

Articles | The Serene Sounds of Success

By A. Terry Patten

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As the door swings shut behind you, you no longer notice the sounds of the barking dog, the leaf blower, the garbage truck or even the roar of the freeway. You've stepped into another world, a well-organized office that exists in its own "sound capsule." The air is filled with the gently dancing sounds of the cello, viola and flute. You sigh with relief as a subtle undercurrent of tension leaves your body- a little like the feeling when a noisy refrigerator shuts off.

"We can't control the chaos out in the marketplace, but the right kind of music can create a balanced work environment that helps our team think more clearly, with sharper focus and improved performance," says Howard Mitchell, president of Venture Dynamics. Increasingly, successful individuals are designing their workspaces to optimize mental clarity and productivity. Ambience and organization are critical, but the right sound environment may affect our brains even more.



Sound Affects Neurology

"Hearing is our most primitive sense, neurologically. Audition begins before birth and helps shape brain development. Sound affects brain function much more profoundly than people tend to realize," says Robert J. Doman Jr., founder and director of the National Academy for Child Development (NACD) in Ogden, Utah. It was while working with children that Doman first became aware of the distracting nature of incidental environmental sounds.

"Imagine," says Doman, "being hypersensitive to specific frequencies of sound and having a short attention span. Now imagine trying to filter out the sound of a lawnmower outside, a car going down the street, forced air rushing through a vent, rock music down the hall, the hum of the computer and to top it all off, the noises coming from inside your own ears. This is the situation facing many children and adults every day."

Even the highest functioning adults are distracted by extraneous noises in the environment. Hundreds of times every day each of us is momentarily distracted by noises, and then we bring our attention back to the task at hand. This little bit of extra effort, repeated again and again, is a subtle source of stress that actually diminishes our performance.

Workplace surveys identify interruptions as a leading cause of stress and lost productivity. Top performers who employ simply structured classical music get more out of each hour of work. It helps them recapture time that would otherwise be lost to the unending stream of unacknowledged noise-induced interruptions.



Classical Music "Recharges the Brain"

Distracting noises, loud and soft, sudden or droning, pervade almost every work and home environment. The most practical solution is to create low-level sounds that mask or filter the extraneous noise. Over a thirty-year period, Doman and NACD experimented with a wide variety of sound filters.

They evaluated the experience of thousands of children whose families utilized white noise, environmental sounds, nature sounds and wide ranges of music types. NACD also examined the research in a neurodevelopmental context. They concluded that the best sound filter is simply structured classical music with some nature sounds. Unlike white noise (which can dull auditory function), it measurably enlivens neurological function.

The renowned French ear surgeon Dr. Alfred Tomatis regarded sound as an essential "nutrient" for the ear, nervous system and brain. He was one of the first researchers to quantify the interconnected effects among the ear, voice and brain. According to Tomatis, the high frequency harmonics in classical music actually "charge the brain" and contribute to overall neurological health.

We've all seen how music can calm us or lift our mood. Now, a number of recent studies show that exposure to certain music can produce measurable short-term improvements in IQ, as well as positive changes in key neurotransmitters, hormones and immune system markers.

As educators with a neurodevelopmental perspective, Doman and his staff at NACD understood that extremely high quality recordings of classical music could serve two purposes simultaneously. First, because they supply a wide range of harmonics, they stimulate the brain's auditory and tonal processing ability. Second, the music masks extraneous environmental noise, thus improving focus. So the right kind of music could directly enliven neurological function, actually boosting intelligence while helping people work, think or study with increased attention and reduced distraction.



Sound Health

Once they knew what they wanted, the NACD staff began to conceive a new kind of classical music recording. The effort was led by Alexander Doman, a third-generation specialist in neurodevelopmental education, whose focus for the past six years has been on auditory therapies.

"It was real challenge for our NACD families to locate classical music that could be played day to day, without distraction and with consistently good results," says Alex. "There is plenty of classical music available, but most of it was written and performed specifically to engage the listener's attention. That's why most recordings emphasize the music's emotional tension and internal drama, and they usually do this with changes of mood and tempo. Although this can be very beautiful, it tends to be distracting. I wanted music that would help the children pay attention to their studies. Also," he observes, "not all classical recordings are equally rich in therapeutic tonal harmonics."

After surveying the field, Alex Doman chose as musical collaborators Joshua Leeds and Richard Lawrence- classical musicians, composers, sound engineers and experts in "psychoacoustics" (the study of the effects of music on the mind and emotions). With the Arcangelos Chamber Ensemble, they had crated healing music with the top people in the field, including Dr. Andrew Weil, Dr. Bernie Siegel and Anna Wise.



A New Kind of Classical Music Recording

Sound Health emerged from this new collaboration. It includes six high-quality auditory environments designed for specific purposes (thinking, concentration, learning, productivity, relax and de-stress). Each is rich in harmonics, consistent in tempo, therapeutic in effect and suitable for use as an auditory backdrop. "Sound Health has added a powerful new dimension to the workshops I teach," says Matthew M. Townsend, a top Franklin Covey trainer. "Whenever my participants are working on the exercises to detect their personal mission statements or to clarify their values, I just pop in the Music for Thinking CD and sit back and watch them unleash their creativity. There is just something about Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert that helps to bring out the best in people."

These recordings can be enjoyed through headphones or speakers and are designed for play at gentle volumes during daily work, school or other activities. In a musically enhanced environment people often find they become more balanced, focused and productive. Wayne Beeson, a senior business consultant with Productivity Point International, has tried various kinds of music in his office environment. "First thing one morning I put in the Music for Productivity CD, and the effect was immediate. In less than 10 minutes, everyone had gone to their computers and were intently focused on work!"

"I believe Sound Health represents the very best psychoacoustic recordings available anywhere," says Doman. "These recordings are unique. Every element was rigorously conceived, produced, edited and reviewed. They are not just 'reissues' of existing classical recordings, as is so common. They were carefully created from the bottom up to help people function better."

What's different about them? "For one thing," says Doman, "the score of every piece was rearranged to optimize positive effects. We know that sound and music affect human neurology through tempo, rhythmic structure, frequencies, timbres, overtones, through alternations between simple and complex sound structures and many other factors. In a way that has, to my knowledge, never been done before, everything that could enhance the final product was consciously considered and painstakingly optimized."



Mental Preparation, Old or Young

Mental preparation is a key habit for personal effectiveness, but really practicing it requires mental relaxation and focus. "Sound Health is one of the most innovative ways I've found to practice Habit 7, Sharpen the Saw," says Franklin Covey trainer Townsend. "I just pop in my Music for Thinking CD while I'm working on writing projects or preparing for an upcoming workshop, and it helps me focus and concentrate and get my work done. Whether it's Music for Thinking or De-Stress, these CDs make mental preparation one easy habit to live."

Professionals and educators are beginning to understand that music has profound effects on both children and adults. As this awareness grows, it is becoming more common to use music as a way to design a mental environment, not just in work environments, but in schools as well. In an informal study among 27 public school classrooms, over two-thirds of the teachers found students more "on-task" when the Sound Health simply structured classical music was playing.

Whether it's for study, relaxation, work or driving, simply structured classical music can induce an ideal mental state. Playing these classical music CDs crates a "sound capsule" in which your brain can be nourished and insulated from extraneous noise, with dramatic improvements in function and performance. So there may be "more than meets the ear" in the stately phrases of cello, violin and piano.

Editor's Note: Four of the six Sound Health titles are available at Franklin Covey stores (Thinking, Learning, Productivity and Relax). Concentration and De-Stress are available through Advanced Brain Technologies at www.advancedbrain.com.

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