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# THE EARS HAVE IT

Hearing health is something no musician can take for granted, but the cost of specialist earplugs has resulted in many players risking it. **Christopher Walters** reports on a new scheme to tackle the problem



▲ 'Successful scheme' – Paul Checkley

**I**t is now accepted that the level of sound most musicians are regularly exposed to can be enough to cause permanent hearing damage. And with specialist earplugs costing £200 or more, the danger is that many musicians have little choice but to carry on without hearing protection and hope for the best. This is a situation that Help Musicians UK (HMUK), the Musicians' Union (MU) and the Musicians' Hearing Services are determined to do something about through their new Musicians' Hearing Health Scheme.

The scheme is open to all musicians who make a living primarily through performing. Heavily subsidised and administered by HMUK, the cost is just £40 (or £30 for MU members) for a full diagnostic hearing test and specialist moulded earplugs. I myself am a clarinettist, performing mostly in theatre orchestras; having never got round to sorting out hearing protection, I decide to apply.

To gain access to the scheme I am required to provide evidence that I make a living through performing. Once this is done, I am

offered an appointment at the Harley Street premises of Musicians' Hearing Services. Knowing that this means finding out how damaged my hearing is, I feel some trepidation as I arrive for my hearing test, which involves sitting in a booth and pressing a button every time I hear a beep. There are many beeps over the course of the test, covering a wide range of pitches and volumes.

Emerging from the booth, I am shown a screen displaying my responses in graph form. My hearing qualifies as normal – much to my amazement after years of playing in loud pits – though it is towards the lower end of what constitutes the normal range. The good news, the audiologist tells me, is that we can now set about preventing damage. This starts with putting putty in my ears which will be used to mould a pair of bespoke, sound-filtering earplugs.

Returning two weeks later to collect the earplugs, I speak to Paul Checkley, clinical director of Musicians' Hearing Services. 'The scheme has been hugely successful, way



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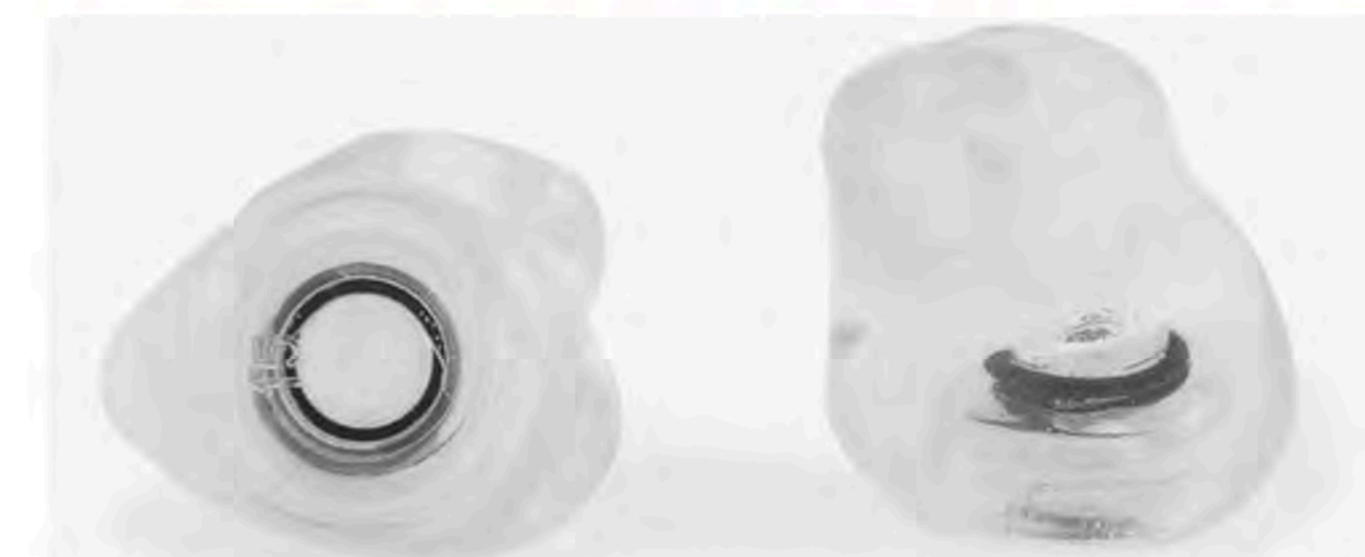
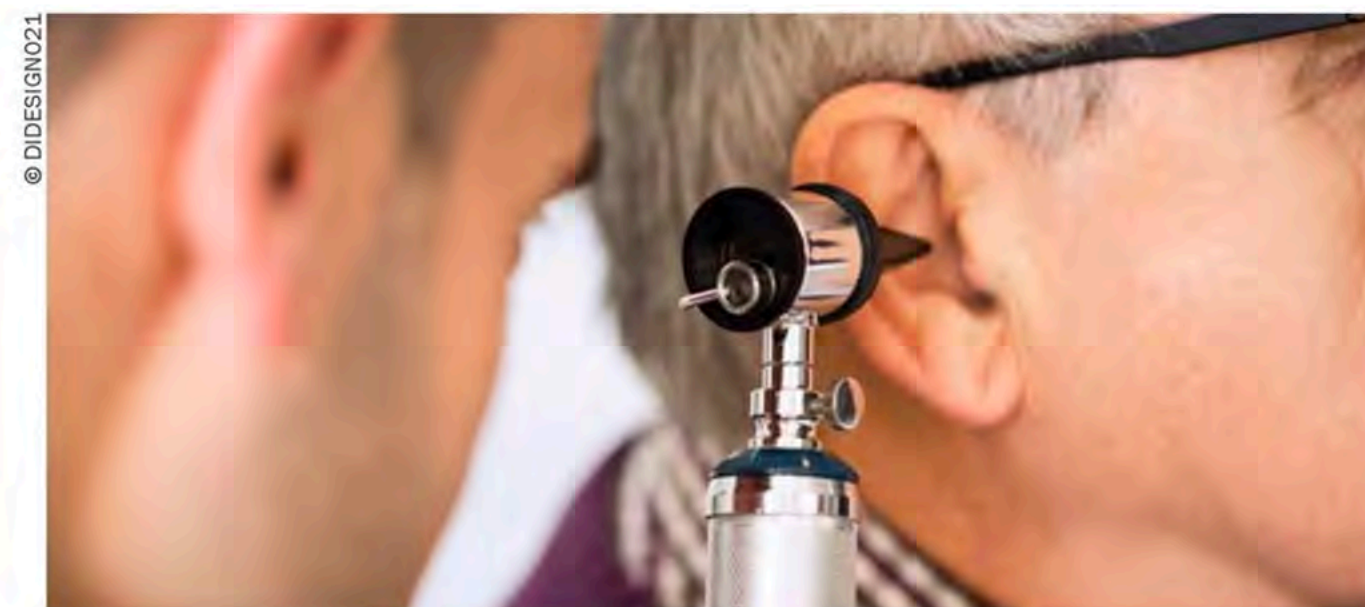
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HEALTH



▲ The Musicians' Hearing Health Scheme includes a free check-up and set of custom-made ear plugs

beyond what the projections were,' he tells me. 'It grew out of an initiative we developed six or seven years ago with the MU, called the Musicians' Hearing Passport, to protect freelance musicians. Employers have a legal responsibility to protect the hearing of their employees, but musicians who are freelance didn't have that cover.'

Then HMUK expressed an interest in getting involved with the scheme. The result is the Musicians' Hearing Health Scheme, adding subsidised hearing protection to the testing and information previously provided by the Musicians' Hearing Passport – and this time available to all musicians, not just MU members.

'One of the problems with noise control in the music industry is that musicians don't make noise – they make nice sounds,' says Checkley when I question him about the quirks of working with musicians' hearing. 'But if these sounds are loud enough they are still as damaging as standing next to a jet engine. In a factory it's easy – you can clad a machine to reduce its noise, or put big headphones on people – but with music it's quite difficult because we still want the audience to have an experience of volume.'

How well do musicians tend to get on with hearing protection? 'The problem is that you are putting something into the ear. A musician who has had a career of open ears can find that quite difficult, and it does take some practice to make these earplugs work for you. With a trombone player, for example, they can hear the sound they are making with their mouth as well as the sound coming out of the end of their instrument. Musicians' earplugs can minimise this effect, but it will never be the same. To some extent it has to sound a bit different in order to work.'

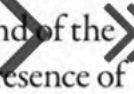
He adds: 'There are people who aren't quite aware that there are earplugs designed specifically for musicians. Most hearing protection will reduce high frequencies rather than low, but specialist hearing protection will retain the fidelity so it doesn't sound different, just quieter. You don't get the dullness you can get with foam earplugs.'

'HMUK listened when, in our 2015 hearing survey, musicians told us that many consider hearing loss an inevitable consequence of their profession,' says Joe Hastings, health and welfare manager at HMUK. 'We listened when musicians told us that they wanted to see audiologists who understand the needs of

musicians, and that hearing protection that is actually effective is often just too expensive.

'We have been astounded by the response to the scheme and delighted that so many musicians are investing in their hearing,' he continues. 'Most of the musicians who are having their hearing assessed have no problems at all, so we are helping them to protect their hearing before damage occurs.'

Diane Widdison, national organiser for education and training at the MU, has been also involved with the scheme from the outset. 'The MU has always taken its responsibility in educating musicians about the importance of protecting their hearing very seriously,' she says. 'The Musicians' Hearing Health scheme builds on our initial work in this area, and now enables musicians to access high-quality ear protection provided by sympathetic audiologists who understand the world of music-making.'

Armed with my new ear protectors, my next trip to the orchestra pit is a different experience. The earplugs allow me to hear everything around me while also shielding me from the loudest extremes. But, as hinted at by Checkley, there is also a greater awareness of the vibrations that are part of the sound of the clarinet, somehow amplified by the presence of the plugs. For the sake of my long-term hearing health, I'll do my best to get used to it. 

## MUSICIANS' HEARING HEALTH SCHEME: FACTS AND FIGURES

Launched in August 2016, the Musicians' Hearing Health Scheme has so far treated more than 1,000 musicians. It costs £40 (or £30 for MU members) and includes:

- Free audiological assessment and ear check-up from a specialist in musicians' hearing (worth up to £145)
  - One set of custom-made, specialist musicians' ear plugs (worth £170)
  - A subsidised hearing test (at a cost of £20, usually £90) every two years
  - Expert advice on referral routes and next steps to manage any problems, including contact with your GP
- Clinics are available in locations around the UK. Apply at [www.helpmusicians.org.uk/working-retired-musicians/musicians-hearing-health-scheme](http://www.helpmusicians.org.uk/working-retired-musicians/musicians-hearing-health-scheme)

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