



Songs of the Desert Wind: A Musical Improvisation and Meditation Performance

Rebecca Sabine Ramsey, BA, CMT-P

Oregon State University Undergraduate Research Fellow, Concert Violinist,
Mindfulness Meditation Teacher

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

This is a performance score developed by a violinist/mindfulness meditation teacher. It outlines a guided group meditation performed with live, improvisational music. Field recordings of natural environments are included, simulating mindful listening as a way to raise environmental awareness.

I created the 'Songs of the Desert Wind' score as a solo musical improvisation and meditation performance for a yoga studio where I often teach. I was asked to write a meditation series for their wellness club membership that would consist of musical sound journeys reflective of the surrounding desert environment. 'Songs of the Desert Wind' is a guided meditation which encompasses mindfulness practices and an

improvised tonal blending of violin sounds with field recordings of the Mojave desert. Although I play 'Songs of the Desert Wind' on the violin, it is a format which I feel can be adapted by classical musicians of any instrument who would like to integrate group meditation into their improvisatory programs. As musicians, we are becoming aware of new ways we can contribute to the environmental movement by introducing our

audiences to the sonic intersection of music, nature, and the contemplative arts.

To prepare the performance score for 'Songs of the Desert Wind', my main influences for the musical segments were derived from works of three renowned innovators in the fields of improvisatory study, deep listening, and sound ecology respectively. American-Canadian composer/violinist Malcolm Goldstein is noted for his explorations of improvised violin sound textures. In the preface to his book, *Sounding the Full Circle* (1988), he offers his view of improvisation as 'the process of discovery, unfolding moment to moment, that is realized in the gesture of enactment/sounding' (1988: n.p.). I feel that this sense of freedom and sensitivity embodies what is essential for the interplay of improvising in response to the variety and spontaneity of nature's sounds.

I also studied the book *Deep Listening, a Composer's Sound Practice* (2001) by composer/accordionist and musical pioneer, Pauline Oliveros. 'Native V' from her set of *Sonic Meditations* reads simply, 'Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears' (2005: 41). This sparked my imagination as I created the mental imagery that would inspire a desert meditative experience in the imagination of the listener. In addition, the book *The Great Animal Orchestra* by Bernie Krause (2012), sound ecologist/recording engineer, expanded my awareness of the importance of preserving the sounds of nature and inspired me to integrate these natural sounds into the performance score.

In the Mindful Listening, Mindful Breathing, and Mindful Walking Visualization segments of 'Songs of the Desert Wind', I draw upon

teachings from several UCLA Mindful Awareness Practices online courses as well as three 5-day Buddhist silent retreats that I attended in person. The Body Scan portion employs mindfulness methods based on the work of Dr. Jon Kabat Zinn (MBSR) and the Compassion portion utilises a Compassionate Touch exercise from a Mindfulness Self-Compassion (MSC) course based upon the research of Dr. Kristin Neff.

In reference to the practical aspects of the performance, I have found that alternately speaking/improvising over a soundscape which softly plays on audio equipment in the room lends a sense of cohesiveness and flow throughout. For 'Songs of the Desert Wind', I use royalty-free field recordings of the Mojave Desert which can be found online (freesounds.org). I also improvise with my own ambient music tracks composed by Aaron Ramsey. The amount of time that I

suggest for each improvisational episode is approximate and I have included prompts in the score at the end of each section to assist the improviser in embodying the meditative experience being offered to the group.

Before beginning a mindful improvisation, it is my custom to set aside some time to meditate in solitude. This helps me to calm the mind, align with the music, and be present with openness and clarity.

1. **Welcoming the Group**

To quote the Buddhist monk, peace activist, and prolific author Thich Nhat Hanh from his book *Peace is Every Step*, 'A tiny bud of a smile on our lips nourishes awareness and calms us miraculously' (Hanh, 1991: 7). I enjoy beginning each group mindfulness meditation with a smile and I warmly welcome each person as they enter the studio, encouraging them to find

their own space for meditation where they feel safe and comfortable. They can choose whether to sit on the floor with pillows and a mat, on a chair, or have both options available to make a smooth transition between the two if they feel like it. During this time, the ambient sound of wind chimes can be heard playing in the background. When everyone has settled, I close the doors of the room, stating the intention that we will now create a time for self-care, leaving the outside world behind for a while.

2. Mindful Listening

After the group has settled in to their chosen spots, I ask them to be present and to become aware of all the sounds around them, not just hearing but truly listening with full attention. As the music in the background changes to one of my original pieces, 'Before the Dawn', I share that I was inspired to

write this music as I watched the sun coming up, rising above towering canyons of red stone in southern Utah. I invite them to just open their ears and experience the soothing music while I play for them. This interlude gives everyone a chance to become accustomed to hearing the violin (or any instrument) played up close, a sonic experience that many have not previously had.

When 'Before the Dawn' comes to a final cadence, I place my violin down and initiate the meditation with a ring of my Tibetan hand bells. I invite everyone to take three deep breaths together, inhaling deeply and then exhaling slowly through the mouth with the sound 'Ahhhh', a sigh of relief.

- Note to the improviser: During this section, please feel free to play any instrumental music that inspires you on your given instrument.

3. Mindful Breathing

The first mindfulness meditation practice that I learned and that I always teach in my classes is mindful breathing. As Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said in the classic treatise *Zen Mind/ Beginner's Mind*, '...your mind should be concentrated on your breathing. This kind of activity is the fundamental activity of the universal being. Without this experience, this practice, it is impossible to attain absolute freedom' (Suzuki, 1970: 31).

I may depart from my script slightly at times as situations change, but I guide the mindful breathing practice basically as follows:

Assume a comfortable, yet regal, meditative posture.

Focus on your breath as it flows naturally in and out of your nostrils, or you may choose to focus on the rising and falling of your chest.

Follow the breath with interest and curiosity.

Eventually, your mind will start to wander. That is normal. As soon as you notice that you are thinking about something else, that is a point of awareness. Just come back to your breath. Basically, meditation is bringing your attention back to your breath, again and again.

Notice in between the breaths when nothing is happening and then wait for the next breath to naturally occur.

Your breath is the bridge between mind and body. For the next few minutes, continue to watch your breath, one breath at a time...

As I play for you, notice that your breathing is like music, rising and falling...

- Note to the improviser: during the next 5 minutes, follow your own breath as you improvise and breathe calmly into the music.

4. Mindful Body Scan

I now invite everyone to lie down on the floor if they are comfortable doing so. For this portion of the meditation, I lead them through a full body scan, a foundational part of mindfulness-based stress reduction. This begins by gently directing the class to bring kind attention to their feet and to become aware of any sensations they may feel. There may be feelings of heat, cold, heaviness, lightness, contact with the floor, textures of fabrics, or possibly nothing at all. All is experienced with equanimity. Slowly and gradually they follow along as I ask them to simply witness without judgement each part of the body in turn until we reach the top of the head. Then the whole body is sensed at once.

In Jon Kabat-Zinn's recording of the mindful-based stress reduction (MBSR) body scan meditation, this

takes at least 30 minutes; for the purposes of the 'Songs of the Desert Wind' meditation, however, I complete the verbal instructions of the scan in about nine minutes, timing it with a field recording which I have playing in the background.

- Note to the improviser: When the body scan is complete, improvise music for 5 minutes, feeling your feet in contact with the floor as you imagine drawing energy from the earth.

5. Mindful Walking Visualization

At this point, I invite everyone to visualize a desert landscape.

Imagine you are in a pristine desert. As you step upon the land, you become the land. You don't have to try hard. That actually blocks your imagination. Just see what comes to you naturally and imagine you are walking in beauty.

Before beginning the musical improvisation, I like to recite this translation of a traditional Navajo/Diné prayer called 'The Beauty Way':

As I walk with beauty
 As I walk, as I walk,
 The universe is walking with me.
 In beauty it walks before me,
 In beauty it walks behind me,
 In beauty it walks below me,
 In beauty it walks above me,
 Beauty is on every side.

- Note to the improviser: Improvise with a desert soundscape field recording for 5 minutes, feeling the space around your body and imagining a light desert wind surrounding you. Sense the beauty on every side, emanating through your arms and fingers as you improvise.

6. Compassion

The final part of the session is a heart-centered meditation. This is a

mindfulness practice that I learned while participating in a six-week mindful self-compassion workshop which draws upon the work of Dr. Kristen Neff. Focusing on the heart increases emotional mindfulness, sensitivity, and honesty with oneself regarding what one is feeling at the present time. I suggest that the participants place one or both hands over their heart and, before beginning the next improvisation, I softly say to them in my own words,

Be in the space of your heart.

Sit with your heart like you would sit with a beloved friend.

Feel as if you are sitting in reverence in the temple of your heart.

Your heart is always there for you.

Connect with the pure understanding and compassion that your own heart gives to you and become one with it.

Go deeply into the silence of your heart.

- Note to the improviser: For this final improvisation, feel the space of your own open heart and imagine the sounds coming from the center of your being, radiating out into the room as you freely create music for 5 minutes.

7. Closing the Meditation

After a few moments of silence, to signal the end of the meditation I place my violin down and gently ring the Tibetan bells again. I am careful to gradually bring the participants out of the deep state of meditation that they are in. I ask them to bring their attention to their feet again, wiggling their toes. Since they have been lying down, I will ask them to bend their knees and place their feet flat on the floor. Then they may sway their knees

from side to side, loosening up the lower back. Now they can wiggle their fingers, rotate their wrists and then stretch their arms up overhead. When they are ready, they can roll to one side and gently push themselves up to a seated position. This can be a time to experience deep stillness as a group. To quote Pauline Oliveros from her 'Heart Chant' meditation (2001), 'Sense the energy of your own heart... Can you imagine that the heart energies are joining together for healing yourself and others?' (Oliveros, 2005).

In closing, I always offer this blessing in the tradition of Kundalini Yoga: 'May the long time sun shine upon you, all love surround you, and the pure light within you guide your way on'.

- Note to the improviser: when the time feels right, you may play

music or speak closing words of your own choosing.

Although I usually perform group meditations in the relaxed atmosphere of a yoga studio or meditation space, as a publisher on the Insight Timer Meditation app, I have also presented 'Songs of the Desert Wind' as a livestream meditation event from my home studio. I find that performing live online transforms the experience of creating music from a musician's perspective. The palpable energy that is generated by a group's physical presence in the space is noticeably absent. However, I knew from comments in the online chat box, which I responded to from time to time, that people were actively listening as I was improvising. Although I could not see them, I felt a new sense of connection, reaching out to the world in a way that could only be possible in this time of advanced technology.

Moving beyond the environment of the traditional concert hall, it is yet another way to share the gifts of music and meditation.

Interweaving improvised music, accompanied by field recordings of natural environments and established mindfulness practices is a mode of performance which I am eager to share with other musicians. It is my hope that, as musical artists, we can continue to further a deeper awareness of the precious sounds of the earth and our integration within the natural environment.

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Rebecca Sabine Ramsey, presenting an Insight Timer Livestream from her home studio. 10/2022



Rebecca Sabine Ramsey, leading a 'Desert Sound Journeys' meditation class at Red Rock Spa by Well&Being, Las Vegas, Nevada. 10/2022



Rebecca Sabine Ramsey
Photo by Tracy Stokes