

## **My First Experiences with Noise-Cancelling Headphones**

By Bruce Petherick

Sound is important to me. I think that is an obvious statement for almost everyone, but sound is a way I interact with the world - it is my primary communication medium.

As I have become more and more comfortable with accepting my neurological differences, and especially since I have a support network aka, my family and close friends, I have allowed more and more feelings and affects to show, when previously I would have hidden them, or masked them. This has allowed me to have more balance in my life and not be so prone to autistic burnouts.

What this has foregrounded for me, however, is that there are now situations where I don't want to mask or places that I have to avoid. I have noticed, or probably more accurately become more hyperaware, that our local shops and malls are noisy. (As I write this sentence, an arborists' truck outside has started to chop up some trees from our local park and it has taken me three or four times to get the sentence correct). Again, this isn't a groundbreaking revelation or a tipping point of history. Everyone knows this.

But it has started to become a problem for me. Just after the COVID-19 restrictions were dropped here in Alberta, my family and I went to our local mall as a treat. We had decided to do a little bit of shopping and then get something to eat in the food court. By the time we got to the food court, and this was less than 30 minutes from arriving, almost the entire family was done. We were all overwhelmed by the people and the activity and the noise - my poor wife, who has recently discovered her own ADHD, had to try and manage an ASD husband, and two teenagers with ADHD. She suggested that perhaps it was time to try some noise-cancelling headphones, especially since we also had an overnight trip planned with her sister and her family upcoming to West Edmonton Mall (I think this is still the biggest mall in the world).

Part of my "job" and my life is to know about musical recording equipment, and I know the theories of noise-cancellation. I also know that for it to work, it can be expensive! I decided to purchase a well-known brand's high end domestic model and ordered them online so that they would arrive a couple of days before we left for Edmonton. (They are not sponsoring me, so I shan't mention the brand, but if you want to contact me, I am happy to tell you more details). When they arrived, I needed to pair them with my iPhone, and I decided to go to the local shops to try them out. The minute I put them on and turned them on, I knew they were going to work.

The headphones have 10 levels of noise cancellation, but there are only 3 states that you can toggle from the headphones, a level 10 that basically stops almost all background noise, a level 5 that stops half and a level 0. When they are on level 10, I can still understand someone talking to me who is standing close, but that works better at level 5. During our trip to the mall, I changed the levels several times to see how they worked in such a busy place, and also how much conversation I could have with my family. The noise reduction worked really well, but I am still getting used to what "internal" volume I need to speak at so that people can understand me. The headphones were relatively comfortable to wear for a couple of hours, and I realise that I have worn headphones all my professional life, so I am used to that. The headphones helped me get through the trip and the mall wonderfully.

I have now realised that the headphones have become a helping tool for me to get through situations; And this has disturbed me somewhat. I subscribe to the idea of the social model of disability. This basically means that our difference is called a disability because of what society expects and barriers that “typical” society puts up. I have come to terms with calling myself disabled, mainly due to the fact that in applying for Government benefits, I realised that I need support to get through my day-to-day life. I am OK with this. What I am not ok with is having to wear noise-cancelling headphones in my daily shopping to block out the music that is too loud, the machines that are too loud, the announcements that are too loud. It is not only too loud for me, it is too loud for **any** person, disabled or not. The contrast of what it sounds like with my headphones on, and then taking them off in the parking lot is often too overwhelming. When I turn the headphones off, I am instantly aware of how loud our regular noise background is, and how it confuses me but also how much damage it is causing everyone.

I will get used to using the headphones as I know that they help me manage my surroundings. As my friend Kara reminded me: “It is ok to ask for help. It is ok to recognise that I need help”. I will continue to practise deep listening in as many environments as I can. I will just take my headphones with me if things get overwhelming.

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#### **About the Author**

Bruce Petherick is a neurodiverse (ASD) musician and a creator of acoustic spaces living in Calgary, Canada. He has performed music around the world, playing various styles from classical to jazz and musical theatre. He is married to Meredith, an artist, and a social worker, and is a parent to 3 children, 2 of whom are also neurodiverse (ADHD). As well as being an active performer and composer, he has taught at tertiary institutions in both his home country of Australia and in his new home of Canada.

Bruce has presented at many musicological conferences around the world and is an infrequent speaker at churches where he performs.

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