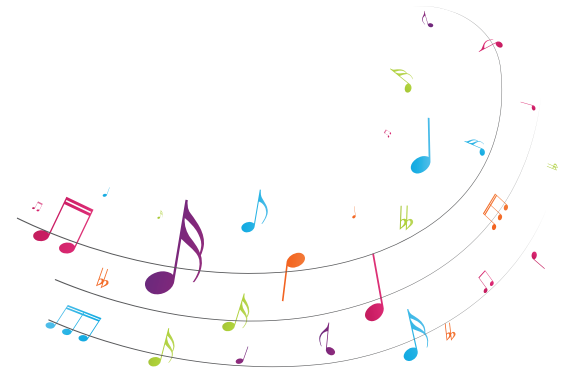


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What's that sound?

Ambient Music in Your School Library



For most of us, the outdated stereotype that libraries must remain silent is just that: an outdated stereotype. With an increase in collaborative makerspaces, shared community spaces, and student engagement, the library is no longer functioning only as a silent space to do independent research. Four years ago, our library team decided to play instrumental music in our high school library to help make our space more inviting, and to distance ourselves from the outdated stereotype. Here are some of the things we considered before (and after) we began playing ambient music in the library.

Picking the right kind of music

Everyone has their preference for music, and we wanted to make sure that the music we were going to play wouldn't be distinctly off-putting or distracting to students or staff. The first thing we agreed on was no lyrics! We knew that playing music with lyrics could be very distracting to students who did use our space to study or complete homework. We wanted to start with well-known classical music that students would be familiar with, like Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8* or Tchaikovsky's *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies*. We also decided to include other instrumental music that had a moderate tempo and up-beat feel to create an inviting and calm space that did not make students and staff too jumpy or too sleepy. We were aiming for music that would make our patrons smile when they entered the library, even if they weren't familiar with (or fans of) instrumental music.

Choosing our music

Digging in our personal music collections, we found some great instrumental music. We brought together some Spanish-style guitar music, a CD with 100 classical song recordings, the soundtrack from *Riverdance*, a series of themed modern instrumental music, and two CDs with instrumental music mixed with nature sounds. This was the start of a music collection that would grow to include over twenty instrumental CDs, including a *Harry Potter* soundtrack, original guitar songs from our music teacher, the jazz stylings of Miles Davis, and traditional Indigenous music. We worked to include music from different genres, cultures, and eras to round out our growing collection.

Playing the music

When we first began playing music, we would play it all day. We noticed, however, that during our busiest times it became difficult to hear the music. After a bit of observation and discussion, we decided only to turn on the music when we were at about half capacity or less. This was an easy compromise, since it meant that we were still able to create a specific

atmosphere in the library without increasing the overall noise level during busy times. This also helped us keep the music at a reasonable volume that did not reach the back of the library, so that students who did wish to study or work in near silence were still able to do so.

Breaking our own rule

There were only two instances where we would play music with lyrics. We had a few CDs with both instrumental and lyrical songs that were low-key enough that we felt comfortable interchanging these with the instrumental music. We also would play music with lyrics during the Christmas season. As we are in a Catholic school, we opted to play *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and other Christmas-themed music during the last two weeks before winter break. This was, in part, to support other school-wide celebrations. Playing music with lyrics was something we chose to do to increase the variety of music we played without creating an off-putting atmosphere. When choosing to play music with lyrics, we wanted to ensure that the songs would be familiar or calm enough that they would somewhat blend into the background – we didn't want to play music with lyrics that would be overly distracting to students.

Deciding to not play music

After three years, we significantly decreased the amount of time we played music. We had acquired quite a few CDs with many variations in style, tempo, and genres. However, it began to feel repetitive and intrusive. We realized, also, how valuable silence was. After failing to restart a CD one day, my colleague came out of her office and remarked on the tranquility of the near silence (we have a large fish tank that provides soothing water noises). We started to discuss the possibility of not playing ambient music during certain times. Eventually, we agreed that we would continue to play music during some events held in our library, such as the art show, staff meetings which allow for collaborative work, or parent-teacher interview night. We also continued to play music at non-peak times when there were enough students working that the music would not sound overtly loud or out of place, but could help increase concentration or cover distracting conversations.

The decision to play ambient music in your school library is not always going to be an easy one. We had numerous students and staff remark on how welcoming and calm the space felt with the music, and a few even lamented its loss when we stopped playing it as frequently. Finding the balance between mood, volume, and effectiveness was the most difficult thing for us to do, though we believe the decision to play music in the library was successful and well-received. ■