

Einhorn Consulting, LLC

320 Riverside Dr. #15C New York, NY 10025 Tel: 917-225-1632 richardein@mac.com

Theater/Concert Sound Mixing for People With Hearing Loss

by Richard Einhorn

Draft of February 9, 2015

A sound mix tailored specifically for people with hearing loss can easily be implemented on many modern mixing consoles, especially those in large venues like concert halls and theaters. Such a mix would be close to a standard sound mix for, say, an orchestral concert or a Broadway show, with a few simple, but important changes.

Here are a few of the considerations that should go into the creation of a sound mix for a wireless assistive listening system in a concert hall or theater:

1. An assistive listening sound mix (AL mix) should avail itself of the full frequency response of the sound system. Even though modern day hearing aids provide nowhere close to the full frequency response of modern audio equipment, I believe the sound going into the assistive system should be as accurate as possible. Therefore, the sound mix that is distributed to people's assistive listening devices - including hearing aids via neck loops or phased array room loop systems - should comprise the same frequency response as the standard house mix and not be cut off at some arbitrary low frequency below that.

2. An AL mix should also be as free of distortion and artifacts as possible. Those of us with hearing loss are extremely sensitive to any kind of distortion due to issues like hyperacusis and recruitment. We need both a loud *and* a clean signal - which, unfortunately, is often not the case. A good rule of thumb is that if the AL mix sounds distorted to the house engineer, it will sound far more distorted for someone with hearing loss and will possibly be unlistenable.

3. An AL mix should be compressed and limited in its dynamic range, and likely somewhat more so than a standard house mix. People with hearing loss have a restricted dynamic range and cannot hear soft sounds without amplification. What is less well known is that people with hearing loss can also be overwhelmed when the sound is too loud. Therefore, the sound we receive should have no sudden peaks and no passages that are very soft. To achieve this properly, thresholds, attack and release times for compressors need to be set carefully to minimize pumping effects, which I have heard quite often over assistive listening systems and which can easily be avoided by the use of modern hardware and plug-ins. There should be a set of compressor presets for typical situations - eg, orchestra concert, play, musical, jazz or rock concert - which are simply switched on as needed. Also, since sound levels are invariably quite high for people with hearing losses, it is important that a brick wall

limiter be placed just before the final output to the wireless system to prevent sudden, dangerous transient peaks

4. **An AL mix should be available in mono as well as stereo.** For example, I have only one working ear after my sudden sensorineural hearing loss and can't wear headphones because of recruitment and hyperacusis in my bad ear.

5. **An AL mix should probably feature somewhat more prominent voices in vocal music mixes** - say for operas and musicals - and **should be a bit brighter than a typical house mix, especially on the vocals.** Please note that a small emphasis is all that is necessary. If the vocals are severely over-emphasized and the instruments too soft - which I have experienced at a major Broadway musical here in NYC - you lose all the pleasure of the music, and it is very unpleasant. Likewise, too much brightness creates a harsh, displeasing sound even for people with a serious high frequency loss. Probably only a bit of vocal re-balancing (3- 6 db louder vocals vs the standard house mix) and high frequency emphasis (again, only a few db) is desirable.