

The Simple Sound That Can Soothe Stressed Dogs

Shelters around the world are using this to end the barking and anxiety, and calm their dogs within moments. It lets their personality shine through and makes them adoptable. What a brilliant idea. Better yet, why not use it at home for your own pets?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Songwriter, music producer and engineer Terry Woodford has created music for dogs called Canine Lullabies, based on the theory that simple sounds are soothing
- Woodford marries compassionate human voices and the sound of a human heartbeat to traditional lullabies; the music tracks are reportedly very effective at reducing barking and lowering stress in shelter dogs
- The lullabies are deliberately structured for simplicity, and Woodford adds a singer's compassionate voice for its soothing abilities, as well as the familiar sound of a human heartbeat
- Another effective shelter music project is the Rescue Animal MP3 Project, which is currently playing in over 1,350 U.S. shelters in 50 states
- Past studies have shown that classical music is a clear winner over human conversation, pop music, no music and especially heavy metal music, in calming shelter animals

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Because animal shelters are, sadly, both essential and also incredibly stressful for the pets who wind up there, it's always encouraging to hear about new approaches that help make these environments a bit more tolerable for the residents.

Mainstream songwriter, producer and engineer named Terry Woodford is applying his significant skills to creating music for dogs late in his career. He calls his works **Canine Lullabies**, which marry the steady, soothing thump-thump sound of a human heartbeat with traditional lullabies.

Woodford's music tracks are being played at animal shelters across the U.S. and in a handful of other countries, and are receiving a big thumbs-up from shelter employees and volunteers. The music is reportedly very effective in reducing barking and overall stress levels in shelter dogs. As Lisa Morrissey, a dog trainer and behaviorist who consults with shelters told The Washington Post via email:

*"I was looking for aids to help calm dogs arriving into a high-volume, high-anxiety and incredibly stressful environment. I have found the shelter dogs respond and calm faster listening to 'Canine Lullabies,' versus other calming/separation anxiety music."*¹

Simple Sounds Are Soothing

When it comes to music for animals, simplicity is key. Woodford explains why the simple sounds on his recordings are calming to animals:²

"Dogs, cats, and chimps can use their acute selective listening to escape what is bothering them even better than humans can. Animals don't relate to or interpret most man made music the same way we do. Most of our music is mathematically too complex and alien sounding. They are attentive and interested in sounds that are simple, predictable, familiar and ordered in a simple structure."

Most relaxation and training techniques use the same basic mathematical principles to help animals and humans learn to behave and relax. The following are some of the relaxation / learning principles combined with human sounds that were incorporated in the musical arrangements of simple melodies. For example, the ticking sound of a clock touted for helping calm whimpering puppies has five of these principles."

1. *Simplicity*
2. *Repetition*
3. *Predictability*
4. *Consistent tempo*
5. *Consistent volume*
6. *Basic symmetric structure*
7. *Human compassion (in the singer's voice)*
8. *Familiarity (human heartbeat)*

Woodford's theory is that when animals (and humans) are forced into a chaotic environment such as a shelter setting, they're attracted to the structure and order his music tracks offer. Lullabies are deliberately structured for simplicity, and he adds a singer's compassionate voice for its soothing abilities, as well as the familiar sound of a human heartbeat. Watch as a Woodford Canine Lullaby calms 50 barking shelter dogs in less than two minutes:

The Rescue Animal MP3 Project

The **Rescue Animal MP3 Project**, founded by Ohio veterinarian Dr. Pamela Fisher, is playing in over 1,350 U.S. shelters in 50 states, calming more than 160,000 homeless animals.³ Over 500 shelter follow-up evaluations show up to 95% less barking (an average of 54%) and the animals are an average of 58% more relaxed.

This works in two ways: the dogs are calmer, which allows more of their real personalities to shine through, and potential adopters may also find the experience more favorable. According to the journal Animal Welfare:

*"This form of music [classical] may also appeal to visitors, resulting in enhanced perceptions of the rescue shelter's environment and an increased desire to adopt a dog from such a source."*⁴

Studies Show Heavy Metal Music Is Stressful to Shelter Residents

Lori Kogan, Ph.D., a psychologist and associate professor at Colorado State University's College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, led a 2012 study on the effects of music on the behavior and stress levels of shelter dogs.⁵

Kogan was looking for inexpensive, easy-to-implement ways to improve the quality of life for animals living in stressful situations. She knew that music makes an impression on dogs, so she decided to take a closer look at what types of music are most beneficial for dogs in shelters.

Dogs detect sounds in a much broader frequency than humans (from a low of 16 to 20 Hz to a high of 100,000 Hz, compared to 20 to 70 Hz up to 20,000 Hz for humans). Canines can also move their **ears** in ways we can't (e.g., tilting, rotating and raising), which helps them determine a sound's location rapidly as well as detect sounds from much farther distances.

In many ways, dogs are built for listening, so it's not surprising that music can have a dramatic influence on them. Kogan and her team observed 117 dogs, including 34 rescue dogs and 83 boarding dogs, over a four-month period. The animals were exposed to three types of music: classical, heavy metal and classical music designed specifically for its soothing effect on dogs.

First there was a control period during which no music was played. Then each type of music was played for 45 minutes, followed by 15 minutes of silence, during which the activity level, vocalization and body shaking of the dogs was recorded every five minutes. The dogs' response to the classical music was to sleep more, indicating this type of music relaxed them and helped them rest.

As you might suspect, the heavy metal tunes caused an opposite response, causing the dogs to tremble, indicating this type of music increases agitation and stress levels in kennelled dogs. Interestingly, the specially designed classical music had no measurable effect on the dogs' behavior.

In another study of different sounds played for shelter dogs (human conversation, classical music, heavy metal music, pop music and a control), classical music was again the clear winner. The dogs showed reduced stress levels based on measures such as heart rate variability, salivary cortisol and behavior.⁶

Kogan's study and others show that even though shelters are fundamentally stressful for most dogs, a few simple modifications in the environment, such as replacing the music many shelter employees and volunteers might prefer with music that has a calming effect on dogs, can reduce stress levels and stress-related behaviors in shelter residents.

Sources and References

¹ [The Washington Post, August 13, 2018](#)

² [Terry Woodford](#)

³ [Rescue Animal MP3 Project](#)

⁴ [Animal Welfare, Volume 11, Number 4, November 2002, pp. 385-393\(9\). \(Archived\)](#)

⁵ [Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research, Volume 7, Issue 5, September-October 2012, pgs 268-275](#)

⁶ [Physiology and Behavior, 2015 May 1;143:70-82](#)
