

Excerpts from EarLine Magazine (July 2022)

NL and BE editions translated by Anneke Pastoor

Violinist Monica Germino responds to the panel discussion

The answer was found in the whisperviolin

“Hyperacusis – a heightened sensitivity to sound – to me meant: bad luck. This condition has a lot to do with heredity, with the way one is built. For example, I can stand next to a cellist friend and hear the same exact level of decibels as they do, but that same sound can cause me to sustain damage while the cellist has no adverse effects at all.

Sound ‘assaults’ my ears. That might sound violent, and truth be told sometimes it does feel violent. Unloading the dishwasher? Best done wearing earplugs. Being in a noisy café, walking on the street and being shocked by a dog’s piercing yelping – the physical recoiling is tiring and unwelcome. After the first few years of discovering my condition, starting as far back as 1999, I was able to figure out a way to make the hyperacusis much more bearable.

Reading Jos de Lange’s words about how he adapted to wearing hearing protection in the orchestra, how certain things like speech actually become easier to hear after becoming a veteran user of hearing protection, how he didn’t pay attention to social norms – this was eye-opening and inspiring.

I, on the other hand, was unable to get used to what I experienced as ‘muffling’ my ears. I tried out pair after pair of custom-made earplugs for months on end, but this never could give me what I craved—the extremely soft, under-the-ear sounds from playing the violin. Sounds that I hadn’t realized were guiding my ears and intonation, like the nigh-inaudible tapping of fingertips on the fingerboard. The grain of the rosin on a silver-wrapped D string, a myriad of soft, essential sounds that to me were inextricably intertwined with the tactile pleasure of playing the violin.

I struggled for months trying to figure out what to do, learning as much as I could about what I was facing and what the options were. I had been told by many a hearing specialist to avoid playing above 80 dB for more than 15 minutes. There were rules about decibels and duration and ratios and how much my particular set of ears could handle.

I knew I wanted to create a new way of playing, and I tried all kinds of things out. Since 2015 my collection of mutes [small devices that attach to the bridge of the violin and reduce the sound levels, ed.] has grown to ±600 at last count. Each one has a different effect and varies in the amount of decibel reduction.

My answer ultimately lay with the instrument itself. The idea of ‘muffling’ the instrument, rather than my ears, allowed me to bring everything around me down to acceptable volume levels. I was able to reduce the decibel level under my ears while experimenting with an array of [low-decibel violins](#). Luthier [Bas Maas](#) and designer [Marcel Wanders](#) created the [whisperviolin](#), an entirely new, ingenious, lower-decibel instrument, inspired by and loosely modeled on the 17th-century pochette violin and built to explore the world of quieter sounds. It’s an incredible work of art and a testimony to helping others. Its very existence opens doors to talking about what’s going on in the music world and the increasing loudness of our world. We are living in an epidemic of noise, as Marc described so well.

By simply bringing down the basic dB level, I had finally found a way that I could pour the same amount of energy into performing as I always had, without the cruelty of being damaged by something you love. I had found a way to not miss volume and still feel like a powerhouse. This was a welcome turning point.

Lastly: one of the unexpected discoveries was just how relative the concept ‘loud’ can be. There’s an experiment that I often do when people first hear the sound of the frame violins. I’ll play a Debussy fragment on a frame violin, and they will concentrate, sometimes visibly straining to hear the soft sounds. Then I mute the frame violin with one of my 600+ mutes, making it even softer than before, and play the same fragment. Gradually their ears – and mine – adapt to this soft environment. After a few minutes of Debussy, I take off the mute and immediately play the same fragment, or morph into something solistic— Beethoven concerto, solo Bach. The reaction is always the same: “It’s so loud!”