

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN TO MAKE MUSIC

-By Dr. Alicia Ann Clair and Karl T. Bruhn © 1999

Perhaps one of the best ways to be well is to remain interested in life and to participate fully in it. The mode of participation is a matter of individual choice, however, music making can be central to that which stimulates interest and motivates participation.

Participating and learning to make one's own music appeals to people of all ages. However, it is often especially appealing to older adults who value wellness and prevention of disease, because involvement with music tends to promote physical and psychological well-being. When people have success with music, boredom is relieved and efforts are directed toward personal productivity and pleasurable results. In addition, feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction tend to dominate feelings of pain and discomfort. People experience positive emotional responses and report that generally they "feel good."

Many healthy older adults have the time and energy to pursue a host of interests, including music making. Some have long desired to develop musical skills or to relearn a music skill acquired earlier. Regardless of the age at which people begin, music making provides great potential for enhanced quality of life and subsequent wellness.

Ideally, people learn to make music in their early years, often in elementary school. Unfortunately, if they don't have the inclination or opportunity to begin at that entry level they are, too often, unlikely to do so later in their lives...primarily, because they are under the mistaken belief that they are "too old."

However, writing in *MUSICIA*, Research Notes, Dr. Norman M. Weinberger, Center for the Neurobiology of Learning & Memory, University of California at Irvine, is quick to point out that it is "never too late" for music. He goes on to say, "It is an established fact that the adult brain is perfectly capable of learning and remembering music throughout life span. A well known case in point is the New Horizons Band started by Dr. Roy Ernst, Chairman of the Department of Music Education at the renowned Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Dr. Ernst has formed a band comprised largely of adults between the ages of about 60 to 85, the majority of whom never had previous music lessons. With instruction and encouragement, the New Horizons Band had achieved excellence in performance, not to mention the great pleasure and happiness afforded both its members and audiences."

Dr. Frederick Tims, professor and chair of Music Therapy at Michigan State University says, "We feel strongly that abundant healthy benefits can be achieved by older adults who learn to make music in a supportive, socially enjoyable setting." Researchers believe this to be the case because over and above the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of learning to make music, participating in supportive, socially enjoyable music classes provides the opportunity for social interaction in a totally non-threatening environment.

The fact is that the capacity to learn music remains viable throughout life and research indicates clearly that older adults retain their musical abilities. Furthermore, these abilities often remain strong through the seventh, eighth and ninth decades.

Clearly, music making and wellness is an idea whose time has come, and as Dr. Weinberger points out, it is "never too late" for music.

Dr. Alicia Ann Clair is Director of Music Therapy, University of Kansas.
Karl Bruhn serves as presidential advisor to the American Music Therapy Association.