

## **Health Benefits –**

excerpts from the Late Starters handbook:

**‘Music Engagement at mid-life on the Guitar’** by Bruce Stewart

### **Health benefits of music engagement**

#### **Personal Health Benefits**

Health issues are at the heart of late starter music engagement. When asked to give an account of their experience of learning my adult students conveyed the deep satisfaction and joy of their newfound interest. For them, the task of learning music, once thought to be impossible, is now a reality – their feelings of doubt overturned by new confidence that music making [how ever simple it may be] is not only achievable, but thoroughly engaging and rewarding. More than just the acquisition of new skills, students reported with exuberance, the thrill of playing and their gladness of this late opportunity. Their attitude, and in some cases, their countenance, reflected new meaning, new purpose, and new insight to their day-to-day existence. One student reported:

*“I believe music is especially important for me at this time of my life, as I have come to that point where people my age are questioning their purpose in life. My son is grown up and living his own adult life, and work, whilst satisfying, is no longer the driving force behind my existence. In short I need something that truly interests me to keep me focused, happy and occupied in my spare time.”*  
*Nigel Baker 49yrs. May 2005*

Because our physical, mental and emotional health are connected, there is little doubt that music making in mid-life, has positive health ramifications for adults (James, 2004)[p 3]. Biological stress responses – depression, poor immune system, diabetes and high blood pressure, are causally linked evidence of anxiety, insecurity and low self-esteem (James, 2004)[p 5]. By engaging in mentally stimulating learning, a range of physical and psychological conditions can be offset (Hurworth, 1995)[p 44]. The function of education is no longer simply the ‘preparation of youth for adult life’, it’s an important health benefit for adulthood (Myers, 1992)[p 2]. Studies at the University of Miami School of Medicine have found that adults engaging in music making, enjoy substantial health benefits (Ernst, 2001)[p 3]. Music engagement not only gives an added sense of purpose, it also encourages a healthy outlook, and a sense of competence and empowerment, to deal with stressful situations (Myers, 1992)[p 3].

While mental activity is essential for the development of the individual at mid-life, music engagement in particular, provides wider benefits which have a positive impact on the community (Hurworth, 1995)[p 39] . We need to keep our minds active - use it, or lose it. By maintaining an active intellectual life, we can carry our mental abilities well into our eighties with little or no loss (Hurworth, 1995) [p 42].

## ***New Approaches in Music Education***

### ***Traditional Role of Education***

Today, adults can benefit from education methods that were non-existent in the 70's. For too long music educators have had to justify music as a legitimate component of basic education - as yet it is still not valued as a resource for tertiary admission (Myers, 1992)[p 2]. With adults now constituting a majority of the world's population, the primary purpose of education can no longer simply be the preparation of youth for adulthood (Myers, 1992)[p 2]. Increasing numbers of adults are turning to education for both job-related needs and quality of life needs (Myers, 1992)[p 2].

### ***Adult Education***

Although teacher education programmes have provided little in the way of adult-training insight, music educators recognizing this need, have begun to adapt their teaching methods to serve adult amateurs (Myers, 1992, Ernst, 2001)[p 3][p 8]. The rapid rate of change in society, together with the growing aging population, has led to a new focus of education, capable of meeting the needs of people of all ages (Ernst, 2001)[p 2]. Presently there are many opportunities for the development of new educational aids for adult learners and during the coming years, instructional books geared to adults will be more and more commonplace.

### ***Life transition education***

Education for adults should be designed to encourage independence – providing new opportunities, far in advance of those experienced in high school (Hurworth, 1995, Myers, 1992)[p 39][p 3]. Baby boomers forced society to think about the needs of adolescents during the 60's – they now are forcing society to think about the needs of adults (Myers, 1992)[p 3].

## **Conditions for Learning**

### **Ideal Conditions**

Although adults are frequently concerned about the toll of the aging process on their ability to learn, they nevertheless possess ideal conditions for music making.

#### **These conditions include:**

- good physical health
  - more time, with diminished family responsibilities
  - can afford instruction and purchase of instruments
  - often give high priority to new music activities
  - have a strong desire for learning
  - desire to be challenged and think in new ways
  - have independent approaches to learning
  - are motivated by the music itself or value the music they learn
  - adults are not interested in grades, ratings or competitions [extrinsic]
  - self motivated
  - are responsible for their choice to learn
  - often want to fulfill a suppressed or previously denied desire to play
  - carry a desire to know what it means to think musically
  - often become lifelong learners
  - learn well by controlling the pace of learning
  - often desire to study related subjects like theory and composition
- (Wlodkowski, 1993, Ernst, 2001, Myers, 1992, Hurworth, 1995)  
[p 6][p 5][p 4]

### **Special strengths**

- most adults enjoy their practice and practice regularly
  - they have many years of music stored in their memories useful for interpreting the music they learn
  - despite starting slowly, they can move ahead in bounds, given the right cues
  - discipline problems are non-existent
  - are more likely than younger learners to recognize their need for learning and practicing
  - can energize their teachers through their enthusiasm
  - have more clearly established learning goals
  - devise their own strategies for improving their performance
  - often only require guidance rather than heavily structured tuition
  - understand the purpose of long-term goal of simple exercises better than children
- (Wlodkowski, 1993, Ernst, 2001, Myers, 1992, Hurworth, 1995)  
[p 6][p 5][p 4]

## ***Progressive advantage***

The attributes of adult learners far outweigh their weaknesses. Due to their strengths I refer to them as the most progressive students, maintaining unwavering enthusiasm and steadily gaining ground. Much like the tortoise in the anecdotal fable, adults are rarely without motivation – moving slowly but steadily forward. Younger learners inevitably bound forward like the hare, but are more often regularly distracted by new or popular influences. Late starters, no matter how incremental their advancement, are progressive learners transforming their skills over longer periods of time. Through their special strengths, they compare favourably with younger learners and by virtue of their experience they may in fact have a progressive advantage.

## **Bibliography**

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