STEP aside heavy metal headbangers and teenage boy bands, the music most likely to hurt your ears comes from the humble French horn.

Players of the distinctive brass instrument are one of the most at-risk orchestral groups for developing noise-induced hearing loss, according to researchers from the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney.

Researchers assessed 144 French horn players attending an international conference in Brisbane and found about one-third suffered some form of hearing loss, according to the joint study published online in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene.

Any warnings a blast from the brass could potentially cause hearing damage were falling on deaf ears, with as few as 18 per cent of players regularly using any form of hearing protection.

Lead author Wayne Wilson, from UQ’s School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, said any loss of hearing could be a disaster for a musician.

“Even mild hearing loss can result in difficulties discriminating pitch, abnormal loudness growth and tinnitus, all of which can affect a musician’s ability to perform, subsequently jeopardising his or her livelihood,” he said.

Co-author Ian O’Brien, a professional horn player and PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, said the majority of players admitted they never used hearing protection, and only half of those who wore earplugs used devices specially designed for musicians.

“Our findings reinforce the need to educate horn players, their mentors and audiologists about the need to protect hearing and how best to achieve this while still enabling musicians to play to the highest level.”

Brisbane French horn player Lauren Manuel, one of five full-time French horn players with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, said the orchestra provided warnings before shows expected to be particularly loud.

“Being in a professional orchestra we are supplied with ear plugs and there is sound monitoring and regular hearing tests and things like that,” she said.

“I guess we are one of the most at risk because we are one of the loudest, being in brass.”

Ms Manuel, who also teaches French horn, said the findings would prompt her to raise hearing protection with her students.

“I don’t really talk about it with my students but maybe I will now.”