

ARTS

Music to their ears: The Shedd is installing a system to help the hearing impaired

The fully remodeled Jaqua Concert Hall is set to open in November



This year, Sue Prichard truly heard music again for the first time in 22 years.

That day when she heard music in her hearing aids through a telecoil loop lives vividly in her memory. Her voice wavers and her eyes brim with tears as she recalls when it connected. She burst with surprise as the ebb and flow of the notes rose to the foreground, finally allowing the distracting sounds of the world to fall away.

Come fall, Eugene's hearing-impaired community will have the opportunity to share in Prichard's experience. In the second part of its six-year remodeling project, The John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts is revamping Jaqua Concert Hall with a new balcony to improve audience sightlines, flattening and tiering the floor for more versatile use of the space, and most notably — installing hearing loops.

A hearing loop is a wire that wraps around the room, and, when activated, transmits sound directly to the hearing aids in the room via a magnetic field. Hearing

loops have been around for years, but the technology has evolved to emphasize the intended sound and eliminate muddled background noise. For those who are hearing impaired, simply flipping a switch to the “T” on their hearing aids is the difference between all the sound in the room being amplified and being able to hear with clarity the specific music, voices or sounds those with good hearing naturally can tune into.

“I think it’d be like if a blind person all of a sudden was able to see color again,” Prichard said. “It’s that moving just to be able to hear again.”

This is in part because hearing impairment can be a somewhat isolating disability. When you are in a situation where you are unable to properly hear, she said, people often think you are “aloof or ignorant.”

The inability to hear well is an emotional barrier that local audiologist Sandi Ybarra is all too familiar with. “Every day ... I have people who are in tears in my office because they can hear again,” she said.

Ybarra said she recently met with a son who brought in his hearing-impaired father because his father was becoming withdrawn, no longer wanting to do everyday things such as watch television or talk on the phone.

“What was wrong was one of his hearing aids wasn’t working,” Ybarra said. “So I put the hearing aids back on him, and I get the biggest smile. The son is like, ‘Oh, Dad’s back.’ ”

“With glasses you can get back to 20/20,” said Sue’s husband, Hugh Prichard. “With hearing, you can’t get back to full hearing.”

This is especially hard for Sue Prichard sometimes, as both of the Prichards also are musicians. She plays the ukulele, and before the hearing loop she had never properly heard her husband’s band play.

Jim Ralph, executive director of The Shedd, was the one to initially show Prichard the hearing loop. He and his wife, Ginevra, always have tried to put accessibility first at The Shedd, he said, so this project is no exception.

“Whatever you’re doing in life, you’ve got to think about how to include other people,” he said. “One of the first things we did when we got the building, without even thinking about it, is we put in an elevator. From day one we began to figure out ways to make this building accessible.”

The partnership between The Shedd and the Prichards — inspired by Ginevra Ralph’s background teaching special education and the couples’ longtime friendship — resulted in The Shedd being a leader of this technology in Eugene’s performance arts centers.



But this comes with a price tag. Adequately looping all The Shedd's performance halls, dining hall and classrooms costs \$150,000. So Prichard set out on the task of personally raising the first \$50,000 needed to loop Jaqua. The Prichards have raised 78 percent of this first goal, and plans to loop the Jaqua Concert Hall still are underway.

The fully remodeled Jaqua Concert Hall is set to open in November. For the opening, The Shedd will be inviting patients of local audiologists such as Ybarra to experience the hearing loop for the first time as part of a private concert.

Ybarra stressed the importance that people know whether or not their hearing aids are compatible to the hearing loop, as only around 71 percent of hearing aids have a telecoil.

"Part of the confusion is they talk about these loop systems and that it connects to people's hearing aids. It only connects to the hearing aids if it has a telecoil. And it only connects to the telecoil if it is turned on," Ybarra said.

She said she strongly recommends hearing aids with telecoil compatibility to all her patients, and encourages people to consult their audiologist if they're unsure if their hearing aids are compatible.

Prichard's hearing aids originally didn't even have a telecoil, so she recently ordered a new pair. She hopes this project will "elevate" the conversation about hearing impairment and disabilities in Eugene. And she hopes it will inspire other performance arts centers to loop their auditoriums to better include the hearing-impaired community and give others that awe-inspiring moment she had hearing with the telecoil months ago. Because after living her life without that clear, beautiful sound of music for 22 years, she's never looking back.

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Shedd renovation

Where: The John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts, 284 E. Broadway

What: Second phase in a six-year renovation plan includes replacing Jaqua Concert Hall's balcony, improving sightlines, as well as flattening and tiering of the main floor, the installation of a state-of-the-art telecoil induction loop system, an enhanced HVAC and ongoing improvements in theatrical sound and lighting

When: Expected to reopen in November

Information: The Shedd, www.theshedd.org. To listen for the difference a hearing loop makes firsthand, visit www.hearinglossupport.com.