

THE SILVER-SWEET VOICE OF A LOVER... AND THE SOUND OF TINNITUS:

Can Pleasant Tinnitus Exist?



Shakespeare was a master of sonic and auditory metaphor. Can we use his words to raise questions about tinnitus?

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare contrasts one of life's most pleasurable sounds with one of its most disturbing. Romeo describes Juliet's voice as "*How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night, Like softest music to attending ears!*" In contrast, he later refers to "*the shrieks of mandrakes torn out of the earth*", sounds so horrifying that they were believed to drive those who heard them mad (Shakespeare, 1597).

More than four centuries later, this literary contrast raises an intriguing scientific question. Human hearing spans an extraordinary spectrum, from sounds that attract us to those that repel us.

But where does tinnitus belong on that spectrum? Could tinnitus ever resemble Shakespeare's silver-sweet voice, or does it inevitably lie closer to the unsettling cry of the mandrake?

For decades, tinnitus research has focused on understanding why tinnitus becomes distressing. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), tinnitus retraining therapy (TRT), and other approaches have greatly advanced our understanding of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes that transform tinnitus into suffering. Yet a more fundamental question has received remarkably little attention. Before asking why tinnitus

becomes distressing, perhaps we should first ask why tinnitus has the capacity to become a source of suffering at all. Could the answer lie not only in how we think about tinnitus, but also in the immediate qualitative character of the tinnitus percept itself?

This question recalls Ludwig Wittgenstein's observation in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that "every possibility must lie in the nature of the object" (Wittgenstein, 1922/2001). If the possibility of tinnitus becoming distressing exists, perhaps it is not explained solely by the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes that follow perception,

but also by something contained within the nature of the tinnitus percept itself. The idea becomes even more interesting when viewed through philosophy. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant argued that although beauty is experienced subjectively, our judgement of beauty nevertheless carries a claim to universality (Kant, 1790/2000). We expect others to recognise the beauty of Beethoven's symphonies, Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, birdsong, or Shakespeare's silver-sweet voice, even while recognising individual differences. These experiences appear to share qualities that commonly evoke aesthetic delight. They are not identical, nor are they universally liked, but they possess characteristics that invite shared appreciation.

"Patients rarely describe tinnitus as resembling music, birdsong, or the silver-sweet voice of someone they love."

MIGHT TINNITUS HAVE THE QUALITIES OF A NECESSARY UNPLEASANTNESS?

This raises an intriguing question for tinnitus. If beauty may possess qualities that commonly evoke delight, might tinnitus possess qualities that commonly evoke the opposite? Not universal distress, but a "necessary unpleasantness" (Aazh, 2026).

The distinction can also be understood philosophically in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. A necessary condition is something without which an outcome cannot occur. A sufficient condition is something that brings the outcome about. The hypothesis proposed here is that immediate unpleasantness may represent a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for tinnitus-related suffering.

The sufficient conditions consist of the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and contextual processes that elaborate the initial sensory experience. Catastrophic interpretations, selective attention, fear, frustration, emotional responses, previous learning, and behavioural patterns may together transform an intrinsically unpleasant tinnitus percept into persistent suffering.

Descriptions provided by people with tinnitus are striking in this respect. Patients rarely describe tinnitus as resembling music, birdsong, or the silver-sweet voice of someone they love. Instead, they describe distorted static, relentless hissing, buzzing, screeching, mechanical noises, alarms, or intrusive throbbing. Long before modern audiology, writers recognised these qualities. T. S. Eliot described a "dull tom-tom" hammering within the brain together with the false note of cracked cornets (Eliot, 1915). Dante imagined thunder rolling within the head and ears pierced by cries of pain (Kirkpatrick, 2004). These literary descriptions do not define tinnitus, but they illustrate a longstanding recognition that certain sounds consistently occupy the unsettling end of Shakespeare's spectrum.

Of course, unpleasantness should not be regarded as absolute. Just as not everyone responds identically to Beethoven, Michelangelo, or Shakespeare's silver-sweet voice, not everyone experiences tinnitus in the same way. Hyperacusis, misophonia, previous learning, personal associations, fatigue, stress, and sensory sensitivity are all likely to influence where a tinnitus percept falls along the continuum between aesthetic delight and immediate unpleasantness. The hypothesis of necessary unpleasantness therefore does not claim that tinnitus must always be distressing, but that some degree of immediate unpleasantness may provide the platform from which suffering can, but need not, arise.

Can pleasant tinnitus exist? At present, we simply do not know. Shakespeare's contrast between the silver-sweet voice

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of a lover and the shriek of a mandrake continues to resonate because it captures something fundamental about human hearing. Some sounds naturally attract us, while others immediately repel us. Whether tinnitus inherently belongs to the latter category remains an open empirical question.

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