

Exposure to noise: musicians' career at stake
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The Control of Noise at Work regulations came into force in the UK on Sunday 6th April 2008. The UK Music Industry was given 2 years by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to agree on how the new legislation would be implemented. The British Musicians Union (BMU) has worked closely with employers and the HSE in order to minimise inconvenience and to ensure effective application of the new Act.

There are many misconceptions regarding noise at work and orchestras that have prevailed until now and that have to be overcome by both managers and musicians in order for the new legislation to bring real improvements to musicians welfare. These include:

Orchestra are not loud This is simply not true, with the development of louder instruments, metal flutes and big bore brass, orchestras of today are significantly louder than they were 50 years ago.

Music that we enjoy does less harm to our ears than music that we don't like This is another misconception, it is true that music that we like to hear appears to cause less harm but there is absolutely no scientific evidence to support this.

If I sign a consent form then the new legislation will not apply to me There is no opt-out clause in the new legislation. Both the employer and the employee have an unwaivable duty under the Act to observe the legislation.

The BMU has already experienced problems with musicians not understanding their new responsibilities and in particular freelance musicians who are unsure how the Act affects them and what they and their engagers need to be doing. In order to offer support and advice to our freelance members the BMU has launched a new initiative called The Musicians Hearing Passport (MHP). The MHP is available to all freelance BMU members at a heavily subsidised price of £40. Members who participate in the scheme receive full training in the new legislation and instruction on how they can better protect their hearing. In addition to the training the musician receives a thorough programme of hearing tests including otoacoustic emissions in order to monitor the effects of different types of orchestral work on the musicians hearing. The MHP is a useful way of demonstrating to potential engagers that the musician takes the new legislation and their well being seriously. The MHP is in its infancy and time will tell whether the members see it as a real benefit, nevertheless, initial take up has been very encouraging and there are already signs that the profession values the new scheme.