

There is no age limit on learning to play an instrument, and the benefits are enormous.



Celebrating Senior Sounds

Playing an instrument is not an activity that must end with one's youth. Two innovative programs are showing the way to keep older adults engaged with music.

For Jim Valentino, a 67-year-old retiree, the clarinet called him back. "I was one of the millions of kids who played in high school, but later in life let it go," he recalled. "I remembered what it felt like when you made music with other people, and I realized I could go back to it without worrying about becoming a great musician as a senior."

For 68-year-old Cal Johnson, it was the tuba. "When I was in a private boys' band in high school, I marched in the Tournament of Roses parade about five times, carrying a sousaphone about 7 miles," Johnson said. "It was a great experience, but that all sort of ended after high school. About 40 or 50 years went by, and I retired as a mathematician. My wife did not want me sitting around the house, so she got me involved in a couple of choral groups and this band. And now that I am retired, I consider this my activity."

Jim and Cal are members of the New Horizons Band, a performing group organized and led by the Third Street Music School Settlement in New York City and sponsored by MetLife Foundation. The band is one of several catering primarily to older adults that Third Street hosts.

As our population ages, more older Americans are finding they need to take positive steps for their overall health. Making music provides a wonderful outlet for mental engagement, while strengthening social connections through the many informal musicians' communities across the country.

Engaging Older Adults

The oldest community music school in the United States, Third Street Music School Settlement primarily serves young musicians throughout the years of their formal education. But in 2007, the administration saw

an opportunity to reach older adults in the local area through an international program called New Horizons International, which was started by Eastman School of Music professor Roy Ernst. "The cornerstone of our adult-engagement initiative is the New Horizons program," said Nancy Morgan, director, School & Community Partnerships for Third Street. "We started in the fall of 2007 and were the first New Horizons band in New York City." Third Street launched their band through a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts.

"We started with a single band that year and had 15 to 20 students by the end of the year," Morgan added. "Most of the musicians had not played a lot. It was a little slow getting started. We even helped people rent instruments if they could not afford to."

The program has since expanded to include more bands, a chorus for people age 60 and above, and much more. There is an adult chamber music program, which is a 90-minute session for practice and coaching. Third Street also offers individual and group instruction for older adults. "Doing group work is very important with the older adults because of the social aspect," Morgan pointed out. In addition, there's Season Pass, in which adults can purchase 6 hours of instruction with a Third Street faculty member, and an Adult Performance Workshop, which is an evening program as well.

All told, the Third Street adult engagement program includes between 150 and 200 adults, Morgan said. The program is sponsored by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Jean and Louis Dreyfus Foundation, and MetLife Foundation. "MetLife Foundation has been extremely supportive of this program, giving us major grants last year and this year as well," Morgan said.

Some of the New Horizons musicians even come after school to work with younger students. “Some of the work we do with the New Horizons Band is intergenerational, so we will bring the public school kids here and have them read and play the same piece with the adult band, where they are sharing stands,” Morgan explained. The kids love it, too. “These sessions have been described as ‘an explosion in a spaghetti factory.’ Just a delightful thing for the school to have the adults come during the day.”

For the Joy of Music

The musicians of the New Horizons Band describe their participation in the most enthusiastic terms. In part, the enthusiasm lies in the pleasure of playing together. “Everyone here is so motivated. They are here because

they want to be here,” said Marianne Ledwidge, a 59-year-old clarinetist. “Because of that, it adds to the speed of the learning curve because everyone is so relaxed about learning and playing together.”

Indeed, the New Horizons Band has not only grown together, but also grown very good in the process. The band has played a number of public concerts in the past couple of years and continues to do so. But it did not necessarily start out that way. The band had to learn how to play together, and to dust off old skills in the process.

But not everyone in the band has prior experience. “I have seen people come here with no prior experience, and within a year, they are sitting in with the band,” said Valentino. “At the end of the second or third year, they are playing as good as anyone else. The ability to learn

**New Horizons Band,
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an instrument later in life works. You can learn starting in your 70s, even, in the right environment.”

One of the most common objections band members hear from those they try to encourage to participate is this: “I am too old to start learning something new.” 74-year-old clarinetist Larry Hellenberg is having none of that. “A lot of people I try to encourage to join us wonder, ‘How can I start now, at my age?’ And I try to explain to them that yes, you can because we are all doing it,” he said.

Then there’s the joy of playing music in and of itself. “You come together to play a song, and it feels great when you come together to play a song,” Valentino said.

Another benefit: Being together among other people who love music. “It is wonderful being part of the community that may not have come together in any other way,” said Ledwidge.

A Seat on Stage

On the opposite coast, the Pacific Symphony is starting an initiative all its own to open the stage to the community’s amateur musicians: The Side-by-Side program.

Open to all musicians over the age of 24, the Side-by-Side program seats up to 60 community amateur musicians with the professionals of the Pacific Symphony for two one-hour sessions on stage at the René and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall in Santa Ana, Calif. The sessions will consist of a 45-minute rehearsal, followed by 15 minutes of performance of selected movements from Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.” The performances are free and open to the public.

“There are many, many terrific and dedicated community ensembles which are comprised mostly or entirely of adults,” said Molly Buzick Pontin, manager of arts-X-press and community engagement for the Pacific Symphony. “So there are generally opportunities for people of all ages to play in some great groups. But the special events—the chances to learn from or work with master musicians—are something that become much rarer once one has finished college or grad school.”

The Side-by-Side program is designed to address that need, she says. “This is something we have wanted to do for a very long time, because when you are a kid and in youth ensembles, there are all kinds of opportunities to play and train with master musicians,” said Pontin. “But those opportunities dry



Carl St. Clair and the Pacific Symphony.

up once you are an adult, so we saw this as an opportunity to engage older adults who are amateur musicians.”

The performances are scheduled for May 16, 2011.

Pontin is anticipating a big response from the community’s amateur musicians. “We are talking to conductors of community ensembles of Orange County to spread the word. They have been hugely enthusiastic, as the musicians have an opportunity to play with the symphony and are energized by the opportunity,” she said. “The conductors have been very excited. I am a former conductor of a community ensemble myself, and an opportunity like this is a terrific tool for maintaining vitality in any adult setting. There are mental, physical, intellectual and social benefits to a program like this.”

Key to the program’s launch is MetLife Foundation’s support. “We could not do without them,” says Pontin. “We are a per-service orchestra, so our players are paid for each performance. The more work they do, the more we pay them. We also pay rent to the concert hall whenever we play there. So MetLife Foundation’s support enables us to keep the participation fee low so everyone can participate, while still putting on a really great program.” ■