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- Alice:** Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English: the programme in which we talk about a story in the news and learn some vocabulary while we're doing it. I'm Alice and joining me today is Rob. Hi there, Rob.
- Rob:** Hi Alice.
- Alice:** Now, Rob I have a question for you. Any idea what an **ear worm** is?
- Rob:** Eugh – an ear worm. It sounds like a nasty bug that burrows into your ear.
- Alice:** I think you're thinking of an earwig. That's a little black insect. I don't think it necessarily burrows into people's ears though thank goodness!
- Rob:** Well that's a relief! So what's an ear worm then?
- Alice:** It might help if I give you an example. Here's one you may know. Excuse my singing. (Alice sings a tune) When I hear this little phrase of music it **sticks in my head** all day.
- Rob:** I see. An ear worm is a tune, a piece of music you **can't get out of your head**. That's always happening to me. I hear a song on the radio and then I keep singing it all day!
- Alice:** I know the feeling. And the tune I was singing – do you recognise it? It's long been associated with the BBC World Service. But do you know what it's called Rob? Is it:
- a) Lilliput
 - b) Lillypad
 - c) Lillibolero
- Rob:** I think I know what it's called – but I don't know why! And I'll leave it to you, listeners, to make your own guesses.
- Alice:** And as usual we'll find out what the answer is at the end of the programme. Now let's find out more about ear worms. Psychologists have been doing some research into what makes a particular bit of music so **catchy**.
- Rob:** Catchy – that's a nice word. It means something that you can catch easily. Like the flu?
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Alice: Ha ha. Yes you can catch a cold or the flu, but a catchy piece of music means it is very easy to learn, and it sticks in your head for a long time. Here's musician Terry Dobson with some good examples of catchy tunes:

Musician, Terry Dobson:

Even in the film industry - just a few notes, five notes – Close Encounters of the Third Kind, and Jaws and 007 – only a few notes but those notes, you've only to hear them played by any instrument and you know instantly what the tune is.

Rob: Some great examples there of tunes which can become ear worms. You only need to sing about 5 **notes** of the James Bond theme and people will recognise the tune. And he also talked about the **theme tune** – that's the main tune - for the films Jaws and Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

Alice: See if you can remember them, listeners. Musician Terry Dobson said you can hear those notes played by any musical instrument and you know exactly where the music comes from. In fact I noticed in the new James Bond film they only needed to play two notes before you recognise the music immediately!

Rob: Am I guessing – du duh.

Alice: Exactly! Now let's look at some of the science behind ear worms. There are two features which seem to be common in catchy bits of music.

Rob: Let me guess – repetitive sounds. And easy to remember tunes?

Alice: Kind of. Long notes and spaces – what's known as intervals in music – spaces which are very close together. Dr Lauren Stewart of Goldsmiths University in London has been analysing the features of very common ear worms:

Psychologist, Dr Lauren Stewart:

A tune or a part of the tune that comes unbidden into the mind, and then goes on to repeat and it's outside of your conscious control of it. Two features seem to be rather predictive of whether a song will get stuck – and that's rather long notes and intervals that are very close together. So this is quite interesting because it obviously makes a song easy to sing.

Alice: Dr Lauren Stewart talked about those two features which make pieces of music very catchy. Long notes and intervals which are close together. It makes them easy to sing.

Rob: And she used the words **conscious** and **unbidden**.

Alice: Yes – conscious - you're not aware, or conscious about trying to remember or sing a piece of music. It just sticks in your head without you wanting it to. It's unbidden – not invited.

Rob: Maybe that's what makes some ear worms so irritating.

Alice: Rather like an earwig climbing into your ear!

Rob: But why are psychologists investigating ear worms? It seems a strange thing for them to research.

Alice: Dr Lauren Stewart says that ear worms have different effects on different people.

Rob: So what does it say about you if you can't get the James Bond theme tune out of your head?

Alice: I don't know. Maybe that you unconsciously want to have a more exciting life! Now before we go – have you had a think about that ear worm that's stuck in my head today? (Alice sings the tune) Is it called:

- a) Lilliput
- b) Lillypad
- c) Lillibolero

Rob: I think it's c) Lillibolero.

Alice: Well done! Lillibolero, has long been used as the theme for the BBC World Service radio station. It's actually a march – a tune used for soldiers to march to, believed to have been written by Henry Purcell in the seventeenth century inspired by an Irish jig.

Rob: Well, don't let it be said that you don't learn anything on 6 Minute English!

Alice: Now, time for a recap of some of the words we heard in today's programme.

Rob: They are:
ear worm, stick in my head, can't get out of your head, catchy, theme tune, note, conscious, unbidden

Alice: Join us again soon for more 6 Minute English from bbclearningenglish.com.

Rob: And don't forget to find us on Facebook and Twitter.

Alice: Bye for now.

Rob: Bye.

Vocabulary and definitions

ear worm	song or musical phrase which repeats itself in your head
catchy	very easy to remember or sing
note	musical sound
stick in my head	a thought you can't stop thinking about
can't get out of your head	not being able to stop thinking about something
theme tune	the main tune in a film or play
conscious	aware of
unbidden	uninvited

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