

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor



'Tommy, Can You Hear Me?'

“Encore” Editorial Note: This month’s editorial originally appeared in the *School Music NEWS* in the late spring of 2020 as a feature article. It is being reprised here in recognition of October as National Protect Your Hearing Month.

I wear hearing aids.

After years of punishing my ears in loud band rooms, in percussion sectionals in small rooms, at indoor gymnasium pep rallies, football games and parades, I finally gave in and saw an audiologist several months ago [early 2020, just prior to the pandemic] to have a comprehensive hearing exam/audiogram analysis to measure the extent to which my hearing had degraded over the years.

My last hearing exam prior to my recent check-up was probably some time when I was in public school some 60-plus years ago. My audiologist (also a woodwind player) told me that it is very common for folks to neglect their hearing for many years and that she has many patients who waited too long to have their hearing evaluated.

Hearing loss is serious

Hearing damage often becomes more severe as the years go by, and left undiagnosed there comes a point where irreparable damage is done and hearing aids become useless. Many folks also do not know that there is a direct correlation between hearing loss and early onset dementia / Alzheimer’s disease. Not only does hearing loss negatively impact our careers as music educators and musicians, but it also greatly diminishes our social interaction, and psychological and cognitive performance.

Normal brain function depends upon the stimulation of what we hear spoken by others. Failure to process what we hear closes off receptors in our brain. This is pretty scary and should be a wake-up call not just for my retired colleagues but also for all music educators. Knowing what I now know about my own hearing loss, if I could turn back the clock to the beginning of my career, I would have taken much better care of my hearing.

Turn down the volume

A while back I wrote an editorial exploring concerns about hearing loss in our students exacerbated by the extreme volume of music that kids are routinely exposed to in live settings and on per-

sonal listening devices. I also bemoaned the increasing blasting of music in high school locker rooms, announcements over school P.A. systems, in weight rooms, at athletic events, dances (dance clubs), weddings and other occasions where the over-amplification of music (both live and canned) is used to get the crowd pumped up.

While we all know that music is certainly a powerful medium when used to create the right mood, it can also be dangerous when it is amplified far beyond the norm.

I was at a wedding not too long ago and giggled to myself when I saw a young mom / wedding guest with a baby in tow. The mom put a set of baby-sized headphones on her infant child. My uninformed initial reaction to seeing this was, “Gee, even babies get to listen to music these days. Someone is making money manufacturing infant listening devices.”

Of course, I was completely wrong. These were headphones but they were not playing music. Instead, the headphones were protecting the child from unbearably loud music (a common problem at many wedding receptions especially if you’re unlucky enough to be seated too close to speakers used by the DJ or live band). At any rate I asked the mom about her child’s headphones and was set straight about them. “There’s a very smart mom,” I thought. Let’s get back to the working environment at school.

Prioritize hearing health

Many public-school districts require their staff to undergo yearly OSHA “Right to Know” training. This training is designed to educate the staff in schools about hazardous chemicals that can be found in the school. Liability concerns aside, it’s also good to know more about all of the potentially dangerous things we’re being exposed to in our schools every day. Yet not many ponder the long-term cumulative effects of loud volume/noise in a confined space. It is, therefore, incumbent upon each of us to make time to have our hearing checked annually

along with our other “tune-ups!”

It might also be a good time to think about the use of earplugs in certain situations. When the pandemic ends and you get to hear a professional live symphony orchestra performance or attend a Broadway musical where the pit orchestra/band is visible, look for those clear Plexiglas sound baffles. They’re there for a reason. It’s all about taking precautions to protect the hearing of the musicians.

The perpetuation of our careers as music educators is predicated on the routine use of our critical listening skills, regardless of whether we are performing group directors and/or classroom music educators. We don’t often think about extreme volume levels in our classrooms but it is something that we should be more concerned about today more than ever.

Family members and friends have asked me about my hearing aids. Do the hearing aids make a difference? Can you adjust them to different environments? Do you hear things again that you haven’t heard in a long time? The answer to these questions and more is, “Yes.” Hearing aids do make a big difference.

[Some] of the highs that I lost because of damage to my hearing long ago are back. I can hear my own intonation and that of the musicians around me with much greater detail. This is where technology really shines. The tinnitus that I’ve had for years disappears quite often these days thanks to my hearing aids. They are a wonder.

We celebrated the 250th anniversary of the birth of Ludwig van Beethoven in December 2020. We all know some of the stories about Beethoven’s eventual profound loss of hearing. Take care of your own ears and pay homage to one of the greatest composers who ever lived by acknowledging the importance of healthy hearing, and, while you’re at it, be a force in your school for promoting good hearing health with your students and colleagues. These days I can hear you, again! ||