



THE SUNDAY TIMES

HOME

LIVING

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As I write this, a sound like a jackhammer is carving a jagged path through my brain. It could be a drill or a stonemason or a really noisy lawnmower, but it turns out to be one of those things the council uses to blow away leaves. Overlaying this, like an acoustic Armageddon, are the roar of a man in a Virgin Media van having a banal conversation with his phone on loudspeaker, and the relentless tick of a cheap clock as it clicks through the seconds until I get up and rip out the batteries.

"We've had to cope with noise for so long, we think it's normal," says Poppy Szkiler, founder of Quiet Mark, the industry standard for less noisy domestic appliances. Szkiler, who is as poised and serene as a Siamese cat, has produced a very quiet film, *In Pursuit of Silence*, which is coming to our cinemas later this month. It explores how we might all benefit from finding quieter time in a world that doesn't ever seem to shut up. She hopes to do for noise pollution what Al Gore and *An Inconvenient Truth* did for climate change.

"Stressful sounds bleed into our minds and hearts every day," says Szkiler, 41. "What the film is saying, very gently, is, 'Come on, let's find what's really going to support you as a human being. Because this pace, this constant noise and drive and pressure — it's actually totally unnatural.'"

She lives less than a 10-minute car ride from the roar of Clapham Junction, in southwest London, but her house, a double-fronted nine-bedroom Victorian villa, is so eye-poppingly white and airy — and quiet — it makes my head spin. Doors lead off the hallway to TV and music rooms, but the true heart of the house is a beautiful open-plan kitchen-cum-living room, its pristine surfaces groaning under the weight of many vases of flowers.

This is where — readers with less tranquil domestic arrangements might want to look away now — Szkiler enjoys a whole hour of quiet time every morning. "Creating a sanctuary within your home is so important," she says dreamily. "This morning, I sat outside and listened to the birds singing." If it's raining, she sits in the fabulous glass extension, or she might strum her harp.

This may not be quite as doable if you live in a bedsit on the Caledonian Road, yet she insists that location is no barrier to auditory bliss. "Anyone can find quietness," she says. "When you start to do quiet time for yourself, you begin to bring peace into your home. The more you do it, the more tangible it becomes."

Silence is a family business: her grandfather, John Connell, founded the Noise Abatement Society in 1959, when he realised there was no authority to complain to about noise — in his words, "the forgotten pollutant". A letter to *The Telegraph* asking if anyone else was similarly concerned produced, Szkiler says, "a room full of letters".

Connell subsequently campaigned for rubber dustbin lids and plastic

milk crates, and — less successfully — for Heathrow airport to be moved to the coast.

He was, Szkiler continues, an "extraordinary visionary". He owned a fleet of the first refrigerated lorries, and came up with the idea of an airport in the middle of the Thames estuary, which, when you think about it, are both quite noisy things. "He was committed to public service," she says. "He wasn't whimsical or spiritual, he was deeply practical. If there was a problem, he'd have a plan for solving it."

His granddaughter seems both practical and deeply whimsical and spiritual. "As a child, I was creative and sensitive," Szkiler recalls. "I had a little music box that played I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing. So this passion for everyone to live in harmony was always there."

She grew up in Hove, East Sussex, and trained at the Drama Centre London (often referred to as the Trauma Centre, on account of its punishing regime: alumni include Colin Firth, Russell Brand and Helen McCrory). Then, in 2005, when she was 30 and "on her way to Hollywood", she had what she calls an epiphany. "Let's just say I had an encounter with God. One day I was an actress, on track for stardom, the next I heard someone preaching the gospel in the street, and everything he said made sense."

"I looked at my life and thought, 'I want to lay everything down — my properties [flats in Primrose Hill and Brighton], my acting career, my dreams — and help people.'"

Having given God permission to guide her, very gently, Szkiler's career (Hollywood, Footballers' Wives, *The Last Detective*) pattered to a halt. While she waited for redirection, she stepped back and "listened" — and that's when the idea for Quiet Mark popped into her

head. She sold the Primrose Hill flat and moved back to the family home. "I found the answer in stillness and quietness," she says. "Honestly, my friends, my mum and my agent all thought I'd lost my marbles."

Her decision to award industry a "kitemark" for making its products quieter was a bold move. Her mother, Gloria Elliott, still runs the Noise Abatement Society, the only charity in the UK devoted to noise reduction. "It's difficult to raise money, and it's so unglamorous," Szkiler sighs. "I told Mum, 'Quiet Mark has got to be cool.'"

In 2010, she met her future husband, Paul Szkiler, 58, a financier who introduces billionaires to investment opportunities in the developing world. He was the one who suggested creating a certificate, and when Quiet Mark was officially launched in January 2012, scores of companies were already paying to have their appliances tested and approved. It was, in Szkiler's words, like "hitting oil". Seventy leading global brands with products in 40 categories are now on board, including Virgin Atlantic, Dyson, Lexus and Panasonic. "I just love God, and everything around me is glorious," she whispers.

And indeed it is. On this gorgeous, sunny early-autumn afternoon, light streams in through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the back of the house. The melodies and harmonies of the birds in the garden soothe, rather than grate. Even Szkiler's email alerts seem to purr. "Truthfully, I don't feel stress," she says. "Because I've learnt how to manage it in quietness. It's what I call a deeper surrender. I believe peace is inside me."

The couple, who also own a luxury hotel, Glenapp Castle — "an especially peaceful place" on the Ayrshire coast, bought last year for

Silence is golden

The founder of Quiet Mark is on a mission to turn down the noise of modern life. Her tip for achieving serenity? Spend an hour a day listening to the birds, she tells **Caroline Scott**



Francesco Guidotti, Ray Wells



Inner peace Poppy Szkiler, left, at her white and airy home in southwest London. She enjoys an hour of quiet time there each morning, contemplating the uncluttered spaces and the huge vases of flowers



"Stressful sounds bleed into our minds. Creating a sanctuary within your home is so important"

an undisclosed sum — moved into their London home last September and have done little to the property since. Indeed, it is amazingly sparsely decorated.

"Part of my epiphany involved chucking things out," Szkiler says. "I threw out clothes, I stripped everything back. Each thing I have now means something. And if it doesn't, it goes." The beautiful blue embroidered tablecloth on the kitchen table was given to her by "the wife of the president of Kurdistan", so it stays. The painting of a spot on the Californian coastline reminds her of "a time of joy in our lives". The flowers "mean everything to me. They're like living sculptures — they're a glimpse of heaven."

The usual domestic debris is hidden behind full-height cupboards in the Bulthaup kitchen. "Go through and remove things," she advises. "Be brave enough to have nothing on the walls."

Her oven, dishwasher and washing machine are by Miele ("You can hardly hear them"), her food processor is a Magimix and her kettle is by KitchenAid — all Quiet Mark approved. She has a new Dyson hairdryer and she drives a Lexus. "It's so important to think about the sound of every device you buy," she says. "By doing that, we can take back, in a lovely way, our boundaries."

Quiet Mark now uses a team of senior acousticians to measure not just decibels, but the quality and tonality of sound waves. "Decibels are only part of how we experience sound," she explains. "Sounds are emotional — some make you wince, some make you relax. That psychoacoustic response is where we're moving with Quiet Mark now, and we're the only people in the world doing this."

Szkiler describes the Noise Abatement Society as "my beautiful inheritance. It was a bit tattered, but I'm so happy that through my quiet time, I've been able to restore it for a generation of people who are suffering noise. People who visit email to say how peaceful they've found my home," she says, showing me to the door.

I still find it difficult to understand how she manages to keep noise out. What if people come clattering in with a different auditory agenda? I'm thinking young people (she has a 21-year-old stepson) or troublesome house guests who want to listen to the Today programme in the morning, without a thought for anyone's quiet time. Does she find that rather difficult?

"Not at all," she says serenely. "I find they leave with a little bit of what we are, rather than the other way round."

■ quietmark.com