

## Simple Ideas to Improve Your Hall Acoustics

*by Adam Naylor - sound engineer with Mumbo-Jumbo, acoustic close harmony trio that has played over 50 different village halls across the UK through the last four years.*

British village halls, ancient and modern, were rarely designed with acoustics top of the list, and certainly not designed for amplified music performance.

I've been to many village halls over the past few years - we've played big halls, small halls, square halls, tall halls - each one is different with its own set of acoustic characteristics, and many promoters are aware that the sound bouncing around can be a problem even at lower volumes.

One thing the lovely people who look after these hubs of the community ask me all the time is "how can we make the hall sound better?"

This is a question that seems simple, but it can have complicated and multiple answers and I thought I would put forward some straight forward and cost effective suggestions for measures that village halls can implement to improve the sound for audience and performers alike?

### Walls

Halls have walls, and walls have generally flat surfaces that sound likes to bounce off. When you hear the same sound once from the musician, then again a short delay later from the first wall, then the second wall....well, it can all turn a bit 'mushy'.

You'll know if this is a problem in your hall because people will be finding it hard to understand the lyrics in live music performances, at film nights it maybe difficult to follow the dialogue and just the chat at social nights becomes noisy.

There are a few things you can try quite cheaply to improve on this.

The easiest thing to do is to hang heavy curtains where possible on parallel walls, and not just over windows. These absorb a lot of sound and will stop all the ping-pong noise. They don't even have to cover the whole wall - anything will help. And make sure any curtains you have over windows are shut for shows too - windows reflect sound just as badly!

If curtains, or maybe decorative wall hangings are not possible, then do you have some movable exhibition stands? You know, the big pin boards covered in fabric with feet. Alternatively you may have some portable bookshelves, privacy screens or any other large flattish items, anything that breaks up that large flat wall at the far end will make a big difference.

We recently played a stone walled village hall in Wiltshire and were concerned that the sound would bounce around a lot. However, because the walls were 'knobbly' the sound got broken up by the rough surface and the sound was surprisingly good. Unflattening your walls in terms of any of these ideas will help reduce the echoing.

Soft furnishings like sofas or playgroup mats are great as well - borrow the ones from the conference room (if you have one!) and scatter them around the sides of the room for concerts.

## High Overheads

High ceilings can also be a fundamental problem.

Lots of village halls have consulted sound engineers and local builders and been offered roof based solutions at alarming costs. Before you even consider the expensive options why not try one of the following low cost ideas.



Many village halls have rafters and beams along the roofline. Hanging swathes of heavy fabric within the roofline will help trap the sound, and they can be really attractive features too!

Other hanging items in the roof such as large lampshades, banners, hangings etc. could also make a difference.

I'd like to mention the people in a hall we played in the Scottish Borders - they have a lovely vaulted ceiling and had spent lots of money on fitting professional sound baffles to try and improve the sound. They then had to have them removed as they were dripping condensation onto the audience. So beware the knock on effects of doing building work. Having said that the sound wasn't bad at all.

## Quiet is King

Another thing to consider is volume. The more sound energy being pushed into a room, the more will bounce back off walls and ceilings. So the louder the band (and particularly the drummer) or the film soundtrack the worse the acoustics will be. Even a small reduction in volume can make a really big difference so ask your performers to keep the volume down if the audience is struggling.

## Mobile Sound Baffles (ie people!)

People are great sound absorbers so the more tickets you sell to events the better the sound!

## Building a new hall?

Often the village halls we have come across with the worst acoustic problems have been newly built. The modern style seems to be simple clean plastered walls, blinds not curtains and everything stored away. This looks great but is not good for acoustics. If you are planning a new build or major refurbishment please bear this in mind and think about the rooms acoustics from the beginning!

We do hope that this gives you the confidence to try some simple solutions before you approach external specialist companies. Every room is different and trial and error is the only reliable way to make changes. When in doubt, try something roughly and trust your ears before implementing it!

For more information on Mumbo-Jumbo please visit [www.mumbo-jumbo.biz](http://www.mumbo-jumbo.biz)