

**Extract from *Fingers to the Keyboard: 2000 - 2014***

Ben Bennetts

**Summary**

In-between writing 'proper' books, I often dash off an essay on anything that amuses me or otherwise catches my attention. *Fingers to the Keyboard* is an eclectic mix and collection of these essays on topics such as the stupidity of politicians, the idiosyncrasies of English grammar, the baiting of scammers, the trials and tribulations of being hard of hearing, commentaries on various sports, religious extremism, the beauty of mathematics, film and book reviews, and a miscellany of grumpy old man moans and groans.

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## The Sound of Music How Does Music Sound To Me?

Ben Bennetts  
23 November, 2012

### Background

I have listened to and enjoyed music all my life. The interest was sparked by the early rock and roll greats of the late '50s, early '60s. Performers such as Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent, Elvis Presley (his early music), the Everly Brothers, Bill Haley, Fats Domino and so on got me started. I was then introduced to classical music at my boarding school in the late '50s by 'Drip' Drennan, the Geography teacher. Drip was passionate about classical music and ran an after-class music appreciation society of which, eventually, I became the secretary. From these two vantage points, rock and roll and classical music, I expanded my musical interests and as I travelled around the world during my professional years, I collected all sorts of music. I estimate that I have around 1,400 CDs in my collection; half classical, the rest a mix of jazz, world, ambient, percussion, trance, hip-hop, popular and other forms of progressive and modern music.

One other point. I have always been an inveterate whistler while listening to music. I whistled all the time unless in a closed public environment such as an aircraft cabin or a concert hall. I derived enormous pleasure from my personal accompaniment to the music. These days, I no longer whistle, even when by myself. I no longer remember tunes, other than simple *Happy Birthday* tunes, and just about all music now sounds grossly distorted. Hence my research into the cause of the distortion and the experiment described below.

### The Experiment

On the 13th November, 2012, I visited Marina Salorio-Corbetto, a PhD student in the Auditory Perception Group in the Department of Experimental Psychology at Cambridge University. The purpose of my visit was to see if she could identify the root cause of my musical distortion problem and our studies are on-going. At the lab, I was introduced to Professor Brian Moore. Brian is the Leader of the Auditory Perception Group and during our brief discussion he asked me to describe how music sounds to me - 'What do you hear?' he asked. This is a tough question and my reply at the time was flippant - 'a cacophony' - and devoid of any meaningful content. Subsequently, I pondered on how to answer this question more accurately and yesterday I conducted an experiment. I selected around twenty of my CDs and played samples from them on my Bose *Lifestyle 20* music system. I kept my hearing aids in place (Phonak *Nathos MW* behind-the-ear aids) rather than listen to the music either with my hearing aids removed (I would not be able to hear much unless the volume was at full blast), or through headphones (which would again mean removing my hearing aids). Here are the results of yesterday's experiment.

### Results: Classical

First, I tried a couple of Beethoven Symphonies: the *5th* (the *Allegro*, first movement) and *9th* (the *Presto 'Ode to Joy'*, last movement). The opening bars of Beethoven's *5th* are unmistakable but although I heard the four-note opening motif, *da-da-da-dah*, the fourth *dah* note did not seem to drop by two diatonic intervals. The drawn out fourth note was different to the first three notes but not by the difference I remember. (I'll say more about musical memory as I proceed.)

Similarly, *Ode to Joy* is extremely well known and in my musical appreciation heyday was a movement I could whistle at several levels - the voice levels and a couple of orchestral levels. Not any more. I could barely make out the main tune even though I tried hard to impress my memory's version over the notes I was hearing. Were it not for the general theme of the music coupled with the CD cover in my hand, I would not have known that this was *Ode to Joy*.

Next I tried lighter classical music, selecting Vivaldi's mandolin concertos - another favourite whistle-along piece of music. Alas, virtually nothing. I could barely make out the sound of the mandolin let alone the tune. Something was there but tinny and without the rich harmonics I expected from the mandolin. A similar thing happened when I tried classical guitar music composed by Fernando Sor and Robert de Visée. Nothing. Nothing that was recognisable as a tune; just a noise that, again, if I hadn't known it was a guitar I would not have been able to identify the instrument.

Before I moved to other musical genres, I tried some of Telemann's trumpet concertos (the trumpet has a distinctive sound and is usually easily identified), another symphony (Dvořák's *From the New World*), some Spanish Renaissance music (lute, vihuelas, guitar and female voice), and something

more savage: Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, an all-time favourite of mine - I have three different recordings of this piece of music all of which defied my attempts to whistle! In all cases, I would not have recognised the music in a 'blind' hearing. I tried hard to recreate the music in my head from memory but it was extremely difficult to match memory with what was being received and processed by whatever part of the brain does this. Notes did not go up and down as they should and in many cases the base lines dominated anything that was happening at higher frequencies. I expect this given the nature of my hearing loss but I had hoped that my new *Nathos* aids with *SoundRecover* (non-linear frequency compression) might have helped in some of the upper frequencies. They didn't.

Then I turned to other styles of music.

### Results: Non-Classical

Drums and drum music have long been a passion of mine and I dredged up several CDs containing predominantly drum music, starting with a two-girl two-boy Dutch percussion group called Slagerij van Kampen performing on an album called *Tan*. This group base their drumming style on the native drummers of Burundi but they add sampling and midi techniques to create more of a modern sound. The beats are infectious and if you enjoy stage shows such as *Stomp* then you will enjoy Slagerij van Kampen's *Tan* album. Here, I had more success. I could make out the beat and also the transition and juxtapositioning of the drums. At certain points in this CD, the girls shout exuberantly and I could even hear this sound way above the drums - not as female shouts as such but certainly as a noise over and above the drums.

Moving on from this, I tried other drum music. I have a recording of a Japanese group called Ondekoza. This group specialises in drum music centred on the huge odaiko type of drum (2.25 m in diameter, 2,000 kg in weight). Needless to say, the low base frequencies of this massive drum came through loud and clear on my Bose woofer speaker and in fact I was expecting a knock on the wall from my neighbour (but, fortunately, he was either out or couldn't hear it or liked what he heard!). Ondekoza use a variety of smaller higher-pitched drums in their performances and although I could hear their noise, like tightly-stretched snare drums, above the odaiko, the base frequencies dominated. But, in a way, drum music is always acceptable no matter what higher frequencies are missing because the music is basically a rhythm.

I tried other drum music - *A Mission into Drums*, a compilation of different trance-ambient artists who focus their music around a repetitive drum beat. (A bit like drum 'n bass without too much of the bass.) I also tried an early 1986 electronic style recording called *Transfer Station Blue* by Michael Shrieve who used an electronic drum to create a sharp rhythmic beat, rich in pulse-punctuated full-frontal higher frequencies. *Mission into Drums* and *Transfer Station Blue* were not so successful for me compared with what I call the 'pure' drum music of Slagerij van Kampen or Ondekoza because they both contain higher-frequency counterpoints to the base rhythm. My memory told me that the counterpoints should be there but I didn't hear them.

From here I moved on to more lush electronic music - albums such as *Suave* by B-Tribe (flamenco music mixed with trip-hop and ambient, with what some people describe as having 'rich musical pastures and sweeping harmonics'); *Suzuki* by Tosca (Dorfmeister and Huber, two early exponents of what we nowadays call ambient music); *Big Calm* by Morcheeba; and *Moodfood* by Moodswings. Each of these compositions is rich in aural landscapes, sweeping in their musical development, and fantastic late-night music to relax by (in contrast to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, I might add). And, all were lost on me. I have listened to these CDs many times, enjoyed them, know their nuances but now they mean nothing to me. The *Moodfood* CD has Chrissie Hynde (of The Pretenders) as the vocalist on a couple of tracks but I did not hear her voice. For me her voice is pure, like Maddy Prior (Steeleye Span) and Joan Baez, and unmistakable. But I didn't hear Chrissie Hynde on the Bose tweeter speakers.

By now, I was quite depressed but I thought I would try just two more of my favourite ambient music CDs. The first was Sanchez and Mouquet's *Deep Forest*, an assembly of electronic music based on the rhythms of the African natives in Cameroun, Burundi, Senegal and the sounds of Pygmy tribes. The pygmy voices soar above the rhythms in repetitive chants and contribute to the unique sound of this album. There is only one adjective that can be used to describe this music and that is *beautiful*. But, I could not hear these voices nor make out the smash hit *Lullaby* tune on the CD.

The other ambient CD I tried was *Gevecht met de Engle (Battle with the Angel)* by another Dutch group, Flairck. This is fast-paced music, frenetic in places, played by an instrumental group whose style has been described as a cross between 'folk, jazz, classical and with a touch of blues.' The music is not easy listening but in places it has several counterpoints running simultaneously and very fast and the challenge to me in my whistling days was to select one of the themes and stay with it for the duration of the track. If you do this enough times, you learn all the idiosyncrasies of the music. I was

unable to distinguish any of the major themes. They all ran into one another and the result for me was indecipherable as music.

I tried one of my jazz CDs, an album called *Blue Camel* by the Lebanese oud player Rabih Abou-Khalil. Abou-Khalil specialises in fusing Arabic oud melodies with jazz, rock and classical playing styles and some of his compositions are amazing: rich overtones, syncopation and an overall sound unlike any other jazz I've ever listened to. But again it was all lost on me. I could not make out the various rhythms and the Arabic sound flavour was missing.

At this point I stopped, depressed with the results and challenged by how to describe them.

### Conclusion

When I met Brian Moore, he asked me to describe the nature of the distortion I was claiming to experience when, these days, I try to listen to music. My answer was short, imprecise and subjective. What I do know is that I used to be pitch perfect and able to whistle complex tunes correct in pitch and correct in timing. Many people can testify to this, especially my daughter who is herself musical and has sung with the New London Singers and now sings regularly with a choir in Switzerland. Nowadays, I cannot whistle in tune nor can I recreate the melody from memories. I have had all sorts of tests including an MRI scan to see if I have a brain tumour affecting either the auditory nerve or that part of the brain that processes and recreates sound received by impulses transmitted along the auditory nerve. Nothing was found. I have been tested twice for dead cochlea zones using the Threshold-Equalising Noise, TEN, test and on both occasions pronounced free of such zones. In fact, I sometimes wonder if it's all in the mind - that is, my inability to hear music correctly is caused more by a psychological problem than by a physiological problem. I am not aware that I have any psychological problems (but then, how can you tell?) but as far as I know I do not exhibit any behaviours that would point in this direction. I cannot see why I would subconsciously switch off a major source of pleasure that has been with me all my life. It makes no sense to do this but I sometimes wonder as I move from one set of tests to another with no result, 'Could it all be in the mind?' The fact that I can no longer remember the tunes worries me.

I have tried to be objective in my answer to the question, 'What do you hear?' By its very nature, the answer is difficult to express in unambiguous objective scientific terms. We hear what we hear and if it's pleasurable, fine. If it's not pleasurable, also fine. We just don't like it. If it's not pleasurable, whereas once it was, not fine. I would like to know why listening to music is no longer pleasurable and why I can no longer recall complex tunes in my head. Even if I can't fix the problem, it would be good to know its root cause.

### Footnote

In my initial answer to Brian Moore, I also said that music, to me, these days sounds just as if it had been played by the defunct Portsmouth Sinfonia. This orchestra, founded in 1970, was comprised of people who were either non-musicians or, if they were musicians, were asked to play an instrument with which they were unfamiliar. They were also asked to do the best they could rather than deliberately play out of tune. Their first recording became a surprise hit and they continued playing until they disbanded in 1979. You can sample the sound of this orchestra on YouTube. Enter 'Portsmouth Sinfonia' into Google and see where it takes you.

If you do this, the renditions you will hear are extremely close to what I now hear when I play correctly-played classical and non-classical music. But, there's an interesting paradox here. When I listen to the Portsmouth Sinfonia on YouTube, am I hearing what they actually played or am I hearing a distorted version of what they played? A distorted version of music that is already distorted? I will never know the answer to this question but I have to admit, I collapsed with laughter today when I listened to *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Richard Strauss's stirring music used to herald the start of Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001, A Space Odyssey*. The Portsmouth Sinfonia's version of this piece of music encapsulates the meaning of what I meant when I described my listening experience to be a cacophony.

### Postscript

In 2013, I travelled to Cambridge three times and my hearing was thoroughly checked out by Marina Salarío-Corbetto, the PhD student working in Professor Brian Moore's department. We planned a fourth and final trip to discuss her final assessment but ill health prevented Marina from keeping the appointment. Subsequently, she must have completed her PhD and I lost contact with her. All I have regarding her conclusions is a short e-mail she sent me on 31 May, 2013. Here is what she said:

*Dear Ben,*

*I do apologise for not getting in touch. Things have been complicated here and I had some health issues too. I agreed to give you a quick response now; as I said in the lab, the tests I performed show that your hearing loss affected your ability to use temporal fine structure information. There is evidence supporting the role of temporal fine structure information in pitch perception. Therefore, the inability to use it can affect both speech and music perception. Your hearing loss has also affected your frequency selectivity, that is the ability to hear out different frequency components presented together. Your auditory filters are wider than normal. This again affects both speech and music perception. Both deficits are common when you have a cochlear hearing loss. I did not find dead regions in the cochlear. I could tell you more about this and give you a report that we could discuss ...*

*Best wishes, Marina.*

So there you have it. My hearing loss has affected my ability to use temporal fine structure information which, in turn, affects my ability to process both speech and music. My auditory filters are abnormal also. I am still working at understanding the physiological behaviour that underpins temporal fine structures and auditory filters but this is taking me deep into the realms of how the ear works and how aural data is processed by the brain and, quite frankly, is currently beyond me. I accept that my ability to hear and enjoy music correctly will never return; there is no cure for what ails me, more's the pity.

(^\_^)

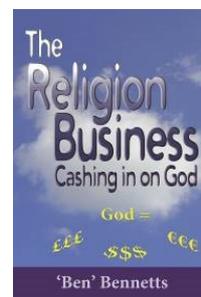


**Atheos Books Catalogue**

Books by Ben Bennetts

**The Religion Business:  
Cashing In On God**

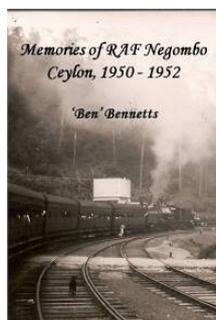
Ben Bennetts  
Published 2012  
[www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com) and Amazon Kindle Store  
\$6.99  
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**Faith Warning!**

**Do not read this book if you have a blind faith in the existence of God, or any other god(s), and you don't want your faith shaken, stirred or otherwise disturbed.**

If you make the assumption that all gods, including God, are the inventions of fertile, imaginative and in some cases, manipulative minds, and then take a look at any specific religion, you see it for what it is – a business like any other commercial business, marketing and selling a product in exchange not only for money but, in many cases, mind control of a large group of people. This book is written from this point of view and surveys both ancient and modern religions, questioning the evidence for the existence of God and challenging the beliefs, doctrines and practices of major religions such as Christianity and Islam.



**Memories of RAF Negombo  
Ceylon, 1950 – 52**

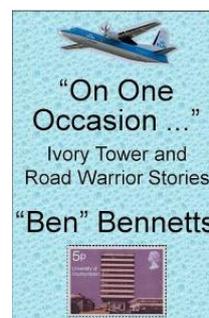
Ben Bennetts  
Assisted by Maureen Wyatt (née Bennetts)  
Published 2012, revised 2014  
[www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com) and Amazon Kindle Store  
\$0.00/\$0.99

My father was stationed in RAF Negombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in the early '50s. I joined him along with my mother and sister. This is an account of my life in Ceylon, my first experience of living outside of the UK. The essay tells of trips to the jungle, life on the RAF camp, long troopship journeys, encounters with wild animals (some in the living room), and falling in love for the first time (I was 10 years old!).

This essay was also my first attempt to publish an e-book containing photographs and other images. I've improved my skills in later e-books. The 2014 version contains better images, better formatting, grammar improvements, and the removal of the end notes.

**“On one occasion ...”  
Ivory Tower and Road Warrior Stories**

Ben Bennetts  
Published 2013  
[www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com) and Amazon Kindle Store  
\$3.99



I am a retired electronics consultant engineer. During my professional career, I spent eleven years as a researcher and lecturer at Southampton University (the Ivory Tower) and a further twenty-eight years in industry, mostly as a one-man-band consultant roving the world (the Road Warrior). These are my stories: some funny, some sad, and some just interesting.



**Tales from the Trails  
Part 1: UK trails**

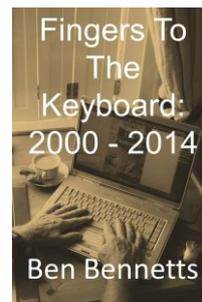
Ben Bennetts  
Published 2014  
[www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com) and Amazon Kindle Store  
\$1.99

Walking is good for you. It provides physical exercise and stimulates the senses. It gets you out and about. You see places that can only be reached on foot. It also has its moments, sometimes funny, sometimes dangerous, plus mishaps and other adventures. This book is a collection of observations, stories, advice and photographs from the long-distance walks made by the author, and his wife, after retiring at age 66 in 2007. Part 1 covers UK long-distance trails including many UK National Trails.

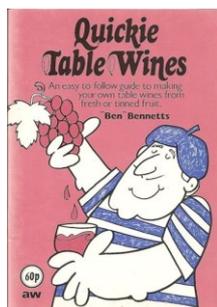
Part 2 covers long-distance walking in the Himalaya Mountains in Nepal and India, the lower Sierra Nevada mountains in Spain, and along the *levadas* of Madeira.

**Fingers to the Keyboard: 2000 - 2014**

Ben Bennetts  
Published 2014  
[www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com) and Amazon Kindle Store  
\$3.99



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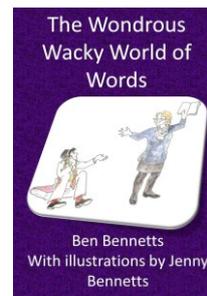
**Quickie Table Wines**

Ben Bennetts  
Published 1977, re-published 2015  
[www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com) and Amazon Kindle Store  
\$0.00

In 1977, I published a small 16-page booklet titled *Quickie Table Wines*. It was a simple “do this, do that” set of instructions designed to produce palatable home-made fruit-based table wines within 4 to 5 weeks. The technique had been well researched and proven by experiment and the booklet went on to become a UK best seller, selling just under 12,000 copies before publication ceased sometime around the mid-’80s. Friends and family still talk about the booklet and their wine-making experiences and I have decided to re-publish as an e-book. The prices in the booklet are 1977 prices but the technique is ageless. Download a free MOBI (Kindle), EPUB (iPad) or PDF file from Smashwords and enjoy.

**The Wondrous Wacky World of Words**

Ben Bennetts, with illustrations by Jenny Bennetts  
Published 2015  
[www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com) and Amazon Kindle Store  
\$6.06 (e-book), \$11.00 (paperback)



How are you on words? Do you know your oxymorons from your tautologies; your alliterations from your euphemisms; your acronyms from your homonyms; or your onomatopoeias from your palindromes? Is *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* a nonce word or a nonsense word? Can you create neologisms by prefixing, suffixing, back-forming, compounding, and blending with the best of them? Can you define the word *word* without using the word *word*? Do you know what it means to *munch a brick* or *bend someone’s ear*? Is a *fire distinguisher* a spoonerism or a malapropism? Are you a logophile, an etymologist, a lexicologist, a philologist, a logologist, a linguist or just someone who enjoys a walk in the park? If you know the answers to all these questions, you’ve no need to read this essay. If not, read on and be amused, amazed and ameliorated.



**Tales from the Trails  
Part 2: non-UK trails**

Ben Bennetts  
Published 2015  
\$1.99

Tales from the Trails Part 2 is a follow on from Part 1 and covers long-distance walking in the Himalaya Mountains in Nepal and India, the lower Sierra Nevada mountains in Spain, and along the *levadas* of Madeira.

**About The Author**

I’m a retired electronics engineer in my 70s who now writes blogs and books and, with my wife Carol, walks long-distance trails. During my professional career, I authored two technical books and just under a hundred technical papers. Since retiring in 2007, I’ve written *The Religion Business: Cashing In On God (2012)*, *On One Occasion ... Ivory Tower and Road Warrior Stories (2013)*, *Tales from the Trails, Part 1 UK trails (2014)*, *Part 2 (2015)*, *Fingers to the Keyboard (2014)*, an essay describing my life as a young boy in Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka, *Quickie Table Wines (2015)*, a republication of a booklet first published in 1977, and now the latest essay from my alter ego Molly Wordmaid, *The Wondrous Wacky World of Words*.



With *Fat Betty*, Coast-to-Coast, 2010

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