'I can't listen to music any more. It's ruined my life': Andrew was a composer until he was hit by this little-known hearing condition that affects thousands... and leads to tinnitus. This is the common habit that causes it

By PAT HAGAN - REPORTER
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Andrew Hugill has been in love with music most of his life.

A skilled composer and performer, the 68-year-old former professor of music at De Montfort University has recorded pieces of classical music for BBC radio and written several books on the growth of digital technology in music.
But these days, he struggles to listen to music at all. Usually, Andrew can only listen to a few minutes at most.

'After that, my brain gets tired really quickly – it has to work really hard to process the sounds,' he says.

That's because Andrew suffers with a rare condition called diplacusis – or double hearing, where, rather than the ears both registering a sound or musical note as one single entity, they respond differently.

In some cases, this means one ear will pick up the sound fractionally later than the other one, creating a constant 'echo' effect.

In others, as with Andrew, the two ears each register a completely different pitch or note, making previously enjoyable sounds distorted.

It means a favourite song or tune sounds different in one ear than it does in the other. For many sufferers like Andrew, this leads to mental exhaustion, as so much of the brain's processing power is taken up dealing with the divergent sounds.

Composer Andrew Hugill, 68, suffers from diplacusis - or double hearing, where, rather than the ears both registering a sound or musical note as one single entity, they respond differently

‘I’m used to listening to sounds with very clear pitches,’ says Andrew.

‘I listen to a musical note and expect to be able to hear it clearly and accurately. But with diplacusis I hear two notes and one is out of tune.’

Diplacusis is usually caused by chronic exposure to loud noise, a blow to the head or as a side-effect of age-related hearing loss.

The delicate hair-like cells in the inner ear which send an auditory signal to the brain become permanently damaged, making the ‘double hearing’ incurable.

But it can also be brought on by more innocuous ailments, such as a build-up of ear wax or infections which cause temporary inflammation deep inside the ear.

It’s often accompanied by tinnitus, the round-the-clock ringing-in-the-ears that affects an estimated 7m people in the UK.

‘Diplacusis is not as common as tinnitus,’ says Dr Finola Ryan, executive medical director at the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine, a charity which gives medical advice to those working in performing arts – such as professional musicians who are more at risk because of years of loud noise exposure.

‘There’s not much data on prevalence in the general public but we know that among those working in music between three and eight per cent will suffer with diplacusis.

And it’s possible that it goes unnoticed by many people who have it but are not musicians,’ she says.

Similar to how our eyes work – with two separate visual fields interpreted by the brain as one image – our ears should do the same with sounds.

Even if they perceive that sound slightly differently from each other, the brain still presents it as a single sound.

But in diplacusis, it can be two entirely different sounds, or the same one but a split second apart in each ear – leading to the characteristic echoing.

‘It can range from being slightly irritating to having a real impact on quality of life,’ says Dr Ryan.

‘Many people find it very tiring as the brain has to work so much harder to process the sound.’

Hearing-related problems are widespread among professional musicians.

It’s estimated that tinnitus, a chronic ringing nose, is twice as common amongst musicians as in the general public. Hearing loss is four times more common for this group. However, experts say that anyone can develop diplacusis if they don’t take care of their ear health.

According to the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, the risk of the problem occurring – as well as tinnitus – can be reduced by taking at least a 5-minute break every hour from music to give your ears a rest.

Andrew Hugill now wears hearing aids to help counteract the damage to his ears

The charity also advises patients stick to the ‘safe’ volume level set out on their phone, as well as wearing ear plugs during music gigs and staying at a distance from loud speakers, like at a music festival.

It adds that patients should consider wearing noise-cancelling headphones, as these can block out excess noise, removing the need to listen to music at a very high volume.

For Andrew Hugill, diplacusis was likely brought on by another condition called Meniere’s disease. This is a disorder of the inner eat that causes bouts of severe vertigo, as well as hearing loss, tinnitus and, for some, diplacusis.

Meniere’s develops when there is a fault in the fluid pressure in the ear – affecting balance. The condition can be triggered by a virus, but ti can also occur for no clear reason – as it did for Andrew.

The musician now wears hearing aids, as he has almost no hearing at all in one ear.

‘I can have good days and bad days,’ he says. ‘If I listen to music for a long time the double hearing gets worse.’

At a recent piano recital, the pianist played one particular note which – to Andrew’s ears – sounded like several different notes at the same time but to everyone else was entirely normal.

‘I actually laughed out loud because it was so weird,’ he says.

‘I wear ear plugs or headphones over my hearing aids when there is live music, just to reduce the level of impact from the sound and make it a bit more tolerable.

‘But the truth is most of the time these days I avoid going to concerts altogether.

‘And I don’t really listen to music at home at all anymore, which is a big change in my life.’

END ARTICLE

Current Mail Plus link is https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15305347/Composer-Andrew-68-loved-music-developed-echo-ear-double-hearing-listen-song-experts-say-makes-everyday-mistake-risk.html