

Building Technique or Listening Within:
A Practice-led Case Study of
Two Methods of Developing Musicianship

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Master's Level Project
Year 1
MU701640
Assessment 2

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Abstract

This document contains a practice-led case study that defines and compares two musical processes, *listening within* and *building technique*. These processes are studied within the context of a classically trained musician who is learning to become an improviser and composer. The author, Nicole Pinnell, is a career cellist based in the United States. Pinnell is both researcher and practitioner in this study, which weaves elements of positivist and constructivist methodology into a personal and revealing autoethnography.

This study is in partial fulfillment for a Master of Music degree at the Academy of Music and Sound, an affiliate of the University of West London. Pinnell's cello teacher in this program is Grammy-winning, American, creative cellist Eugene Friesen. Her mentor is British composer, researcher, and performer Andrew Hall.

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1. Research Topic

In the classical genre, improvisation is considered an art of the past (Moore, 1992). However, at one time, it was a natural extension being a performing artist (Nettl *et al*, 2001). In the present day, young musicians fervently study the works of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, but rarely are they asked to train as these great performers did (Campbell *et al*, 2016). Pursuing performance, improvisation, and composition simultaneously is considered superfluous, and sometimes detrimental to a blossoming classical musician's path (Sarath, 2015). Outliers to this way of thinking do exist (eugenefriesenmusic.com; Harding, 2019; jacobszekely.com; joshuaroman.com., mikeblockmusic.com).

Inspired by this trend and driven by a desire to keep my career viable until the end of my lifetime, six years ago I decided that I would learn to improvise. Pursuing improvisation led to a transformative artistic journey. Despite genuine desire and experiences with some of the finest musicians in the world, (Block, 2015; Das, 2015; Watanabe, 2015), and co-arranging an album that rose to the top of the Classical Billboard chart (Billboard, 2019), five years into studying improv, I appeared to be moving backwards. I was reluctant, self-conscious, and questioned my every move.

There are some clear reasons for this. First, I did not know how to practice improv. Second, when I asked for help from improvising colleagues, they talked over my head about things I did not understand. Third, the exercises that seemed to work for others did not seem to sound good on the cello. Perhaps most detrimental of all, I had become convinced that improvisation is *difficult*.

I started a degree program at the Academy of Music and Sound, under the tutelage of Eugene Friesen (USA) and Andrew Hall (UK). This paper documents my transformation and compares two different musical processes that I named *building technique* and *listening within*.

2. Methodology and Data Collection

Building technique refers to an objective, positivist musical skill set. *Listening within* refers to a subjective, constructivist skill set (Kara, 2017). *Building technique* includes many measurable techniques and *listening within* refers to abilities that are internal.

This phase of the project is practice-led. In practice-led research, the focus is on the process rather than the outcome (Candy, 2006). It is further defined as an auto-ethnography because I am both researcher and practitioner in the project (Kara, 2015). The specific goal is to prepare for two different concerts, focusing on the processes used to prepare for each, and to contextualize how those processes affect the outcome of each concert.

Action inquiry in the creative arts is a challenge, particularly as an autoethnographer. Rigorous documentation must support analysis of data, or conclusions are merely thoughtful reflection on artistic practice, rather than research on artistic practice. As a field, research in the creative arts is still changing, and more self-practitioners are developing what it means to design systems of collecting qualitative data in both depth and breadth (Chang, 2016; Nimkulrat, 2007; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).

I used multiple means of collecting data, incorporating a mixed methods style of collecting data that was both quantitative and qualitative (Small, 2011). The goal was to provide conclusions that would help me in this journey, as well as to explore how this may be relevant for others.

Here is how I collected the data. I kept two journals, one for cello practice, to reflect a *building technique* practice, or positivist artistic construct. This journal was to keep impersonal data. The other journal was for meditation, to reflect my *listening within* practice, or subjective, qualitative inner experience. This journal was to keep track of my thoughts and feelings, and speak to my unique, constructivist mindset. I engaged in hermeneutic cycles in both journals (Kara, 2017). Since action research requires a practitioner to observe, reflect, plan, and act, (Kara, 2017) this is how some of these forms of documentation went through various stages of these cycles.

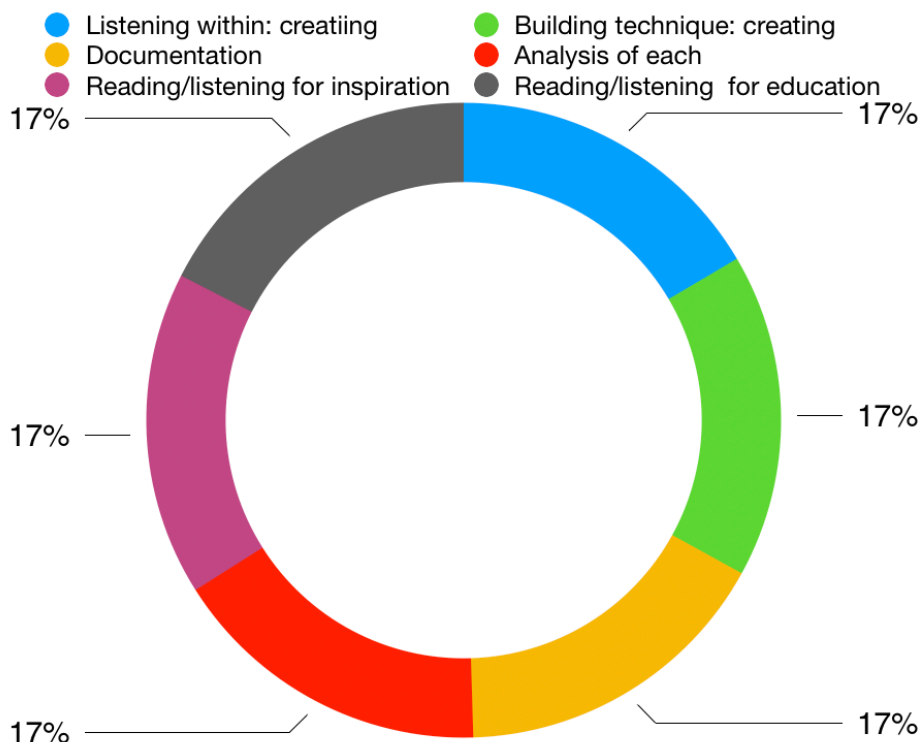


Figure1
Action Research Cycle in this Study

Lessons with Mr. Friesen were video-taped and computer-generated text transcriptions of those lessons were studied. I kept track of improvisational progression via voice memos to contextualize musical progression but switched to videos. Videos helped me keep track of visual cues such as grimaces, frowning in the brow, and squinting my eyes. The last stage of data collection was to analyze the performances.

3. Literature Review: Five Musicians

The external structures of *building technique* are objective and reflect a positivist ontology. On the other hand, *listening within* reflects a constructivist ontology because it describes thoughts and feelings (Kara, 2017). Since epistemology evaluates how we gain knowledge about our reality, the constructivist mindset is a critical part of developing musically. Five notable musicians have each written about the practice of cultivating their inner, subjective world while also referring to simultaneous engagement in objective musical skills. Here is a summary.

Kenny Werner, jazz pianist, speaks of freedom from self-made barriers in *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within* (Werner, 1996). Abundant with relatable stories, the text is accompanied by a series of bold audio meditations available at <https://kennywerner.com/effortless-mastery>. Werner synthesizes these concepts with non-musicians and musicians alike (college.berklee.edu, 2021). While there is much to the practice of *Effortless Mastery*, what seems most pertinent is to fully embrace a self-perception that is limitless.

Phillip Toshio Sudo explores the impacts of meditation in *Zen Guitar* (Sudo, 1997). This book, written within the context of a *dojo*, or martial arts training studio, advocates for a whole life practice. Wisdom, experience, and, finding one's own, personal musical voice, is deemed more interesting and valuable than technique.

Edward Sarath is rigorous and academic in *Improvisation, Creativity and Consciousness: Jazz as Integral Template for Music, Education and Society* (Sarath, 2013). Some of Sarath's work is based on concepts that originate from Ken Wilbur, in the *Theory of Everything* (Wilbur, 2001). "All Quadrants, All Levels," or AQAL, is a useful lens to house positivist and constructivist methodologies. Here is Wilbur's AQAL table, where the human experience of reality is defined in four ways. Two distinctions are the inner vs. outer worlds (constructivist vs. positivist ontologies), while the other distinctions are one individual vs. a group or community.

INTERIOR STRUCTURES (LISTENING WITHIN)	EXTERIOR STRUCTURES (BUILDING TECHNIQUE)
"I" Individual, subjective interior 1st person	"It" Individual, objective exterior 3rd person
"We" Collective, inter-subjective interior 2nd person	"Its" Collective, inter-objective exterior 3rd person

Figure 2
AQAL Table: Wilbur, 2001

In Sarath's book, which expands on these concepts, the topics improvisation-growth vs. meditation-based growth are featured. Sarath's work is now the basis of a program titled *Creativity & Consciousness Studies* at the University of Michigan with participating faculty from specialties that range from business, biology, medicine, neuroscience, psychology, athletics, language, culture, religion, social work, theatre, dance, and the arts. This curriculum presents significant new possibilities in education (University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance, 2021).

Eugene Friesen, Grammy-winning creative cellist and my teacher in this program, is a pioneer of creative cello (Isaacson, 2007). Friesen writes with clarity and compassion on how to address our inner world. *Improvisation for Classical Musicians* begins with a plea for musicians to develop a practice wherein a musician sometimes suspends judgement, since the classical mindset is so frequently critical (Friesen, 2012). This, Friesen explains, is essential to the process of cultivating a voice that is distinctly one's own. Friesen further describes this practice as one of *surrender* (Creative Cello Workshop, 2020). Friesen advocates for peace in all aspects of our lives, because our relationships with our families, colleagues and communities are integral elements of a meaningful creative practice (Friesen, 2021).

Victor Wooten, bassist, departs from the style of these texts to reveal a personal and constructivist work, *The Music Lesson* (Wooten, 2010). The author's account is magical, and he acknowledges that the reader will question whether his account is real. The book's sequel, *The Spirit of Music*, reveals an intricate and sophisticated inner world, where Wooten draws the reader into a new reality (Wooten, 2021), where music is a living entity that is female and divine. Wooten's bold account features an inner world that is personal, unique, and confident.

Each of these artists acknowledge the power of the constructivist mindset. All use opposing definitions to describe their musical process. The following table shows the words they each use for their objective and subjective processes.

	Werner	Sudo	Sarath	Wooten	Friesen
Objective Process (<i>Building Technique</i>)	Mastery	Dojo	Improvisation-driven growth	Magic	Rigor
Subjective Process (<i>Listening Within</i>)	Effortless	Zen	Meditation-driven growth	Feel	Surrender

Figure 3
Table Depicting the Objective and Subjective Processes of Five Artists

A common theme among all the artists is flow, a state in which the brain operates in a state of peak performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Since there are varieties of ways in which improvisation is approached (Bailey, 1980), each artist has

ways of describing a world that is external vs. a world that is internal. Each has ways of describing how the flow state happens and offer insights for developing shortcuts to that critical zone (Kotler, 2021; Schroeder, 2018). Learning music as a language is likewise prominent in all texts, as well as others (Margulis, 2019). Consciousness (Blackmore, 2017), and the power of will are also key themes. Integral elements, such as the brain's ability to sense, perceive, and act (O'Shea, 2006) also appear. Elements of storytelling (Harker, 1999; Limb, 2008), also appear as a commonality.

4. The Creative Artifacts: Two Concerts

The next step is to describe the context of two concerts, each reflecting the two different parts of my practice, *building technique* and *listening within*. While I knew from the outset that these two processes were bound to cross-pollinate, I strove to create distinctions.

The Utah Arts Festival is an annual event and is one of the largest and most venerated outdoor arts festivals in the Midwest (uaf.org, *Arts Fest*, 2021). Tens of thousands come to hear headlining and local artists. I had been able to secure a spot in this festival with my duet partner Morgan Case (uaf.org, *Pinnell and Case*, 2021). It appeared to be a good fit to reflect an external, *building technique* practice.



Photo 1: Utah Arts Festival

To reflect the personal processes of *listening within*, the inner world, I found an intimate venue in a Himalayan Salt Cave (Purify Wellness Center, 2021). There is a distinct and powerful cleansing quality with salt (Kurlansky, 2003) that reflects change. The cave spoke to the barriers of my own mind (Bloom, 2016), as well as drew on my desire for this concert to be a transformative experience (Arksey, 2015). The event would be intimate and percussionist Chris Petty would be my partner in the venture. Since this was a human-made cave with four corners, and the human heart has four chambers (Jahar, 2019), we decided on a concert in four parts.



Photo 2
Himalayan Salt Cave at *Purify Wellness Center*

5. Data and Analysis: ***Building Technique***

I prepared for the two concerts with two processes: *building technique* and *listening within*. *Building technique* exercises included modal and pentatonic scales, spelling five different seventh chords up and down the cello, and chord progressions across the fingerboard. These are measurable, positivist skills. In addition to scales and chords, I worked on developing polyrhythm and polyharmony. I also engaged in scat singing and transcription. Here are some details on a few of these techniques that I learned, and an analysis of what they've added to my playing.

5.1. Modal scales and scale patterns

In classical training on the cello, mastery of four octave scales is required. Since western music has 12 different pitches, and each pitch has a major key and a minor key, (natural, harmonic, and melodic), there are 48 different scales for instrumental mastery.

Mr. Friesen adds the Lydian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Phrygian and Locrian modes. Adding modal scales creates an additional 60 new scale patterns. New scale work increases left hand facility and alternative thumb positions are practiced. Pentatonics, blues scales, world scales and modes of melodic and harmonic scales, each add more scales.

Going from a scale routine that had 48 scales to one that feels endless, I have felt a new approach take place. A deep connection between the ear and the hand emerges, and the scale feels like it comes out of my ear into my hand. It takes less time to play the scale time, in tune, and with ease.

5.2. Spelling five seventh chords

Before studies with Mr. Friesen I had spelled 12 major and 12 minor arpeggios up and down the fingerboard. Mr. Friesen adds major 7th, dominant, minor 7th, minor 7th flat five (half diminished), and fully diminished 7th chords. Mr. Friesen has a copyrighted fingering system for this where the root is spelled with either the first finger or the fourth finger. He teaches the system aurally.

Spelling notes across the fingerboard through thought, rather than memorization, seems to use a part of the brain that I have not used before. With this work, I frequently get a headache behind my right ear, where the cerebellum is located (Dispenza, 2007). Mapping this in the brain through an fMRIs and other measurable data (Limb, 2008; Taylor, 2016) would be useful. Quantitative contexts could reveal more about the effects of learning music theory aurally on fretless fingerboards vs. pitches on a piano, and instrument that is more visually clear.

5.3. Understanding Harmony and Practicing the ii-V-I chord progression

In addition to spelling five seventh chords from 12 pitches, I also practiced the famous ii-V-I chord progressions: ii7-V7-I7 and ii7(b5)-V7(b9)-i(#7). Understanding and executing chord progressions on the instrument has a unique feel in the hand. It is instinctual, rather than intellectual. The benefit to my musical imagination in the voicing of repertoire like the Bach Suites, and to technical mastery in etudes like those by Popper and Duport, is in my estimation, immeasurable. It would be compelling to collect more data, both qualitative and quantitative, on the impact of consistent chord spelling with other string players.

6. Data and Analysis: *Listening Within*

Some of the techniques that I chose to develop my inner world include but are not limited to silence, meditation, and connections to nature (Murdock, 2020; Murphy, 2020; Schroeder, 2018; Yates *et al*, 2015). Notably, journal entries served opposite purposes than planned. The meditation journal housed material about the *building technique* practice because post-meditation, my mind was calm and clear. During practices, I experienced a wide range of emotions and ideas, so the practice diary was personal, intense, imaginative, and filled with memories.

6.1. Sitting in silence with your instrument

Part of Mr. Friesen's teaching is to spend time next to the instrument in silence. Using the cello to access silence, rather than just music, opened unexpected themes.

Journal Entry

"I have never sat down with my cello without a purpose before. I have new experiences every day. Sometimes I am overwhelmed with memories that I had forgotten, or not thought of for a long time. These range from joyous to traumatic. Other times I realize that I am sitting forward with the cello, with a posture that is like an athlete ready to race. Every day I relax more. Every day I am filled with more and more gratitude. While it used to be hard to sit next to my cello in silence, now I welcome it. My neck, arms, back, and jaw loosen, and my mind calms. I am so grateful to the cello, for all the love she has given me. And for all the love that I can give back."



Photo 3: Ready to accomplish



Photo 4: Relaxed

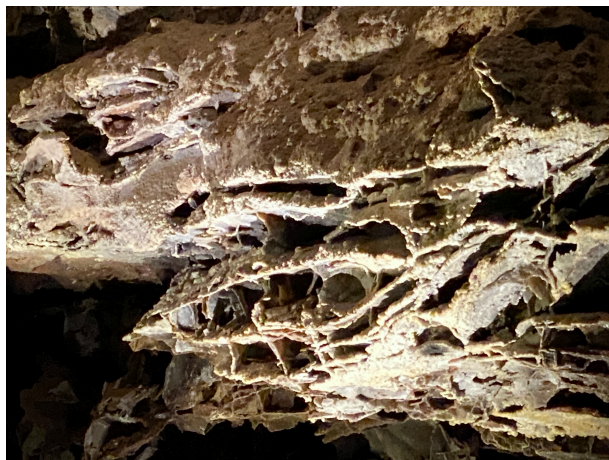
To contextualize these changes in posture, I worked with Jean Applonie, a regarded practitioner of Alexander technique based in Salt Lake City. Ms. Applonie helped me to see that even when I perceive that I am relaxed, my low back still has a dip, and is overarched (photo 3). A constant arch in the low back creates an exaggerated curve in the neck, which pulls the chin and shoulders up. This results in tension in the upper body, which is visible in the photos. In the photo on the right, my low back and neck are flat, relaxed, and in alignment (photo 4). My jaw is lower. This subtle change in posture has increased my stamina. I play more hours with more strength, and my hands, shoulders and neck no longer get sore after long, challenging gigs or practice sessions. Furthermore, my tone is bigger, my bow bounces more easily, and I create more color with my bow.

Silence opened other elements. I also learned that I was remembering more because the body keeps track of things that the mind forgets (Van der Kolk, 2105). A strong connection to the cello, connecting with silence, was powerful. This practice may have accessed memories that were previously hidden because improvisation accesses the part of the brain that tells stories (Limb, 2008).

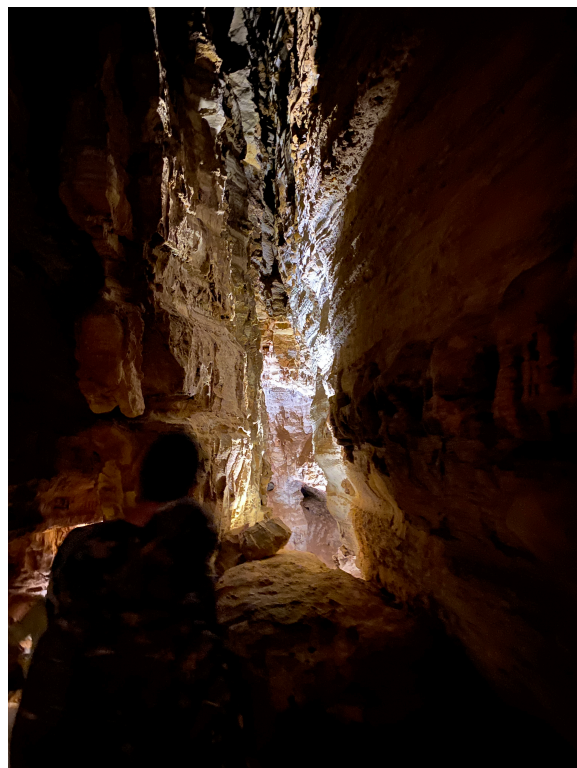
In a society that can be obsessed with external realities like accomplishment, wealth, objects, and perceived beauty (Yates, 2015), silence can be challenging. To explore the metaphor of playing in a natural cave, I drove to *Wind Cave National Park*, 600 hundred miles away so I could experience what real silence, deep in the earth, felt like. Since this cave is part of the National Park Service, I was required to go in the cave on a guided tour, with a group of 30 people. While participants are asked to move in silence, this was how our silence transpired.

Journal Entry

"The cave is beautiful. But it is not quiet. A woman in our group can't stop talking about her stove. Our group goes eight stories down on slow, cold, slippery stairs, passing crystals, intricate lattices, and strange formations, all while hearing about the stove. Even when the guide specifically stops the tour and asks everyone to be quiet so we can hear what real silence sounds like, it only lasts for a second. This time, the stove lady is not the only one talking. No one can handle the quiet of the cave. There is nervous laughter and outbursts from everyone. There is no silence. No silence at all."



Photos 5-8
Wind Cave, South Dakota



6.2. Meditation

Meditation involves calming the mind and connecting to breath (Sarath, 2013; Yates, 2015). This helps many to develop a state of peak performance that many describe as in the zone or in the flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kotler, 2014). Some years back, I meditated for 90 minutes daily for one year, only skipping five days out of 365. Since then, I have kept up an active awareness practice of one type or another. Mr. Friesen has a cellist meditate two ways: away from the instrument, and on the instrument. Connecting meditation to my instrument opened up a new realm, and despite my previous experience in meditation, it proved to be challenging.

Journal entry

"I finally tell Eugene that I can't meditate. I make mental lists of all the things that I need to do. I fret about my relationships. I get angry at the people around me who are behaving badly. I catch myself over and over, multiple times, every single minute. Sometimes every few seconds. The avalanche of breathing and positive thoughts that I force on my mind only seem to agitate me. I blurt out at a lesson, 'Eugene, I can't meditate' and pause in embarrassed silence."

"Eugene thinks for a while, as he sometimes does. He smiles gently. He nods. 'This is over-striving, Nicole. It's ok, It's normal.' This time, instead of bursting out a comment, for once I follow his example. I pause. I ask: 'So Eugene, what does it feel like to you when you meditate?' 'I'm glad you asked me that, Nicole. No one has ever asked me that. Thank you for asking me that.' (Pause, smiling) 'Well, I become a whale. Or maybe, I just connect with whales. But when I meditate, I am in water. I am surrounded by wise, ancient beings, and we float together. We swim together. We feel together.'"

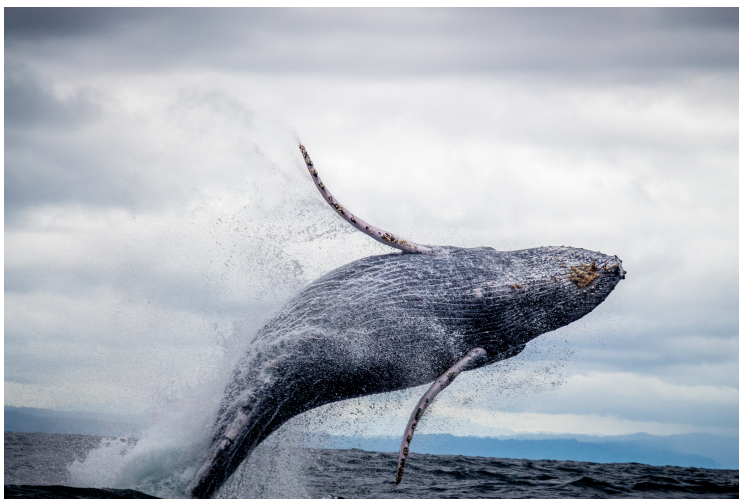
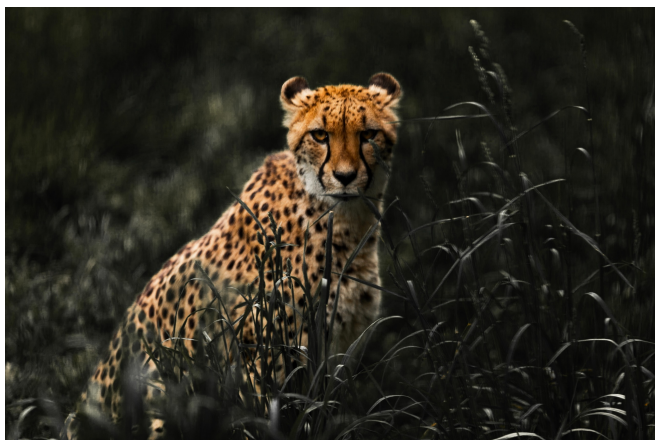


Photo 9: *Whale* by Silvana Palacios, used by permission



"The next day, I think of whales when I meditate. It seems to work, but only a little. A cheetah appears in my mind. I let go of the whales and watch the cheetah. She is beautiful, busy, and angry. The cheetah paces, pants, growls, and rumbles, watching me all the while. The cheetah is so beautiful and interesting that I don't think of anything else but her. Gradually, the pacing decreases. Cheetah watches me all the while. Finally, she is still, and so is my mind. The cheetah looks straight into my eyes. I look back. Now we are watching each other."

Photo 10: *Cheetah* by Trace Hudson, used by permission

My connection to the cello is so strong that it felt different to meditate while connected to it, both while sitting next to the cello, and meditating while playing it. It would be useful to study if other musicians likewise experience meditation differently while connecting to their instrument. Both quantitative data, such as brain scans, and qualitative data, such as personal experience, could be insightful.

6.3. Spending time in nature and exploring metaphors

I spent as many sessions as possible improvising in nature. While it took substantial effort to take a large, valuable instrument into secluded areas, I found that outdoors, improvisation came much more easily. Interestingly, my improvisations near water always felt particularly effortless and genuine. The water connection could use more exploration in the future.

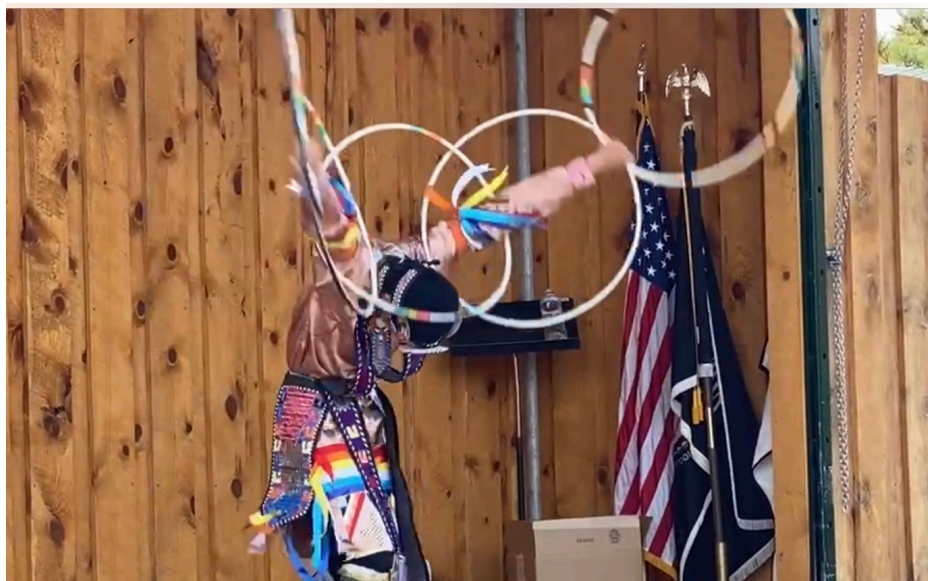


Photo 9: Playing by a Lake in the Black Hills in South Dakota

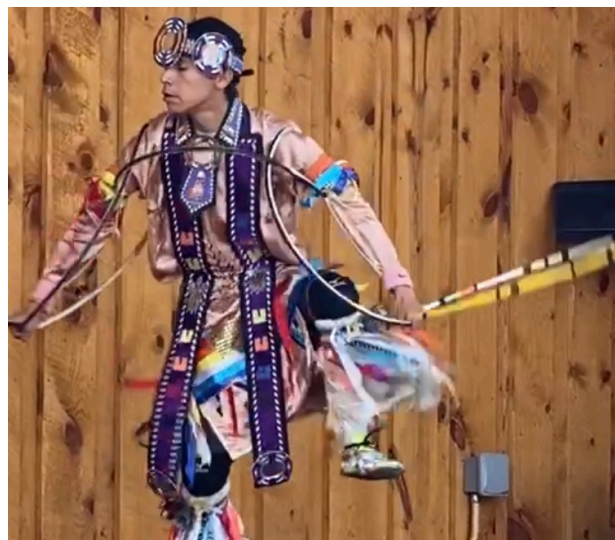
A meaningful experience about nature happened while learning more about *Wind Cave*. This cave has sacred meaning to the Lakota tribe (Hollow Horn Bear, 2013; Marshall, 2001; Nps.gov, 2020). I first learned about the Lakota connection to *Wind Cave* at a presentation given by Carlos Benally, Jessie Taken Alive-Rencountre, and Sophia Rencountre at *Crazy Horse Memorial* (crazyhorsememorial.org, 2019).

Journal Entry

"I don't know why the dancing moves me so. I cry and my stomach trembles. I try to control it so the audience doesn't notice. The young man performs two dances. One is a hoop dance, the other, a war dance. Carlos explains that the name that I've been taught as the name of his tribe, Sioux, is a name that the U.S. imposed upon his people. Sioux means snake, or enemy. The real name of his tribe is Lakota. Lakota means ally."



Photos 10-12: Carlos Benally performing at *Crazy Horse Memorial*
Used by permission



Recently, topographical evidence has confirmed something that has been taught for centuries among the Lakota people. The Black Hills of South Dakota form the shape of a human heart. Even chambers and arteries are evident (SDPB, 2015). To the Lakota, the Black Hills are *Paha Sapa*, “the heart of everything that is” (Marshall, 2011; Native-americans-online.com, n.d.; Sacred Land, n.d.). All living things are connected. When we disrespect others, we diminish the light of our own soul (Marshall, 2011; Taken Alive-Rencountre, 2018).



Photo 13: *Black Hills* and Bison of South Dakota

Bison, or *tatanka*, also factor profoundly into life in the Lakota tribe (Marshall, 2001; Nps.gov. (2016a); Nps.gov, 2020; TEDx Talks, 2016). In the beginning of time, bison were made guardians of the Lakota people in the beginning of time. As such, bison impart wisdom, strength, courage and prosperity. Hunters ask bison for the privilege of using its flesh, and then use every part of its body to respect its sacrifice. In a final act of gratitude, the skull used is faced east with the rising sun, so the bison’s spirit is in rhythm with the earth for all of time. I was able to see a large number of wild buffalo while at the park and was inextricably drawn to them. Even though I was a great distance away, one of these magnificent, powerful creatures seems to have looked me right in the eye.



Photo 14: Close up of Bison at *Wind Cave* National Park

Upon returning home, while telling my parents that I had several poignant experiences during a Lakota dance and felt a profound connection with bison, I learned that I have a Native American ancestor in my father's Missouri pioneer line. DNA testing may prove useful in the search to learn more about my grandmother.

7. Other Data

7.1. Lessons and Aural Learning

Mr. Friesen is warm, friendly, and kind. Even though our lessons are over zoom, he builds a close and trusting relationship. He peers into the camera closely and often. He is voraciously intelligent, and every time he plays it is spectacular. However, Mr. Friesen is down to earth and completely genuine, without ego, and without guile. However, his generous, continuous warmth, did not have the power to stop my own mind. Often, I was trapped by my own thoughts in an epic struggle to listen, which frequently prevented me from hearing what mattered most (Murphy, 2020).

Journal entry: early in lessons

“Eugene’s hair, goatee and shirt are all brilliant white. The walls in the farmhouse are white. The light is so bright that Eugene looks angelic...he’s a disembodied, divine being, a sparkling white bubble floating in my computer screen. Even though he smiles and nods, even though he speaks with wisdom and compassion, visceral feelings of panic continue to overcome me. My mind starts chattering, telling me the meanest things. This heavy darkness continues to cloud my ability to hear and listen. I try to not let this show, but later, watching the zoom recording, I see the fake smile on my face. When I am slow Eugene is not dissuaded, he persists, he always persists. Then I learn just a little, like a camel going through a needle.”



Photo 15: Eugene Friesen
Used by permission

The voices of analysis, which serve so well in some practices, can paralyze one's experience in the present (Dispenza, 2007). The classical mind has a finely tuned, critical mind that is constant (Green and Gallwey, 1986). Aural learning requires 100 percent attention to the present. There is simply no room to think other thoughts. This journal entry is midway through my studies with Eugene.

Journal entry

"Today was different. 'Nicole, you are so capable. You'll get it.' Eugene's encouraging words are starting to stick. Now when overwhelmed, I chase out darkness with Eugene's voice saying, 'Nicole, you are so capable. You'll get it.' I believe it." Wow, it's taken eight months for me to start to believe in myself as he does."

Lastly, is a comparison of lesson notes. The first document contains lesson notes from February. The second document contains lesson notes from October 1. In the first example, my handwriting is messy and the thoughts on the page appear random. In the second example, my handwriting is neat, and the approach is methodical and clear. This shows that the abilities of my mind have increased (Kwik, 2020).

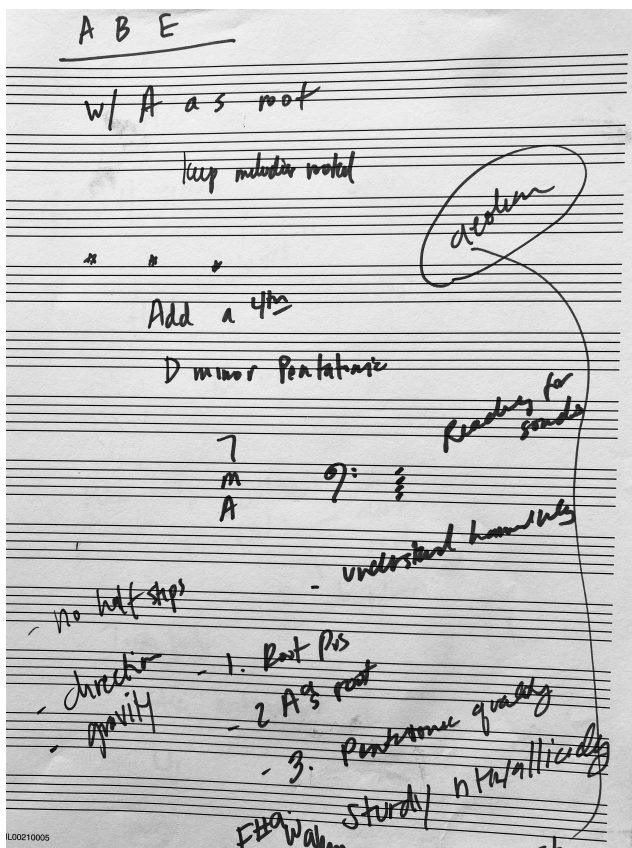


Photo 16: Lesson Notes from February 2021



Photo 17: Lesson Notes from October 2021

7.2. Artist vs. Research Practitioner

It is relevant to consider my experience as a research-practitioner. Often, I was discouraged and worried. Action research is not always valued by those who are accomplished in the field (Purcell, 2017), and I perceived this to be so amongst performing musicians.

Journal entry

Who is going to read this? 'CLASSICAL Cellist does ACADEMIC research on IMPROV,' talk about an oxymoron. I am a MUSICIAN. I just want to PLAY. If I had known this project was going to cost three pints of blood, I would have just written a stinking PAPER and called it GOOD."

I remained diligent, sustained by respect for my mentor, Dr. Andrew Hall. While being a practitioner pushed me to new limits, there have been rewards. I am learning more quickly in all aspects of my life. I understand more of what I read. I communicate with more clarity and cohesiveness. I am more self-aware. This all contributes to deeper, more empathic connections with family, as well as colleagues, students and friends.

8. The Creative Artifacts: Evaluations of the Two Performances

8.1. *Utah Arts Festival: August 28, 2021*

The performance at the Utah Arts Festival took place on August 28, 2021. Musician Morgan Case was ill, so two days before the concert, guitarist Nick Petty agreed to take Morgan's place. A concert of free improv was intimidating, and I was nervous and afraid. However, I have a bond with Nick Petty, and we share a love of stories (Harker, 1999) and *Big Magic* (Gilbert, 2016).



Photo 18

Nick and Nicole, *Utah Arts Festival*, August 28, 2021

The first piece, “Spanish Fantasy in D minor,” featured nice cello melodies, good flow, and virtuosic licks. The guitar provided a steady stream of contrasting and vibrant ideas that flowed into each other. The low cello didn’t seem a good fit for the guitar solo at 4:00.

The next tune, started at 6:00, and is about a suburban family while traveling to Disneyland. The guitar’s crisp chords, interlaced with a low, articulated motive and flowing passages, provided a bed for the cello to explore contrasting emotional textures. At 9:16, I remember getting lost, backing off, and thinking that I had failed. But the cello disappeared into the texture nicely.

“Maggie, the Lazy Cow, Making Pizza,” at 12:45, was a story from the audience. Tasty guitar country swing alternated between humorous low and high passages in the cello. Despite the chromatic movement, the cello stayed with the guitar. At the guitar solo at 15:09, less cello would have provided better contrast.

The next piece, “The Whale and the Cheetah,” began at 16:35 with growling sounds from the guitar. I did not realize that Nick had started the song but recovered, listened, and entered with whale sounds at 16:48. Nervous, quick gestures from the guitar at 17:09, began the next section. At 17:40, the guitar started a groove. The whale sounds, interspersed into long cello melodies, were successful. While I remember feeling lost at 19:10 during the pentatonic cello passages, there is no outward evidence of this. The cello glissandi at 20:30 added more contrast, and the tune ended cohesively.

The next piece is about an octopus escape (Malik, 2016). The cello entry with pizz at 22:55 added intensity and variety. Likewise, the fast vibrato 24:40 added variety. Less cello at 25:12 also provided welcome points of distinction. The guitar solo at 25:30 was lovely, high lyric playing, alternated with short, articulated notes. I remember being very frustrated that I did not have much “to do” to support this line, but silence would have served that purpose. At 27:28, the fast cello notes are descriptive of the storyline, as are the harmonics.

At this point in the program, a musician from another band sat down in the audience. Distracted, I hinted at the same style in this piece as “Maggie, the Lazy Cow.” While this was acceptable and alternated by fine guitar playing and a few cello descriptors, I allowed myself to entertain thoughts that I was playing poorly.

However, the next tune, starting at 28:27, is successful. The low guitar was extremely rich, and rhythmic slapping sounds created a convincing groove. The long cello lines compliment, and the few scale passages, while simple, don’t sound “dumb,” as I was thinking in the moment. The slides in the 30:50s are interesting, even though I had thought, “too obvious, be creative!” At 31:28, I start playing a long B. I remember feeling stuck, literally, as if I could only play one note, and being embarrassed. But the length provided welcome tension and mystery and could have been extended longer. Even though I kept playing well, I didn’t realize it, and suddenly I was in a swirl of cruel thoughts. I remember the wonderful guitar vibrato at 33:16 snapping me out of it. Surprisingly, there is no external indication of this struggle.

Nick asks to play in E major. I agree even though to that point, I had never shed E Major. I am now visibly off, for my ear and hand aren’t connecting. I struggle with notes. This time, Nick senses my struggle. He leans over and says, “I’ll take it.” Instead

of taking a break and allowing a tasty guitar solo at 37:22, I pluck wrong notes. I finally stopped playing. This helped me to gather composure. Upon reentry at 36:25, I appear confident, but I was battling, and I chose to stay more simple, which helped me to be in the right key. Nick leaned directly towards me at 39:04. I remember feeling like Nick was giving me good energy. That helped me recover a bit more.

The last song is based on the color “purple.” Nick picked the key of C Major, and I started to remember some of the things that make a piece great. I executed moments of silence and interspersed them with long lines and quick licks. At 41:51, the guitar switched from rhythmic texture to long lyric lines. I do not switch textures. Bowing a simple version of his rhythm would have worked nicely. The piece winds down, and the performance is over.

My awareness that this was to be a concert to reflect the exterior, outward, *building technique* structure, resulted in more notes, but not better pieces. The licks and long lines were more exciting. Any rhythmic and harmonic texture would have added welcome contrast. Working in more keys and learning to not entertain negative thoughts in performances will also prove useful.

8.2. Cello in the Cave: October 2, 2021



Photo 19
Nicole and Chris, *Cello in the Cave*, October 2, 2021

This concert featured four parts: storytelling, feelings, “the inner critic,” and “magic, the flow from the heart” and took place in Pleasant Grove, Utah, in a Himalayan Salt Cave at *Purify Wellness Center*. I played with percussionist Chris Petty, who is Nick Petty’s twin brother and an extraordinary musician.

Wind Cave started with a slow entry with effects at 3:32. While it was compelling, it would have benefited with more silence and better audio from the nature sounds. The entrance of the “trickster” at 4:50 was a nice theme, and one that was truly improvised. The first quick *tabla* entrance at 5:06, brief, confident, and quiet, was interesting. The movement that began at 5:42 could have continued, but perhaps the choice to pause reflected the storyline better. The tremolo in the *tabla* at 6:25 was exciting. The second section with movement seemed out of place. Perhaps one vibrant middle rhythmic section would have been better. If I had remembered the themes, and related them, that would have also been interesting, and a skill to work on in the future.

Living in Phrygian began at 11:05. The melodic material was familiar. Silence, interspersed with rhythm, was effective. The bookend of form at 14:42 was effective. The final *tabla* punctuation at 15:12 was satisfying, and the *kanjira* provided excellent texture.

For the first two songs, I was aware of my inner critic and anxious. However, the voice was dulled, muted. On the third song, titled “*The Inner Critic, Me vs. Debbie*,” this voice was more present. It was empowering to awaken it, describe it, try to banish it, and then surrender to it.

The fourth song was in D Dorian, and I was more confident and loved playing with the intense *cajón*. In my excitement I rushed and had trouble with the looper but was able to work with both in the context of the piece, and Chris kept the energy confident. I adventured into changes of harmony in minute 28 and added virtuosic elements in minute 29. At 29:30 the downward slides were effective, as was the clapping at 25:45. The encore, *Slap*, by Eugene Friesen, was an exciting exploration of harmonic and rhythmic possibility on the cello, and provided an exciting end to the concert.

9. Conclusions

A person’s inner world is subjective. Defined simply, the inner world is composed of our thoughts and feelings, which are unique. In contrast, we all share the common space of an objective, measurable outer world. The improvisational journey offers immense possibility for classical artists. New ways of *building technique* offer heightened levels of virtuosity, facility, and ease. *Listening within* develops tools for listening, connection, and self-awareness. All are important to flow, integral to peak performance.

Another useful skill is to become a research practitioner. Rigor in learning and self-reflection is transformative. Becoming a creative artist requires many types of constructs. It is recognized by many as an integrated and holistic practice. Therefore, action research adds a tool to an individual’s framework. It also provides opportunities for increased connections with teachers. Furthermore, the opportunity to be rigorous about studying other musician’s mindsets reveals insights on how artists formulate a personal voice in both music and research.

Allowing myself to organize my lesson material into two different categories, naming them *building technique* and *listening within*, provided a framework where I took ownership over my learning experience. Studying how other musicians experience my two defined processes helped me to synthesize my own learning. Depth and breadth aids in the quest to become a classical musician. Furthermore, striving to be an improvising/composing artist like Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, is a path that is worthy of pursuit.

Most revealing of all is the power of the human brain, for the brain learns in ways that are both internal and external. The exterior structures of *building technique* within an improvisational skill set magnifies technique. Similarly, the interior world of thoughts and feelings is honed in the fire of improvisation. Becoming an improviser provides a new lens in which to address important musical issues. In this case study, it resulted in a progression towards increased musicianship and intellectual knowledge.

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