

The Drive: California composer's music helps soothe the savage commuter

By [Tim Harlow](#) Star Tribune
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Heavy traffic congestion for the afternoon commute on Interstate 494 at France Avenue in Bloomington, MN. (Glen Stubbe, Star Tribune)

Morning and afternoon commutes can bring out the worst in us. Ken Elkinson speaks from personal experience.

Elkinson lives in suburban Los Angeles, one of the most traffic-snarled cities in the world, and time spent on clogged freeways provided him plenty of time and opportunity each week to spew venomous tirades at the motorists bogging down his drive to work. He was careful to keep his windows rolled up and unleash his fury inside the car for fear of being shot, he said.

But some tender ears heard it all. When his 4-year-old twins began repeating verbatim phrases that didn't include child-friendly language, Elkinson knew he had a problem.

"I was an angry driver," said Elkinson, 42. "I was nervous that their preschool teachers were going to come up and ask where are they learning how to talk like this. I decided I needed something to calm me down."

He found it in music. The pianist and multi-instrumentalist composed more than 100 instrumental tracks and released 60 of them in a six-box set called "Music for Commuting" in 2011. It came out just ahead of Los Angeles' "Carmageddon," the big weekend shutdown of Interstate 405. The soothing ambient tunes with names such as "Solitude," "Violins/Escape" and "Eventual Morning" were wildly popular and led to another six-box set released earlier this year.

"It has taken the edge off," the former road rage sufferer said. "I am in a zone. I'm not angry. It's not healthy to get angry over stuff you can't control. I'm improved."

There is a CD for each day of the week, each with a distinct sound. Monday's melodies are more solemn reflecting the start of the workweek. Tempos pick up by Friday. The sets also include compositions for the weekend.

Health toll of commuting

Studies have shown that commuting, especially solo commuting, can have lots of adverse effects.

A Washington University study found that people who live more than 10 miles from their work are more likely to have high blood pressure than people with shorter commutes. A 2011 study by Swedish researchers found that people who had long commutes to work were more likely to divorce, experience neck pain, and feel lonely. Add in the stress of being trapped in traffic, and that's a recipe for trouble.

While Elkinson's music can't eliminate gridlock, it has helped calm down aggressive drivers. His calm-inducing music has been downloaded nearly 200,000 times by commuters around the globe.

"There are people in Iowa who hardly have a commute and say, 'I like listening to it,'" Elkinson said. "People in the Netherlands who ride the bus to work say they like listening to the music so they don't have to listen to people talk on the bus."

His opus features tunes that would seem more appropriate in a spa, but to his knowledge the music has never caused anybody inching along in rush hour traffic to doze off.

“A reporter told me that it made him sedated and wondered if I had any complaints from people who got into accidents because they were too relaxed,” Elkinson said. “In California, people would have sued me, so maybe it’s not too sedating.”

“Music for Commuting” Vols. 7-12 and a free download of the cut “Air Travel” are available at www.kenelkinson.com.