In-Ear Monitors (IEMs): 10 Best Practices For Worship Musicians

Many churches these days have moved to **IEMs** (In-Ear Monitors) to reduce stage clutter, tighten up sound, and heighten musicality in the band. The sound and individual control of IEMs is fantastic, but it takes some getting used to – especially because the relational, community environment that is worship is very different from a straight performance. Gleaning from some great friends who have gone before us in the IEM world, here are 10 best practices for using IEMs in your worship environment.

It's going to take time to get used to using IEMs, so decide now that, because you can't go back, you're going to keep getting better at using them. There are things to learn about how to wear them, how to keep the relational environment that is worship intact as you do, and how to create a monitor mix that works for you and the overall sound.

10 Best Practices For Using In-Ear Monitors In Worship – Musicians

1. Wear Them Correctly, And "Relationally."

Take the time to learn how to wrap your IEMs around your ear, and insert them correctly so they stay well. If this hasn't happened, you won't hear well. Put cables down the back of your shirt, or at least around your back. The more obvious it is you are wearing headphones, the more clearly you send a message of disconnection (think of a teenager with their headphones in at a family gathering). Be as unobtrusive as possible. (For drummers, especially behind a shield, sometimes using isolating headphone with bigger ear muffs is not so bad. Heck, everyone knows you're already isolated! But avoid that for the bass player, and everyone else.

[Remember – *everything* messages on a stage. Like a music stand raised high and between us and the community messages some level of disconnection, so too constant fiddling with our tech can message the same.]

2. Give Yourself Time To Get Used To Them.

Wear them around the house, and use them with your iPhone or Android. When possible, come in early to practice and fiddle with your mix based on some of the ideas here. Over time, using your in-ears will become easy.

3. Take A Few Minutes Before Rehearsal To Set Up Your Mix Correctly.

Take the time during sound check to set up your mix properly. Ask questions if you're having difficulty. If you get them right from the outset, you'll have less tweaking and fussing to contend with as you go, and your part in the music will sound better. It's exactly like getting the gain-structure right as a sound engineer – if you don't take the time to do it properly, you'll be fighting the sound for the rest of the morning.

4. Start With The Master Volume Low And Work Up.

Your ears are sensitive, so care for them from the gate. Start with your master volume low, then work up until it's feeling clear. Then, work with each individual instrument to get only the level you need. This goes with the next one.

5. Only Put What You Need In Your Monitor Mix.

You will have total control of your personal mix, either with a small mini-board (we use Behringer P-16s) or an app. The more cluttered your mix is with instruments, the more muddy and frustrating it will become. Determine what you *really need* to do your part in the playing, then keep the number of direct instruments to a minimum in your mix. Get those levels right. (Ex. Everyone needs to hear something of the leader's voice, and lead acoustic for rhythm. Adding in the kick drum helps create energy, and aids timing. Vocalists need to hear

the other vocalists well for blend and tightness. Bass players need to hear that drummer, and drummers need to hear the inside rhythm of that lead acoustic).
Try this: Turn your volume down a bit, and try taking things *out* of the mix (if you are right next to the drums, for example, you might want to not have those in your mix). Then, begin to add in the congregational/room mic to catch everything else. According to some, the sound will be much better for you, and you'll be able to follow well.

6. Don't Hyper-Edit Your Mix.
Having said that, having too few items in your monitor (imagine your electric player only having the hi-hat in their mix) will change the music. Keep it pared down, but make sure you have what will help you "fit" into the overall sound.

7. NEVER Use Only One Of Your In-Ears.
Everybody must know this. NEVER use just one of your In-Ears for any extended period of time. Your brain will tell you to turn up the volume, and you'll damage your ear. You just have to get good at mixing your own monitor mix so it feels good to you. The following one matters for this.

8. Add The Congregation Mic To Your Mix.
Worship is a relational experience, and if you feel isolated from the congregation and the room, you will feel like you're alone in a studio. Every church should have an ambient mic or two for the congregation, and you will want that in your mix. You'll feel the connection as soon as you do this.

9. Be Aware Of Your Mix Volume As The Set Begins.
You'll want to do the least fiddling possible once the actual set begins. You should only be adjusting your master volume during the set, and that very infrequently.

10. Actively Communicate Engagement With The Band And With The Congregation.
Technology is meant to serve our shared community worship experience – not dominate it. Work on getting fluid with your IEMs as quickly as possible so your eyes can be open, and on the congregation and the leader as needed. Used well, the richness of the music will begin to grow as you hear better, and play better, together.

Bless you as you integrate IEMs to enhance your worship experience as a community. Be patient, teachable, and eager to learn. As the music gets better, I think you'll be glad you did.

[For those asking, I'm a huge fan of my 1964 IEMs. They are simply amazing; I got the molded set, and it's worth the investment if you're in this for the long haul.]

Question: What best practices or tips not listed here would you give? Note the system and IEMs you use if you know them.

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Resources: After much research, Monoprice earbuds are the cheapest (like $10-$12 ea.) and give basic, quality sound. We use them. For more expensive pairs, Shure makes one for around $100, and 1964 Ears would be this writer's choice for full-on molded in-ears (triple driver has been suggested by many as being 'plenty' for a worship context). These can run $500-$600. Ultimate Ears and others are great, too.