

Listening to music is a practice.



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Beyond how we listen and where we listen, there are many ways we can listen to music while introducing physical practices. These exercises can be done with any piece of music. I am going to use "Music for 18 Musicians", by Steve Reich as an example of how I would teach this.

Music for 18 Musicians is a very important piece of music for me. It was first performed in 1976 in New York City, a year before I was born. I first listened to it in college and it became the inspiration of my early compositional life. It is considered a minimalist approach to music, but for me it is rich with complex rhythms, dense harmonies, layers of thick instrumentation, and a relentless drive for an hour straight. It represents a time and feeling of music coming out of NYC that I wish I could travel too. While I was living in NYC, I would put it in my portable CD player and walk around early mornings on the Upper East Side. I would start at the Guggenheim Museum and walk in and out of Central Park all the way back down to where I lived on the Bowery.

Here are ten different ways I practice this with a class, I usually pick just one a semester:

1. Fall asleep to it. Have your students lay down on the studio floor, spread apart and get comfortable. Turn off the lights and ask the students not to stare or talk with each other during the practice. This is a solitary experience done in a group. Tell them that the goal is for them to fall asleep. Play the track over the studio

speakers at a good volume, but not blasting. The repetition can be unsettling for some students, so let them know they can take a break and walk outside the studio if they need to. When the piece ends, leave some time for silence and gently wake up the students that fell asleep. Make a circle and discuss what images, feelings, and experiences were had. This is by far the most popular of any of the practices and I have used it when I sense students are stressed. I find that falling asleep to music lets go of bias and genre and allows the subconscious to have a deeper experience with sound.

2.Walking meditation in a studio. Line up on one side of the studio. The task is to walk from one side of the studio and back once in the time it takes for the piece to play. This is a practice in duration and space. Inspired by the work of Eiko and Koma, this practice builds the ability to be engaged in a singular task over a long period of time covering a measured area of space.

3.Walking meditation outside across a field. If the weather is nice, find a long field. Ask the students to download the music onto their phones and bring headphones. Have them line up on one side of the field and task them with walking across the field to the other side once for the duration of the piece. Similar to the last exercise, this challenges the students' concepts of space and duration.

4.Do a repetitive motion in time with the piece for the duration. First time listeners are often surprised that all of the instruments in the piece are acoustic and not electronic. Music for 18 musicians is a physically demanding piece to play. Even tapping a hand on the leg without missing a beat is a fun exercise.

5.Hold a group improvisation. In most of the performances of Music for 18 Musicians, a vibraphone is used to cue the ensemble to change patterns or sections. Each time the vibraphone plays, the group of movers improvising sits and makes space for a new group of movers to improvise.

6.Take a drive, it is one of the best pieces of music to listen to on a long car ride or stare out the window of a train or bus.

7.Pick a number (2,3,4,6 or any really) and count it in your head along with the piece for the entire duration.

8.Look at the score and follow along. This is an incredibly interesting score to study. The approach to notation is not that far off from how some choreographers think about long structures.

9.Take a week and listen to a different recording each day. There are many versions, each with unique and subtle variations. My favorites are the classic ECM recording of the Steve Reich Ensemble, The Ensemble Signal version, and the extremely original version by Rough Fields.

10. Make a piece of choreography that uses some of the same compositional elements.