

A Surge in Hearing Loops Gives Hearing-Impaired Front Row Seats

By Gina Shaw



Images.com/Steve Dimino

The modern classical composer Richard Einhorn lost most of his hearing in 2010, suddenly and irreversibly, when he was 57. He feared he would never enjoy a live musical performance again. A year later, however, he attended a production of the musical “Wicked” at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, which had temporary hearing loops installed for those attending the annual Hearing Loss of America Convention.

Mr. Einhorn wrote to the Kennedy Center after the performance to urge them to install permanent hearing loop technology. “That evening was, by far, the clearest, most enjoyable performance I’ve attended since my hearing loss,” he said. “It meant so much to me to sit in a concert hall and, for the first time in a year, actually enjoy a live performance again.”

More and more people with hearing loss across America are having the revelation Mr. Einhorn experienced. Thousands of new locations, from churches to theaters to the New York City subway system, have been looped in the two years since the American Academy of Audiology and

the Hearing Loss Association of America collaborated to create the public education campaign, “Get in the Hearing Loop.” The campaign received an enormous boost from Mr. Einhorn’s experience. The *New York Times* featured a front-page article about hearing loops on Oct. 23, leading with Mr. Einhorn’s experience. The story was the *Times*’ second most emailed article for the prior month by Oct. 25. (See FastLinks.)

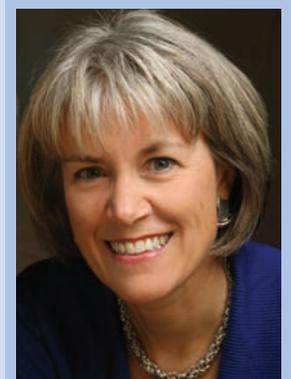
“Within the last six months, things have exploded with accelerating momentum,” said David Myers, a hearing-impaired professor of psychology at Hope College in Holland, MI. Mr. Myers founded HearingLoop.org to help campaign for universal looping. (See FastLinks.) “The *New York Times* story led to other media picking up on the issue — *National Geographic* in their April issue and the *Washington Post* in [April]. Now, the biggest event of them all: two major suppliers of audio technology, Listen Technologies and Williams Sound, announced within three days of each other that they would be bringing hearing loops and training installers throughout their national network of audiovisual dealers. They both say that this is in response to growing consumer demand for the technology.” (See FastLinks.)

New York City’s Metropolitan Transit Authority also looped some 500 subway booths, and in April the city announced that it had awarded the contract for all its future taxicabs to Nissan. The “Taxi of Tomorrow” will be fully looped.

MIDWEST LEADS THE PACK

Despite coverage of big Eastern cities like New York and Washington, DC, the heart of hearing loop country has long been the Midwest. Hearing loops are a word-of-mouth technology, said Juliëtte Sterkens, AuD, who has taken a year-long leave from her Oshkosh, WI, audiology practice to become HAAA’s hearing loop advocate. “Every hearing loop begets other hearing loops,” she said.

Dr. Sterkens excitedly reported that she had just received notice of a \$20,000 donation toward installing



Juliëtte Sterkens

hearing loops at the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in Appleton, WI, a popular venue that features performances of everything from Mannheim Steamroller and the Blue Man Group to “Billy Elliot,” “Mamma Mia!” and Bill Cosby. “It’s an expensive installation, probably in the \$150,000 range, so a donation of that size really makes the job easier,” she said. “I want this to be among the first large performing arts centers in the country to have this well designed IEC [International Electrotechnical Commission] standard meeting hearing loop. We hope that other theater operators will take notice and realize that improving accessibility for people with hearing loss makes good business sense considering the aging baby boomers.”

Wisconsin currently has about 165 churches, senior centers, and small theaters that are looped, Dr. Sterkens said. “The pace is definitely accelerating. In the last three years, I have spoken to about 100 groups, to pretty much everyone who wants to listen: Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, ministers, and parent groups,” she said. Public speaking is something any audiologist can do. I also have used my hearing aid patients, their children, and their connections in the community and around the country to foster loop installations.”

Dr. Sterkens is to looping Wisconsin as Linda Remensnyder, AuD, is to looping Illinois. The founder of Hearing Associates in Libertyville, Dr. Remensnyder recently sent sheets on how to program hearing aids for loops to every audiologist in the Illinois Academy of Audiology. She hosted a one-day meeting in June for a group of two dozen leading audiologists from across the United States, enlisting them to market hearing loops.

HIGH PRAISE FOR LOOPED CHURCHES

Dr. Remensnyder has designed more than 50 letters custom-written for specific venues promoting hearing loops. “I have one targeted to Roman Catholic churches, one for synagogues, performance spaces, motion picture theaters ... there’s no need to reinvent the wheel.”

Her letter to architects at a Catholic church in Antioch, for example, cited examples of how well hearing loops have been received in other Catholic churches. Hearing loops in Catholic churches have received such rave reviews from parishioners that

they have written letters that were published in *The New World Catholic* newspaper. Looping also dovetails with the Church’s Catholics Come Home initiative, she said. “I believe that the inaudibility of the services has contributed to dropping attendance rates,” Dr. Remensnyder said, adding that the loops provide audibility for aging priests with hearing loss, most notable among them



Linda Remensnyder

Francis Cardinal George, who wears binaural hearing aids with telecoils.

Dr. Remensnyder also told other churches that some seniors of other denominations attend mass at St. Mary’s of the Annunciation Catholic Church in Mundelein because of its hearing loop.

Fifty facilities in the Chicago area have been looped within the past three years: three theaters, including a big musical theater at the Marriott Hotel in Lincolnshire, three residential high-rises with gathering rooms, three senior centers, and multiple places of worship. The next big venue scheduled for looping is the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, an internationally recognized theater that produces everything from Shakespeare’s canon to classical theater and modern shows like “Beauty and the Beast.”

Another place in the area currently being looped is the Great Lakes Naval Station. “One of my patients had a loop

‘Within the last six months, things have exploded with accelerating momentum.’

David Myers

in his church, and he’s a veteran affiliated with the station. He went to the command about it, and now they’re getting looped,” said Dr. Remensnyder.

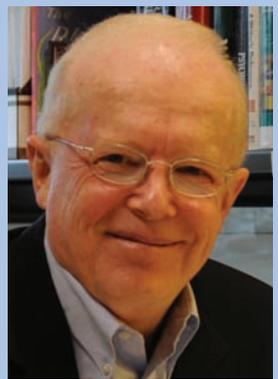
BRINGING IT HOME

Loops are not just for public venues. The Santa Rosa, CA, team of Bill Diles, MA, and Christine Diles, AuD, has looped almost 1,900 home televisions in their area over the past nine years. “We offer a free loop with the purchase of a hearing aid to all of our patients,” Mr. Diles said.

Hearing aids do not work well with television, but the Diles have found it difficult to convince the audiology community to get on board with looping homes. “It’s so elegant once it’s installed. You spend one hour in a house, and it’s set for life,” he said. But that is beginning to change. “I tried to make a business of selling loops to audiologists five years or so ago and gave up on it, but now there’s a lot of push again. Some people say, ‘Oh, to loop patients’ homes I have to send someone to their house.’ No, you *get* to send someone to their house. That’s a personal touch. Now you’ve put a loop in their house, and they’re way more likely to buy their next hearing aid from you.”

The Diles have also looped more than 40 public venues as well, including bank counters, churches, community auditoriums, pharmacies, and libraries. “Right now we’re working to loop a local five-auditorium cinema showing independent films,” Mr. Diles said. “Some 70 percent of their patrons are over the age of 65, and it’s an older theater and doesn’t have great acoustics.”

Engineering looping a five-theater cinema is a challenge, lest the loop sound spillover into adjacent spaces. That is not a problem in a church where the spillover feeds into the parking lot, but you do not want to hear the Incredible Hulk smashing things in “The Avengers” next door when you have



David Myers

come to contemplate Judi Dench in “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel,” he said.

“It will be tough to loop these five theaters, but we have a motivated owner who wants to promote looping on screen,” Mr. Diles said. “I’ll spend whatever I have to spend to do this because it’s such an opportunity.”

Mr. Myers of Hearing-Loop.org said his ultimate goal is much more than hearing loops. “Hearing

loops are merely today’s technology. If somebody invents a better technology, I’m all for it. My vision is simply that hearing instruments, by which I mean hearing aids and cochlear implants, would come routinely to have doubled functionality. The hearing loop effectively takes the hearing aid [microphone] and puts it on the podium or the TV speaker. Hearing instruments then become wireless speakers for televisions, PA systems, ticket windows,

subway booths — anywhere that sound needs to be communicated.

“What I would like audiologists, hearing instrument manufacturers, and the whole hearing care community to realize is that hearing loop signs, if they were ubiquitous in places that our patients frequent — churches, theaters, pharmacy counters — will constantly remind those in attendance that this church is looped to benefit those among us who use hearing aids,” said Dr. Sterkens. “If we want good PR, put hearing aids in a good light. Looping does that!” 



FastLinks

- Visit David Myer’s site at <http://hearingloop.org>.
- Read more about hearing loops from *The New York Times* at <http://bit.ly/NYTimesLoop>, *National Geographic* at <http://bit.ly/NatGeoLoop>, and *The Washington Post* at <http://bit.ly/WashPostLoops>.
- Visit *HJ*’s Student Blog at <http://bit.ly/HJStudentBlog>.
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