

OFF THE RECORD

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A musical makeover for the Connaught

For posh hotels, a classy music policy used to mean a man tinkling a grand piano in a corner. Now they call in a music consultant to sort out the sounds and create the perfect playlist.

The five-star Connaught hotel in Mayfair is in the middle of a £70 million modernisation, and recently reopened its Coburg Bar with art by Blur collaborator Julian Opie on the walls. It bustles with cocktail-sipping youngsters, and the soundtrack, put together by Clapham-based company Music Concierge, includes soul from Al Green, African blues from Ali Farka Touré and something more modern from the likes of Alice Russell.

Rob Wood of Music Concierge says it is only lately that hotels and restaurants have started paying as much attention to choosing the tunes as choosing the curtains. His songs arrive at a hard drive via broadband, and switch tempo depending on the time of day, always changing, shuffling and refreshing with new material so that no one gets bored.

"There's a growing trend for sensory branding, the idea that a brand can appeal in more than just a visual way," Wood tells me. "We've tried to appeal to a younger guest without offending the older ones." But although it may not irritate like the muzak of old, isn't it still musical wallpaper, only there to be ignored? "It should never be in your face, but at the same time it needs to add to the atmosphere of the room and if you do tune into it, it ought to be engaging."

The music is turned on halfway through my experience of the Coburg cocktail hour, and the mood noticeably picks up. There's one more sensory development to come, though, and the punters will never want to leave — soon, the Connaught will be getting its own painstakingly concocted smell.