultural activity." Limitations of this evaluation process are revealed in the wording of these objectives, since this was not a music appreciation course, and since the goal was not to "improve thinking." Supplementary honors program evaluation forms provided more helpful open-ended responses and qualitative feedback. Students responded most enthusiastically to the variety of in-class mindfulness experiences, guided music listening activities, and the freedom to choose their own meaningful experiences outside of class. Written comments were more effusive than average, and included statements such as:

"This class has been like nothing I've taken before and has really opened my eyes to a new subject matter."

¹⁵ My university uses the IDEA Student Rating System for course feedback. The scores reported are the summary course scores for Fall 2014 and Fall 2019 respectively.

“I’ve learned more about myself and about life than in any other college course. I think this should be required for all students in college.”

“Honestly, this has been the best seminar I have taken. Life-changing.”

Instructors are encouraged to design their own supplementary course evaluation tools, with relevant and well-crafted objectives and assessment criteria related to contemplative practices.¹⁶

Music listening can serve as an attractive and engaging means of practicing mindfulness in the college classroom. If we use music to understand how we navigate the events in our lives, we can learn to accept dissonance, recognize our inherent biases, suspend judgment, and pay attention to each other with deeper understanding. Contemplative practices can lead to a more transformative learning experience for students by helping them develop the skills of open awareness (Zajonc, 2013). Like many mindful experiences, these music activities can facilitate personal growth if the instructor allows each student the opportunity to direct her own internal experience. A safe classroom space can invite diverse perspectives, and can dissolve many of the artificial boundaries between participants. These best practices in whole-student teaching can, at the very least, facilitate powerful new methods of inquiry and imaginative thinking among students and teachers alike.

Representative Music Listening Examples

John Adams, *China Gates* or *Phrygian Gates*

Tori Amos, “Raining Blood”

Samuel Barber, String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11

Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony No. 7 (II. Allegretto)

Alban Berg, selections from *Wozzeck*

John Cage, *4’33*, *Number Pieces*, *Water Walk*, *Seven Haiku*

Elliott Carter, String Quartet No. 1

16 See, for example, Camfield & Bayers (2019).

Ornette Coleman, *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*
 Henry Cowell, *The Banshee*
 George Crumb, *Black Angels*
 DEAN, "Instagram"
 Disturbed, "The Sound of Silence"
 Ramin Djawadi, "Light of the Seven" from *Game of Thrones*
 Bob Dylan, "Mr. Tambourine Man," "Subterranean Homesick Blues"
 Bill Evans, "Peace Piece"
 Béla Fleck, "D'Gary Jam"
 Sofia Gubaidulina, *De Profundis*
 Mona Haydar, "Hijabi (Wrap My Hijab)"
 Jimi Hendrix, "Voodoo Child"
 Little Richard, "The Rill Thing"
 Lizzo, "My Skin"
 Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*
 Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story"
 and "Burn" from *Hamilton*
 R. Carlos Nakai, "Corn Grinding Song"
 Nickelback, "Photograph"
O Brother, Where Art Thou?, selections from the soundtrack
 Pauline Oliveros, *Suiren*
 Steve Reich, *It's Gonna Rain*
 Rodrigo y Gabriela, "Diablo Rojo"
 RuPaul, "Born Naked"
 Frederic Rzewski, *De Profundis*
 Fazıl Say, *Black Earth / Kara Toprak*
 Steven Scott, *Arcs* for bowed piano
 Svartsot, "Kromandens Datter"
 Nobuo Uematsu, selections from the *Final Fantasy* game series
 Iannis Xenakis, *Metastasis*
 Zap Mama, "Brrrlak!"

References

- Anderson, W. T. (2012). *The effect of mindful listening instruction on listening sensitivity and enjoyment*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- André, C. (2011). *Looking at mindfulness: Twenty-five paintings to change the way you live*. Blue Rider Press.
- Bailey, D. (1992). *Improvisation: Its nature and practice in music*. Da Capo Press.
- Barbezat, D., & Bush, M. (2014). *Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Beaman, C. P., & Williams, T. I. (2010). Earworms ("stuck song syndrome"): Towards a natural history of intrusive thoughts. *British Journal of Psychology*, 101(4), 637-653.
- Blacking, J. (1973). *How musical is man?* University of Washington Press.
- Bradley, D. (2006). Music education, multiculturalism, and anti-racism—Can we talk? *Action, Criticism, & Theory for Music Education*, 5(2), 2-30.
- Bradley, D. (2015). Hidden in plain sight: Race and racism in music education. In *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education*. Oxford University Press.
- Brendel, W., & Cornett, V. (2018). Professors practicing mindfulness: An action research study on transformed teaching, research, and service. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 17(1), 4-23.
- Brown, R. C. (2014). Transitions: Teaching from the spaces between. In O. Gunnlaugson, E. W. Sarath, C. Scott, & H. Bai (Eds.), *Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines* (pp. 271-286). State University of New York Press.
- Camfield, E. K., & Bayers, L. (2019). Mindful assessment in support of student learning. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 6(1), 121-144.
- Coburn, T. B. (2013). Peak oil, peak water, peak education. In L. A. Sanders (Ed.), *Contemplative studies in higher education* (pp. 3-11). John Wiley & Sons.

- Cornett, V. (2019). *The mindful musician: Mental skills for peak performance*. Oxford University Press.
- Duerr, M., & Bergman, C. (n.d.). *The tree of contemplative practices*. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>
- Dylan, B. (1965). Mr. Tambourine Man [Song]. On *Bringing it all back home*. Columbia Records.
- Foster, R. (1983). *Meditative prayer*. InterVarsity Press.
- Fujita, F. (2006). Musicality in early childhood: A case from Japan. In S. A. Reily (Ed.), *The musical human* (pp. 87-106). Ashgate.
- Gunaratana, B. (2012). *Mindfulness in plain English*. Wisdom Publications.
- Healey, K. (2017). From Cage to Coltrane: (Un)popular music as contemplative practice. *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 4(1), 7-24.
- Hess, J. (2015). Decolonizing music education: Moving beyond tokenism. *International Journal of Music Education*, 33(3), 336-347.
- Hess, J. (2017). Equity and music education: Euphemisms, terminal naivety, and Whiteness. *Action, Criticism, & Theory for Music Education*, 16(3), 15-47.
- Higgins, L., & Campbell, P. S. (2010). *Free to be musical: Group improvisation in music*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hoerl, C. (2013). Husserl, the absolute flow, and temporal experience. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 86(2), 376-411.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144-156.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living* (Revised ed.). Bantam Books.
- Kassabian, A. (2013). *Ubiquitous listening: Affect, attention, and distributed subjectivity*. University of California Press.
- Keator, M., Savage, W. J., Foley, A., Furtado, M., Gray, J., Hussein, H., & Raikhman, M. (2017). Interfaith dialogue: The art of listening. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 4(1), 27-46.

- Koza, J. E. (2001). Multicultural approaches to music education. In C. A. Grant & M. L. Gomez (Eds.), *Making schooling multicultural: Campus and classroom* (pp. 239-258). Prentice-Hall.
- Mithen, S. (2009). The music instinct: The evolutionary basis of musicality. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1169, 3-12.
- Mithlo, N. M. (2012). No word for art in our language? Old questions, new paradigms. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 27(1), 111-126.
- Nettl, B. (2015). *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-three discussions* (3rd ed.). University of Illinois Press.
- Nobel Media. (2016). *The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016*. [Press release.] Retrieved from nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/summary/
- Oliver, M. (1994). Yes! No! In *White pine: Poems and prose poems* (p. 8). Harcourt, Inc.
- Oliveros, P. (1974a). Native. In *Sonic Meditations (I-XII)*. Smith Publications.
- Oliveros, P. (1974b). Re Cognition. In *Sonic Meditations (XII-XXV)*. Smith Publications.
- Oliveros, P. (2005). *Deep listening: A composer's sound practice*. iUniverse, Inc.
- Reeder, H. P. (2010). *Theory and practice of Husserl's phenomenology* (2nd ed.). Zeta Books.
- Rogers, C. R. (1990). *Dialogues: Conversations with Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, B. F. Skinner, Gregory Bateson, Michael Polanyi, Rollo May, and others*. Constable.
- Sahn, S. (1997). *The Compass of Zen* (H. G. Sunim, Ed.). Shambhala.
- Sarath, E. (2003). Meditation in higher education: The next wave? *Innovative Higher Education*, 27(4), 215-233.
- Sarath, E. (2010). Jazz, creativity, and consciousness: A blueprint for integral education. In S. Esbjörn-Hargens, J. Reams, & O. Gunnlaugson (Eds.), *Integral education: New directions for higher learning* (pp. 169-184). State University of New York Press.

- Sarath, E. (2013). *Improvisation, creativity, and consciousness: Jazz as integral template for music, education, and society*. State University of New York Press.
- Sarath, E. (2016). Meditation, improvisation, and paradigmatic change: Integrity of practice as key to individual and collective transformation. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 3(1), 85-96.
- Senyshyn, Y. (2004). Popular music and the intolerant classroom. In L. Bartel (Ed.), *Questioning the Music Education Paradigm* (Vol. 2, pp. 110-120). Toronto: Canadian Music Educators' Association.
- Treleaven, D. A. (2018). *Trauma-sensitive mindfulness: Practices for safe and transformative healing*. W. W. Norton.
- United States Media. (2020, March). The media and entertainment industry in the United States. In *Industry snapshots*. Acquisdata, 20520 (8-10).
- Watson, A. (2019). *Music listening frequency in the U.S. 2019, by age group*. Retrieved from Statista database. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/749666/music-listening-habits-age-usa/>
- Wolf, R. (2019). *In tune: Music as the bridge to mindfulness*. The Experiment.
- Wright, J. (2019). Using Lectio Divina as an in-class contemplative tool. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 6(1), 71-93.
- Zajonc, A. (2013). Contemplative pedagogy: A quiet revolution in higher education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 134, 83-94.
- Zajonc, A. (2014). Contemplative pedagogy in higher education: Toward a more reflective academy. In O. Gunnlaugson, E. W. Sarath, C. Scott, & H. Bai (Eds.), *Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines* (pp. 15-29). State University of New York Press.