

The Quietest Place on Earth

by Peter Pearson

The Quietest Place on Earth is not what you think. It is not a forest, or a mountaintop, or the middle of Antarctica. It is a room called the anechoic (an-eh-KOE-ic) chamber at Orfield Labs in Minneapolis. In 2004, the Guinness Book of World Records measured the sound there at minus 9.4 decibels, almost ten times quieter than the quietest sound humans can hear. It is so quiet that, after a while, you can hear the blood flowing inside your lungs. Which seems fun. So I go for a visit.

When I arrive, I meet Steve Orfield himself, the head of Orfield Labs, who tells me about the chamber. Every room has an echo, he explains. Gyms have a large echo. Closets have a small echo. But the anechoic chamber has no echo at all. That's what "anechoic" means: "without an echo." Because there's no echo, your ears can't tell how big the room is. Noises disappear the second they're made. It's like being in space.

NASA uses anechoic chambers to test astronauts for this reason. As it turns out, absolute silence can have strange effects on the body—dizziness, upset stomach, hearing things that aren't there—and NASA wants to be sure the astronauts don't panic. Let's hope I don't panic either.

I say goodbye to Steve and meet Wes Chapman, who takes me down to the chamber itself. The anechoic chamber isn't just a room—it's a room within a room. The inner room of the chamber "floats" inside the outer room, suspended by springs, and both rooms are made from heavy sheets of double steel. Wes heaves open two sets of doors.

"Well," he says, "here we are."

It's smaller than I expected, only about the size of my bedroom. Much quieter, though. And with more World Records. I also notice something else: the anechoic chamber doesn't have a floor. At least, not exactly. Imagine the gym again. It's loud, right? Echoes everywhere—sound bouncing all over the place. That's because of all the hard surfaces: the floor is hard, the walls are hard, the ceiling is hard. Sound loves to bounce off of hard things. So, in the anechoic chamber, everything is soft. The ceiling, walls, and floor are all covered by huge wedges of yellow foam, which soak up sound like a sponge. But you can't walk on them, so instead there's a wire mesh halfway between the floor and ceiling, almost like standing on a chain-link fence.

“Can I get a chair?” I ask.

“Sure thing.”

Wes brings one in from the lab and puts it in the center of the mesh. I'm going to stay in here for as long as they let me (or until I can't take it), so at least I want to be comfortable. I make one last request before Wes seals me inside.

“Can you turn the lights off?”

Mr. Orfield has a bet that no one can stay in the chamber for forty-five minutes in the dark, which I'm pretty sure I can do. Wes smiles. “No, we don't want you clawing the walls while I'm somewhere else.”

“It's all right,” I say. “I've done things like this before.” Which is not exactly true.

Wes smiles again and shuts the door. The lights stay on.

Instantly, I understand his concern. The change is astounding. Everywhere we go, even in the quietest places, there's always a little bit of sound. Pages turning in a

library. Cars in the distance. A breeze. These tiny sounds let us know where we are in the world, that there *is* a world.

After a few seconds in the anechoic chamber, the world floats away.

For a moment, I can't breathe. My breath is so loud now, like a snoring hippo, that I instinctively take shorter and shorter breaths. But, these aren't enough, and my heart becomes a freight train, picking up steam with each passing second. *Shuh. Shuh. Shuh.* Meanwhile, my ears strain to hear anything at all. No luck. All they get is the sharp angular Nothing of the chamber.

Then the room tilts. Our ears do more than just let us hear; they also control our feelings of balance and pressure. However, with no sound to anchor them, all of this comes apart. The walls pitch and roll like the sea, while the rest of my body now feels tight, stretched by a million silver threads that are pulling it outwards. All this Nothing feels very much like a Something. Quiet? Yes. Relaxing? No. Not even close.

After a few minutes, though, I adjust. Closing my eyes helps with the sensation of being at sea, and I also breathe more deeply, calming my heart. And then, I listen. Nothing to hear, right? Well, almost. There's certainly nothing to hear from the outside. Inside, though—that's a different story. Our bodies make sounds all the time. Mostly, we don't hear them—they're covered up by everything going on around us. Inside the anechoic chamber, though, they're all that's left. One by one, I start to hear them, like stars appearing in the night sky. The flick of an eyelid. The groan of a neck. The velvet bending of a wrist. Sounds everywhere, more and more and more. Inside this alien void, I am a symphony.

I spend almost half an hour in the chamber before an engineer opens the door.

Sound floods in like a vacuum seal breaking.

“They told me to check on you,” he says. “Hey, come listen to this.”

The engineer takes me across the hall to the reverberation chamber, a room where sounds echo for a full eight seconds before dying away.

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!” He yells as loud as he can. Coming from the anechoic chamber, this is like being hit by a truck. “Cool, huh?”

“Thanks,” I say, gongs ringing in my head. “That was really great.” I leave. Quickly.

As I walk through the halls, I marvel at the sound around me. I’m Somewhere again. The small noises of my body are covered up once more, but I know they’re there, clicking and squishing and whooshing. I do have one disappointment, though: I didn’t hear the blood flowing in my lungs. Apparently I needed to stay inside a little longer for that. Oh well. Guess I’ll have to come back.

WORKS CITED

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