

THE LAST THING MUSICIANS THINK ABOUT: SAVING YOUR HEARING

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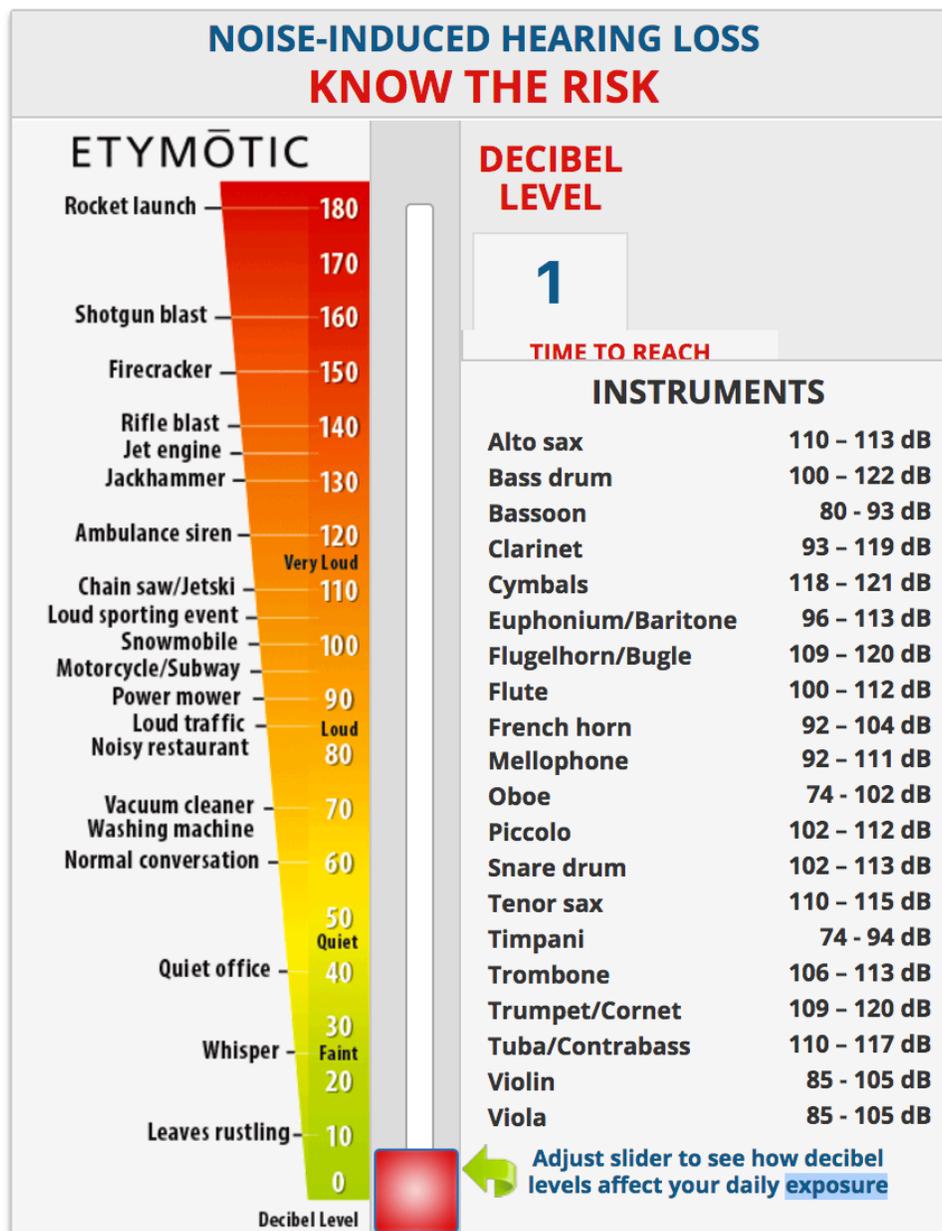
Hearing is a precious gift and one that must be protected. Once hearing has been damaged through long-term exposure to high-decibel music and/or sound, the loss cannot be restored. Thus, prevention and protection are essential

As musicians, we often take our hearing for granted, especially when we are young. The first step to protecting and preserving one's hearing is to realize just how delicate and fragile the membranes of the inner ear are. With this in mind, the next step is to get proper hearing protection to be used in situations that are potentially dangerous to hearing. For musicians, this means wearing ear plugs. These should be small and inconspicuous (it would be impractical for musicians to wear the "headset" ear muffs like the ones worn by airport personnel and construction workers).

My first professional job as a musician was at age 20, playing in a symphony orchestra that backed up the rock band, Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. At the time, ELP was noted in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as one of the loudest rock bands in history. (Guinness has since stopped measuring this statistic, in an effort to discourage bands from going for a new record, while deafening their audiences.). This extreme volume is measured in decibels, and was measured to be about 135 db (similar to having your ears next to a jet engine). Fortunately for me, the company "3M" had recently developed disposable foam earplugs called "EAR," which saved the day for me. I bought a couple of dozen pairs, and wore them in every rehearsal and performance. At first, my perceptions of my sound and how it related to the ensemble was a bit askew. But, I adjusted quickly and learned to play very well with the plugs. This may have saved my hearing!

It is worth noting here that wearing hearing protection as a musician was something that was not common and likely frowned upon, in the 1970s. I stood my ground,

however, and have never wavered from that day forward. Since that time, I have always carried ear plugs in my clarinet case and used them when appropriate.



I subbed for over 20 years with the New York Philharmonic, where I also utilized hearing protection when necessary. I was always discreet when putting in or removing the ear plugs. During rehearsals for a particular work, I would make decisions as to

when to insert and when to remove the ear plugs, and would notate this in my music. This was necessary in works with extremely loud volume (Mahler symphonies, contemporary scores, etc.). My decisions as to when to use hearing protection also depended on the physical setup of the orchestra on the stage. Sometimes, I would be directly in front of the brass or percussion section. This sent up a red flag. Where time allowed, I always removed my ear plugs before playing softer sections, and anytime the music required sensitive entrances and tuning.

I remember one instance when I was playing a long run of the *Nutcracker* ballet. My chair in the orchestra pit was literally two feet in front of the principal trumpet. I insisted to the orchestra manager that they place a Plexiglas shield between the back of my head and the trumpet bell. The trumpet player resented this and wouldn't speak to me, but I never regretted asking for and using the shield. For additional protection, I also wore ear plugs during several loud trumpet parts during the ballet.

In my current position as a university music professor, I sometimes work with the University of Florida marching band. This ensemble has more than 350 players and the sound is powerful with lots of brass and percussion. At football games, the band staff sits directly in front of the band, and we wear earplugs at all times. I also wear earplugs on airplanes and in any extreme noise situation.

There are many varieties of ear plugs you can wear. The inexpensive, but effective, EAR foam plugs (or similar), can be purchased at any CVS or Walgreens drug store. These plugs effectively reduce the decibel level on all sound. More sophisticated ear plugs that allow better musical perceptions when playing can also be purchased rather inexpensively. The ETYMŌTIC brand ER-20 plugs are excellent choices, and I carry a set of these in my clarinet case. For maximum musical perception and protection, custom ear plugs can be made for you by an audiologist. With a little research, you can determine safe levels of sound exposure and the maximum length of time for such exposure. You can also evaluate each product to see what each one will offer you in terms of decibel reduction and musical perception.

After a 40-year career as a musician who was exposed to dangerous decibel level volume for many years, I am happy to report that I recently had my hearing evaluated

at the Mayo Clinic, and tested age appropriate without any damage! Wearing hearing protection will allow you to preserve one of the most delicate and important components of your overall health.