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First-Time Buyers' Grant is for the Developers' Back Pocket

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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**

As I write this, a sound like a jackhammer is carving a jagged path through my brain. It could be a drill or a stonecutter 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 in UK 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. "This morning, I sat 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 in Dublin city centre, 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".

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."

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



Silence is golden



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



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 (Holby City, Footballers' Wives, The Last Detective) puttered 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 launched in January 2012, scores of companies were 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 an undisclosed sum – moved into their south London home last September and have done little to the property since.

"Part of my epiphany involved chucking things out," Szkiler says. "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".

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 APPLIANCES

Dyson Tower fan AM07, €399.95; appliancesdelivered.ie

Kettle Dualit Classic, €179; littlewoodsireland.ie

Alarm clock Lumie Starter 30, €89.95; maplin.ie

Washing machine Fisher & Paykel WH7060J1, €649.99; did.ie

Fridge Panasonic NR-B53VW2-WB, €1599.95; appliancesdelivered.ie

Steam iron Morphy Richards Atomist, €350; debenhams.ie

Tumble dryer AEG T76280AC, €420; currys.ie

Vacuum cleaner Miele Complete C3 Silence EcoLine, €259.95; expert.ie

Extractor fan AirFlow QuietAir QT100, €78 (€87); expert.ie

Lawnmower Viking ME 443 cordless, €300; donegan.ie

Leaf blower Stihl BGA 85 cordless, €329; donegan.ie



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 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 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

First-time buyers' grant is for the developers' back pocket

Over the last few weeks, political feelers have gone out to test the likely response to a grant for first-time buyers. Perhaps surprisingly for the government, the reaction has not been totally positive.

The broad idea is that first-time buyers would get a lump sum payment, or other credit, of between €5,000 and €15,000 to help them to meet new mortgage lending thresholds, depending on the price of the house they are buying, perhaps up to €350,000.

Even in principle, the idea is a bad one. Experience has shown that in the absence of supply (houses), any boost to demand (potential purchasers) merely serves to inflate prices. People can outbid each other, and developers add the sum to the sales price. Therefore, this proposal will end up hurting the very people it has been supposedly designed to help: the first-time buyers.

As this proposal is tied to new housing only, it seems to be about giving taxpayers' money to the development industry by the back

door. Neither is there any guarantee of any new housing: developers are like supermodels – a mere €10,000 or €15,000 won't necessarily get them out of bed.

Developers say they cannot construct and sell houses at current costs, so if prices rise, it will become more viable for them to build. But if it's not viable to build at current costs, then why not examine those costs instead of throwing money at builders

without identifying and resolving the underlying issue? Reviewing our expensive building control system would be a good start.

If it's not viable to build at current costs, how come there are several reputable developers across the country building and selling passive standard houses for less than €200,000?

They don't seem to need taxpayers' money. Or do taxpayers now have to subsidise

developers who overpaid for their land?

Finance minister Michael Noonan is also on record as saying he wants house prices to rise. (We are a funny country, only happy when house prices rise. Other countries would be worried.)

What has also been overlooked is that this proposal is a circular way of undermining the Central Bank's lending limits, which are unlikely to change in November's review. For a government to try to do this sends the wrong message about the regard it has for the guardian of our banking system's stability.

Since 2011, Irish housing policy has been about "equity across tenures", treating renters and purchasers equally. Although this phrase has conveniently disappeared, this scheme is blatant discrimination against those renting.

Worse, it uses renters' taxes to subsidise house purchasers. So much for equity as those renting get it in the neck again. The proposal also contradicts two of the minister's own "pillars" in the



Developers are like supermodels; €10,000 won't get them out of bed

much-lauded Rebuilding Ireland document: this will not create housing that is affordable, as it will inflate prices; and as it is directed at new builds only, it will make no inroads into reusing our 200,000-unit vacant stock.

The main supporters of this proposal are the Construction Industry Federation, for whom

this policy could have been written.

The argument that it will create housing jobs reveals this is indeed about boosting profitability in the construction industry and not about housing people, or building homes or communities. There's no evidence to say how many jobs it will create, though.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

