

Music and Dance Scheme

Promoting health and wellbeing in young dancers and musicians

Don't lose the music!

Sanchita Farruque,
British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM)

Hearing loss and tinnitus

If you're a performer, then being able to listen to the music you are either performing along to or producing yourself, is vitally important! It seems obvious, but why is it then, that so many performers forget to look after their ears?

Summary

This infosheet is aimed primarily at performers working in and around amplified music or in environments in which noise levels are likely to get dangerously above legal limits, but of course we all need to think about protecting our hearing when we're out and about as well – whether just enjoying a night out clubbing or catching a mate's gig at the local pub.

Key messages:

- >> it has been proved that exposure to live and amplified music of any kind can cause hearing damage
- >> *Noise at Work Regulations* require each employer to manage the risk to their employees and, where possible, freelancers
- >> it is important to control, reduce and monitor exposure to noise
- >> many of the controls are simple and cost-effective
- >> audiences can still enjoy the performance with the controls in place

Safe noise levels

The law basically outlines that noise levels should not go over **85db** (db = decibel) over an average working week. This level of noise is the threshold for an average eight hour day or an average for seven days of noise exposure. If you are exposed to less than 85 db, you can work for slightly longer periods ie more than eight hours: but we do not mean continuously! It's the amount of **exposure** that is important here, which is dependent on both the **noise level** and the **amount of time** your ears are exposed to that level of noise. If you go over 85db, then you must reduce the number of hours you perform for, in order to reduce your exposure. This can be done by having days off and reducing volume levels, as well as taking regular breaks.

If levels reach up to or over **90db**, the risk is considerable and the venue will be liable if they do not take adequate measures to reduce this. Sometimes venues will have devices that will turn off the electricity supply to sound amplification equipment if they peak these levels. However, this level can often be peaked in some environments very easily, with no real way of preventing it from happening – so you need to take measures to protect your ears.

Look after your hearing – it's all you've got!

>> Sir Paul McCartney

Issues for performers to address on a day-to-day basis:

- >> if you are using amplification equipment, especially monitor speakers, make sure they are at a **safe listening level**. You need to be able to hear what you and your fellow performers are playing or performing to, without damaging your ears

Music and Dance Scheme

Promoting health and wellbeing in young dancers and musicians

- >> if you can't hear, don't be tempted to increase the volume level – ask your fellow musicians to **play quieter** or for the background music to be set at lower, more reasonable levels. If the quietest instrument (or singer) is being drowned out, it's likely to be uncomfortable for everyone, including the audience
- >> try wearing **ear-plugs** regularly, both at rehearsals and performances, so you get used to them. These ear-plugs (probably more relevant for musicians) need to attenuate the volume of the music, without affecting its overall sound (frequency response) so things sound clear but quieter. Specialist ear-plugs are designed for this purpose and customised ones, though expensive, may be worth the investment as they will be moulded to the user's ears. They cost £70-£170 on average. RNID, MU and Don't Lose the Music! can provide more advice about these types of ear plugs
- >> you should also consider a combination of **acoustic shields** (say, to isolate the drummer from the rest of the band) and carefully aiming instruments so that other players and performers are not too much in the firing line
- >> watch out with using MP3 players or personal stereos. You're probably listening to music far too loudly, so turn it down! Give your ears a rest and don't be tempted to increase the volume as the background noise gets too high (like on the train). It will end up being dangerous for your ears. Ear-plug add-ons can help cut out background noise (noise-cancellation earphones) so you don't have to play your music so loudly
- >> after exposing their ears to very loud noises or music, some people experience a ringing or whistling or other sound, long after that noise has gone or when there doesn't appear to be any external source of that sound! This is called **tinnitus** and can be permanent and incurable in some people. Look at the Tinnitus Society's website for more advice on how to deal with this often distressing condition
- >> take **breaks** of up to 10-15 minutes away from the noise to help reduce the effect of the sound (chill-out zones etc). This also goes for using MP3 players and personal stereos

When I first started playing in bands I never wore hearing protection and we played as loud as we could. One night I came home from a show and my ears were ringing, as they often did. And they were still ringing the next day. And the next. Ever since then, I've worn hearing protection when exposed to very loud music. I know that once my hearing is gone it will never return.

>> Moby

For orchestral musicians and dancers in a dance company, whether freelancers or employees, management has a legal obligation to provide a safe working environment. Some orchestra managements now provide hearing tests for their performers. However, don't rely on the management to know your individual level of exposure – they cannot follow you around with noise meters to assess how much noise you've been exposed to. Make sure you get your hearing tested regularly: every six months if very active in music.

Music and Dance Scheme

Promoting health and wellbeing in young dancers and musicians

A few home truths for your social life...

The following important points about noise levels in clubs, bars and music venues come courtesy of the RNID's campaign Don't Lose the Music!

At some gigs and clubs, the music can be louder than 100db – that's louder than a pneumatic drill 10 feet away! Most of these types of venues will eventually be pulled up under the regulations for not controlling their noise levels, but as this can be a slow process, performers will need to take care of themselves in the meantime.

ringing ears or dull hearing are signs of permanent damage. So, if you go to a club and you have to shout to the person two feet away, the noise level is far too loud and you are damaging your ears.

Further Reading

- *Noise at Work regulations:*
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/noise/>
- *Sound advice about the specifics of noise/hearing issues in the rock and pop industry:*
<http://soundadvice.info/>
- *General information on hearing:*
<http://www.rnid.org.uk/> and
<http://www.dontlosethemusic.com/home/>
- *Hearing tests and ear-plugs:*
MU musician's passports:
<http://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/site/cms/contentviewarticle.asp?article=480>
Musicians' Hearing Services:
<http://www.harleysthearing.co.uk/>
- *Tinnitus advice:*
<http://www.tinnitus.org.uk/>
- *General help and advice on hearing issues:* <http://www.bapam.org.uk/index.php>
BAPAM (the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine) is a unique charity delivering specialist health support to performing artists and can source hearing specialists.

Protecting your ears in clubs and at gigs:

- >> stand away from the loud speakers
- >> wear special re-useable earplugs designed for clubs and gigs (not necessarily expensive)
- >> use chill-out areas to give your ears a rest

There's no going back...

Remember, once hearing damage occurs, there is usually no cure. If you start getting hearing problems, you need to get professional help and probably also a hearing test. Contact BAPAM to find out about what assessments and/or treatment you are entitled to and check out the websites listed for a range of relevant information.

Performers have to carefully judge their exposure to potentially damaging noise by limiting the amount of time they are working or present in that noise; reducing their exposure by wearing ear-plugs; taking breaks; and following the other advice given here.

South West Music School, The Barn, Dartington Hall, Totnes TQ9 6DE
info@swms.org.uk 01803 847011



Publication date: January 2010

Copyright © South West Music School 2009 and the individual author. All rights reserved. South West Music School encourages the copying, reproduction and distribution of this document to promote health and wellbeing, provided that South West Music School is acknowledged. However, no part of this publication may be copied, reproduced or distributed for profit or other commercial enterprise, nor may any part be incorporated into any other publication, without written permission of South West Music School.

Disclaimer: Every care has been taken in preparing this advice but no responsibility can be accepted by the authors, South West Music School or the Music and Dance Scheme for any harm, however caused, which results from this advice.

Don't lose the music! >> Sanchita Farruque, British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM)