



Steve Orfield
in the anechoic
chamber

The quietest place on Earth

My quest started when I was in the New York subway with my kids. ¹ _____, four trains came screaming into the station at once, and I put my hands over my ears and **cowered**—the noise was deafening. In cities, the ever-present, dull background roar of planes, cars, machinery, and voices is **a fact of life**. There is no escape from it and I was beginning to be driven mad by it.

² _____, I decided to go on a mission to find the quietest place on Earth; to discover whether absolute silence exists. The place I was most excited about visiting was the anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories in Minnesota. This is a small room, massively insulated with layers of concrete and steel to block out exterior sources of noise. It is the quietest place on Earth—99.9% sound-absorbent.

³ _____, most people find its perfect quiet **upsetting**. The presence of sound around you means things are working; it's **business as usual**. When sound is absent, that signals malfunction. I had heard that being in an anechoic chamber for longer than 15 minutes can cause extreme symptoms, from claustrophobia and nausea to panic attacks. A violinist tried it and hammered on the door after a few seconds, demanding to be let out because he was so disturbed by the silence.

⁴ _____—no one had managed to stay in for that long before. When the heavy door shut behind me, I was **plunged into darkness** (lights can make a noise). For the first few seconds, being in such a quiet place felt like nirvana, **a balm** for my jangled nerves. I strained to hear something and heard...nothing.

⁵ _____, I became aware of the sound of my breathing, so I held my breath. The dull thump of my heartbeat became apparent—nothing I could do about that. As the minutes ticked by, I started to hear the blood rushing in my veins. The feeling of peace was spoiled by **a tinge of disappointment**—this place wasn't quiet at all. You'd have to be dead for absolute silence. Then I stopped obsessing about what bodily functions I could hear and began to enjoy it. I didn't feel afraid anymore and came out only because my time was up. Everyone was impressed that I'd beaten the record, but having spent so long searching for quiet, I was comfortable with the feeling of absolute stillness. Afterwards, I felt wonderfully rested and calm.

⁶ _____, I found that making space for moments of quiet in my day is the key to happiness—they give you a chance to think about what you want in life. If you can occasionally become master of your own sound environment—from turning off the TV to moving to the country, as I did—you become a lot more accepting of the noises of everyday life.

By George Michelson Foy in The Guardian

Glossary

driven mad (NAmE *driven crazy*) made someone very angry

- A Then, after a minute or two
- B The kids were whining
- C I booked a 45-minute session
- D My experience in the anechoic chamber changed my life
- E In an attempt to recapture some peace
- F Despite my dislike of loud sounds
- G Ironically, far from finding it peaceful