

## Hearing Protection for Musicians

Many will be aware of recent controversial high-profile cases of permanent hearing damage to musicians caused, or exacerbated by overexposure to noise in the workplace. As musicians we rely on our hearing on a daily basis and there is now extensive evidence that damage can occur not only over months or years of exposure to excessive noise levels, but also very quickly, in a matter of minutes or seconds if the exposure is great enough.

A helpful way to think about it is that there are three causal factors: sound level, exposure time, and proximity to source. If one or two factors are great enough, the third may be of little relevance.

There are various ways in which we can mitigate potential damage (screens, moving position, etc.), but one of the easiest and the one we can take individual control over when so many other factors are beyond our control, is the use of earplugs.

Although playing whilst wearing earplugs can initially seem challenging, it is possible to make it work satisfactorily with experience - and of course it is better than potential permanent hearing damage.

Foam earplugs are readily available and cheap enough to keep some in instrument cases, jacket pockets, etc. but cut a wide range of frequencies and can be difficult fit effectively. The LMP Orchestral Manager will have some available if you need some immediately.

Better are the silicone "Christmas Tree" type - they are generally designed for musicians and are more suitable for the kind of work we do. They are readily available online and relatively cheap - some come with cases so that they can be kept on keyrings, etc. but can become uncomfortable after extended wear.

The best option, custom moulded earplugs, was traditionally very expensive. However, in a deal with the Musicians' Union called the *Musicians Hearing Health Scheme* these are now available for a very reasonable price including a hearing checkup. The advantage of these plugs is that they can be tuned to give the level of attenuation desired by the individual, they are easy and quick to insert and remove due to being shaped to the individual's ears and made of soft silicone, and they are comfortable to wear for extensive periods. Due to the close fitting they provide the best isolation from unwanted outside noise but still allowing a more "natural" sound than other earplugs.

The process for getting fitted for a pair of these earplugs at the reduced rate is quick and straightforward with just an online form showing evidence of being a professional musician. Once this is done, a Musicians' Union member can obtain a pair, fitted for £30 (£40 for non-MU members). Full price would be over £200 including the hearing assessment etc. It's also worth considering "add-ons" - a string to keep them from getting lost is recommended, and you can also ask them to keep your details on file so that if you lose them you don't need to pay for another fitting.

The application process is simple and can be found here

<https://www.hearformusicians.org.uk/>

A fourth option, in its infancy, is electronic “attenuating” plugs that allow more sound through, but in the event of any very loud noises attenuate the sound almost instantly. These are not a cheap option, but combined with custom plugs could prove to be an effective solution.

Whatever people’s feelings on the issue, there is little doubt that it is now being taken very seriously within the music industry, and as musicians who rely on our hearing every day, we should be taking it seriously too. It is now relatively quick and cheap to protect ourselves with top quality professional earplugs, and a well worthwhile addition to any professional musician’s instrument case.

Links:

**Foam Earplugs:**

Howard Leight LaserLite - 10 pairs (£2.49 at time of writing)

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Howard-Leight-Laser-Lite-earplugs/dp/B0073UATQ0>

**Silicone Reusable Earplugs:**

Etymotic ER-20 - various sizes/colours/attenuations available (£13.99 at time of writing)

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Etymotic-Research-High-Fidelity-Earplugs-White-Tip-Clear-Stem/dp/B0015WNZ9K?th=1>

**Custom ACS Moulded Earplugs: (recommended)**

Musician’s Hearing Health Scheme

<https://www.musicianshearingservices.co.uk/what-we-do/musicans-hearing-health-scheme/>

Apply here:

<https://www.hearformusicians.org.uk/>

**Electronic Attenuating Earplugs:**

Etymotic Music Pro (£272.39 at time of writing)

[https://www.thomann.de/gb/etymotic\\_music\\_pro.htm](https://www.thomann.de/gb/etymotic_music_pro.htm)