

Protect Your Hearing Every Day

Information and Recommendations for Student Musicians

Standard Version

**National Association of Schools of Music
Performing Arts Medicine Association**

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Protect Your Hearing Every Day

Introduction

In working toward a degree in music, you are joining a profession with a long and honored history. Part of the role of any professional is to remain in the best condition to practice the profession.

For all of you, as aspiring musicians, this involves safeguarding your hearing health. Whatever your plans after graduation – whether they involve playing, teaching, engineering, or simply enjoying music – you owe it to yourself and your fellow musicians to do all you can to protect your hearing.

As you may know, certain behaviors and your exposure to certain sounds can, over time, damage your hearing.

You may be young now, but you're never too young for the onset of hearing loss. In fact, in most cases, noise-related hearing loss doesn't develop overnight. (Well, some does, but we'll address that issue later in this document.) But the majority of noise-induced hearing loss happens gradually.

So the next time you find yourself blasting music through those tiny earbuds of your iPod or turning up the volume on your amp, ask yourself, Am I going to regret this someday? You never know; you just might. And as a musician, you cannot afford to risk it.

The bottom line is this: If you're serious about pursuing a career in music, you need to protect your hearing. The way you hear music, the way you recognize and differentiate pitch, the way you play music; all are directly connected to your hearing. Do yourself a favor: protect it. I promise you won't regret it.

Consider these common sounds, their corresponding decibel levels, and the recommended maximum exposure times established by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



You can listen to sounds under 85 dB for as long as you like. There is no risk involved, well, except for the risk of annoyance.

Musicians and Noise-Induced Hearing Loss

Nowadays, more and more is being written about the sound levels of certain musical groups. It's no secret that many rock concerts expose performers and audiences to dangerously high levels of noise. The ringing in your ears after a blaring rock concert can tell you that. But now professional and college music ensembles are under similar scrutiny.

It's true that musicians are exposed to elevated levels of sound when they rehearse and perform music. But that doesn't equal automatic risk for hearing loss.

Take for instance a typical practice session on the piano. When taken at close range to the instrument over a limited period of time, a sound level meter fluctuates between a reading of 60 and 70 decibels. That's similar in intensity to your average conversation (60dB). There will, of course, be moments when the music peaks and this level rises. But these moments are not sustained over several hours. At least not under normal practice conditions.

While the same is true for most instruments, it is important to understand that certain instrumental sections tend to produce higher sound levels. Sometimes these levels relate to the piece of music being performed and to notational requirements (*pianissimo*, *fortissimo*); other times, these levels are what naturally resonate from the instrument.

For example, string sections tend to produce decibel levels on the lower end of the spectrum, while brass, percussion, and woodwind sections generally produce decibel levels at the higher end of the spectrum.

What's important is that you are mindful of the overall volume of your instrument and of those around you. If you're concerned about volume levels, share your concerns with your instructor.

***FACT:** Approximately 50% of musicians have experienced some degree of hearing loss.*

Mindful Listening

Now, let's talk about how you can be proactive when it comes to music and hearing loss.

It's important to think about the impact noise can have on your hearing health when you:

1. Attend concerts;
2. Play your instrument;
3. Adjust the volume of your car stereo;
4. Listen to your radio, CD player, and MP3 player.

Here are some simple ways to test if the music is too loud:

It's too loud (and too dangerous) when:

1. You have to raise your voice to be heard.
2. You can't hear someone who's 3 feet away from you.
3. The speech around you sounds muffled or dull after you leave a noisy area.
4. You experience tinnitus (pain, ringing, buzzing, or roaring in your ears) after you leave a noisy area.

Evaluating Your Risk for Hearing Loss

When evaluating your risk for hearing loss, ask yourself the following questions:

1. How frequently am I exposed to noises and sounds above 85 decibels?

Resources Information and Research

Hearing Health Project Partners

National Association of School of Music (NASM)
<http://nasm.arts-accredit.org/>

Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA)
<http://www.artsmed.org/index.html>

PAMA Bibliography (search tool)
<http://www.artsmed.org/bibliography.html>

General Information on Acoustics

Acoustical Society of America
[\(http://acousticalsociety.org/\)](http://acousticalsociety.org/)

Acoustics.com
<http://www.acoustics.com>

Acoustics for Performance, Rehearsal, and Practice Facilities
Available through the NASM Web site ([click here to purchase](#))

Health and Safety Standards Organizations

American National Standards Institute (ANSI)
[\(http://www.ansi.org/\)](http://www.ansi.org/)

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)
[\(http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/\)](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/)

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)
[\(http://www.osha.gov/\)](http://www.osha.gov/)

Medical Organizations Focused on Hearing Health

American Academy of Audiology
<http://www.audiology.org/Pages/default.aspx>

American Academy of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery
<http://www.entnet.org/index.cfm>

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)
(<http://www.asha.org/>)

Athletes and the Arts
(<http://athletesandthearts.com/>)

House Research Institute – Hearing Health
(<http://www.hei.org/education/health/health.htm>)

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders –
Noise-Induced Hearing Loss
(<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/noise.html>)

Other Organizations Focused on Hearing Health