

Ear Compatibility

Listening for health and happiness

Maybe someday I will direct my attention to the purported healing powers of music tuned to A=432Hz,



Paul Squillo

or to New Age music recorded on weird electronic instruments. I'll look into why Radiance Dairy plays music to their cows, or how Joshua got those walls to tumble down.

This month, however, I want to elaborate on how to choose a system that is compatible with your ears and listening tastes—because listening to an audio system tuned to another's ears can be boring at minimum and disturbing at worst. Conversely, a system that fits your needs, even an inexpensive one, will give you endless hours of enjoyment, something we need our audio system to do in this time of social distancing and staying at home.

Years ago, I was visiting a friend who

owned a prestigious audio salon in Bel Air, California. I walked in as he was having an animated phone conversation with a successful surgeon about buying an exotic music system.

"You have to buy this system!" he exclaimed. "When you come in here, you're a wreck from all the stress of your profession. Listening to this system will give you the release you need from the pressures of your life!" A bold sales pitch, for sure, but not without a basis in truth.

In 1697, William Congreve, in his play *The Mourning Bride*, wrote the oft-misquoted verse:

Musick has Charms to sooth a savage Breast,
To soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak.

No, it's not a Shakespeare quote, and it wasn't "savage Beast." But whatever version you prefer, neither heartbreak nor animal rage can long withstand the comforting powers of music. And the more refined the sound quality, the deeper music can reach into your soul. Squawky and raspy sounds, and music that is too loud or badly balanced cause fatigue, not relaxation. If

your music system can transport you to a higher place, your entire body's chemistry will change, producing endorphins instead of stress hormones. All the more reason to be aware of how your system must be designed to fulfill *your* listening needs, not those of your audiophile buddy, the salesperson, or the self-important blogger.

First, let's see what musical qualities are important to you. Remember your favorite events. Imagine you're listening to real instruments on a stage or in your living room. You know what real instruments sound like live.

Have you always made sure to have front row seats at a concert, where the instruments are bright and energetic? Or were you closer to the oxygen seats, where the highs are mellow and the bass rolls up richly? Do you remember all the echoes and sounds surrounding you, or is your attention riveted to the soloists onstage? Please continue to think "small hall," where a PA system isn't required.

Your favorite types of music feature qualities in sound that can reinforce your personal preferences. Do you notice the difference between steel and plastic guitar strings, or the complex harmonics of a Stradivarius violin? What happens when the drummer switches to brushes from sticks? Does the big bass fiddle sound rich and powerful, with the rasp of rosin on the bow and the clack of slapped strings? Can you tell that it's hollow? Can you hear its sound resonating around the room? Do you notice where all the musicians are

onstage with your eyes closed, or do you use your eyes to find them?

What about kick? Does a powerful drum punch you in the gut? When that tenor sax is expressing emotion through his horn, soft or loud, do you notice that every note has its own subtle volume?

If your audio equipment has let you down after this exercise, you should at least be starting to notice what your system lacks. What you come up with may be unique among all of your friends. And that's okay. Just pay some attention to what your significant other needs as well, so they can enjoy your music system with you.

I've had clients share that they had spent tens of thousands of dollars over decades, trying to get musical satisfaction from a high-end system that someone else chose for them. They eventually sold off all of their gear, feeling that high-end audio was the emperor's new clothes. More than one said that they'd replaced their super system with a mid-fi system—and had been happy ever since. Why? They picked it out themselves, based on the elements of sound that were important to them!

It's time you discovered how your audio video system needs to be configured for it to soothe your savage breast.

Paul welcomes your feedback at paul@paulsquillo.com. He'd love to hear from you. Or call him to set up a listen.

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