

## What It's Like for a Deaf Person to Hear Music for the First Time

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*With new hearing aids, Austin Chapman is listening to music for the first time in his life, and it sounds glorious.*



Austin Chapman was born profoundly deaf. Hearing aids helped some, but music -- its full range of pitches and tones -- remained indecipherable. As Chapman explains, "I've never understood it. My whole life I've seen hearing people make a fool of themselves singing their favorite song or gyrating on the dance floor. I've also seen hearing people moved to tears by a single song. That was the hardest thing for me to wrap my head around."

But earlier this month, that changed when Chapman got new hearing aids (Phonak's Naída S Premium). Suddenly:

"The first thing I heard was my shoe scraping across the carpet; it startled me. I have never heard that before and out of ignorance, I assumed it was too quiet for anyone to hear.

I sat in the doctor's office frozen as a cacophony of sounds attacked me. The whir of the computer, the hum of the AC, the clacking of the keyboard, and when my best friend walked in I couldn't believe that he had a slight rasp to his voice. He joked that it was time to cut back on the cigarettes.

That night, a group of close friends jump-started my musical education by playing Mozart, Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, Sigur Ros, Radiohead, Elvis, and several other popular legends of music.

Being able to hear the music for the first time ever was unreal.

When Mozart's *Lacrimosa* came on, I was blown away by the beauty of it. At one point of the song, it sounded like angels singing and I suddenly realized that this was the first time I was able to appreciate music. Tears rolled down my face and I tried to hide it. But when I looked over I saw that there wasn't a dry eye in the car."

I'm just going to go ahead and [play] Mozart's *Lacrimosa* right here. Listen. Think: What would this sound like, what would this feel like, if you had not been listening to music your whole life? I'm pretty sure you'd have tears rolling down your face too.

Following that experience, Chapman did what any smart Internet-connected 23-year-old with a question for a crowd would do: He turned to Reddit, asking, "I can hear music for the first time ever, what should I listen to?"

The response was tremendous, running more than 14,000 comments and garnering the attention of Spotify, which gave him six months of free membership and a 13-hour playlist that covers a huge range of music. In the Reddit conversation, bands like The Beatles and Led Zeppelin figure in prominently, as do classical composers such as Beethoven. Overall, Chapman said to me over email that Beethoven's Ninth was the top most recommended piece.

There's more music suggested in those comments than it seems possible to consume in a lifetime. Chapman says he's going with the recommendation of one GiraffeKiller: "This is like introducing

an Alien to the music of Earth. I wouldn't know where to start. Once you're through your kick on Classical, I might start with music from the 50's and progress through each decade. You can really see the growth of modern music like that." Except he's going to start earlier -- way earlier -- with Guillaume de Machaut's Agnus Dei which dates to the 14th century.

But first, Chapman writes, "I did the only sensible thing and went on a binge of music." From that binge, he composed his top-five list:

1. **Mozart's Lacrimosa**... I know it's a depressing song but to me it represents the first time I could appreciate and experience music.
2. **The soundtrack to Eleven Eleven**... I can see how this comes off as narcissistic, it being my own film and all but it's such a personal work that when I listened to it for the first time I broke down. I felt like I was truly seeing the film for the first time ever. I'm grateful that Cazz was able to capture the tone perfectly. We discussed the film and specific scenes with essay-sized reasoning/ deliberations on what should be conveyed. The critical response to the film surprised me and I still didn't quite get it until seeing the visual images coupled with the soundtrack.
3. **Sigur Ros's Staralfur**... The first song I had to listen to again, over and over.
4. **IL Postino-Luis Bacalov**
5. **Minnesota's A Bad Place** [original by Shotgun Radio featuring Mimi Page, remixed by Minnesota]

I wanted to better understand what this experience was like for Chapman. How much of our experience of music is the cultural connotations we have absorbed and how much of it can be conveyed to someone who is hearing everything for the first time? How do you develop preferences when everything is all so unmoored from the taxonomy of genre or the nostalgia a song can evoke?

I exchanged emails with Chapman to get more of a sense of what music he is enjoying and what he hasn't quite warmed to. The first and clearest thing that comes across: Taste does not take long to develop. Right from the get-go Chapman had a very strong (and, in my personal estimation, very

good) sense of what he liked and did not. Top of the like list? Classical music, which he said was "the most beautiful genre to listen to." Country was, so far, his least favorite. "It's very heavy on vocals and since I can't clearly understand the words, the story is lost on me. Instead it just sounds like a man or woman crying for a couple minutes."

Chapman is careful to point out that he doesn't mean to belittle the genre (he tells me that he "absolutely loved" Johnny Cash, "Folsom Prison Blues" being a new favorite). Much of what music sounds like to him, and his reaction to it, may be more the result of how the music sounds coming through the hearing aids, and his own gradual learning of how to hear and listen. "I'm not a huge fan of vocals or extreme overlapping of sounds because my brain is still adjusting to the world of sound," he told me.

In general, his preferences tends toward what he terms as "melodic or soothing." In particular, the Icelandic band Sigur Rós has become his favorite. "Every song [of theirs] haunts me and I'm not even 20 percent done listening to everything by them." He's also liked Radiohead, Pink Floyd, Rolling Stones, Queen, and some occasional dubstep too. Dubstep has really benefited from the new hearing aids, Chapman says. Before them, "I could feel the bass, but because I couldn't hear the higher tones it was like listening to half of the song so I never really dug it. Now ... being able to hear and understand almost the full spectrum of sound has given me a whole different view on bass. To put it simply, I'm head over heels in love with bass."

With so much more to listen to, Chapman says that, "ironically enough, I'm turning my hearing aids off more often than before." There are too many annoying sounds.

"Silence is still my favorite sound," he writes. "When I turn my aids off my thoughts become more clear and it's absolutely peaceful."