

We don't need the sound of silence

The World Health Organisation says we should only listen to one hour of music a day. Rubbish, it's the volume that's the problem, says Neil McCormick



Death metal: headphones are blamed for a rise in hearing loss Photo: EPA

By Neil McCormick

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The World Health Organisation says **we should listen to music for no more than an hour a day**. Is that even possible in the modern world?

I start my morning with a radio on in the kitchen. I go for a run with my iPod set to shuffle. During my working day, I play albums on my office stereo and listen to music online. At night, I might go out to see a live gig. I am listening to music right now, in fact. I would turn it off, doc, but I'm not sure my editor would accept health and safety as an excuse for failing to submit a review.

Being a music critic I might be considered a special case. But am I really?

The average American listens to five hours of music a day. Unless you lock yourself in a sound proofed room, stay off a computer and don't watch TV, music is surely almost inescapable in the modern world. There is music in bars, music in shops, music in restaurants and often music in the workplace.

Our main forms of entertainment are accompanied by music: TV shows, video games, movies, concerts and clubs. People talk about the soundtrack of their lives because music has come to be an accompaniment to everything we do, on the portable music devices that accompany us wherever we go. And yet the only thing that's really new about this is amplification.

There is no known culture, now or in the past, that lacks music.

Anthropologists, archaeologists and evolutionary scientists are agreed that music has been an ever-present part of human development, even if there remains considerable debate about its function. "Our ancestors, as far as we know, had far more music in their lives than we do," asserts Daniel Levitin, musician, neuroscientist, and author of *This Is Your Brain On Music*. He points out that contemporary subsistence cultures, hunter-gatherers and pre-industrial village-based communities have music as a continuous presence throughout their day, typically with hours of singing at night around camp fire, singing while performing daily activities, as well as ritualised music making. Music appears to be hard wired into the human experience. "The average 14-year-old will hear more different music in a month than his great grandfather might have heard in a lifetime – but probably not more hours of music than, say, someone 5,000 years ago," according to Levitin.

The WHO report was occasioned by concerns over hearing loss amongst young people, with the headline grabbing figure that 1.1 billion teenagers and young adults are at risk of permanently damaging their hearing. Yet calling for people to cut music to an hour a day is patently ridiculous. It is not music that is the problem, it's the way we listen to it. According to the WHO report, 85 decibels is a safe volume level for around 8 hours a day listening. Nightclubs, discos and bars have average sound levels ranging from 104 to 112 dB; pop concerts are often higher. Pete Townshend, who suffers from tinnitus and is almost completely deaf in one ear, has accepted a share of the blame. "I unwittingly helped to invent and refine a type of music that

makes its principal proponents deaf,” the 69-year-old guitarist has opined. “My intuition tells me there is terrible trouble ahead.” It is the WHO versus The Who.

I once went for a hearing test and was told I had minor hearing loss concomitant with working in a loud environment, which sounds fair. But my uncle has the same issue and he worked in a car factory his whole life.

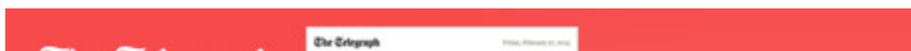
Motorbikes run at about 95 dB, underground trains reach about 100 dB. Food processors and kitchen blenders tend to generate more than the recommended 85 dB. The modern world is loud. Some doctors suggest you wear ear plugs whilst drying your hair.

Our personal options regarding controlling the volumes we are exposed to are often quite limited. I have my own rules of thumb regarding the preservation of my hearing. For me the ideal concert volume is loud enough to drown out the conversation of anyone but my closest neighbour. If I get uncomfortable, I put something in my ears. These days, I usually have ear plugs with me but in the past I have inserted whatever comes handy: fingers, small wads of balled up paper and even filters torn off cigarettes.

The real hidden danger, though, is headphones, particularly those ubiquitous tinny little buds projecting high frequencies into the delicate apparatus of the inner ear. According to the WHO report, the number of people listening to music through headphones in the US increased 75 per cent between 1990 and 2005. The prevalence of hearing loss in teenagers over a similar period (1994-2006) rose from 3.5% to 5.6%. So it certainly makes sense to use noise cancelling headphones (which facilitate listening at lower volumes), read manufacturing guidelines about the noise level of your headphones and set volume limits (a safe level is usually about 60 per cent). Ears are precious. Noise induced hearing loss is irreversible. If you love music, if you need it in your life, as I think we all do, then it is wise to take precautions, or the world might get very, very quiet indeed. But it is not the quantity of music that is the problem. It is not even the quality. It is the volume.

END Daniel Levitin's new book is *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (Viking £9.99).

The Who play London's O2 Arena on March 22 and 23





How we moderate

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