

WHEN NOISE ANNOYS

Practice is part of life for all musicians and string players are no exception, but what do you do if those around you think your music is just a nuisance? **VICKY HANCOCK** finds out



IT CAN BE A TEST OF TOLERANCE FOR SOME, LIVING next door to a musician – or sharing a hotel with one. The sounds of practising can be as unwanted as a TV or radio on too loudly. Most of the time, musicians and neighbours happily coexist side by side, but when disputes occur, there's a chance things will turn nasty, as violinist Alexander Sitkovetsky discovered in a hotel in Novorossiysk, Russia. 'After I'd practised for five hours, a massive, tall guy knocked at my door. He told me in broken Russian that if I didn't stop immediately he would break my violin in half and then snap each of my fingers.' And what did Sitkovetsky do? 'I said, "Thank you for letting me know," and quickly closed the door.'

Sitkovetsky's experience was extreme, but musicians often face conflict. Back in 2007, one such dispute caught the attention of the national press in the UK. Two young freelance violinists living in a block of flats in Manchester, Hazel Ross and Oliver Morris, were sent a letter from their local council telling them that their instruments could be seized if they continued to practise. The cause of the letter: just one unhappy neighbour who'd lodged a complaint. The pair had been aware of his unhappiness, but the action came as a surprise. 'We did everything we could to avoid practising at home,' says Ross. 'We practised at college and at friends' houses, and if we did practise at home, we always stopped if he asked.' Despite support >

from their other neighbours, in the end the couple moved. They decided they had to be able to practise at home, plus the relationship with their unhappy neighbour had deteriorated further because of the publicity.

Practising at home also caused problems for violinist Ilya Gringolts while living in New York. 'Our neighbours below were sure that the violin sound wasn't good for their newborn baby, regardless of the time of day,' he recalls. 'They would knock on the door and quickly run back downstairs to show their discontent. It made it difficult to reason with them, though I once tried to use a scientific argument – how listening to Mozart is said to be good for cows.'

Similarly, violinist Nicola Benedetti, who lives in a top-floor flat, has had a couple of protests. 'My neighbours rarely complain, but if they do it's because I'm practising too loud, too late. I think people get used to hearing you play, but if you start when they're already asleep and wake them up it could become a problem.'

Adding more players for an ensemble rehearsal can also attract the attention of those around you, as cellist Guy Johnston discovered while rehearsing with the Aronowitz Ensemble in Amsterdam. 'We were in a flat rented by two other members of the group. The downstairs neighbours put their music on loudly to get the message across that they were fed up with us.'

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS to resolve tension with neighbours is to communicate. As double bassist Chi-chi Nwanoku suggests: 'If they know it's what you do for a living, they might be more sympathetic.' Caroline Aldred, head of members' fund operations at the Incorporated Society of Musicians in London agrees. 'Talk to your neighbours. Sometimes the two sides fail to negotiate properly and the problem escalates. Then the neighbours may even make a complaint to the local authorities.'

Aldred also advises being 'reasonable and considerate' with practice times. 'Don't practise at all hours,' she suggests, 'and try

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ILYA GRINGOLTS

not to play at night or at breakfast time. Try to keep your hours sensible – I would say not before 9am or after 7pm or 8pm in the evening, with a later start at weekends, or discuss mutually acceptable hours with your neighbours. If you're considerate and flexible, your neighbours will be too.'

This is the approach that violinist Chloë Hanslip takes. 'I have neighbours above, below and next door, but the majority are out in the day so I try to finish practising by the end of the workday.' Some neighbours might not mind a later cut-off – Johnston and Gringolts stop at 9pm, and Sitkovetsky 10pm.

It's also possible for string players to get an idea of the problems they could potentially face even before they move into a new home – by checking how well it is insulated. This is what Benedetti did: 'I took my violin and played in every room. My mum and sister then went downstairs, into the corridor and

BENEDETTI PHOTO: DECCA/SIMON FOWLER; CARPENTER PHOTO: AKOS SIMON; HANSLIP PHOTO: BENJAMIN EALOVEGA; JOHNSTON PHOTO: COURTESY MUSICA UNIVERSALIS ARTISTS; NWANOKU PHOTO: COURTESY CHI-CHI NWANOKU

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

Soundless exercises could be the ultimate solution to appeasing the neighbours. Here, string players give their favourite methods of practising without an instrument



Nicola Benedetti

Nicola Benedetti I sit and look at the score and practise in my brain – I go through the piece and finger through without noise. Sometimes just reading the score is a very pure way of making decisions, for example on tempo or how you want to play a phrase.



David Aaron Carpenter

David Aaron Carpenter I like to do vibrato exercises. One by one, hold each left-hand finger down (and the thumb), and flap the other three. It's great for your circulation as well as improving the consistency of vibrato. I also study the score and my sheet music when I don't have access to my violin.



Chloë Hanslip

Chloë Hanslip Studying the score is invaluable. I listen to different recordings to get ideas and to get to know a piece, so I can play it through in my head.



Guy Johnston

Guy Johnston I make a conscious effort to go through works in my mind. You can often read music on the page and take it too literally and not always listen in the right way – you need to think and imagine.



Chi-chi Nwanoku

Chi-chi Nwanoku I 'do' phrases as sentences in my head. I go over a passage 25 times or so but with different accents or phrasing, giving notes vowels and consonants.