



Quiet time: Classical music has been used as the basis of new sound therapy to help sufferers of tinnitus.

Photo: Steven Siewert

# The sound of therapy

GUY ALLENBY

Paul Bazelmans has had to put up with an infuriating ringing in his ears for 15 years – a sort of “chirping” as he describes it. “I’d wake up at three in the morning and it’d sound like a whole lot of sparrows were fighting outside the window.”

He also found visits to the cinema almost intolerable. “I used to put cotton buds in my ears because of the noise,” he says.

“My ears would sort of start vibrating like a speaker when you turn a stereo too high.”

Bazelmans suffers tinnitus.

Tinnitus, explains Professor Bill Gibson, of the University of Sydney, is a disorder whereby noises are spontaneously generated in the ear. “It can be a number of high-pitched sounds,” he says, explaining that when sound enters the ear normally it vibrates the eardrum and vibrates the fluid in the inner ear.

“Sitting in that fluid you’ve got nerve endings or little hairs. When they vibrate they activate the nerve and send the message to your brain.”

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Gibson is an otolaryngologist at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and an expert in the field. In the most common tinnitus, he says, these hairs (or cilia) “are firing spontaneously, inspiring the nerves instead of doing what they are told”.

The sound that is generated by these errant cilia – which have likely been damaged by illness or exposure to loud noise – is then carried to the brain through an amplifying mechanism called the reticular system.

“A lot of people with tinnitus don’t have

such a significant generator in the ear, but the brain stem amplifies it enormously,” he says, adding that “17 per cent of the population has some tinnitus . . . although only about 10 per cent of the 17 per cent (or 1.7 per cent) actually find it bothersome”.

Like Bazelmans, he traces his problems



Paul Bazelmans Photo: Wade Laube

to blockages he suffered in his eustachian tubes (which connect the middle ear to the upper throat) as a child. “Since then I’ve always been having problems with my ears,” he says.

Bazelmans is a metalworker, but is adamant the loud noises of his vocation haven’t contributed to the onset of tinnitus “because I’m so protective of my ears I’ve

always used ear muffs and everything,” he says. “And then about 15 years ago I noticed I was getting noises in my ear.”

“It is a terrible affliction,” he says.

Bazelmans consulted a doctor and was told nothing could be done. Then he heard of Sound Therapy International.

The company markets classical tapes that tinnitus sufferers can listen to on a personal stereo but can barely hear.

“It physically stimulates the brain,” says Rafael Joudry, director of Sound Therapy International. “It’s classical music

filtered with alternating frequencies to stimulate the ear muscles and activate the receptor cells in the inner ear.

“It is training the ear with special sounds. . . It works on the middle ear, inner ear and the brain.”

Patients are encouraged to listen to the tapes for at least three hours a day for a total of 300 hours.

“But I’d like to stress that it doesn’t take any time out of a person’s day because you can have it on during just about any activity,” says Joudry. “You can concentrate on other things. It is very, very low volume. You can hear and you can have conversations with it on. You can be physically active because it is a Walkman that you can carry around your waist.”

And the results?

Joudry claims success not only in tinnitus cases, but also with improvements in some forms of hearing loss, delivering improved energy and better sleep.

Clinical trials haven’t been conducted on the therapy, but a survey the company conducted among its clients found that 84 per cent of tinnitus sufferers “got some benefit from it,” she says.

For those suffering hearing loss 56 per cent reported some benefit. Meanwhile, 98 per cent enjoyed less stress and better sleep and energy levels.

Gibson says he has referred patients to Sound Therapy and has found it “one of the effective treatments”.

Bazelmans says that since using the tapes his tinnitus “has definitely improved enormously”.

“I can go to the cinema again. I can listen to classical music at normal volume,” he says. “Sound therapy doesn’t actually fix that [tinnitus] but it relieves the symptoms. Sometimes I wake up and there’s actually no noise in my ear.”

The fighting sparrows have flown away.

Sound Therapy International  
www.soundtherapyinternational.com