

Why you can and should engage in music as you age

<https://stayingsharp.aarp.org/articles/learning-music-after-50/>

Roy Ernst remembers the first few times he conducted an orchestra full of novice adult musicians.

“When we played a piece that was recognizable, people were like, ‘Oh, my goodness, they are really good,’ ” says Ernst, a professor emeritus of music education at the University of Rochester in New York. “One advantage we had was that expectations were so low.”

It’s not just audience members who are skeptical when adult beginners take the stage. Would-be singers and musicians often face their own doubts.

“We often think about people participating in music only if they’ve done it earlier in life,” says Julene Johnson, associate director of the University of California, San Francisco, Institute for Health & Aging. “It’s a little bit of a myth that people later in life can’t do it.”

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Not only can we do it, we probably should do it: Making music is a good brain-stimulating activity at any age, according to a report on music and the brain from [AARP’s Global Council on Brain Health \(GCBH\)](#).

“We now have a number of studies suggesting that engaging in music late in life is not only good for your brain but good for your social and emotional well-being,” says Johnson, who was among the experts who wrote the report.

In a study led by Johnson, older adults — many with no musical experience — joined choirs at senior centers. After six months, the singers felt less lonely and more engaged in life. And while the singers did not show improvements in thinking skills, other studies point to cognitive benefits. Researchers at the University of South Florida found improvements in mental processing speed, verbal fluency and other cognitive measures among adults ages 60 to 85 who took piano lessons over several months. In those studies, people were instructed to practice a minimum of three hours per week — which means the dose of music learning may

have been higher for the piano players than for the weekly singers in her study, Johnson says.

Go to [Music and Brain Health](#) to learn more about how music can trigger memories, lift your mood and more.

Music lessons belong on the long list of learning experiences likely to bolster brain health, says neuroscientist and musician Daniel Levitin, another contributor to the GCBH report.

“Your willingness to try new things and be open to new experiences,” whether it’s making music, taking language lessons or tackling new puzzles and books, is a key to healthy aging, says Levitin, a professor emeritus at McGill University in Canada and founding dean of arts and humanities at the Minerva Schools at the Keck Graduate Institute in San Francisco. Such experiences matter because our brains make new connections throughout life, he says.

Levitin’s own grandmother learned to play an electronic keyboard at age 80 and played every day until she was 96. “She didn’t become a concert pianist, but that doesn’t matter,” he says.

Solo lessons and practice are beneficial, but playing or singing in time with a group is an especially rich experience, says Ernst, the conductor who works with novice older musicians. Ernst is the founder of New Horizons, an organization of community bands and orchestras that teach members of any age to play. New Horizons groups are in nearly 200 communities in the United States, Canada and elsewhere, he says.

Community choirs also are widespread and especially accessible since you don’t need to rent or buy an instrument. Yet the biggest obstacle for many adult learners is not the cost of a guitar, but overcoming the idea that they’ll never be good enough. Ernst hears the same childhood stories again and again: “My father said I had no talent ... my music teacher told me to move my lips but not to sing.” Those lingering insecurities are irrelevant, he says. “I can tell you that the success rate is pretty close to 100 percent,” Ernst says. “By success, I mean being able to play at a level that brings a lot of satisfaction.” —Kim Painter