

MUSIC TO YOUR EARS

"If music be the food of love, play on" – Shakespeare.

Writer: **Dirk de Moore - Audiologist**

The beauty of music:

The beauty of sound is evident in many forms such as the roar of the ocean, whispered secrets of a grandchild or birds singing at dusk heralding a new spring.

But perhaps the most moving sound for many is that of music. It can inspire great passion, stir us emotionally and evoke a wonderful sense of nostalgia. In the world of music, there is no more famous hearing impaired person than Ludwig van Beethoven.

Alas poor Ludwig:

As a composer, Beethoven is clearly one of the music Gods. However Beethoven suffered increasing deafness throughout his life and this caused him great frustration. He wrote in 1802, "How great was the humiliation when one who stood beside me heard the distant sound of a shepherd's pipe, and I heard nothing; or heard the shepherd singing and I heard nothing. Such experiences have brought me to the verge of despair." Beethoven was so deaf by the time of his first performance in Vienna of the famous 9th Choral symphony that he had to be turned around from his conductor's podium to see that the crowd was giving him a standing ovation.

There is much speculation regarding the cause of his deafness, syphilis being one possible aetiology and recent theories even suggesting lead poisoning as a factor. However, the fact that Beethoven would compose in later years by placing his head against the piano to hear the notes he was playing, suggests to me that he had some form of otosclerosis involving calcification and stiffening of the middle ear bones leading to hearing loss. By placing his head against the piano, Beethoven would hear vibrations which would bypass the damaged middle ear and stimulate the inner ear directly.

Hearing aid technology and music:

Most people lose hearing in the high frequency range for speech. On a piano this would start around the note c, the third space of the treble clef moving back to more middle c as we age and lose more hearing. This leads to music being perceived as flat or dull as bass sounds are still heard normally but there is an absence of treble.

Of course long-term exposure to loud music will cause damage to the hair cells within the inner ear resulting in permanent hearing loss. It has been a source of some amusement to me that many rock stars from the 60s and 70s are now advocates



for leading hearing aid brands.

Sadly all Beethoven had to help him were primitive hearing aids called ear trumpets.

Even modern hearing aids are primarily designed to enhance speech detection by boosting high frequency sound with the result often leading to a harsh perception of music. However many high quality hearing aids have sophisticated music modes, which when activated, recover the richness and full dynamic range of signal, making music listening a more enjoyable experience.

Hearing is important to a healthy relationship, a good social experience and more broadly your quality of life. For more information or to make an appointment contact the Bendigo Hearing Clinic on (03) 5442 5800 or visit www.bendigohearingclinic.com.au ■

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Eileen – Retired music teacher, church organist, hearing aid user

DIRK de MOORE – Audiologist

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