

Soundtracks for... Concentrating

by Mark McKergow

Some of us may remember wanting to listen to music while doing our homework and being told in no uncertain terms to “Turn it off!!” I certainly do. It always seemed to me to be easier to work with some kind of steady, gentle background sound rather than absolute silence. In recent years, studies are starting to show that for many people, this may indeed be the case.

Brain-based learning expert Eric Jensen has found that only 10% of learners prefer to study in total silence. That leaves 90% who prefer some other kind of background sounds. In my work with adult learners I find that the 10% are used to getting their way and seem surprised when I suggest background music whilst they and their colleagues work. My own impressions are that Jensen is about right – the majority seem to work well on their own with some kind of musical accompaniment.

A more surprising finding is quoted in Elizabeth Miles’s excellent book ‘Tune Your Brain’. She quotes a study of surgeons, who appear to prefer a musical accompaniment while they work in the operating theatre. The surgeons said that the music helped them stay focused on the task, and had additional benefits – it covered up extraneous background noise, and let everybody know that something important was going on. Most of the surgeons liked classical music, but one chose to work to the strains of his favourite Irish dance music...

When choosing music for concentrating, I like to think, as usual, in cinematic terms. If there were a soundtrack to a classroom full of students busily getting on with their work, what would it be? The answer (usually) is not

pop music – this is designed to attract attention, and may well be more distracting than helpful. I like to find music that is steady in terms of speed and tone, and towards the low end of the emotional scale – epic Puccini arias are out, nice medium tempo Mozart or Philip Glass ticking along in the background are in. Or maybe some cool jazz?

A few suggestions for soundtracks for concentrating:

Classical Harmonies (LIND Institute) – my own favourite. A super collection of medium tempo Mozart, very well suited for study sessions.

Mozart Effect Volume 4 – Focus and Clarity, Music for Projects & Study is a 2CD set containing one disc of slowish Mozart (for concentrating) and another of faster music (for preparing and more high-energy work).

Philip Glass, Glassworks CD – a collection of classic Glass, minimal and haunting. Many of these pieces will sound familiar as broadcasters use them as background.

Kind of Blue, Miles Davis – beautifully played jazz, which ticks along mesmerically. Uplifting and calming all at once. (Note for non-musicians – not all Miles Davis’ music is like this by any means! Caveat emptor.)

‘MOOD MUSIC’ CDs (Roland Roberts)

Classical Octane Adrenalin Pumping with the Classics
The Accelerated Learning Zone Alpha State Music for Relaxed Learning Efficiency
Meditation Chill Out Classics for Quiet Moments

£12.99 each

Details of how to order are inside the back cover of this magazine.



Mark McKergow is a speaker, author and learning consultant. His website www.mckergow.com contains more information and research on music and learning, as well as links to CD, book and web sources.

