

MUSIC FOR LIFE

Music educators can help meet the musical, social, and health needs of adults by creating new communities of music makers.

BY ROY ERNST

The Grand Masters Series is an ongoing feature offering the opportunity for MEJ readers to learn more from or become acquainted for the first time with those special individuals who have led our profession with distinction during their music careers. It is also an opportunity for senior members of our profession to share their insights relative to what they have seen and experienced in music education.

This month's article, "Music for Life," was prompted by a nomination that included the following words, "Although it is the rage to push for music education at the earliest moments of a person's life, due to the pioneering efforts of Roy Ernst, successful attempts at music making are also being extended well beyond a person's retirement years."

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and instrumental methods. Ernst began his career teaching instrumental music in elementary and secondary schools in Michigan, and he was a member of the applied faculty at Wayne State University in Detroit. He received his B.S. and M.S. degrees from Wayne State University and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He received the President's Arts Achievement Award from Wayne State University in 1994. Ernst was also on faculties at Georgia State University and the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in Sydney, Australia.

Publications by Ernst include books and articles on conducting, flute performance, and music education. He is the founding director of the Aesthetic Education Institute in Rochester, New York. Sometimes called the "Pied Piper of music for senior citizens," he conducts frequently at New Horizons Institutes, which are national and international events for New Horizons Band members.

—Mark Fonder, series editor

One of the frontiers of music education is service to people outside traditional K-12 school settings. I'm going to focus on the need to create new programs for adults of all ages, since this is the goal of a new project I direct called Music for Life,¹

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Roy Ernst

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funded by the National Association of Band Instrument Manufacturers and the National Association of Music Merchants. The New Horizons Band project, which has the goal of creating entry and reentry points to music for older adults, continues under the larger umbrella of Music for Life. My own interest in beginning instruction for adults was influenced especially by Mary Hoffman, who made "Lifelong Learning" the theme of her MENC presidency, and by John Burley for his research in the late 1970s on instrumental music education for adults.

The leading edge of the Baby Boomer generation (with seventy-four million people) is just now reaching retirement age, increasing a population in which the number of people over sixty-five is already greater than the number of people under eighteen.² This demographic shift will be even more pronounced in the future.

Music education programs that create appropriate entry points for adult beginners and “returnees” have a good record of success. These programs include intergenerational choral and instrumental ensembles, group keyboard classes, Weekend Warriors (a program to reinvolve adult rock musicians), Tri-Tone jazz camps for adult amateurs, parent bands, faculty bands, chamber music, jazz bands, and New Horizons Bands and Orchestras (for people age fifty and above). In most locations, however, the opportunities are limited at best.

Quality of Life

Numerous retired adults have ideal conditions for learning music. Most have time that they can devote to new interests, and many can afford to pay for instruction and purchase instruments. A full schedule of music activities often helps to fill the void left after leaving careers. Retirees in the well-elderly category can look forward to many years of good health, and most want challenging and rewarding activities. For many people, their new music activities become one of the most important aspects of their lives.

The intrinsic qualities of making music have a high priority for most adults, who tend to be motivated by the music itself. Grades, chairs, festival ratings, competitions, and so forth are not factors in any situation that I know of.

Adults also value the social aspect of group music making. Gerontologists generally feel that when social opportunities decrease and people feel more isolated, their health declines. Music can provide an opportunity to meet new friends who already share common interests and goals, such as preparing for a concert or going to a music camp for adult amateurs.

A recent medical study at the

University of Miami School of Medicine and six other universities found that older adults who made music enjoyed measurable health benefits.³ Participants in the study experienced decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation, an increased sense of well-being, and improvements in their immune systems. Although much more research is needed, the conclusions of this study agree with a great deal of anecdotal evidence. In addition, there is abundant evidence that the “use it or lose it” principle applies to our minds as well as to our bodies. The constant intellectual challenge of music supports good mental abilities.

The human qualities of music also provide a good counterbalance to the world of technology. As people spend more and more time isolated at their computers and alone in office cubicles, the need to come together with other people for a significant reason becomes greater than ever.



Most adults report that they love to practice, and they do so regularly.



Entry and Reentry Points to Music Education

We see many adults who sing and play in community groups getting a lot of enjoyment from making and sharing music. The vast majority of these people are continuing music participation that they started when they were in school. But what about all those who did not have a substantial music education in school (about 90 percent of the population) and all those who did have substantial music education but put it aside for many

years? I would venture that these two groups together probably constitute about 99 percent of the population.

Imagine a middle-aged adult who would like to learn clarinet and play in an ensemble. In almost all cases, the last entry point for doing that was elementary school. Yes, it would be possible to find a good private teacher and take lessons, but most people would need an ensemble experience to sustain their interest. Theoretically, this person could take lessons and then join his or her local community band, but in many cases this is not realistic. Community bands are often too advanced to serve as entry points for novice ensemble players. In many bands, almost everyone has a music degree, and auditions are required when openings occur.

Let’s compare music making to playing golf. Most golfers don’t start playing until they are well beyond their early adult years. If playing golf were limited mostly to people who began in school, the whole golf culture would be a very small part of what it now is. The substantial audience for professional golf is not a product of people taking golf appreciation classes or golf history classes—it’s a byproduct of people playing golf. Adults of any age feel that they can start golf, and beginning instruction is easily found. Similar conditions in music would create a much larger and more vital musical culture in which support for music education of all kinds would increase.

Model Programs

I believe that modeling is the most effective way of influencing change in music education. It may explain why there are so many successful bands, orchestras, and choruses. There is an almost endless supply of good models, and they receive a lot of visibility. There aren’t as many models of successful adult music education programs, and they are often not known beyond the school or community they serve. We need to find those that do exist and give them national visibility so that others can use them as models for starting their own programs.

In 1991, I started the first New Horizons Band.⁴ The goal was to create a model program emphasizing

entry and reentry points for adults aged fifty and above. Part of the band's purpose was to gain some visibility for the concept and gather information that would help others create their own version of the model. Nine years later, there are more than fifty similar programs in the United States and Canada, and the number continues to grow. Through our new program, Music for Life, we will create a similar process for other kinds of models. When good models are found, Music for Life will give them national visibility and will provide information that will help in starting similar programs. Where the need for a type of program is identified and no model exists, we will create a model, evaluate it, and then provide information about it.



The common factor in successful programs for adults is group instruction.



The first new Music for Life model program started in Hot Springs, Arkansas, last year, where the community band started offering beginning classes and added a New Horizons Band to create entry and reentry points for adults in its community. The main innovation of the Music for Life model is that a community band explored the various ways in which it and a New Horizons Band could support each other. A very successful program involving parents, teachers, administrators, secretaries, cooks, and the custodial staff was founded at the Northwestern Middle School in Fulton County, where teacher Marcia Laird includes them all in an annual "flashback" concert that is the hit of the year.

Adult Learners

Both aging and the way adults learn are very individual. Some adults at the age of eighty have very active and independent lives, while others need assisted care. Still, there are some patterns. A very small number of adults with arthritis or other similar conditions may need to make small changes in how instruments are held. I found, surprisingly, that denture problems for wind players are not very common. The most frequent problem for senior adults is hearing loss—a problem that will probably show up at younger ages because of the increasing frequency of loud sounds, both musical and nonmusical. Placing players with hearing problems closer to the front of an ensemble helps them to hear instructions and other performers. Closed-loop audio systems of the type sometimes provided in professional performance venues may also help.

Sometimes it's difficult for adults to share music parts, especially if one person has bifocals and the other doesn't. The solution is simply to provide separate parts for each person. Some adults enlarge their parts by photocopying them if the notation is too small.

Adults have many special strengths. Most adults report that they love to practice, and they do so regularly. Singing in a group is comfortable and enjoyable for most adults; so singing can become a main mode of instruction. The band leader can simply say, "Let's all sing it. Now let's play it." Adults have many years of music in their memories. That becomes a point of reference for sensing how music should sound. When music that they already know is included in their classes, they move ahead in leaps.

Adults are involved because they choose to be. Serious discipline problems are nonexistent, although there is plenty of humor that can cause short disruptions—with everyone enjoying a good laugh. Like everyone else, adults want to learn in a situation that is comfortable, nurturing, and enjoyable. They want their conductor to be a positive person with a good sense of humor, and they don't want to be intimidated or embarrassed. A good

general rule for adults (and children) is "Your best is always good enough."

Creating an inclusive rather than an exclusive ensemble provides opportunities for many more people and has its own satisfactions. Making inclusiveness a high priority may require adjusting some performance goals, but by no means rules out satisfying and even exciting performances. Audiences like a relaxed performance style with some informal talk. Controlling the obsession to be perfect can be liberating for everyone, especially the conductor, and can make music more enjoyable for all concerned. The difference between china dishes and pottery dishes is an apt analogy. China is usually more perfect, but pottery is also beautiful, and the imperfections are part of its charm. For most conductors at any level, it's important to be able to make a musically convincing and satisfying whole out of parts that are not perfect.



Creating a new ensemble is a personal legacy from teacher to community.



Group Instruction

The common factor in successful programs for adults is group instruction. Most interested adults want to learn music in groups, and they want to perform with ensembles. Many adults who start with group instruction also take private lessons to increase their progress and enjoyment.

Group music education in K–12 schools is a great success story. Many music teachers probably don't really appreciate how unique and important it is. Adults want music education that is very much like school music pro-

grams, and many features of school music can be adapted to create new opportunities for adults. Public school music educators already know most of what is needed to create successful programs for adults.

Group instruction is a specialty of the music education profession—we generally do it much better than other musicians. We learn, practice, and evaluate methods for group instruction, and we observe and emulate other teachers who successfully use group instruction. One of the important skills of group instruction is dealing with a wide range of abilities in one ensemble. Some of the repertoire needs to be appropriate for the advanced players or singers. When that is being performed, those who are less advanced can learn by taking small, gradual steps, such as the following:

- Just listen to the music. Being able to hear it is the most important step in being able to perform it.

- Listen, keep a beat, and feel the meter.

- Listen, keep a beat, and say rhythm syllables or pitch names.

- Listen, say syllables, and put your fingers over the notes on the instrument without actually playing it.

- Listen, keep a beat, and play or sing what you can.

- Playing or singing incorrectly is not progress. It is impossible to hear it right at the same time that you are performing it wrong.

This step-by-step approach can keep everyone involved and learning at his or her own rate, while the ensemble is able to play music that is interesting for the more advanced participants.

Some composers and arrangers include a very easy part for each instrument so that beginners can play with more advanced players. Some teachers create their own easy parts. The demand for such publications will grow, and I hope that publishers will respond.

When performing music that is most appropriate for beginning players, the more advanced players can be challenged to do the following:

- Make the best sound you've ever made.

- Feel the meter and tonality and express it in the music.

- Focus on precision—long notes that are exactly the right length. Feel the subdivision of the beats.

- Examine every aspect of breath support, posture, hand position, and tone production.

- Shape phrases with feeling and conviction.

- Play by memory.

Playing a simple piece beautifully is always a great challenge—one that can bring a lot of satisfaction to all players and improve important aspects of their musicianship.

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There are some special challenges for adult choral groups. One choral conductor told me, "I think bands and orchestras for senior adults are great, but senior choruses can never be successful because voices worsen as they age." I don't believe that. I believe voices become *different* with age. We need to define the special strengths of older singers and then create new arrangements, compositions, and methods that take advantage of what they can do. In many cultures, the oldest singers are the most revered because of the wisdom and years of life experience that they bring to making music. A seniors'

choral group in Iowa City alludes to that by calling itself "The Voices of Experience." I love hearing this group sing because they really do offer something special.

Teacher Education and Benefits

Music teacher education schools that offer a wide range of classes and ensembles for adults can give their preservice students an opportunity for firsthand experience in serving the adult population in new ways. Some music students may want to teach, but they don't want to teach children in schools. For them, new models of adult education create new career options. Many teachers, having had a good experience teaching adult amateurs in college, go on to start similar programs wherever they teach.

People who become involved in adult ensembles support music education in the schools by their example of choosing to be active music makers. They tend to admire and support music teachers. One senior adult musician told me, "I heard the elementary concert in my district. Wow! Those kids are good, and the teacher is wonderful!"

Adult ensembles sometimes share concerts with elementary and secondary school ensembles, and in intergenerational models the sharing is ongoing, leading to rich personal and musical experiences for everyone. Sharing concerts brings out the best in both younger and older musicians. The presence of musicians on stage ranging from school age to old age gives the community the strongest possible message about the lifelong value of music making.

Getting Involved

There are many ways to get involved in Music for Life. If you have a program that creates entry or reentry points for adults or if you know of such a program in your area, send information about it to me at New Horizons, 201 Pine Street, Corning, New York 14830, or e-mail me at rojernst@aol.com. Also contact me if you would like to start a New Horizons band or orchestra or create and evaluate a new model.

Many opportunities exist for research and development in music education for adults. We need additional research about musical and nonmusical outcomes. We need to know more about how adults learn music. Leadership is needed to create new professional organizations and networks. Instruction books geared to adults. Events are needed that bring adults together for music making such as music camps, Elderhostel programs, and classes in collegiate settings are needed. Many adults who sing or play an instrument want to go on to study other subjects, such as music theory, music history, and composition. These classes need to be adapted to serve adult amateurs.



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Starting an ensemble that creates a new entry point brings a special satisfaction. As it grows and brings happiness to many people, the teacher who started it will know that none of it would be happening without his or her initiative. Creating a new ensemble is a personal legacy from teacher to community.

I teach and conduct senior adults on a regular basis and help others start new programs for senior adults. My career satisfaction has never been greater, and the power of music has never been more clear to me. I also have memorable moments. One

occurred when the New Horizons Band (more than a hundred players) of the Eastman School of Music played its annual spring concert. When a mom or dad has recently taken up music and is playing a concert, their children make a big effort to be there—with the grandchildren. About 1,500 people were in attendance, many of them from out of state. It was during a moment of silence between sections of a piece that we all heard a young voice from the audience shout, “Yeah, Grandma!”

Notes

1. The term “Music for Life” was registered and put in the public domain by R. Gabe Ireland, president of Jupiter Band Instruments, Inc.

2. Annual Population Estimates by Age Group and Sex, Selected Years from 1990 to 2000, United States Census Bureau, May 26, 2000 (www.cache.census.gov/population/estimates/nation/intfile2-1.txt).

3. “Scientific Findings Show That Music Making Helps Make Active Older Americans Healthier,” American Music Conference, press release, April 27, 1999.

4. The New Horizons Band project was supported by the National Association of Music Merchants, the National Association of Band Instrument Manufacturers, the University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music, and the University of Rochester’s School of Medicine and Dentistry. ■

The “Grand Masters” series welcomes suggestions for featured writers. If you have a nominee whom you believe should be recognized by this series, please contact Mark Fonder, Music Education Department, School of Music, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY 14850. E-mail: fonder@ithaca.edu. Nominees should have a distinguished record in teaching, publication, and leadership.