

Prevention and Alleviation of Noise Phobias in Dogs
A Review of Audio Discs Offered by CalmAudio.com
by Karen Palmer

Those of us who have owned a working companion dog appreciate the value of a dog's ability to use their eyes, ears, and especially their sensitive noses as they do tasks for us. Even the average pet dog owner recognizes that dogs are more in touch with their senses than most people are. Unfortunately, especially when it comes to the dog's sense of hearing, I believe that we have not been nurturing these senses as much as we could. What Dean Lake has done is provide canine professionals and dog owners with a unique set of tools to help us help our dogs, from puppies to adult dogs with noise phobias.

I have listened to all of the discs currently offered at www.calmaudio.com, with dogs present, and provide this review with no financial compensation or other promises. If anything, this review has made me more interested in the topic of noise phobias in dogs.

The short story is that Dean Lake's audio discs, in my opinion, are a great tool for dog owners and professionals in all areas of the canine industry. All dogs could benefit by being exposed to these quality sounds.

All discs come with brief instructions to play sounds at low volume during meal times or other pleasurable times for the dog, and to turn it down or off if the dog shows signs of stress. The instructions also include a comment that a puppy or phobic dog should never be left unattended while the CD is playing. The goal is to play the sounds so the dog is never stressed, but is desensitized to these sounds and is able to handle other strange sounds with ease. My advice is to start any disc at a very low volume the first time through, so you can observe your dog for signs of stress and build up over time from there. It may not take much at all to trigger some noise phobic dogs. A player with a volume level you can measure can be a great way to help you keep track of your progress as you provide consistency with each listening event.

“Puppy Sounds”

This CD has a total of 25 tracks. The shortest, “Vacuum”, is 39 seconds. The longest, “Airport Gate”, is six minutes and seven seconds. The main categories are: travel sounds, things that go boom, animal sounds, home sounds, child noise, and show sounds.

Might your new puppy ever fly in a plane? Will you ever board your dog, or need to leave him in the stressful atmosphere of a veterinary clinic for a while? Will your dog ever need to work in the presence of fowl or sheep? Would you like your dog to stay calm and safe during thunderstorms or firework celebrations? Will you ever bring your dog to a dog show or other competitive arena? All of these situations are addressed on this disc.

Dean Lake has made recordings from a variety of environments where a pet dog or working dog may find themselves at some point during their lives. These are made with quality equipment, with no effort to change the environmental sounds to coddle the listening dog. There is no posh, cutesy music to soothe your puppy to sleep. This is the real world in valuable sound bites, all boiled into one audio

disc to give dogs a real chance at hearing and getting accustomed to things that might otherwise strike fear in them later on.

The purpose is to introduce these sounds, which cannot be easily produced in the home environment, to the puppy at an early age. Trainers commonly talk about socialization, as in, “take that puppy out to lots of places and let him meet lots of people”. But even before that puppy can leave the house or his litter, he can have the chance to get used to these sounds as well.

The inscription on the inside cover suggests that a breeder can play this CD once a day for a litter of puppies as soon as their eyes are open, preferably when they are having a good time. By starting with a low volume and gradually increasing it over time, closely observing them for any signs of stress, a good owner can play the disc loud enough to bother people but not the pups at seven weeks of age. A mother dog should be removed from the litter for a while if she shows signs of stress, so she is not able to transmit her fear to her litter. The same general idea can be used with all of these discs with dogs of any age.

Lake has put together this disc particularly for the working dog and the “show puppy”—dogs which will need to be calm and confident in a variety of environments, regardless of loud and unfamiliar sounds. Of course, a dog meant solely for companionship can benefit in the same way. I propose that this disc can also be used to help those working with feral dogs or greyhounds taken off the track, as well as with dogs with noise phobias.

One piece of advice I have for dog owners who use the disc is to keep it volume turned down low from the start—don’t be tempted to turn it up during a lull in the sounds. On some tracks, especially where the sounds are originating from a distance, they sound like they are from a distance in volume. This is valuable as it “feels” right. However, if you then turn up the volume too much, a sudden louder sound might startle a dog a bit. Keep in mind, however, that we actually want the dog to learn that a startling sound is not necessarily a bad thing, so even this potential problem with volume has its benefits.

From the helicopter and “stressed dogs” to thunderstorms and field guns, from the kitchen to the lawn mower, the babies crying (and playing), the arcade, and the skateboards, from the ducks and geese to the dog shows and grooming dryer, this disc has it all. The sounds are realistic because they are real! If I were to suggest one disc to start with, this would be the one.

“Obedience Trial Sounds”

This disc has four tracks. The first is just over an hour long, and I can imagine a dog sitting in a crate, listening to these sounds of obedience trials being held indoors. There are dogs barking in the distance, their voices echoing off of concrete walls. There are handlers calling dogs through exercises, voices sometimes muffled and sometimes crisp. I even recognized the squeak of a nearby camping chair, I think. The track ends with a judge calling out scores and placements, to applause from near and far. Because this was recorded during an actual trial day, anything you can imagine being heard during an indoor competition can be heard here.

Track two has about two minutes of outdoor applause. You might imagine a dog sitting with a handler at the sidelines as awards are given out. Track three has about a minute and a half of indoor applause, and track four has over three minutes of indoor applause.

As Dean Lake is no stranger to the obedience ring herself, she put together an audio disc for the performing handler based on experience. The first track is meant to be played during a training session. But as dogs also spend much of their time at trials crated, I could see plenty of value in playing this track while a dog is resting in a crate before and after training. A dog that can rest comfortably while hearing these sounds in his home environment has a better chance of resting at a trial, and thus performing with more energy. In contrast, a dog that is new to that environment, or has already been exposed to it with fear, can become stressed upon arrival, making it difficult for him to focus when it is his turn in the ring. Imagine how much easier it could be for the competition dog when he hears these sounds from the time he is a few weeks old!

The other three tracks were added to help a dog which has a particular sensitivity to applause. As these shorter tracks are a little different from each other, using more than one in a desensitizing program can help prevent a dog from memorizing a pattern. They are also long enough to make their time worth while.

“Indoor Agility Trial Sounds”

This audio disc has four tracks. The first is a jumpers and standard course, lasting more than twelve minutes. This is similar to the obedience trial track, as it provides all the background sounds of an indoor agility trial. I could hear sounds over a loudspeaker, excited dogs barking, people talking or shouting, sometimes rather excitedly, and of course the banging of equipment. In addition, I realized I could hear birds chirping away. This could be what your dog would hear while crated inside a building where agility trials are taking place, or in an outdoor field or training barn.

The second track is of a standard course, and it lasts for more than forty-eight minutes. This one seemed a bit more relaxed to me. The recording did not take place at ring-side, but a little distance away. Both of these first two tracks are designed to provide background sound for training periods, or to help handlers whose dogs are sensitive to the sounds in this exciting kind of environment. Again, I can also see value in this disc being used at while a dog is at rest, starting at a low volume and increasing with tolerance.

The third track is of teeter close up sounds, while the fourth and final track provides contact equipment sounds. This is what your dog might hear if he was sitting near the equipment as another dog went over, or going over the equipment himself. There is banging, crashing, and clanging of wood and metal, as well as the fainter sound of a dog panting. Since this dog seems to be having a good time, his panting may actually be recognized by the listening dog as a good thing. These two tracks provide just a few minutes of specific types of sounds, and are meant to help a dog which has fear related to certain types of equipment.

This disc, like all of them, has been “recorded for maximum realism”. There are no extra pleasantries, music, or sounds of people having discussions nearby. There is, however, great value for the competitive dog owner who wants to prepare or rehabilitate their dog so it can enjoy agility

competition events rather than become stressed or exhausted by it. I would recommend playing the first two tracks for dogs before they ever enter a competitive arena, simply to help a dog avoid potential problems.

“Fireworks”

This audio disc has five tracks. There are small firecrackers, whistlers, all kinds of big and little bangs, and large city fireworks displays with deep booms. The variety of sounds, and the “distance” effect you can hear—some farther away, some nearer—give it that authentic feel. It has been “digitally mastered for maximum realism” for that purpose. Also noteworthy is an instruction to not play this CD too loudly as the explosive sounds could damage speakers. Of course, you don’t want to get too loud for your dog’s sake anyway. The idea is to help them through desensitization over time, without overdoing it.

Many dogs every year escape confinement or become injured or even killed after being frightened by the sudden and loud sounds of firework displays or private parties. A call to your local shelter would likely confirm this. These tracks can be used to help desensitize puppies to these sounds so they can keep their cool when sudden bursts of sound happen, or to help adult dogs who have already developed a noise phobia of fireworks or thunder cracks.

As I played this disc to hear the sounds for myself, my noise-phobic dog found the majority of the sounds on the first track non-threatening, but became uncomfortable as track two began. I immediately turned it off. I played it again another day at a lower volume, and she was quite relaxed. By listening to the disc for this review, I have done what you don’t need to do; please don’t “test” your dog, but put these discs on at a very low volume first, regardless of how you expect your dog to behave. The sounds are quality enough to produce a desired affect, or even an undesirable one, even when played low.

“Thunderstorms”

There are two tracks of about 26 minutes each on this disc. It is not a “rainforest” CD for people to fall asleep to. There is no pleasant instrumentation or people singing. It has been designed as a serious tool for use in helping to prepare the puppy or the noise-phobic dog for real-life storms. These are recordings of real storms—not falsely generated ones—they provide a way for dog owners to reproduce the sounds of wind blowing in the trees, rain, and of course, thunder. There are lulls in the storm, leaving mostly the sound of rain falling, and then intermittent thunder rolls, just like a real storm often does. Again, the listener shouldn’t turn it up during quieter times, as the intermittent thunder may seem too loud.

I found neither of these storms to be overwhelming or frightening for myself or my dogs when played relatively low, and this can be helpful for a very sensitive dog. The dog that panics at the first hint of the sounds of a storm could benefit from this disc played low. The Fireworks disc may actually provide a better alternative for desensitization in dogs which seem to react only to the loudest thunder rolls and booms (and ignores most other factors involved in storms).

Dogs which become fearful during thunderstorms may react to a variety of stimuli. There are plenty of theories as to what exactly they are responding to. It could be a combination of more than one factor. Or it could be that a dog became fearful first of the sound and later connected other storm factors (such as dark clouds, rain, a drop in barometric pressure, electricity in the air, light flashes, etc.) as signs of something terrible. Regardless of what triggers YOUR dog, it is likely that this disc will produce a response if you turn it up just too much.

“But my dog knows the difference between a recorded sound and the real thing.” While that may be the case, the quality sounds on this disc and the others can still be used to help desensitize a dog to one of the most frightening aspects of a thunderstorm and other events—its sounds. So why not give it a try?