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This document shares a holistic teaching approach to free improvisation by integrating mindfulness and conventional free improvisation teaching strategies. Within current yet limited resources for teaching free improvisation, none incorporate mindfulness practices—a pivotal aspect of my own journey as a free improviser.

At its core, the primary research question that guided this study is: “What methods exist for teaching free improvisation?” My investigation into existing literature, instructional materials, and pedagogical approaches uncovered two significant areas of insight. First, an examination of expert Western classical improvisers revealed five distinct categories of improvisation teaching strategies. Second, an observation of notable free improvisation pedagogues (including Pauline Oliveros and Fred Frith) provides a pedagogical and philosophical framework for free improvisation teaching. These two studies provide a theoretical framework for my analysis of free improvisation teaching resources by Jeffrey Agrell, Marilyn Crispell, Sarah Stiles, Alice Kanack, and Nicole Brockmann. Each resource was contextualized through the five strategy categories established by the expert Western improvisers.

Beyond a detailed analysis of these texts, two suggested mindfulness resources from Jon Kabat-Zinn and Rick Rubin are discussed and applied to themes in free improvisation teaching. Consequently, I advocate for the integration of mindfulness strategies as a transformative means to deepen the free improvisation journey. This study introduces a blended teaching sequence that harmonizes free improvisation techniques with mindfulness practices, offering a contemporary and enriched approach to the teaching and learning of free improvisation.

Keywords: free improvisation, mindfulness, free improvisation teaching

MINDFULNESS AND FREE IMPROVISATION: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO
CULTIVATING CREATIVITY AND AWARENESS

by

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Approved by

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DEDICATION

With gratitude and deep affection, I dedicate this dissertation to the foundations of my journey—my family and my partner. Their support has allowed me a path not only for academic pursuits but also space to enjoy my passions for creating music.

To my esteemed committee members, Dr. Rawls, Dr. Ott, and Dr. MacLeod, I extend my profound appreciation. Their mentorship and generous guidance have provided me with grounds to cultivate my research.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, AND SIGNIFICANCE

Introduction, Background, and Significance

On the night of October 28, 2023, the University of North Carolina Greensboro School of Music hosted its annual Collage Concert—a variety showcase featuring brief performances enhanced by meticulously synchronized lights and planned stage arrangements. I was scheduled to perform viola alongside an ensemble with electric guitar and synthesizer.

As we navigated through the darkness to assume our positions onstage, I glanced at the guitarist. To my surprise, he struggled in the dim light, revealing a lack of power, with none of the equipment plugged in. With the preceding group seconds away from concluding their performance, my ensemble members were still without power. I looked again at the guitarist, and he whispered urgently, “play something!” The spotlight quickly shifted to us. Facing the audience, I began to freely improvise, my viola sounding through the auditorium filled with over a thousand attendees. As time elapsed, I turned back to my partner, now restored with power and prepared to start our piece. I ended my final phrase by fading out into the opening guitar lick.

I share this story not to tout my proficiency in free improvisation but to underscore the power of being able to engage in free play whenever one desires. Three years ago, the idea of performing a solo improvisation at the premier concert of the year seemed impossible. Yet here I am, feeling somewhat unstoppable! My work in free improvisation has given me new joy of engaging in solo performances and creating original compositions. These experiences have not only invigorated my own pedagogical practice but also served as motivation for this document and my passion to share this experience and empower every young musician.

The art of free improvisation has largely been excluded from western classical music traditions and education—overlooked as a valuable tool for cultivating heightened musicianship. Despite constant evolutions in the professional music field, collegiate music programs are slow to adapt some teaching practices for improvisation outside of the jazz idiom ultimately excluding non-jazz musicians from practice of improvisation (Song, 2013). Graduates from higher education music programs lack tools for accessing free play, and rarely have the confidence to display their own musical voice and artistic choices outside of the school environment.

With roots in the late 1950s movements in free jazz and avant-garde classical music (Bailey, 1992; Sbordoni & Rostagno, 2018), the culture of free improvisation is characterized by a spontaneous approach to music-making, where creativity and expression are prioritized for inspiration over strict musical form or notation. Maud Hickey, a contemporary researcher on the topic of free improvisation education, defines it as “... a form of improvisation that is ultimately the most open, non-rules bound ... It is not a free-for-all approach, as it requires attentive and sensitive listening to the environment and others involved” (Hickey, 2009, p. 294)

Derek Bailey, a significant figure in the field of free improvisation, provides this definition of free improvisation: “Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it” (Bailey, 1992, p. 83).

From my experience, I recognize that free improvisation places a strong emphasis on individual and collective listening skills, encourages willingness to break traditional musical conventions, and cultivates a deep sense of one’s musical identity and voice. and communication between the performer, their instrument, and their environment.

The benefits of free improvisation have been displayed not only in my own journey, but in those of my peers. Free improvisation has encouraged me to think beyond the boundaries of notation and to engage in a creative dialogue with my own musical voice. It has cultivated a deeper understanding of possible musical devices by requiring me to use these techniques to express my innate musical instincts spontaneously.

There have been significant publications on the topic of teaching improvisation and its role in the elementary and general music classroom (Dobbins, 1980; Johansen et al., 2020; Kratus, 1991). More narrowly, there has been research on the significance of free improvisation in educational settings (Ng, 2023; Niknafs, 2013), and an even smaller number have been published on teaching free improvisation in higher education (Ford, 1995; Hickey, 2015).

Acquiring free improvisation skills in higher education can allow students to access a heightened level of creativity and enjoyment, ultimately contributing to the advancement of their own musical skills and journey. A 2013 study of group free improvisation in a choral setting asked students to report their “perceived individual growth through the improvisation process.” (Ott, 2015, p. 42). The survey showed feelings of enhanced creativity, communication, ability to take risks, active listening, connection, and overall musicianship (Ott, 2015, p. 43). By exploring free improvisation, classical musicians can expand their expressive range, fostering a more intimate connection with their instruments and gaining a deeper appreciation for the art of music-making.

However, advocating for the integration of free improvisation into higher music education has been sparse.¹ Outside of the collegiate classroom, pre-college and general music educators have been acknowledging the benefits of structured improvisation for the last 2

¹ For further reading, see Hickey (2009) and Song (2013).

decades.² In addition to this research, many publications have been produced on introducing and applying improvisation activities for young students.³ While some of these strategies could be easily adapted for college-age students, they are often too simple in nature and focus too heavily on idiomatic improvisation.

I use the terms idiomatic and non-idiomatic improvisation the same way that Derek Bailey defines them. For Bailey (1992),

Idiomatic improvisation, much the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom—such as jazz, flamenco, or baroque—and takes identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called ‘free improvisation and, while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity. (Introduction, pp. xi–xii)

While many resources for studying idiomatic improvisation exist, much less exist within the realm of non-idiomatic or free improvisation. I found a handful of free improvisation teaching resources including Jeffrey Agrell’s (2019) exceptionally large *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* and Stiles’ (2002) brief *Impro: Free Improvisation in String Playing for Teachers and Pupils*. While Agrell’s method uses games and multiple permutations of group and individual improvisation exercises, Stiles’s approach relies on musical notation.

Although the pool of resources showed some variation in approach to teaching free improvising, I noticed a lack of emphasis on cultivation of awareness, active listening, or conscious breathing. These mindfulness elements have played a pivotal role in my development as a free improviser. Awareness practice of my body, mind, and environment has made me more

² For further reading, see Dobbins (1980) and Koutsoupidou and Hargreaves (2009).

³ For further reading, see Scott (2007), Gruenhagen and Whitcomb (2013), and Kratus (1991).

vulnerable to sharing my own music and created comfort in spontaneous free play. Despite the effectiveness of various improvisation strategies, I strongly believe that young musicians may miss the opportunity to fully benefit from free improvisation if they do not simultaneously practice mindfulness. This leads me to ask: What is needed to best introduce free improvisation? How do we teach the art of spontaneous and creative free improvisation?

Integrating mindfulness into free improvisation training can provide a unique dimension to enhance musicians' ability to feel open and respond in the moment. Mindfulness is often defined as being present, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgementally" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 4).

There is an increasing amount of research on the benefits of mindfulness, especially for young people (e.g., Mrazek et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014; Weare, 2013). Benefits from this literature include heightened awareness, meta-cognition, greater attention and concentration skills, and general improvement of cognitive function (Mrazek et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014). Heightened sensory awareness can only enhance free improvisation by offering more possibilities for nuanced listening, responding, and genuine interaction. Additionally, such mindfulness practices enable musicians to tap into their emotions and transcend technical concerns, ultimately shaping them into more versatile and emotionally connected artists. In essence, the inclusion of awareness practice in the study of free improvisation offers connection between technical proficiency and artistic expression, enriching the musical experience for both performers and audiences alike.

To enhance the instruction of free improvisation and ultimately foster elevated musicianship, I suggest a methodology that combines practices in mindfulness alongside activities aimed at developing improvisational skills.

Free improvisation is inherently vulnerable, demanding one to take risks and be openly honest and authentic in musical expression. A 2015 observation of free improvisation pedagogues documented common themes in teaching and amongst these was the attention to creating a safe psychological space for students (Hickey, 2015). David Ballou, an observed teacher in the analysis further emphasizes the vulnerable nature through the lens of intimacy: “It’s a pretty intimate conversation ... I mean we’re asking people to be honest and genuine and there’s very little time in people’s lives where they’re asked to do that” (Hickey, 2015, Ballou Interview 2, p. 439).

When performing and teaching the art of free improvisation, there are no set guidelines on what, when, or how to play. This lack of structure requires one to draw from their own personal passions and experiences and it is the utilization of these intimate inspirations that forms the unique non-idiomatic environment of free improvisation.

What elements support the creation of a safe psychological space that encourages students to express their musical voices comfortably? My answer is to acknowledge the inherent vulnerability of free improvisation and integrate mindfulness practice. Mindfulness techniques such as breathwork, meditation, and body awareness facilitate self-awareness (meta-cognition), awareness of others, and environmental sensitivity (Mrazek et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2014). These practices not only foster comfort but also promote mutual respect among participants sharing in the same creative context. Furthermore, self-awareness can enhance the discovery and acknowledgment of improvisational ideas within oneself. The observed pedagogues in Maud Hickey’s research demonstrated sensitivity to psychological space, emphasizing trust, community, and present-moment awareness (Hickey, 2015). While teachers can exemplify these

traits, students can also cultivate them through mindfulness, learning to trust themselves and each other.

By integrating mindfulness into improvisation pedagogy, students not only learn to trust themselves and each other but also develop deeper insights into their creative potential.

Mindfulness and free improvisation share parallels in embracing the present moment and confronting the unknown, making them mutually reinforcing practices. As students engage in both, they discover new dimensions of self-expression and cultivate a profound connection between mindfulness and free improvisation.

This project is inspired from my own experience and personal growth in developing sustainable motivation, creativity, and expression through mindfulness practice. Additionally, this project stems from observations of music students in my own undergraduate and graduate studies. For myself and many of my student colleagues, free improvisation has opened doorways for alleviating performance anxiety, experiencing more freedom in play, and enablement and discovery of personal musical voice.

As a future collegiate-level educator, this research interest has focused on creating a progressive sequence for teaching free improvisation. My research will be guided by questions including: What strategies do expert-level free improvisors utilize in teaching and practice? What methods of creation do they use themselves? What types of conversations, activities, and education should be included in teaching free improvisation? What are the challenges in navigating teaching free improvisation?

Problem Statement

Current resources on teaching improvisation fail to cover the specific genre of free improvisation. In a subset of those that do, the methods lack any attention to developing

awareness before the creation of sound. By excluding the development of integral building blocks of accessing creativity, such as meditation and awareness, the student is denied full access to improvisation. Awareness is not only imperative for the development of heightened musicianship but is an important step in accessing one's own musical voice.

Objectives

This document provides a resource for facilitating free improvisation that integrates mindfulness practice. The paper will be philosophical, and the outline, structure, and content of these resources may serve as examples or inspiration for other academics interested in introducing free improvisation to their students.

Thesis Statement

This research surveyed strategies utilized by expert Western classical improvisers and current free improvisation method books to reveal and propose the addition of mindfulness strategies to the curriculum of free improvisation. To enhance the instruction of free improvisation and ultimately foster elevated musicianship, I proposed a pedagogical sequence that integrates mindfulness strategies into the teaching of free improvisation.

Hypothesis

In a survey of texts, there will be many similarities across strategies utilized to teach improvisation. I anticipate that most of these strategies will be geared towards idiomatic improvisation and present challenges to extract non-idiomatic improvisation strategies. Additionally, there will likely be an apparent lack of strategies aimed at developing mindfulness. The findings of current strategies for free improvisation will bring to light the need for additions of awareness practice as strategies for free improvisation education.

Research Questions

- What current teaching methods and strategies are available for learning free improvisation?
- What themes, similarities, and differences do these improvisation teaching strategies and method books have?
- What strategies do expert-level free improvisors utilize in teaching and practice? What methods of creation do they use themselves?
- What types of conversations, activities, and education should be included in teaching free improvisation?
- What resources are available for cultivating awareness?
- What are the challenges in navigating teaching free improvisation?

Limitations/Delimitations

The limitations of this study connect directly to the inherent nature of free improvisation, which at its core is unpredictable and found delightfully so by its performers. Since little formal research exists about the topic of teaching non-idiomatic improvisation, many of the strategies in this document will be extracted from surveyed texts on teaching general improvisation and interviews with expert improvisers and teachers. In addition, information will be shared from my personal experience and based on my own training and education.

The number of free improvisation method books is small. The information provided by these five texts will be analyzed for strategies that stimulate non-idiomatic improvisation. While the texts may imply strategies that require heightened awareness, none will provide specific examples for developing this skill.

The research will also include a selection of texts for teaching mindfulness-based strategies. The number of resources for teaching this are vast and generally non-academic. Therefore, collected strategies for this will be based on personal experience and education.

CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR MINDFUL FREE IMPROVISATION TEACHING

Expert Western Classical Music Improvisers' Strategies

A 2017 article published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* acknowledged the need to observe expert Western classical music improvisers. This study formally documents teaching strategies used in various classroom contexts under diverse instructional styles. Prior to this research, teachings of these particular free improvisers had not undergone systematic documentation or analysis.

A team of researchers, composed of Jean-Philippe Després, Pamela Burnard, Francis Dubé and Sophie Stévance, conducted interviews with “five internationally recognized Western classical music expert improvisers” (Després et al., 2017, abstract). This study represents a crucial step in synthesizing and comprehending the pedagogical approaches employed by experts in the field, offering insights that are extremely beneficial for this document.

The observed improvisers included five globally recognized musicians whose expertise was qualified through years of experience, formal training, recorded albums, and peer recognition (Després et al., 2017, p. 146). Among them were two guitarists, two organists, and one double bass player. It is important to acknowledge that the authors focused their observations on Western classical music improvisers, a category encompassing jazz improvisation, historical improvisation, and free improvisation. Even though the identified strategy categories are not specific to free improvisation, they remain valid for conceptualizing teaching and sequencing in the broader context of Western classical music improvisation.

Their interviews and observations yield a wealth of strategies that were subsequently analyzed and “organized into five categories according to their respective functions” (Després et al., 2017, p. 149).

1. “preplanning strategies, implemented before the improvisation;
2. conceptual strategies, implemented to establish pitch, rhythm, or tonality;
3. structural strategies, implemented to organize the improvisation;
4. atmospheric and stylistic strategies, implemented to set a mood, a sonority, or a style;
5. real-time strategies, implemented to negotiate the extemporary nature of ideation and execution during improvisation.”

Table 1. Després et al. Improvisation General and Specific Strategies

| Category | General strategies | Specific strategies |
|--|--|--|
| Preplanning | | Choosing a theme ^a Fixing a frame Setting the color palette ^a |
| Conceptual | Harmonic priority Melodic priority Tonal approach ^a Rhythmical considerations ^a | Using quartal harmonies ^a Thinking in intervals Using the chromatic scale ^a Using parallel motion ^a “Breaking” tonality ^a Choosing a comfortable tempo ^a |
| Structural | Phrasing and articulations Idea bank Development ^a Form | Thinking in terms of phrasing or articulations Quoting a theme Expanding technical ideas ^a Embellishing, varying, or recombining Repeating or sequencing Creating a period ^a Varying intensity ^a Contrasting approach Setting a harmonic structure Building a bridge ^a Setting the duration ^a |
| Atmospheric and stylistic ^a | | Imitating another instrument ^a Imitating a composer or a piece |

| Category | General strategies | Specific strategies |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| | | Imitating a style or genre Setting the mood ^a Creating an ostinato or a petal ^a Focusing on the tone color |
| Realtime ^a | | Faking improvisation ^a Gaining time ^a Exploring the field ^a Keeping a steady rhythm ^a Using brief durations ^a Avoiding the beaten paths Refusing the unexpected ^a Using the unexpected creatively |
| | Instrumentalities ^a | Using idiomatic techniques ^a Keeping a visual contact ^a Simplifying an idea ^a |

Note. ^aNovel strategies (i.e., those that were not included in the preliminary coding scheme).

The authors further refine their analyzed strategies by categorizing them into ‘general’ and ‘specific’ strategies. The following table of strategies is distinctly divided between overarching concepts (general strategies) for improvisation and more precisely defined approaches (specific strategies).

This article is an absolute treasure trove for anyone seeking pedagogical insights into free improvisation. Yet, as I perused these strategies, none surprised me. I was hoping for that element of surprise and to discover something new from the observations of these esteemed experts.

Instead, I observed a notable absence of a rather significant element. My experience with free improvisation thus far included aspects of awareness practice, which I will later categorize under the umbrella of mindfulness in this document. I assumed these experts must also engage in awareness practices. Surely, their expertise extends to cultivating attentive listening skills, yet none of these strategies are listed here. While this article provides an excellent framework for

analyzing free improvisation methods, it further reinforces my analysis that mindfulness strategies are notably absent.

Learning From the Experts: A Study of Free-Improvisation Pedagogues in University Settings

Another noteworthy discovery in my research was Maud Hickey's (2015) study, focusing on expert free improvisers as instructors within academia. These experts are prominent figures in free improvisation including Pauline Oliveros, Fred Frith, Ed Sarath, and David Ballou. Through interviews and careful observation, Hickey gathered data and subsequently organized it into four themes: "Strategies and Approaches," "The perceived role of the ensemble leader," "Pedagogue Dispositions," "Other Attributes of Pedagogues," and several smaller common pedagogical themes such as teacher tools, vocabulary, physical teaching space, feedback mechanisms, the role of the leader as a guide, comfort with spontaneity, the establishment of a secure teaching environment, and the pedagogue's dual role as a performer (Hickey, 2015, pp. 434–439).

While this article provides a wealth of strategies, its primary function within my research is to serve as a foundational framework for my proposed pedagogical sequence. Among the resources I have explored, this article uniquely and substantially addresses the intimate and vulnerable nature of improvisation. Moreover, it offers insights into addressing these aspects in the context of teaching. The identified themes will serve as valuable information on how to model improvisation as a teacher, going beyond the 'what' we teach to the crucial 'how' of teaching.

Specific strategies for intriguing themes such as "establishment of a secure teaching environment" or "comfort with spontaneity" are not explicitly provided in this article but are addressed as important contributors to the free improvisation learning space. This gap is where I

aim to contribute by introducing mindfulness strategies and resources in the later sections of my proposed pedagogical sequence. The addition of mindfulness strategies facilitates the development of a safe and egalitarian improvisatory space, complementing other integral elements essential for free improvisation.

Hickey's initial research question, "What strategies and approaches do free-improvisation ensemble leaders employ in facilitating their ensembles?" (Hickey, 2015, p. 430), provided four more teaching aspects: teacher tools, vocabulary, physical teaching space, and feedback (Hickey, 2015, p. 434).

It becomes evident, even at this early stage, how these themes diverge from the teaching information gleaned from "Expert Western Classical Music Improvisers' Strategies" (Després et al., 2017). In contrast to mere categories and strategies, we are now acquiring insights into pedagogical approaches and perspectives. All these elements, naturally, contribute to optimizing the delivery and execution of teaching strategies.

Teacher tools can be defined as strategies and approaches used for teaching in each of the pedagogues' free improvisation ensembles (Hickey, 2015, pp. 434–437). Hickey observes that these tools not only exhibited significant variation from one teacher to another but also within different classes taught by the same instructor. I believe this parallels the idea of each teacher possessing a unique "bag of tricks" and preferred exercises to draw upon. Hickey emphasizes that these tools were primarily applied to the beginning of rehearsal. I resonate with this observation as I view teaching tools as a warm-up to our learning and creative objectives, functioning to review existing skills or introduce new ones.

For the free improvisation environment, starting with any idea or inspiration is viewed as a starting point, not the goal of the improvisation itself. I also believe these tools should grow, expand, and change over time and experience both teaching and performing free improvisation. Because Sarath and Oliveros are such heroes of mine, it would not be right to not share their quoted tools within this section.

- Sarath, “Long tones with a pulse”: “I want to start with this exercise, which is called long tones with a pulse. That means all we do is we play ... You can either play silence, or you can play a long tone ... and just listen ... and I’m going to give you one sort of creative option. When you come in with your long tone, if you feel like you want to shift to another long tone, you can. Generally, when you feel like your pitch is not gelling, you don’t like the way the collective sonority is unfolding, generally a half step up or a half step down solves the problem. Generally.” (Sarath ensemble rehearsal instructions; Hickey, 2015, p. 435)
- Oliveros, “Create a loop”: “Take a moment and create for yourselves a loop. Some material that you can loop, and it can be a short loop or a long loop ... You keep your loop, but you start to incorporate from some other material into your loop, so your loop starts to morph a little bit but it’s still basically there. And then you continue that until you morph more and more. [pause] So we’ll see where it goes” (Oliveros graduate seminar ensemble instruction; Hickey, 2015, p. 435).

Musicians commonly resort to non-musical terms to articulate our perception of music. In this context, Hickey recognizes this phenomenon and identifies observed vocabulary categories: metaphors, density, feeling, texture, energy (Hickey, 2015, p. 435). Other more specific terms

included fabric, sonority, intensity, wave, rumble, logic, texture, color, development, and relationships (Hickey, 2015, p. 435).

Language not only serves as a means to describe music but also plays a crucial role in the communicating and teaching of music. This aspect of the learning process can be additionally challenging for free improvisation as there are no clear rules for what is allowed. However, if the concept of freedom is embraced, language transforms from a challenge into a tool for inspiration. In this context, the absence of norms means there are no right or wrong words. Instead, every word in our language becomes a potential source of inspiration and communication.

An often-overlooked aspect of teaching is the consideration of physical space. Typically, the teacher is perceived as the “sage on the stage,” positioned in front of the students, holding all the knowledge, and, from a political standpoint, wielding all the power. However, free improvisation embraces an egalitarian space, fostering a dynamic where both student and teacher can engage as equals. Hickey highlights, “The pedagogues set up a space that was physically and psychologically purposeful ...” (Hickey, 2015, p. 435).

In Hickey’s observations, each pedagogue utilized a circular physical arrangement, with the teacher positioned both within and at times outside the circle. The average class size comprised 12 students, featuring various instruments. Drawing from my experience in large free improvisation ensembles, I find 12 to be the maximum number for effective engagement. Beyond this, communication and active listening become increasingly challenging with a higher number of participants.

The final category within Hickey’s exploration of strategies and approaches is feedback. Most of the observed teachers steered clear of value-laden terms like “good” or “bad.” Even more crucial to note is that Hickey notes language that creates opportunities for self-discovery

and allows individuals to explore their experiences during improvisation. Hickey writes, “Each of the pedagogues had an extraordinary ability to ask thoughtful questions after completion of an exercise or piece” (Hickey, 2015, p. 437).

The following list is my summary of quotes and notes from Hickey’s observations and interviews (Hickey, 2015, pp. 436–437):

- Avoidance of qualitative assessment
- Constructive assessment
- Reflection
- Exploring how things “felt” - “How did that feel to you?”
- Defining sensations experiences - “What sensations did you have?”
- Inquiring emotions or feelings evoked - “Was there some emotion or feeling that comes up?”
- Encouraging a retry - “Try again!”
- Assessing energy - “How was it energetically? Where is the energy of this improvisation?”
- Conveying that each person’s experience is highly valued

The most important of these is emphasizing the value of each individual’s experience.

Mindfulness can be helpful here for both the teacher and the student. Feedback and questions should initially come from the teacher and, as mindfulness is cultivated, evolve to also emerge from the students themselves. Notably, these questions align with principles explored in

meditation, a concept akin to what Kabat-Zinn prompts us to consider in *wherever you go, there you are*.⁴

The role of the pedagogue is unique within the realm of free improvisation. I would like to reacknowledge the flexible and non-traditional space that free improvisation lives in; In a group free improvisation, there is no assigned leader, and it is typical for roles of listening and leading to fluctuate. Unlike environments like symphony orchestras, which may rely on a conductor or written score, free improvisation is a space for equal participation.

It only makes sense that these pedagogues view themselves as equals to the ensemble members. Hickey (2015) writes, “their actions and perceptions were as ensemble guides and facilitators rather than leaders or directors” (p. 437). Hickey further observed that some pedagogues viewed themselves as a coach to the ensemble and “... as one in a community of artists working together” (pp. 437–438).

While as teachers we spend a considerable amount of time analyzing a student’s disposition, it is much less frequent for us to reflect on our own disposition. It was refreshing to read Hickey’s observations on the pedagogue’s dispositions and made me ask: how often do we view disposition as a tool rather than merely a personality trait?

Hickey highlighted two prevalent dispositions among pedagogues: comfort with spontaneity and sensitivity to psychological space (Hickey, 2015, p. 438). Free improvisation can be an imperfect and intimate act. Consequently, instructing this art demands a facilitator who remains consistently attuned to these elements both within the environment and the participating students. Hickey’s experience of spontaneity saw each pedagogue approaching “ensemble

⁴ Much of Kabat-Zinn’s chapters have mindfulness strategies in the form of self-reflection, awareness, and questions. See pp. 17, 46, or 79 for best examples.

rehearsals without a clear plan” (Hickey, 2015, p. 438). The essence of improvisation was not solely conveyed as a musical practice but also as a pedagogical tool.

If there is one key takeaway from Hickey’s article, let it be this: “The psychological space seemed as important as, if not more important than, the physical ensemble setup” (Hickey, 2015, p. 438). I would go further to affirm that this psychological space holds greater significance than any strategy or exercise employed within the teaching environment. So, how do we cultivate a psychological space conducive to free improvisation?

Initially, we need to understand the constituents of this ideal space. Pauline Oliveros emphasized working to establish “a very safe place to experiment and discover—a place of discovery” (Hickey, 2015, Oliveros interview 1, p. 439). Hickey highlighted a shared characteristic among all pedagogues: “sensitivity to trust and community, and their in-the-moment empathy towards students’ feelings and susceptibilities” (Hickey, 2015, p. 439).

Themes of safety, trust, and community prominently emerge here. In my experience, these elements are crucial components of a psychological space for free improvisation. Additionally, there must be a collective acknowledgment of the intimate and vulnerable nature inherent in improvisation (Hickey, 2015, p. 439). It is no small task to take musical risks and create spontaneous music in the presence of peers, let alone in front of one’s teacher!

In the final segment of observation, Hickey sought to identify additional commonalities among the pedagogues that could contribute to their effectiveness in teaching. Predictably, each pedagogue maintained an active role as a performer and improviser (Hickey, 2015, p. 439). While I will not dwell extensively on this aspect, I will emphasize my belief that effective teaching in the arts requires performance and ‘doing.’ Free improvisation, in particular, underscores the importance of this and interactions with beginning improvisers often lead to

questions such as “how do I do that?” Sustaining an active role as a performer not only positions the teacher as an equal participant but also reinforces the cultivation of “trust and the egalitarian nature of the ensemble” (Hickey, 2015, p. 439).

What insights can we glean from Hickey’s research? Firstly, it highlights the significance of free improvisation and the necessity for a thorough exploration of its principles. Hickey’s observations do not provide a conventional method book for instructing this art form, and rightfully so, given that free improvisation is not as straightforward as utilizing a scale or employing a call-and-response strategy. Instead, this document provides philosophical perspectives and pedagogical guidelines that encourage contemplation on the teaching of free improvisation.

An Analysis of Current Free Improvisation Teaching Methods

When seeking resources for teaching free improvisation from an academic musician, one might be met with a puzzled expression. This is understandable, as the realm of free improvisation rarely includes any written documents. When I embarked on a quest for teaching materials, my findings were rather modest—only two sources explicitly featuring ‘free improvisation’ in the title and three others focused on improvisation games, most of which could be adapted for teaching purposes.

Regarding the previously discussed article on “Expert Western Classical Music Improviser’s Strategies,” I found it beneficial to analyze each teaching resource through the lens of the identified categories. In this chapter, I will not only categorize the strategies and games encapsulated in each resource but also provide commentary on their alignment within these categories. Furthermore, I will consistently draw attention to the absent category in each of these

sources, mindfulness, and discuss how its inclusion could enhance the goals set forth by each author.

Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians

My initial search for free improvisation teaching strategies led me to Jeffrey Agrell's (2019) text, "Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians," originally published in 2008. The book boasts an impressive array of games for learning and teaching improvisation, accompanied by a substantial introduction where Agrell validates his own process and contextualizes the environment for which many of these games were crafted.

As an educator, I appreciate the abundance of games offered in this text. However, it seems a tad ambitious for one teacher to claim ownership over 500+ improvisation games. I observe that many are essentially variations of each other, with different numbering schemes depending on whether they are intended for string instruments or wind instruments. Additionally, most of the games lack music notation. While this fits the milieu of free improvisation, these games still highly suggest key areas or harmony—characteristics more aligned with idiomatic improvisation.

The first six chapters (Part I) convey his philosophies and objectives towards fostering ease and accessibility. He frequently asserts that this book is a versatile resource for performers, music educators, students, ensembles, music therapists, and, as he puts it, "everybody else" (Agrell, 2019, Ch. 2, pp. 4–8). Although Agrell's text is not exclusively tailored to free improvisation, it underscores a pivotal message: improvisation is for everyone.

Agrell's (2019) "Introduction to Improvisation for Classical Musicians" (Ch. 3, p. 9) addresses class size, space, the role of the instructor, and performances—like themes from Hickey's observation on free improvisation pedagogues. He continues building improvisation

learning fundamentals in his fourth chapter, titled, “Musical Training for Improvisation.” Here, Agrell (2019) acknowledges,

The goal of the kind of contemporary classical improvisation espoused here is to return to that ability once enjoyed by all musicians, that of having a voice and being able to ‘think’ and ‘speak’ music, as well as being able to recite the text of others. (p. 29)

I wholeheartedly agree with Agrell’s perspective.

The remaining chapters within this first part emphasize development of technical skills such as imitation, analysis, melody creation, musical forms, and developing the capacity to switch between roles during improvisation (Agrell, 2019, p. 29). The focus on these skills brings a few questions to mind. Is Agrell proposing that these elements should be mastered before engaging in improvisation? Alternatively, is the implication that these skills are cultivated through the act of improvising itself? Another interpretation could be that these are overarching concepts to keep in mind when teaching or practicing improvisation. I believe asking these questions is important not only for my own teaching but also for anyone teaching in this field. What is required to be able to freely improvise?

Like several method texts I will later explore, Agrell writes that possessing some fundamental skills is essential for beginning improvisation. He contends that improvisation training involves both musical and technical training, with technical skills for mastery requiring “basic domain skills (including a specialized vocabulary of the trade)” (Agrell, 2019, p. 31).

Possessing a basic skill of technical proficiency on one’s instrument can only make the learning process for free improvisation easier—much like learning a new piece of repertoire. In my observations and experience, the more technical skills I attain on my instrument, the larger library from which I have to create.

While the necessity of these skills for improvisation or their optimal acquisition method falls beyond the scope of this paper, I consistently encourage both myself and the reader to contemplate which skills are honed through improvisation and which could be imparted through its exploratory nature. From my teaching and learning experience, I have found energy by delving into technique beyond the confines of traditional notation. Teaching technique through improvisation might afford us a fresh perspective on the role of technical skills. Amongst this introductory material, Agrell (2019) delineates numerous games from free improvisation. He introduces this exercise within the technical training chapter:

Daily Arkady: This practice is described in Melody Games. Suffice it to say that a Daily Arkady is “free” playing, exploring melody, rhythm, and mood, integrating all the types of scale, arpeggio, and pattern practices listed here, and directed by the imagination.

Daily Arkady is an imaginative way to practice technique musically, and a great way to start your day. (p. 38)

His use of “free playing” suggests it is distinct from the larger improvisation concept Agrell is emphasizing, and it might not compare to the number of games within this text that have a more idiomatic improvisation structure.

Regardless, many of the games in this text are worthy starting points for general improvisation and demonstrate all Després et al.’s (2017) five categories of improvisation teaching strategies. I would also like to make a last note that Agrell has a second volume of games. Although it presents another substantial collection of 642 games, I did not observe any games or categories that were notably distinct from those in the first volume (Agrell, 2016). We can analyze Agrell’s (2019) book through the lens of Després categories and realize that most of the teaching games fit within the preplanning strategy category. Preplanning strategies

“refers to all the musical decisions made by the musicians before the improvisation” (Després et al., 2017, p. 149).

Table 2. Agrell Strategies

| Improvisation Strategy Category | Preplanning Strategies | Conceptual Strategies | Structural Strategies | Atmospheric & Stylistic Strategies | Real-Time Strategies |
|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| Method Book | | | | | |
| Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians (Agrell) | Warm Up Games Rhythm Games Accent Games Dynamics Games Melody Games Form Games Harmony Games Bass Line Games Aural Games Nontraditional Score Games Conducting Games Energy/Mood Games Texture Games Timbre Games Composition Games Depiction Games Technique Games Accompaniment Games Style Games Text Games Storytelling Games | Rhythm Games Accent Games Melody Games Harmony Games Bass Line Games | Warm-Up Games Rhythm Games Dynamics Strategies Form Games Texture Games | Melody Games Energy/Mood Games Timbre Games | Accent Games Dynamics Games Aural Games Accompaniment Games |

These strategies can provide a sense of familiarity amongst teachers and students as they provide a strong sense of structure and encompass any decisions made before producing any sound. Beyond improvisation, we can identify this process as rehearsal, involving the agreement on what will occur during a performance. For the free improvisation classroom, this may include selecting a theme or mood to create from or establishing the general goals of the improvisation.

Familiarity and structure are powerful starting points for beginning free improvisation students so this text would be impactful in teaching beginning free improvisation sessions.

Improvising String Quartets

In their 2012 work, *Improvising String Quartets*, Kanack and Smolen present a Suzuki-style approach to improvisation (see Suzuki, 2015). The foreword, written by Dr. Sera Jane Smolen, introduces five stages leading into improvisation: Breaking the Ice, Finding Your Voice, Sharing, Using Your Voice, Breaking Away, and Inspiration and “Meta-Cognition.” Each section reveals Smolen’s insights on Kanack and Smolen’s methodology for nurturing creative ability.

The initial stages of creative development begin during the pre-twinkle phases of Suzuki study, complemented by Kanack’s publication and accompanying CD, *Musical Improvisation for Children*. Progressing from this foundational stage, Smolen points to introductory improvisation techniques tailored for students exploring repertoire in Suzuki books 1-3. These strategies include improvisation on a single note and responding to a “magic question”: “We sing the musical question which is a ‘magical question’! Each player in a class offers a musical answer, and all children from around the world have never exhausted the possible answers to this magical question” (Kanack & Smolen, 2012, p. 10).

The second stage, “Finding Your Voice,” appears to take the longest; as Smolen notes, “It takes roughly three years for children (and adults) to pass through this stage. Like all of talent education,”⁵ it is miraculous and unique to each person, yet teachers learn how students follow a recognizable, organic process. For each instrument, she [Kanack] chooses the most accessible,

⁵ Talent Education refers to Suzuki’s Talent Education program, synonymous with the “Mother Tongue” method. For further reading, see Suzuki (2015) and Starr (2000).

idiomatic finger pattern to begin with ...” (Kanack & Smolen, 2012, p. 11). The strategies outlined in this stage align well with the conceptual strategy category, involving improvisation within modes and scales.

I was intrigued to study the methods employed in the third and fourth stages, labeled “Sharing, using your voice” and “Breaking away – the search for truth and beauty.” These stages commence when students have achieved mastery over the physical aspects of their instruments, prompting them to deepen their musical language through advanced forms of imitation and spontaneous yet impactful communication (Kanack & Smolen, 2012, pp. 11–12).

The final fifth stage of creative development is “Inspiration and Meta-Cognition.” Smolen explains,

Creativity at this level synthesizes all the skills from each of the previous stages. At this stage, the creative musical environment has both accumulated a critical mass and has had a cumulative effect. A young musician now discovers an awareness of the symbolic power of music. If this stage is prepared for thoughtfully, musical experiences, stylistic inevitabilities and expressive devices begin to coalesce. (Kanack & Smolen, 2012, p. 12)

Parallel to the Suzuki method, students’ natural progression and education equip them with the tools to experience creativity and, ultimately, engage in improvisation. Once again, we must pose the question: What is necessary to engage in free improvisation? Based on Smolen’s observations, it seems that Kanack’s concept of what is necessary involves exemplary modeling in creativity and the early integration of fundamental improvisational exercises that naturally advance alongside the student’s technical proficiency on the instrument.

For the following table, I have focused solely on categorizing the exercises from Kanack’s text, as the string quartets function as complete pieces rather than teaching strategies.

Kanack outlines the form of each strategy, rendering nearly every exercise suitable for classification as a ‘structural strategy.’

Structural strategies can be helpful for both beginning and intermediate free improvisation sessions. Referring to Després’s definition of structural strategies, they appear closely related to preplanning strategies. Both involve decisions made before the improvisation begins, but structural strategies encompass both “micro-structural elements (such as phrasing and articulations)” as well as “macro-structural components (the formal construction of the improvisation)” (Després et al., 2017, p. 152).

While structural strategies are discussed before the improvisation, their main purpose is to organize how the improvisation unfolds, from its beginning to development and conclusion. In an educational setting, teachers can explore both preplanning and structural categories by initiating an improvisation beforehand that encourages musicians to draw inspiration from their favorite articulations and develop those articulations to match their peers through the development of the improvisation. It is noteworthy that none of Kanack’s exercises fit into the category of ‘atmospheric and stylistic strategies.’ Nevertheless, the ‘Romantic Quartets’ displayed later in her text, prompt students to create based on inspirations such as emotions, nature, and drama.

In addition to each of Kanack’s strategies, she provides a list of suggested permutations along with notes for the teacher. The strategies are presented in order of increasing difficulty. Many of the intermediate and advanced exercises naturally progress toward exploring roles and developing an understanding of cooperation, support, or leadership in a group improvisation setting. Due to the beautifully organized elements, this text stands out as my top recommendation for any instructors of free improvisation.

Table 3. Kanack Strategies

| Improvisation Strategy Category | Preplanning Strategies | Conceptual Strategies | Structural Strategies | Atmospheric & Stylistic Strategies | Real-Time Strategies |
|--|---|--|--|---|--|
| Improvisation String Quartets (Kanack) | Rhythm Machine The Drone Soccer Follow the Leader Rounds Telephone Cross Imitation Bassline with Counterpoint Melody Ostinato Limitations Rotating Roles Passacaglia | Rhythm Machine The Drone Rounds Cross Imitation Modulating Cross Imitation Bassline with Counterpoint Melody Stationary Bassline with Revolving Duets Bassline with Harmony and Melody Ostinato Passacaglia The Canon | Rhythm Machine The Drone Soccer Follow the Leader Rounds Telephone Cross Imitation Stationary Bassline with Revolving Duets Bassline with Harmony and Melody Passacaglia The Canon | | Follow the Leader Rounds Cross Imitation Bassline with Counterpoint Melody Stationary Bassline with Revolving Duets Bassline with Harmony and Melody Ostinato Limitations Rotating Roles |

A Pianist’s Guide to Free Improvisation: Keys to Unlocking Your Creativity

Marilyn Crispell’s video guide to free improvisation (Traum, 2022) begins with her own reflections on sharing strategies for teaching free improvisation: “I hope to expand the concept of what improvisation is or could be, and to inspire people to ultimately find their own personal voices” (Crispell, accompanying booklet, p. 1).

Crispell guides the audience through a series of questions that set the context for her subsequent lessons. She queries, “What is improvisation about? How do we do it?” In responding to these questions, she explains that her ideas will begin with straightforward exercises and progressively advance to more sophisticated ones. While Crispell’s videos and title explicitly state her focus on the piano, I still expected strategies that would extend beyond the

piano—and I was right! Crispell’s strategies begin by exploring intervals and scales, manipulating them for a free play exercise.

In many respects, this DVD provides an excellent illustration of teaching free improvisation, devoid of notation and featuring a wealth of audio and visual examples. Throughout the video, Crispell continuously performs. While a casual viewer might feel initially disappointed that all the strategies are demonstrated and explained exclusively on the piano, a deeper examination reveals these strategies and musical examples as a perfect showcase of how one can leverage the elements of their instrument to initiate free improvisation.

The latter part of Crispell’s DVD delves into melody, an evidently crucial aspect of improvisation for her. She guides the audience through an exploration of the term “melody,” ultimately describing it as “a song that comes to you, and you can’t really say where it comes from” (Crispell, Melody, in Traum, 2022, 00:22:28).

The instruction then journeys to define how one uncovers or creates melodies. This section appears to address inquiries like “how does one make musical sense in an improvisation?” and “how does one maintain inspiration to play during an improvisation?” Amid Crispell’s guidance and internal dialogues, she introduces themes of intention and speech. She alludes to the ability to craft a melody and sustain an improvisation in the same manner one engages in a friendly conversation. There is natural pause, response, and freedom of expression in the moment.

She proceeds the section on melody with two distinct performances: the first, a rendition of a Swedish melody, and the second, a duet improvisation with John Menegan. These performances serve as standalone sources of inspiration for guiding free improvisation.

The Swedish melody provides a more structured approach and suggests the following sequence:

1. Choose a melody.
2. Identify the harmony or pedal point (common drone).
3. Use either as a starting point for improvisation.

During this demonstration, Crispell guides the audience in utilizing energy (derived from the melody's character or key) and the shape of the line as sources of inspiration for improvisation. Additionally, she employs the metaphor of "rhythm as a wave" and suggests incorporating non-traditional parts of the instrument to fuel the improvisational process (Traum, 2002).

Crispell's use of extended techniques, such as knocking on the piano lid and plucking the strings, represents a strategy in itself. Incorporating non-traditional sounds or exploring unconventional parts of the instrument can benefit both beginner and experienced improvisers. For beginners, deviating from expectations of traditional sounds can provide a less intimidating path to expressing sound. Alternately, as an advanced improviser, I have discovered immense joy in experimenting with extended techniques. I have come to view them as a way to genuinely explore my instrument, deepen my understanding of technique, and expand possible sound palettes.

The second performance with John Menegan is a remarkably impressive duet improvisation. Crispell introduces the concept of a new kind of listening, stating, "Here we are in a conversation with another person and not just ourselves" (Crispell and John Menegan, in Traum, 2022, 00:42:81). This final section of the video instruction is less structured, allowing the audience to observe and hear her work within musical roles. Menegan and she seamlessly switch

between what she describes as a “dominant voice,” likely referring to the roles of supporting and soloing in improvisation with others. The performance also serves as a showcase of Crispell employing her initially mentioned strategies, such as pedal point and intervals.

Since there is no accompanying text outlining the strategies featured in Crispell’s instructional video, the categorized strategies are derived from my observation of the video. These strategies differ from other methods not only because they are presented in a video format with real-time playing/demonstrations but also because Crispell explicitly focuses on teaching free improvisation. This emphasis enables her to release the necessity of establishing key areas or ostinatos – strategies that seem unavoidable in other method books. Many of her strategies fall under the real-time strategies category, a category that has had the least amount of contribution thus far (Traum, 2022).

The real-time strategy category is perhaps the most intriguing category from the research of Després et al. (2017). These strategies emerge from the recognition that improvisation is an imperfect, ever-changing, and inherently human event.

“Given that improvisation cannot be paused, musicians adeptly employ real-time strategies to sustain the flow of play” (Després et al., 2017, p. 153). The authors further explain that “... improvising musicians employ real-time strategies to alleviate the cognitive load or technical demands of the improvisatory process and address unforeseen events” (Després et al., 2017, p. 153).

I believe this category is not only a fundamental aspect of learning improvisation but also as a valuable life skill. I am intrigued by why Crispell did not include concepts like breathing, self-awareness, and persistence. Are these not also tools that enable us to “keep on going” during an improvisation? Crispell’s real-time strategies are akin to those in Després’s observations that

include instances of relying on a familiar note, rhythm, or melody to stimulate improvisation (Traum, 2022). This leads me to wonder: What truly aids in sustained free improvisation? What internal dialogue arises when encountering a mistake?

Recalling Després’s general strategy of instrumentalities within the real-time category emerges as an important aspect of initiating free improvisation for Crispell and myself.

Ultimately, our primary instrument can serve as one of the most essential starting points for initiating and sustaining improvisation. When in doubt of where to start or how to continue, I have found much comfort in turning to the familiar techniques of my instrument (viola) such as vibrato, resonant pitches, and harmonics. I would invite any teacher using Crispell’s videos to equate her strategies to something similar on their own instrument.

While the free improvisation environment may not typically acknowledge ‘mistakes,’ the learning atmosphere can often feel quite the opposite. Depending on instrumental technique can serve as one solution to moving past a mistake, but I would contend that mindfulness practices focusing on being present and letting go could be a more effective aid in mitigating any negative effects stemming from unintended sounds.

Table 4. Crispell Strategies

| Improvisation Strategy Category | Preplanning Strategies | Conceptual Strategies | Structural Strategies | Atmospheric & Stylistic Strategies | Real-Time Strategies |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| A Pianist’s Guide to Free Improvisation | Deciding on How to Begin | Intervals Scales Modulation | Deciding on an Ending | Practice Room Concept Emotions Atmosphere | Intervals Scales Pedal Point Call and Response Disruption |

Impro: Free Improvisation in String Playing for Teachers and Pupils

I discovered a wonderfully straightforward method book, uniquely tailored for string playing and prominently featuring the term “free improvisation” in its title. Sarah Stiles’s method book is concise and comprehensive, providing abundant musically notated guidance on how to initiate, develop, and conclude each activity or improvisation. She offers clear notated examples for all four bowed string instruments (violin, viola, cello, and bass) and outlines a pedagogical sequence to transition skills from teacher-led to student-led activities. The book includes suggestions tailored for both beginning and advanced string players and improvisers.

Pupils are encouraged to tap into their innate creative skills, understanding that the only criteria for judging improvisations as good or bad come from the confidence they gain in their own imaginations. Indeed, the examples in *Impro* are merely suggestions to kickstart the process until students acquire the experience to create their own. (Stiles, 2002, Introduction, p. 2)

In Stiles’s introduction, she explicitly emphasizes the significance of imagination and creativity in the improvisation process but does not later prescribe specific actions for learning or nurturing these skills. Notably, Stiles introduces an element we have not seen other authors mention: confidence.

Is confidence solely cultivated through repetitive actions, or are there alternative approaches? I believe that confidence, especially self-confidence, thrives on positive self-talk and developing awareness —skills nurtured through mindfulness practices.

Stiles presents the content across seven chapters, starting with “Inventing and Copying Simple Phrases and Sounds” and “Question and Answer,” and progressing to suggested free improvisation pieces designed around elements such as free note choices, emotions of tranquility

and disturbance, open strings, D major, and rhythm. While this book is designed for string players, its diverse musical examples in different clefs and suggested developmental ideas render it adaptable to other instruments and voices.

The extracted strategies encompass four out of the five strategies identified in the study of Western Classical music improvisers. The sole absent category, structural strategies, is addressed by the author in each chapter, regularly emphasizing the challenge of concluding together. In the third chapter, Stiles (2002) notes,

... agree who will give the sign to end the piece. When the improvisation is felt to be coming to an end, that person will make the last bars clear, and the final bar in particular, so that both players know the ending is about to happen. Hopefully, you will arrive together, but this may take some getting used to before it works! (p. 8).

Stiles further acknowledges other valuable aspects of free improvisation, such as listening and the roles of leadership or support, through teacher notes alongside the notated musical exercises. Despite its excellence in mentioning some factors outside of improvisation strategy, this text still does not address any incorporating of mindfulness into the learning process.

Table 5. Stiles Strategies

| Improvisation Strategy Category | Preplanning Strategies | Conceptual Strategies | Structural Strategies | Atmospheric & Stylistic Strategies | Real-Time Strategies |
|---|--|--|------------------------------|---|---|
| Impro: Free Improvisation in String Playing for Teachers and Pupils | Inventing and Copying Simple Phrases and Sounds Question and Answer Free-Choice Notes Tranquility and Disturbance | Free-Choice Notes Improvisation with Open Strings Improvisation in DMajor Free Improvisation: Rhythm | | Tranquility and Disturbance | Inventing and Copying Simple Phrases and Sounds Question and Answer Tranquility and Disturbance |

| Improvisation Strategy Category | Preplanning Strategies | Conceptual Strategies | Structural Strategies | Atmospheric & Stylistic Strategies | Real-Time Strategies |
|--|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| | Improvisation with Open Strings Improvisation in D Major Free Improvisation: Rhythm | | | | |

From Sight to Sound

Nicole Brockmann’s (2009) work, *From Sight to Sound*, presents a captivating approach to exploring the “many connections between art, music, and language” through the lens of literacy (Brockmann, 2009, p. 1). Her biggest mission is to cultivate literacy skills through improvisation.

Brockmann provides a thorough process, guiding students from individual games to activities involving small chamber groups. The progression of exercises is divided into four main chapters: Building Listening Skills; Simple Melodic Improvisations; Melody and Harmony: Improvisations for Ensembles; and from Sight to Sound: Getting off the Page (Brockmann, 2009, p. 17).

In her collection of 42 games and exercises, Brockmann often leverages existing student skills and repertoire, removing the sheet music to create a more improvisational exercise. The instructions are detailed about how to begin and how to sustain playing but are less prescriptive about how each exercise should conclude. Notably, she includes a few special games that encourage truly free improvisation without specific structure or limits on pitch and rhythm. These games aim to inspire students to spontaneously create sound and music.

Brockmann’s approach relies heavily on Western classical musical examples to serve as inspiration for improvisation. Additionally, she incorporates a unique music theory aspect by

prompting players to write out a harmonic progression before engaging in many of the later games. This dual approach may serve as a source of inspiration and clarity for both teachers and students, but it could also be perceived as overwhelming and restrictive. The method is particularly well-suited for string players with classical training and teachers familiar with string quartet repertoire. Notably, it shares similarities with Kanack and Smolen's (2012) *Improvising String Quartets* as it targets string quartets as the main improvisation setting but introduces more specific rules regarding meter, rhythm, key, and roles among the instruments. Brockmann's use of classical music elements as a departure point for improvisation makes it the majority holder of conceptual strategies amongst other analyzed texts.

In the context of Després's research team observations, the term 'conceptual' is linked to technical musical elements such as pitch and rhythm (Després et al., 2017, p. 150). Their inclusion of this category highlights the centrality of musical elements in musical expression and their usefulness as a tool for free improvisation. In my experience, these types of strategies are often described as limitations and appeal to the technical nature of instrumental playing and music making. I have found using a specific pitch or rhythm wonderful starting points for myself and for my students, especially younger musicians and beginner improvisers.

As Kanack's exercises unfold, it is interesting to observe that numerous exercises require continuous playing from each participant. The game "Dialogue (Counter melody/Echo)" marks the first instance addressing any rests among the players (Brockmann, 2009, p. 100).

Nevertheless, is not silence a key element of free improvisation? Interestingly, meditation also embraces silence. I believe these strategies could be enriched not only by cultivating comfort with silence but also by fostering more nuanced musical details and improvisational choices through this comfort.

Ultimately, this text may not be primarily designed for free improvisation; rather, it seems to focus on fostering an understanding of classical music while using improvisation as a tool. The intended outcome could be that students, when confronted with similar music in the future, possess the ability to perform complex pieces not solely through reading but through a more comprehensive, off-the-page approach.

Table 6. Brockmann Strategies

| Improvisation Strategy Category | Preplanning Strategies | Conceptual Strategies | Structural Strategies | Atmospheric & Stylistic Strategies | Real-Time Strategies |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| From Sight to Sound | Pitch Switch | Pitch Switch | Keep Away | | Sound Effects |
| | Intervals | Intervals | Strings Alone | | He Says, She Says |
| | Pitch Chains | Pitch Chains | Son of Sing and Play | | Strings Alone |
| | Sing and Play | One Third Plus | One Third | | Drone |
| | One Third Plus | One Third | Equals One | | Snake |
| | One Third | Equals One | Fifth | | Musical |
| | Equals One | Getting to the | Fifth | | Volleyball |
| | Getting to the | Root of the | Problem | | Switch and |
| | Root of the | Problem | Rhythmic Scales | | Signal |
| | Problem | Sound Effects* | Fast-Forward | | Dialogue |
| | Sound Effects* | Rhythmic Scales | Rhythm in an | | (Melody/ |
| | Rhythmic Scales | | Alternate | | Countermelody |
| | | | Universe | | Echo) |
| | | Fast-Forward | Music Plus One | | Pas de Deux |
| | | He Says, She | Mosaic | | Pedal to the |
| | | Says | Keep Away | | Metal |
| | | Rhythm in an | Fill in the Blank | | |
| | | Alternate | Strings Alone | | |
| | | Universe | Drone | | |
| | | Music Plus One | Round-Robin | | |
| | Mosaic | Ostinati | | | |
| | Keep Away | The Whole is | | | |
| | Fill in the Blank | Greater Than | | | |
| | | the Sum of its | | | |
| | Strings Alone | Parts | | | |
| | Drone | Means, Motive, | | | |
| | Snake | and | | | |
| | Round-Robin | Opportunity | | | |
| | Ostinati | Monkey Hear, | | | |
| | The Whole is | Monkey Do | | | |
| | Greater Than | Chorale | | | |
| | the Sum of its | Home Away | | | |
| | Parts | from Home | | | |
| | | Being Diana | | | |
| | | Ross | | | |

| Improvisation Strategy Category | Preplanning Strategies | Conceptual Strategies | Structural Strategies | Atmospheric & Stylistic Strategies | Real-Time Strategies |
|--|--|--|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| | Means, Motive, and Opportunity Monkey Hear, Monkey Do Chorale Musical Volleyball Switch and Signal Dialogue (Melody/ Counter melody Echo) Pas de Deux Pedal to the Metal Son of Sing and Play Freeze Frame Dummy Up Bartók Had a Little Lamb Wait Your Ternary Home Away from Home You Can't Get There from Here Circular Reasoning Being Diana Ross Dinner at a Chinese Restaurant It's So Nice, You Can Do It Twice Swing Your Partner Round and Round | Swing Your Partner Round and Round | | | |

A Summary of the Above Methods

After examining these texts, note that some are specifically tailored for free improvisation, while others serve as valuable supplements for teaching the art. Throughout, we

encounter a wealth of strategies spanning the five categories: preplanning, conceptual, structural, atmospheric and stylistic, and real-time strategies. It is intriguing to observe that there is a relatively limited representation of strategies in the atmospheric and stylistic category, despite its potential for creative expression.

Observers of the five Western Classical improvisers defined this category: “Atmospheric and stylistic strategies determine the overall sonority of the improvisation without affecting directly its notes, rhythms, or structure” (Després et al., 2017, p. 153). The authors subdivided this category into six specific strategies, highlighting imitation as the most frequently employed. Stiles’s and Kanack’s methods certainly touched on imitation through call and response strategies, but I believe the imitation referred to in the atmospheric and stylistic category refers to being able to imitate from aural conception. This brings up an important element of practicing and expanding listening. The more styles, moods, emotions, and atmospheres one knows, the more one has to create from. Additionally, we identify a gap in addressing inspiration for initiating an improvisation. While one could argue it falls under preplanning, the concept of inspiration feels distinct, serving as undisclosed images or ideas from personal experience or even during an improvisation.

Finally, in exploring the idea of inspiration for free play, a notable absence is a category focusing on mindfulness. As we familiarize these categories and focus on methods for commencing, sustaining, and concluding an improvisation, the question arises: How do we sustain our creativity beyond the confines of these books and for future free play?

My response is that it necessitates the cultivation of one’s own ideas, self-awareness, motivations, and creativity, all of which can be nurtured through the benefits of mindfulness. Developing the ability to sustain ideas for free play can be likened to teaching our students how

to practice beyond the lesson. The forthcoming chapter will delve into two distinct resources that facilitate the learning and cultivation of mindfulness and creativity.

Suggested Mindfulness Resources

In January 2013, I attended a viola intensive workshop where I was introduced to meditation for the first time. I wish I could recall every detail, but what I will always remember is the burning curiosity I had to find resources that would guide me in recreating that experience. Little did I know that this would become the focal point of my dissertation and an integral part of my daily life! The upcoming chapter features two mindfulness resources selected from my personal experience and practice. They both focus on the nature of meditation and mindfulness that welcomes various levels of expertise. Since mindfulness is not a typical part of Western classical academic studies, I chose to recommend resources that I have personally vetted. Throughout the chapter, I will delve into the organized contents of each resource and explore specific mindfulness strategies they offer. I anticipate these strategies to exhibit overlap and perhaps ambiguity. As you read this chapter, I would like to offer an informal reflection on how mindfulness practices often parallels the ambiguous nature of music, emphasizing elements such as listening, feeling, self-discovery, and embracing the unknown—crucial aspects for nurturing creativity. Throughout this chapter, I will share the contents and mindfulness strategies within each resource, leading us closer to a comprehensive and holistic approach to teaching free improvisation.

Wherever You Go, There You Are

This book is authored by internationally respected mindfulness expert Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He is the founder of its renowned Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Clinic in 1979 and the

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (CFM) in 1995. His book, published in 1994, still stands as a top hit for searches on meditation and mindfulness. The book presents 34 mindfulness strategies divided into three parts, progressing in familiarity with the practice of meditation rather than difficulty.

“Part One: The Bloom of the Present Moment” serves as a comprehensive introduction to the purpose and historical philosophies of meditation. My following comments on the content will highlight pivotal contributions and philosophies from the author, essential for teaching meditation. Part One includes thirteen strategies for approaching meditation and mindset, denoted by the prompt ‘try.’ In “Meditation Develops Full Human Beings,” Kabat-Zinn offers a beautiful definition for meditation:

I’m told that in Pali, the original language of the Buddha, there is no one word corresponding to our word “meditation,” even though meditations might be said to have evolved to an extraordinary degree in ancient Indian culture. One word that is frequently used is *bhavana*. Bhavana translates as “development through mental training.” To me, this strikes the mark; meditation really is about human development. (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 81)

The strategy presented in this chapter is particularly intriguing, urging the reader to embrace every aspect of themselves during meditation. Kabat-Zinn articulates it as “Being open to the prince and the princess, the king and the queen, the giant and the witch ...” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 85). To introduce this strategy, the author suggests that we all embody characters from popular folklore because they resonate with familiar aspects of our being. Each of us possesses qualities akin to a prince, a princess, a witch, and an ogre. This strategy appears to touch on some

essence of what meditation has provided in my musical journey—allowing me to acknowledge and access the various facets of my being and integrate them into my music.

The final chapter that provides significant insight to the author’s writing is “Practice as a Path,” where Kabat-Zinn emphasizes how meditation provides a space to recognize the present moment. Kabat-Zinn (2005) states, “... we are on the road of life” (p. 88). This mindset is not only crucial for a different lifestyle but is also imperative for present-moment performance, decision-making, and the flow state desired for engaged free improvisation.

In “Part Two: The Heart of Practice,” Kabat-Zinn (2005) provides insights into each style of meditation, detailing body positioning, the benefits of specific postures, and tips for practicing in each position—from sitting and walking to standing and lying down. Kabat-Zinn also dedicates a powerful chapter to perceiving posture as dignity (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 107). While the strategies in this chapter may not necessarily be assigned as readings or detailed in whole-class sessions, the ideas should be modeled by the instructor and briefly addressed in the introduction to meditation.

Kabat-Zinn’s (2005) section on posture notes, “A dignified sitting posture is itself an affirmation of freedom, and of life’s harmony, beauty, and richness” (p. 109). Kabat-Zinn advises that this posture may be accessible at times and not at others, reflecting not only a significant aspect of life but also a crucial element of free improvisation.

After addressing other essential queries on meditation, such as “What to Do with Your Hands,” “Coming Out of Meditation,” and “How Long to Practice,” the author makes an important point:

There is really and truly no one ‘right way’ to practice, although there are pitfalls along this path too and they have to be looked out for. It is best to encounter each moment with freshness, its rich potential held in awareness. (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 128)

Here, we find another important reflection on aspects of free play. Approaching free improvisation with the understanding that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ sounds to make, no correct unfolding of events, and the acceptance of new ideas and events in each free play is essential to growth within the genre.

Once the reader is introduced to the concept that there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to meditate, they are guided through an intriguing chapter titled “A What-Is-My-Way? Meditation,” continuing to deepen what meditation can encompass. Contemplating ‘What is my Way?’ is an excellent way to challenge and assess the value of our own purpose and path in meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 132). Kabat-Zinn (2005) explains that “The intention here is to remain open to not knowing, perhaps allowing yourself to come to the point of admitting, ‘I don’t know,’ and then experimenting with relaxing a bit into this not knowing instead of condemning yourself for it” (p. 133).

We can apply this to our mindset and motives for engaging in free improvisation. It will be more productive to teach and create in an environment that allows performers to stay open and accepting, acknowledging that not knowing is a part of the process. Ultimately, this fosters trust within oneself to create music while simultaneously exploring new music, sounds, and expressions.

The third and final part delves into the author’s ideas “In the Spirit of Mindfulness” and continues to offer strategies for practice alongside more personal analogies between life and meditation. These strategies are less about guiding meditation and more about informal

meditation,⁶ such as broadening what you notice, waking up earlier than usual, choosing a time of day for meditation, and generally framing the mind and thoughts outside of meditation. It even includes lighthearted anecdotes on less obvious ways to embrace mindfulness such as “cleaning the stove and listening to Bobby McFerrin” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 204).

In the penultimate chapter, “Some Pitfalls Along the Path,” Kabat-Zinn (2005) writes, “If you follow the life-long path of mindfulness practice, the biggest potential obstacle at points along your journey will undoubtedly be your thinking mind” (p. 260). This opinion is crucial not only for meditation but also serves as a reminder for ourselves and, of course, for the process of free play.

When we obstruct creativity, it is often our own minds doubting our abilities. Beginning free improvisation students often encounter this self-doubt and this counterproductive mindset hinders open connection and expression through music. Many of the previously analyzed free improvisation texts emphasized the importance of “just beginning,” offering a way for free play to unfold without the boundaries or criticisms of the mind. However, this language is vague and fails to acknowledge the common struggle to “just play.”

Introducing this chapter as a journal and reflection exercise would be an empowering way to normalize the self-doubt that occurs within each of us as humans and within free play. Simultaneously, it would also serve to facilitate conversations around accepting and working towards overcoming this common challenge.

Wherever you go, there you are was my first step towards mindfulness and remains a valuable resource for my practice. I find that the text serves as a wonderful introduction to

⁶ For further reading, see Kakoschke et al.’s (2021) article, “The Importance of Formal Versus Informal Mindfulness Practice For Enhancing Psychological Wellbeing and Study Engagement in A Medical Student Cohort with a 5-week Mindfulness-Based Lifestyle Program.”

meditation, awareness, and mindfulness. In addition to its highly accessible language and strategies, many of the author’s sentiments directly reflect aspects of free improvisation or mindsets that are conducive to free improvisation.

The following table features extracted strategies from this text, specifically marked by ‘try’ by the author within the text. These strategies are by no means the only ways of using this text to explore meditation but will be some of the recommended exercises in the final proposed sequence.

Table 7. Kabat-Zinn Strategies

| Wherever you go, there you are | Part One: The Bloom of the Present Moment | Part Two: The Heart of Practice | Part Three: In the Spirit of Mindfulness |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--|
| | Stopping | Sitting Meditation | Harmony |
| | This is it | Dignity | Early Morning |
| | Capturing Your Moments | What to Do with Your | Direct Contact |
| | Keeping the Breath in | Hands | Going Upstairs |
| | Mind | Coming Out of | Cat-Food Lessons |
| | Waking Up | Meditation | Parenting as Practice |
| | Doing Non-Doing | How Long to Practice? | Some Pitfalls Along the |
| | Patience | No Right Way | Path |
| | Generosity | The Mountain Meditation | |
| | You Have to Be Strong | The Lake Meditation | |
| | Enough to Be Weak | Walking Meditation | |
| | Vision | Standing Meditation | |
| | Meditation Develops Full | Lying-Down Meditation | |
| | Human Beings | Getting Your Body Down | |
| | Practice as a Path | on the Floor at Least | |
| | Going Inside | Once a Day | |
| | | Not Practicing is | |
| | | Practicing | |
| | | Loving Kindness | |
| | | Meditation | |

The Creative Act

My discovery of Rick Rubin’s (2023) book marked a pivotal moment in my research. With a track record of working with major influential artists like Beastie Boys and Travis Scott, and earning eight Grammy awards, Rubin’s (2023) book is a guide to what he calls *The Creative*

Act. This contemporary publication authored by a giant figure in the recording industry proved to be empowering for myself and I know it will be for future free improvising musicians.

Rubin introduces the book with a haiku-like text:

Nothing in this book

is known to be true.

It's a reflection on what I've noticed –

Not facts so much as thoughts.

Some ideas may resonate,

others may not.

A few may awaken an inner knowing

you forgot you had.

Use what's helpful.

Let go of the rest. (Rubin, 2023, preface, pre-page 1).

I believe his writing encapsulates a mindfulness perspective, emphasizing the importance of discerning what is essential and avoiding undue fixation on every idea presented in the upcoming chapters. What resonates with you? How does this book align with your journey?

Rubin (2023) establishes a framework for the creative process and initiates the text with impactful statements that not only inspire but can empower aspiring free improvisers. As I delved into the book, I marked passages and quotes to ponder over, integrating them into my improvisational practice, teaching approach, and daily mindset. Ultimately, a few key sentiments stood out and will be incorporated into the eventual pedagogical sequence as they complement the integration of mindfulness in teaching.

The book opens with a framework for perceiving art, identifying oneself as an artist, and understanding creativity. It then explores methods to cultivate and sustain creativity, as well as strategies for overcoming periods of stagnation. The phases outlined include the Seed Phase, characterized by being “completely open, collecting anything we find of interest” (Rubin, 2023, p. 143); the Experimentation Phase, fueled by the excitement of discovering a starting point and exploring various combinations and possibilities (Rubin, 2023, p. 149); the Craft Phase, involving the labor of building when a clear sense of direction has emerged (Rubin, 2023, p. 163); and the Completion Phase, marking the final movement of the creative process once the seed has achieved full expression and has been pruned to satisfaction (Rubin, 2023, p. 191).

The following section includes an investigation of specific statements by Rubin that I believe will be most impactful on nurturing creativity and facilitating free improvisation. Furthermore, I will extract the mindfulness practices advocated by Rubin and present them in our familiar table format, categorizing them according to the four phases delineated by Rubin.

In the fourth section titled, “Awareness,” Rubin (2023) features the significance of awareness, highlighting its pivotal role in the creative process. Expanding our awareness enables us to perceive more, providing a broader palette for creativity. “The universe is only as large as our perception of it. When we cultivate our awareness, we are expanding the universe” (Rubin, 2023, p. 21). This quote has been a guiding principle for my research, and I believe it would serve as an excellent opening for any free improvisation session or provide inspiration material for free play.

Rubin emphasizes the importance of practice in one’s chosen creative act as an effective means for generating more inspirational material. Practice, according to Rubin, provides “an approach to a concept” (Rubin, 2023, p. 43). Notably, there are strong hints towards the

incorporation of mindfulness strategies such as breathing, meditation, and opening awareness into one's practice routine. He advises that practice can cultivate "a desired state of mind" (Rubin, 2023, pp. 43–44). It is not surprising that Rubin, an accomplished musician, advocates for the role of habits in honing a craft. What is even more profound is his acknowledgment of the need to practice meditation, breathing, and states of openness and awareness, underscoring their integral role in accessing creativity.

In addition to the notions of practice, the author shows advocacy for meditation and self-reflection: "If we focus on what's going on inside ourselves—sensations, emotions, the patterns of our thoughts—a wealth of material can be found" (Rubin, 2023, p. 60). He believes that mindfulness practice is a significant means of developing creativity.

Rubin explores collaboration through the concept that what you are creating is never solely yours or occurring only within oneself. An artist's work interacts with other people, nature, space, past and current works, and future endeavors. This perspective can serve as an effective strategy or starting point for free play. Teachers can guide students to embrace and collaborate with what surrounds them—what do we hear, feel, and see? This mirrors both pre-planning and real-time strategies, providing inspiration before the improvisation and fueling new ideas during the improvisational process.

The most deceptive rules are not the ones we can see but the ones we can't. These can be found hiding deeper in the mind, often unnoticed, just beyond our awareness. Rules that entered our thinking through childhood programming, lessons we've forgotten, osmosis from the culture, and emulating the artists who inspired us to try it for ourselves. (Rubin, 2023, p. 101)

In his chapter on “Rules,” Rubin’s statement may not directly represent a specific strategy but rather a mindset that should be considered as a part of practice and reflection during the study of free improvisation. Free improvisation can serve as a training ground for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), where individuals learn to trust themselves and others, communicate within and outside themselves, and diversify their ability to listen, accept, and create music. Given the likely diverse backgrounds and musical experiences in the free improvisation classroom, it is crucial to consider limitations beyond the obvious ones. On the surface, it may seem that Rubin is alluding to the idea of drawing inspiration from our childlike selves, but a deeper contemplation reveals his statement strongly emphasizes the need to be wary of any societal norms that may typically limit our perception of what is possible for ourselves or our instruments.

Rubin also dedicates a more extensive section to the importance of listening. He emphasizes listening not only for intentional moments of creation but also in daily life, moment to moment, making the ear “present to the world” (Rubin, 2023, p. 109). He advises practicing listening to “expand the scope of your consciousness to include vast amounts of information otherwise missed and discover more material to feed your art habit” (Rubin, 2023, p. 110). To complement this recommendation in the free play classroom, I would propose incorporating Pauline Oliveros’s (2022) *Sonic Meditations*.

As the text moves into the final Craft and Completion phases, Rubin includes more explicit strategies for cultivating creativity. The following table of creativity strategies has been extracted from my reading of the text and is by no means a substitute for reading and taking time to work through this text. However, it is intended to serve as a guide and advocate for incorporating these ideas into the free improvisation classroom.

Table 8. Rubin Strategies

| The Creative Act | Seed Phase | Experimental Phase | Craft Phase & Completion Phase |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Meditation | First Time Experience | Anger-Releasing |
| | Self-reflection | Try Everything | Free-Writing |
| | Habits | Welcome Mistakes | Dream Journal |
| | | | Small Steps |
| | | | Change the Environment |
| | | | Change the Stakes |
| | | | Invite an Audience |
| | | | Change the Context |
| | | | Alter the Perspective |
| | | | Write for Someone Else |
| | | | Add Imagery |
| | | | Limit the Information |

A Summary on Mindfulness Resources

After reviewing both resources from Kabat-Zinn and Rick Rubin, one sees a wealth of strategies available for exploring meditation, cultivating creativity, and diving into the practice of mindfulness. These strategies complement the development of abilities for free improvisation and serve as a prescription for challenges typically encountered in teaching free improvisation.

Mindfulness enables self-realization, deeper listening, and awareness. The next section ventures into a hybrid pedagogical sequence that integrates mindfulness strategies into the study of free improvisation.

CHAPTER III: MINDFUL FREE IMPROVISATION: A PROPOSED PEDAGOGICAL SEQUENCE

Mindfulness is an integral part of daily life, gradually weaving its way into my routine over the past decade. Conversely, free improvisation has always been a presence in my musical life, even before I could articulate it with that precise term.

During the initial phases of my undergraduate journey, I immersed myself in the world of experimental music as a violist for a groundbreaking band. My role involved playing through a vocal microphone, the signal of which traversed various distortion and reverb pedals before emanating through the speakers. What set this experience apart was the absence of explicit instructions on what to play—I simply interpreted and expressed what I felt in the moment. The resulting music was a dynamic blend of loud, ambient sounds, and the joy I experienced playing alongside non-classical musicians and exploring non-traditional music remains etched in my memory.

However, this musical exploration eventually faded from my life, and my free playing became sporadic, primarily linked to engagements with church bands. It was not until my doctoral studies that I felt a renewed impulse to delve deeper into courses that could enhance my ability to bridge my musical thoughts with the expressions on my instrument. After perusing the course catalog, a particular class caught my attention:

Free Improvisation: This course is designed for performers who want to develop their skill in spontaneous creative expression. It will focus on building competency and confidence in solo and collective improvisation for both vocalists and instrumentalists. Students will be led through a sequence specifically created to ease fears about improvisation and increase connectivity, creativity, and individual voice. Classes will be

focused on practical experience as well as readings and activities to enhance musical intuition and instinct. The semester will culminate in a performance of improvisation.⁷

I enrolled in the course among an eclectic mix of two master's vocal majors, an undergraduate violinist, and a kinesthetics major. Each class was initiated by a two-minute awareness practice. Each class was initiated by a two-minute awareness practice. As the class progressed, I started to discern the profound impact mindfulness had on my musicianship, particularly in the realm of free improvisation.

My following sequence unfolds across three stages of beginning, intermediate, and advanced free improvisation sessions. There is intended openness towards the number of meetings during this period. I suggest spending most of the time in the beginning sessions, as they play a pivotal role in establishing the tone for subsequent meetings. The free improvisation and mindfulness strategies proposed are a blend of insights from my personal experiences and the texts referenced throughout this document.

While you may anticipate guidance on progressing through the five strategy categories (preplanning, conceptual, structural, atmospheric and stylistic, and real-time), it is important to note that these strategies do not function as a linear sequence for introduction and learning. Instead, they serve as a framework for contemplating potential exercises in the realm of free improvisation. If you are interested in my perspective on the progression of categories, I have observed that preplanning strategies are the easiest to formulate and execute.

Conceptual and structural strategies prove most accessible for beginning improvisers, while the atmospheric and stylistic category tends to offer the most transformative and growth-

⁷ From The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Music Performance (MUP) University Catalog: <https://catalog.uncg.edu/courses/mup/>

inducing experiences. Exploring concepts of color (both visually and aurally), emotion, and atmosphere tend to draw upon a more personal approach to improvisation. For example, asking students to improvise on red will inevitably result in endless interpretations of the color and its meaning in their personal experiences. Looking into my own connections with a particular word, color, or mood has expanded my library for ideas and sounds to create with.

Real-time strategies, though challenging to master, are arguably the most crucial to teach. As mentioned by Hickey,⁸ free improvisation is a vulnerable and human act. In this way, it will be full of spontaneity and unexpected events. Free improvisation will offer frequent opportunities for dealing with these challenges; How one deals with the challenges is the learning moment. My personal take is that dealing with these moments can be approached from both free improvisation and mindfulness strategies. Exploring strategies will serve students both in and outside of free improvisation, making them more confident and capable of handling life's contingencies.

Regardless of the following sequence's strategies, I encourage exploration of exercises from each of the five strategy categories at every session stage.

Mindful Free Improvisation

This pedagogical sequence aims to gradually introduce mindfulness principles into the free improvisation process, fostering a deeper connection between musicians and their creative expressions. Adjust the timing and activities based on the specific needs and dynamics of the participants.

⁸ "All four pedagogues demonstrated an awareness of the 'intimacy' of improvisation within an ensemble and were careful to provide an environment where psychological comfort was central" (Hickey, 2015, p. 439).

Goals:

- To develop musical expression, creativity, and mindfulness through free improvisation.
- To explore mindfulness as a tool for accessing expressive free improvisation.

Beginning Free Improvisation Session: Introduction to Mindfulness and Improvisation

Beginning sessions are uniquely important in that they lay the foundation for all future meetings and free improvisation. It is imperative to take a comprehensive look into the understanding of mindfulness and free improvisation, ensuring thoughtful representation and reinforcement.

I propose that these discussions transpire both within the class setting and through individual self-reflection by journaling. Journaling can be prompted through thought-provoking questions or statements from the instructor or drawn from mindfulness texts. While students should be encouraged to share their journals during sessions, sharing should remain optional. By fostering an open and comfortable environment, students are more likely to gradually open and share their journals over time.

During initial sessions, improvisations should deliberately lean towards being unstructured. The primary objective here is to create a space where students feel at ease playing spontaneously and, if fortunate, producing sounds that reflect their inner selves and passions. It is crucial to acknowledge the inherent vulnerability in free improvisation and to exercise mindfulness in both teaching language and behavior. At this juncture, all improvisations will be conducted as group activities, with exploration encouraged in both small and large group settings. Based on my experience, a small group of three members is optimal, six members for a large chamber group, and twelve as the upper limit for an effective large group dynamic.

1. *Icebreaker*

For the first 2-3 meetings, begin with an icebreaker that aids in students getting to know each other and their musical backgrounds. Use your favorite icebreaker to create a comfortable and open environment.

Some of my favorites:

- a. Introduction of students and their musical backgrounds
- b. ‘Get to Know You’ Scavenger Hunt: Create a fill-in-the-blank worksheet that asks for students to discover each other’s hometowns, favorite colors, music groups, etc.

2. *Introduction to Mindfulness*

- a. Define mindfulness and its benefits through open discussion.
- b. Discuss the connection between mindfulness and music.
- c. Try a beginning mindfulness exercise. Suggested beginner exercises:
 - i. Counted Breathing Exercise: Find a comfortable seated position and begin to breathe in through the nose for a count of four, out through the nose for a count of five. Inhale and exhale counts can be gradually increased for more relaxation. Additionally, you can try adding a mantra for the inhale and exhale breaths such as “breathe in inspiration, breath out limitation”⁹
 - ii. Kabat-Zinn “Stopping” Exercise: “Try: Stopping, sitting down, and becoming aware of your breathing once in a while throughout the day. It can be for five minutes, or even five seconds. Let go into full acceptance of the present

⁹ This breathing exercise is used widely through apps and books available on breathing. This counted breathing exercise was inspired and adapted from the 4-7-8 breathing technique Cato (2021) describes (with music).

moment, including how you are feeling and what you perceive to be happening. For these moments, don't try to change anything at all, just breathe and let go. Breathe and let be. Die to having to have anything be different in this moment; in your mind and in your heart, give yourself to be exactly as you are. Then, when you're ready, move in the direction your heart tells you to go, mindfully and with resolution" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 13).

iii. Journal and self-reflect on some quotes from Rubin in Seed Phase.¹⁰

3. *Introduction to Free Improvisation*

- a. Define free improvisation through open discussion.
- b. Share, listen, explore examples of free improvisation.
- c. Try a beginning free improvisation strategy.

Suggested beginner free improvisation exercises:

1. Stiles: Question & Answer: "Like Chapter One, *Question and Answer* consists of three sections, only this time with a slight variation: i) Making up a simple pattern of notes or sounds as musical questions, ii) The pupil answers what has just been heard, iii) The pupil invents new patterns for the teacher to answer" (Stiles, 2002, p. 5).
2. Kanack: Rhythm Machine, Drone, and Soccer
 - a. Rhythm Machine: "Purpose: To cultivate rhythmic vocabulary, to learn to create and sustain rhythmic patterns, to learn to be "in sync" with other players, to create the basis for future harmonic patterns and ostinati"
 - i. Directions: Try this first without pitch. This can be a fantastic and exciting performance piece of its own. The non-pitched version limits the number of

¹⁰ Use some quotes explored in this document's Chapter 2: "Mindfulness Resources."

choices to be made, allowing the focus to be completely rhythmic. Players sit in a circle.

1. Player 1 begins the machine by clapping or using a non-pitched sound effect to create a rhythmic pattern (i.e., snapping, tapping, short verbal phrases, etc.)
 2. Each player enters clockwise with an original rhythmic pattern, after waiting a bar or two for the player to the right to be established. Once established, each player should continue and sustain his pattern throughout the piece. Each player should strive to be “in sync” as he entered the rhythmic fabric of the other players. The concept of creating space for each other is introduced here. [She suggests seeing musical notated Diagram 1 which is not included here]
 3. After all players are in, player 1 drops out.
 4. All players exit as they entered: clockwise and one or two bars apart. The last person to start is the last person to finish” (Kanack & Smolen, 2012, p. 22).
- b. The Drone: “Purpose: To explore the creation of melodic ideas, to aurally experience tonal centers and harmonic relationships between pitches”
- i. Directions:
 1. Player one begins the piece by improvising a short melody in the chosen key. When finished, player one holds the tonic of the chosen key. This tonic note becomes the drone for the next player.

2. Player two repeats this process by first playing a melody over player one's drone and then providing the drone for player three,
 3. Player one drops out as player two begins her drone and player three begins the melody.
 4. This continues around the circle until all players have had a turn." (Kanack & Smolen, 2012, p. 25).
- c. Soccer: "Purpose: To provide a way for players to both communicate their musical ideas to each other, and to change roles during an improvised piece. In this game, players are forced to listen intensely and use their eyes to communicate to successfully follow the "ball."
- i. Directions: The object of this exercise is to pass a musical idea in a random pattern, thus forcing all players to follow the direction of the sound. The players sit in a circle. "The Ball," a single plucked glissando, is passed from player to player in a random fashion by eye contact. The player with "the ball" plucks his string and looks at another player. That player then has the ball. This continues until someone fails to see the pass and therefore doesn't play" (Kanack & Smolen, 2012, p. 26).
 - ii. Note that you may use any short sound in this exercise.
3. Crispell: Intervals, Scales: Use a particular scale or interval as a starting point for your free improvisation.
 4. Any pre-planning strategies: As defined by the research in chapter two, pre-planning strategies refer to any decisions made before the improvisation (Després et al., 2017, p.

149). This can include making plans for how to start or choosing what can serve as inspiration.

4. *Beginning Mindful Exercise + Free Play*

- a. Guide participants through a beginning mindfulness exercise and directly follow with free play. Teachers can instruct that after the mindfulness exercise, there will be no further instructions or planning; it will be a “whatever happens, happens,” situation.

5. *Reflection and Practice*

- a. Encourage participants to reflect on the relationship between mindfulness and improvisation through journaling or group discussion.
- b. Students will find it helpful to practice outside of class. Encourage practice of mindfulness, free improvisation, and continued use of the journal in between sessions.

Intermediate Sessions: Mindfulness Techniques in Improvisation

As students progress in developing comfort and proficiency in free improvisation, it is crucial to expand and deepen their mindfulness practices. Guided meditation and sound meditation, inspired by Pauline Oliveros, can be directed towards the exploration of sound, as well as tailored to address individual needs such as stress release, fostering positivity, building confidence, and connecting with one’s creative self.

At this point in the sessions, the goals are twofold: to sustain and facilitate free play and to empower students to initiate their own ideas for free play. Encourage students to express interest in guided meditation ideas, fostering a sense of autonomy in their creative pursuits. This

stage is dedicated to helping students embrace and embody their roles as autonomous and creative beings.

Participants can anticipate challenges in concluding improvisations. Facilitate conversations around this by prompting students to reflect on how to effectively conclude a free improvisation. What options are available? This discussion may naturally extend to considerations for initiating and navigating the middle of an improvisation. These conversations form a crucial component of this stage in the learning process.

While you, as a teacher, may have a minute-by-minute plan for the class, be prepared for the potential derailment of these plans due to genuine and passionate conversations, questions, or an eagerness for exploration. Embrace these deviations and view them as opportunities for meaningful engagement. Throughout this stage, continue to explore free improvisation in both small and large groups. Below are some ideas for navigating through these sessions:

1. *Warm-up Exercises*

Each time the group reconvenes, warm-up exercises can serve to set the tone for the session and warm the space for productive free play. Warm-ups in either mindfulness or free play may suit the session goals. Suggestions for both are below.

- a. Oliveros's *Deep Listening*, Listening: "Sit either on the floor or in a chair. If on the floor, use a cushion to raise the sitz bones. If sitting in a chair, feet are flat on the floor. The legs should be crossed either in full lotus position,¹¹ or tucked in close to the body with the knees relaxed downward to the floor. Posture is relaxed upper body, chin tucked in slightly, balanced on the 'sitz' bones and knees. Palms

¹¹ See North American Dharma Teachers Sangha Meditation Committee's (n.d.) "Sitting Meditation," at [https://tnhmeditation.org/sitting/#:~:text=The%20half%2Dlotus%20and%20full,lotus\)%20on%20the%20opposite%20thighs](https://tnhmeditation.org/sitting/#:~:text=The%20half%2Dlotus%20and%20full,lotus)%20on%20the%20opposite%20thighs)

rest of the thighs, or palms folded close to the belly. Eyes are relaxed with the lids half or fully closed. At the sound of a bell or gong listen inclusively for the interplay of sounds in the whole time/space continuum. Include sounds of your own thoughts. Can you imagine that you are a center of a whole? Use the mantra to aid your listening: *With each breath I return to the whole of the space/time continuum*. If a sound takes your attention to a focus, then follow the sound all the way to the end as you return to the whole of the space/time continuum. At the sound of the bell prepare to review your experience and describe it in your journal” (Oliveros, 2005, p. 12).

- b. Kabat-Zinn Pt. 2 “What to do With Your Hands”: “Try: Being aware of subtle emotional qualities you may be embodying at various times of the day, as well as during your sitting practice. Pay particular attention to your hands. Does their position make a difference? See if you don’t become more mindful by becoming more “bodyful.” As you practice being more in touch with your hands in sitting meditation, see if this doesn’t have an influence on the way you touch. Everything from opening a door to making love involves touch. It is possible to open a door so mindlessly that your hand doesn’t know what your body is doing and you hit yourself in the head with it. Imagine the challenge of touching another person without automaticity, with no gaining idea, just presence and caring” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 116).
- c. Review a beginning free improvisation exercise from Kanack and Smolen (2012)

2. *Mindful Listening + Free Play*

- a. Introduce a short improvisation activity emphasizing active listening. Students can be encouraged to recall the deep listening experience during Oliveros's sound meditation or other mediation moments.
- b. Engage in group free play improvisation with a focus on listening and responding.

3. *Guided Meditation + Free Play*

- a. Introduce free play that is inspired from a guided meditation or awareness topic. Inspiration can come from Kabat-Zinn or Rubin but may also be an empowering way for students to start exploring their own mindfulness interests.
- b. As this process becomes more comfortable, encourage students to explore and bring in self-found guided meditations that emphasize topics students are interested in (stress relief, confidence, etc.). Many reputable guided meditations can be found through InsightTimer (an app available on for both iPhone and Android: <https://insighttimer.com/>)

4. *Reflection and Practice*

Students should be regularly engaging in journaling and group discussion. If students are comfortable, take time to share journals in group discussion. The teacher can prompt this the session before with a particular theme to journal on or not. The goal here is to share personal experiences and observations on how mindfulness has influenced free improvisation, any areas of growth, and any questions.

Advanced Free Improvisation Sessions: Integrating Mindfulness into Improvisation

At this stage in the journey, both students and teachers stand as equal participants in the collaborative exploration of mindfulness and free improvisation. The ideal scenario involves

active sharing of experiences, desires for exploration, and constructive feedback on achieving the desired musical moments. Encourage ongoing autonomous exploration of free play and mindfulness throughout this phase.

Performance, though informal, should already be seamlessly integrated into these sessions, providing a valid platform for expressing free play in front of peers. Taking this a step further, performance practice in free play should progress to planning a public performance, whether as a solo performer or part of a group improvisation.

1. *Guided Visualization Meditation & Imagery*

- a. Use a guided visualization exercise to inspire improvisational themes.

Try Kabat-Zinn's "Harmony" mediation: "Try: Drawing back the veil of unawareness to perceive harmony in this moment. Can you see it in the clouds, in the sky, in people, in the weather, in food, in your body, in this breath? Look, and look again, right here, right now!" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 178).

- b. Use images to inspire improvisation. Images can be taken from art or other generated images.

2. *Exploration of Silence*

Experiment with moments of silence in improvisation. Discuss the relationship of silence in musical expression and mindfulness. Create an improvisation that features silence and an improvisation that disrupts silence.

3. *Small Group Improvisation & Performance*

Break into small groups for multiple improvisation sessions, emphasize communication and collaboration and create an opportunity for public performance.

4. *Solo Improvisation Performance*

Allow students space to reflect and explore what they would like to improvise on as a soloist. Create an opportunity for a solo performance either video recording, in-class performance, or public performance.

5. *Full Group Improvisation, Discussion and Sharing*

Bring the entire group together for a final improvisational performance and emphasize the integration of mindfulness techniques. Following the performance, facilitate a discussion about the journey, challenges, insights, feelings, and discoveries.

Extra Considerations

Class Size

Agrell and Hickey mentioned the effectiveness of a smaller class size.¹² In my experience, I have found that a class size ranging from 10 to 12 individuals is the maximum conducive number. This size ensures everyone has a chance to actively participate and be heard. Larger class sizes can present challenges, particularly in facilitating full-group improvisations; the nuances of sounds and intentions tend to get lost.

Class Space

Sessions can occur in a formal rehearsal or performance space, but flexibility is encouraged, including the option to meet indoors or outdoors. The primary objective for the chosen space is to foster a sense of comfort, providing an environment conducive to creativity,

¹² Agrell (2019) and Hickey (2015) describe the optimal class size for improvisation: “Class size. The higher the enrollment, the less each player gets to participate. The absolute ideas might be eight or twelve, but sixteen works well, especially if you have access to several rooms for dividing occasionally into smaller groups” (Agrell, 2019, p. 9); “All of the teachers mentioned that smaller-size ensembles are better for free improvisation than large. Twelve was the average number of participants in the ensembles I observed” (Hickey, 2015, p. 436).

confidence, and exploration. In addition to welcoming an adaptable rehearsal space, I recommend a circular set up—especially with beginning improvisers. This set up was commonly observed in free improviser pedagogues like Pauline Oliveros and Fred Frith.¹³

I have found that standing or sitting in a circle encourages communication, eye contact, and a sense of community. As free play becomes more comfortable, I encourage working with other structures that purposefully take away sight or proximity (i.e., students facing away from each other, all standing in one direction, distanced positions throughout a larger space). Challenging these senses will exercise the ear and highlight the importance of listening.

The Role of the Teacher: Facilitator + Active Performer

In the article “A Study of Free Improvisation Pedagogues in University Settings,” Hickey noted a commonality among free improvisation ensemble directors. They perceived themselves as facilitators, considering themselves as learning artists alongside the class of students (Hickey, 2015, pp. 437–438). I have observed this perspective in my mentors and find it a highly beneficial model for practicing and performing free improvisation. To view each free play encounter as a learning moment, and not perfection, will only aid in creating a safe psychological space for students to share, take risks, and explore.

For beginning sessions, it is crucial to remain active in creating alongside students whenever possible. It is essential for students to witness an expert at work, allowing them to observe both the expertise and the human, imperfect qualities inherent in the realm of free improvisation. As free play advances, the teacher may find it helpful to simply observe. Outside

¹³ Hickey (2015) describes optimal class space: “A circular physical setup was evident in each of the ensembles I observed, and the pedagogue either was part of the circle or sat away as an audience member/spectator” (p. 436).

of class, I encourage teachers and students to engage in free improvisation through practice and performance as much as possible.

Recording

Like practice and performance of composed repertoire, mastering the ability to conceptualize, process, and audibly perceive what we play in the moment can be challenging. I suggest that students record their improvisations at every session stage. This practice enables a more comprehensive understanding of their creations and offers valuable insights into their progress.

Diverse Student Body

There is a notable challenge in managing a group with a wide variety of musical playing levels. While diversity in instruments is welcomed in free improvisation, differing skill levels requires a thoughtful approach. My experience suggests a few strategies: when creating small groups, pair individuals with similar abilities and experiences; encourage students to address technical challenges through free improvisation and experiment with new sounds. Mindfulness can also contribute to students self-actualizing their potential as artists in this process. Free improvisation is an ideal training ground for diversity and teachers should welcome the acknowledgement and exploration of everyone's unique background and skills.

CHAPTER IV: CLOSING NOTES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research was inspired by my own transformative experience with free improvisation. It has served as a profound gateway for me to embrace my musicianship and gain confidence as a solo performer. Upon reflection on the resources that have shaped my journey, I recognized that my growth in free improvisation was deeply influenced by my engagement with mindfulness practices. My initial research question asked what was typically included in free improvisation teaching.

Before assuming a lack of mindfulness practice in free improvisation resources, I surveyed available research and texts on teaching free improvisation. Among these, two case studies (Després et al. and Hickey) observed expert Western classical and free improvisation pedagogues, providing valuable insights into what should be incorporated into the free improvisation classroom and how it can be effectively taught. Additionally, I identified five distinct method books containing free improvisation teaching strategies, with only two explicitly mentioning “free improvisation” in their titles.

Examining these method books through the lens of Després’s research team and Hickey’s observations allowed for a comprehensive analysis of their contents. Each method featured ample preplanning strategies and only three included atmospheric and stylistic approaches. These findings reflect the more advanced nature of free improvisation techniques focusing on color and mood. One crucial aspect I sought in my research was the incorporation of mindfulness practices such as meditation, breathwork, and awareness. Although there were occasional mentions of non-musical skills such as confidence (Stiles, 2002, p. 2) and fostering creativity (Agrell, 2019, p. 30), explicit strategies for cultivating these skills outside of improvisation were absent.

The mention of such skills highlights their importance in the process of free improvisation, but how are they acquired? One could say that through learning how to improvise, confidence and creative power are cultivated. However, I argue that if mindfulness skills are developed alongside the learning process, free improvisation becomes even more meaningful. The heart of this document lies in addressing how mindfulness practices can enhance the process of free improvisation.

Recommendations

My sequence can be applied within a specific free improvisation classroom setting, but it also holds potential value in general or studio-specific music spaces. I encourage readers to initially try these exercises independently. Doing so will enhance their ability to deliver them effectively to students or interested colleagues. Moreover, this sequence could serve as a powerful framework for any ensemble. Typically, smaller ensemble sizes (less than 12, as suggested by Hickey) facilitate greater opportunities for connection, interpretation, and personal communication. However, even a large ensemble could benefit from some level of practice with these strategies.

While I aim for inclusivity, it is important to acknowledge that my research may not cover all available material on free improvisation teaching. Additionally, the mindfulness resources listed in this document represent only a fraction of the extensive sources accessible. Below, I have provided resources for further exploration in both mindfulness and free improvisation. I have also included a reading that, to the best of my knowledge, is one of the few other pedagogical sources addressing the integration of mindfulness into teaching practice.

Extra Resources for Mindfulness

There are a boundless number of resources available for mindfulness but, I would like to suggest a few additional ones for those keen on exploring the topic. From my experience, the most effective way to begin any new interest is through conversation. If you know someone in your life who practices mindfulness, engaging in a discussion with them can be immensely beneficial. If this is not an option, my next recommendation would be to explore mindfulness apps. Personally, I have been using Insight Timer (<https://insighttimer.com/>) for several years and still find it a valuable resource, using it on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

If you prefer a text source, Hanh's (1999) *The Miracle of Mindfulness* emerged as one of the most recommended resources. The author, Thich Nhat Hanh, was a Vietnamese Thien Buddhist monk renowned for revolutionizing Engaged Buddhism.¹⁴

Extra Recommended Free Improvisation Source

The suggested free improvisation resources in this document are primarily aimed at teaching and providing valuable inspiration for developing free improvisation exercises and performances. If you are seeking further resources for free improvisation scores, Pauline Oliveros has been an immensely influential figure for me. Personally, I have found her *Deep Listening* exercises (Oliveros, 2005) to be an enriching complement to both my meditation and free improvisation practice. Furthermore, her *Sonic Meditations* are a captivating collection of text scores for free improvisation (Oliveros, 2022). Although originally intended for group use over extended periods, they also serve as an excellent starting point for individual exploration.

Mindfulness and Music

¹⁴ For further reading, see Hanh's (2008) "History of Engaged Buddhism: A Dharma Talk by Thich Nhat Hanh Hanoi, Vietnam, May 6-7, 2008" in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*.

There has been significant research published on the benefits of mindfulness and the utilization of music as a mindfulness tool (Diaz & Silveira, 2013; Wolf, 2019). However, there has been less exploration into the integration of mindfulness into music education. One noteworthy chapter, “Mindfulness in Music” by Patston (2016), offers insights into this integration within a studio teaching model. I recommend this chapter to readers seeking to explore how mindfulness concepts could enhance the positive psychology of music teaching.

This chapter is part of a broader work titled *Mindfulness and Performance*, which presents diverse perspectives on mindfulness across various performance domains, including sports and the performing arts. Patston’s (2016) chapter introduces mindfulness into a studio pedagogical model termed Music Instruction Non-Deficit (MIND). At the core of this model lie moral principles of “good” and “right” as guiding pillars for learning. Providing a mindfulness-based approach, this chapter proposes innovative methods for teaching and learning in music studios catering to children, adolescents, and adult learners.

As I reflect on my journey with mindfulness and free improvisation, I recognize their inseparable intertwining. As I delved into exploring new sounds on my instrument, I concurrently deepened my engagement with meditation and embraced silence. Initially pursued as separate endeavors, I eventually fused them 3 years ago.

My proposed sequence offers a mindfulness-based approach to teaching and learning free improvisation. The nature of free improvisation draws many parallels to that of mindfulness making it a seamless pairing of concepts. Mindfulness asks us to draw attention to the present moment, look inward, and be open (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Free improvisation requires sensitivity to one’s own musical voice and to be open to making spontaneous musical choices. Preparing for free improvisation through mindfulness can lead to heightened awareness and listening.

Ultimately, the more one can be open and listen, the more one can freely create. This sequence is a positive beginning to helping teachers and students find freedom and power in the art of free improvisation.

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