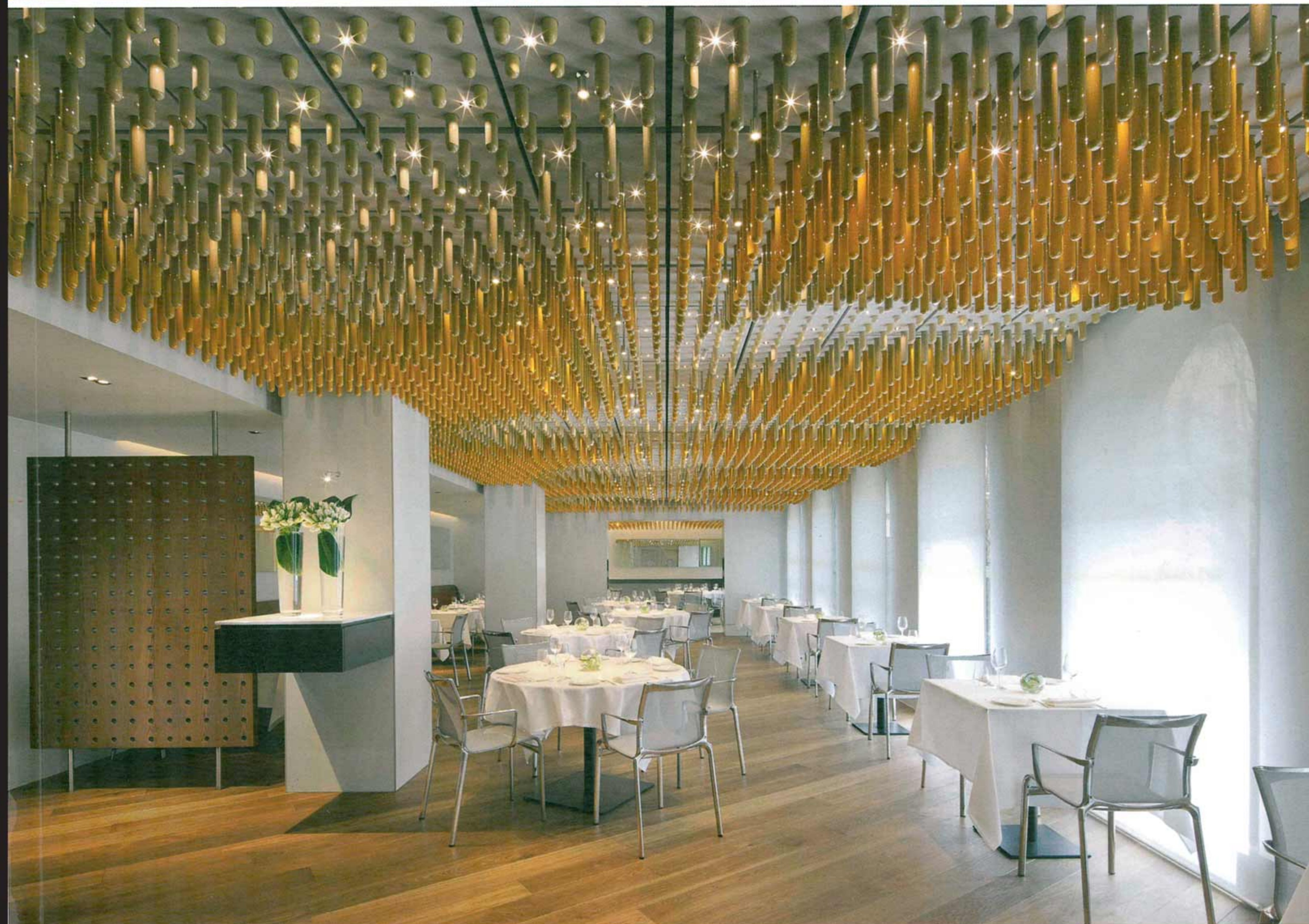


sleep

HOTEL DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT & ARCHITECTURE

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Sound advice

Music plays a key role in the ambience and positioning of a hotel, but does this also apply to the unique environment of the spa, asks **Rob Wood** of Music Concierge.

Spas are increasingly playing a part in people's decision to choose one hotel over another, and form an important revenue stream in their own right. Whether your existing spa needs improving, or you're planning a new spa build – just like the interior design and lighting – music does indeed need to be carefully considered in order to create a spa journey that works, making it one that ultimately encourages repeat visits.

Spas are surely the sensory centre of any property – the distilled sensory essence of the hotel. However when you mention the words 'spa' and 'music' in the same sentence most people's faces instinctively twist into a grimace. It's often the area where a quality 'on-brand' soundtrack is the most elusive, even though it is likely to get a lot of attention from guests. At last year's Sleep event, one general manager asked me if there was an alternative to "the type of music that sounds like whales mating" for his new spa. Even though he did not like it, he presumed such music was the only option.

Spas are all about creating a soothing and revitalising experience through the senses. The visual effect of the interiors and lighting; the smell of the treatment oils; the touch of the massage; the sound of the spa. The spa design and mood lighting are more often than not painstakingly thought out. The oils are carefully chosen. Each room's temperature is controlled, and the therapists are thoroughly trained in the execution of each treatment. Yet often the sound of the

spa is not thought through beyond a poorly curated collection of CDs or tracks which staff and guests are forced to endure on repeat.

Music's impact on humans both emotionally and physically means it can play an integral role in relaxing us. Music can calm us and take us somewhere else as we drift between consciousness and sleep on the treatment room table. It's a great medium for helping us to escape our busy lives, which is surely a core goal of any spa visit. Susan Harmsworth MBE, Founder & CEO of ESPA recognises this: "Music completes the sensory spa journey and can really make or break it. It's so much more important than just background noise; it can complement the emotional and physical effects of treatment - affecting mood and heart rate. Music is an integral part of life and we have always considered it an incredibly important part of the whole spa experience."

Used effectively it can indeed create a truly sensory experience. It can also reinforce the spa's concept and design, and even provide a point of difference for the spa brand. If done well the music could even be something to rave about to friends, building a stand-alone reputation for the spa, engendering that most elusive (and cost-effective) form of marketing: word-of-mouth.

But many spas fail to get the music right. Relying on a therapist to choose a few CDs is the first step to getting it wrong.

PLANNING YOUR AUDIO SYSTEM
A centralised audio system can distribute

different channels of music to each hotel zone giving each part of the hotel its own relevant sound and atmosphere. The same applies to spas. The ideal is to use a digital multi-channel harddrive music solution from a music provider that can store plenty of tracks. The music is sent from a back-of-house, air conditioned comms room or AV area to different parts of the spa. This enables different areas of the spa to have their own feel and music identity. For instance the spa reception could feel warm, welcoming, whilst the relaxation area sounds still and contemplative. With treatment rooms it is becoming increasingly popular to offer guests a choice of music styles. This helps personalise the experience as guests pick a playlist based on their taste or mood. Different music channels can be delivered from the centralised AV area to each treatment room. Therapists will need a control device to change between the channels and control the volume level.

Susan Harmsworth again sees the value of this approach: "It's always particularly successful with our guests when the music reflects the treatment, so if it takes subtle influence from certain part of the world or culture to reflect the flow and tempo of the treatment, its popular with our guests. Music in treatment is a very personal thing so without giving the guest too many decisions to make it's good to have a choice."

THE SPA JOURNEY

Rather than simply focusing on the sound of treatment rooms, it's worth looking at

every aspect of the guest's journey through the spa. The aim should be for the music's mood and energy to be in line with this journey. As a basic example, imagine stepping out of your car in the car park – the normal background sound of an urban environment is probably present, as are the strains of a normal busy life. As you cross the threshold and enter the spa reception the music in this area should immediately feel welcoming and begin to relax you as you step away from your busy life. It is crucial to get this part right. It is the customer's first interaction with the spa brand after all.

To create a consistent experience for most spas it is best if the music in the changing rooms is the same, or one step lower in energy, from the music in the reception area. Once you are in the treatment room itself, the music has to be selected with the upmost care as this is the deepest part of the journey where any sudden sounds, changes in energy or rhythm could upset the relaxation experience.

The sound of the post treatment journey also needs to be thought through as people come out of an ultra-relaxed state and slowly prepare to leave the spa. Heat experiences and thermal suites are better suited to a different atmosphere, whilst finishing studios, spa cafes or retail areas would often benefit from having a more engaging music identity that needs to be carefully chosen with the audience in mind.

With fitness rooms the main decision will boil down to whether guests will bring their own iPods to work out with, or if background music that encourages

exercise is needed. Such music will need to be at a consistent energy level in order to provide the best rhythm for exercising to. It could also be advisable to avoid blatant mainstream or chart oriented music.

THE RIGHT MUSIC DIRECTION FOR YOUR SPA

The biggest mistake is to use clichéd music. For today's high-end emporiums of relaxation and pleasure, it is no longer good enough to rely on tired, generic spa music. Instead music should be selected to reflect the interior design and concept behind the spa.

For example ESPA Life at The Corinthia London the music in the spa public areas is highly atmospheric and contemporary in line with the spa's groundbreaking design. Whilst the music at Aman Spa in London at The Connaught supports various region-led treatment concepts with authentic ethnic music from local places around the world.

For some spas music with eastern influences will make sense, for instance if the spa concept is based around Ayurvedic principles. At Leela Palace Udaipur in India one of the treatment room music choices is dedicated to low tempo, calming genuine Indian music so that guests can immerse themselves in an authentic experience as part of their trip.

For spa brands with no Asian connections, it makes little sense to use music with specifically eastern influences such as Tibetan chanting, or Chinese flute though. Yet it is commonplace to walk into a European luxury spa and be presented with music that is

disconnected from the spa brand or concept.

Worse still generic spa music that has been recorded by 'new age' musicians on 'cheap' sounding synthesizers with obligatory striking of bells can be heard in many places undermining the quality of the brand experience.

I've spent years searching to uncover high quality music that works in spas. The results at spas such as Talise Spa at Jumeirah at Etihad Towers in Abu Dhabi give the public areas a sensual modern oasis-like feel, whilst the treatment room music includes a brand consistent Middle Eastern choice using inspiring musicians from the region which guests enjoy discovering.

It's hard to get right and it takes a lot of time, but it is possible to find beautiful electronic, acoustic, classical, jazz, world, or ambient music styles that can be curated to work wonders in terms of both supporting the spa design and subliminally taking guests through a truly relaxing journey.

Using a good quality, well-planned sound system with music that is warm, alluring and appropriate to your spa is as important as getting the lighting, smell and temperature right. The sound of humping humpbacks is simply no longer good enough. ■

www.musicconcierge.co.uk