

I Dream of Music

Published April 17th, 2014

Gael Hannan

I have a musical dream. It's not a fantasy about being a musician – the hours of practice needed to produce a simple tune are beyond my scanty stores of patience.

No, my dream is that one day I will be able hear, understand and enjoy music the way the *hearing people* do.

Simple things like being able to pick out the voices of the backup singers – which I detect only if I see them on TV. Even then, they're just gorgeous people mouthing words; they could be bellowing out tuba sounds for all I can tell. Their voices and the instruments blend into what is essentially noise with a beat.

I dream of enjoying the ambiance of background music. The host of a dinner party, knowing my difficulty in groups, will ask, "Is that music too loud for you?" Usually, I'm nice and say, "No, it's fine, thanks." And that would be true – the music is *not* too loud because I don't hear it at all. If I reply, "Oh, there's music?" an uncomfortable moment always follows. Regardless of my answer, I always feel an envy-stab at how others can talk and laugh loudly and still enjoy the background music, however soft. If I'm the host, I'll sometimes put music on for my guests, checking with my husband on the appropriate volume. But it's like preparing a dinner that I'm not allowed to eat – there's no personal pleasure.

For many people with hearing loss, one of the biggest sorrows is not being able to enjoy music the way we *used* to. Back in the day, we may have been able to make out the different instruments. We could hear high notes that sent shivery thrills through the legs, along the arms and up the neck to make our hair stand on end. Now, we're lucky if we recognize the song within the first few bars or at least before it's half-over. Even worse, our brain translates the music into mush.

This pain of losing music is difficult to describe. It's like removing a body part, without which we never feel quite whole again. When we had it, music was the poetry in everyday life, the balm that helped soothe the stresses of living. But the cruel joke is that, now, hearing loss *causes* stress and music can't help us anymore.

Some people may stop listening to music to avoid the frustration. But for others, the loss of music is what galvanizes them into reaching out for help, to find ways to hear better. In her groundbreaking book on adjusting to life with a cochlear implant, *Wired for Sound: A Journey into Hearing*, my friend Bev Biderman wrote that one of her pre-implant goals was "to enjoy music as much as I used to before it gradually faded away over the years." Post-implant, she persevered and was successful in enjoying music again, although at first she found that when "listening to the beautiful music, I mourned for the first time what I had lost."

So what are my options? Through time, I've cribbed communication strategy ideas from other people that have helped me with music. My latest hearing aids (finally) have telecoils, and I use a

simple neckloop with my MP3 player and tablet which brings the sound right into my head, comfortably. Printed lyrics and TV closed captioning helps me understand a singer and the lyrics (although the words of those background singers are seldom captioned). But as I read about the incredible advancements in hearing aids and assistive technology, especially in the area of connecting to music, I want more.

Not all people with hearing loss can articulate this priority to their hearing care professionals. They may not know how to say, “I want my music back. I want the hair on my neck to rise, once again, in salute. Help me, what can I do?”

If they did, what would you answer? What *are* our options, not all of which include hearing aids, in this new universe of connectivity? And, when you do your research, will you share them with your clients, even if some strategies aren't technical or in the fee schedule? Because, if you don't, someone else will. The information is out there and if you're not providing it, consumers will turn elsewhere or no longer see you as the source for better hearing. You can change that.

I'm going to tell my hearing care professional that my next hearing aids must be *dream-makers*. Because I have a musical dream that the hearing industry can help me realize.