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Journal Reports

Orchestras Welcome Older Musicians

Across the U.S., Ensembles Are Forming for Older Players—Seasoned or Not

By Julie Halpert

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In concert, the West Michigan New Horizons Music Ensembles of Grand Rapids, Mich. Photograph by Jana Boes

Anne L. Taylor loved playing the cello while studying music as a college student. But when she decided, at age 27, to enter medical school, she sold her instrument.

"I said that part of my life was over," she recalls.

Today, she's playing the cello again—as a member of the Adelphi Orchestra in River Edge, N.J. Forty of the group's 50 members, including Dr. Taylor, are over age 50. She squeezes in practice and rehearsals around her job as a cardiologist and vice dean for academic affairs at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York.

After working a 10-hour day, "I can come home exhausted, end up playing two hours and the sense of fatigue has just drained away," she says. "It's enormously gratifying."

The Sounds of Music

To find an orchestra near you:

 **CONTACT** music schools at local colleges and universities.

 **ASK** at local music stores.

 **LOOK** for area concert listings.

 **CONSULT** the League of American Orchestras, which maintains listings of groups across the country at americanorchestras.org.

 **CONSULT** the New Horizons International Music Association, which helps individuals and groups across the country learn music and organize orchestras, at newhorizonsmusic.org.

The Wall Street Journal

Across the U.S., older Americans are dusting off instruments—or starting anew—to play in orchestras. Figures are scarce, but music directors and others in the field report a significant increase in the number of amateur orchestras and chamber groups made up solely of people 50 and older. At the same time, older adults are populating ensembles of mixed ages.

Some, like Dr. Taylor, are playing an instrument they shelved during work and child-rearing years; others are picking up clarinets and violins for the first time. Participants and educators cite several reasons for the trend: social engagement, the satisfaction that comes from mastering a skill in later life and, for many, a second chance.

Young adults frequently "skirt around the experience that music could be," says Carolyn Grant, 54, executive director of the Museum of Making Music in Carlsbad, Calif. "We have other distractions, or someone is pushing you to do it. But it's not a lost cause. If you couldn't find the door earlier, here's an opportunity to try it again. Maybe this is your door."

Practice Is Fun Now

Requirements for participating in an orchestra vary, but most hold at least two hours of rehearsals a week, and members are expected to practice on their own. Some members also take private lessons. The orchestras usually perform at least two major concerts a year, in addition to smaller community

events. Fees (to cover the cost of music arrangements, for instance) are nominal, usually under \$200 annually.

New Horizons International Music Association in Tarpon Springs, Fla., is a nonprofit group that helps would-be musicians and orchestras find their footing. Started in 1991 by Roy Ernst, a professor emeritus at the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester in Rochester, N.Y., the association has helped set up 29 New Horizons orchestras around the country, involving roughly 1,100 members.

Even adults with little or no musical background can learn to read music, play an instrument and join others who are taking the same steps, Mr. Ernst says. Older adults, in particular, tend to be good students, have a lifetime of music in their memories and—unlike many children who are pressured by parents to play—love to practice.

[Enlarge Image](#)



The Cincinnati New Horizons Orchestra. Photograph by Betty Ann Gottlieb

A musical instrument, he adds, is "like a bicycle for the brain," providing a mental workout that helps combat the toll of aging. "I do not expect to ever see a virtuoso emerge, but there are some extremely good players."

Finding Inspiration

He points to David Stern, who is 63. Dr. Stern, an associate professor of anesthesiology at the University of Rochester Medical Center, took up the violin at age 55 when he began playing with the Rochester New Horizons orchestra. When he started, Dr. Stern recalls, he produced a sound "that the cat hated worse than the vacuum cleaner." But the same nimble fingers that allowed him to insert catheters into patients served him well on the violin.

He now plays with three additional orchestras, spending 10 hours a week practicing (he has cut his work schedule to three days a week) and playing in 10 concerts a year. He finds inspiration, he says, in his many fellow musicians—some well into their 80s and 90s. They drive to rehearsals, haul their instruments about and enjoy good physical and mental health. "Music plays a role in that," he says.

Some groups start informally and build slowly. Ms. Grant, the museum director, founded the North Coast Strings six years ago after taking up the cello and seeking other musicians to play with her. By

word-of-mouth alone, she has seen her group, with roughly half its members over age 50, grow to 55 people from 20.



The Brigham Young University New Horizons Orchestra in Provo, Utah Photograph by Elizabeth Bean

"If I advertised, I could start these orchestras all over San Diego County," she says. She remembers the first time all the members played a note at the same time. "My eyes welled up with tears. That's what it's all about, everybody playing together to make a beautiful sound as one unit."

Other orchestras attracting older adults are geared to more seasoned musicians. The Adelphi Orchestra requires an audition, and every member studied music in college. The Senior Pops Orchestra of Long Island, based in Melville, N.Y., has 65 members, many of whom were music teachers. Stephen Michael Smith, the conductor and music director, says membership is up: He has 40 string players, twice as many as when he started with the orchestra four years ago.

Music directors, when asked what advice they would give would-be musicians, are all but unanimous: Jump in with both feet.

Learning to Make Mistakes

Adults, as opposed to children, "are far less forgiving of themselves" when starting out, says Andrew Dabczynski, a music professor at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, who directs the school's New Horizons Orchestra and its approximately four dozen members. "They know what Yo-Yo Ma sounds like, and they can get frustrated," he says.

"But we defuse that with humor," he adds. "We laugh with each other and learn that it's OK to make mistakes. And you build the courage to do more."

Yes, "music can be intimidating," says Nancy Summers, music director of West Michigan New Horizons Music Ensembles in Grand Rapids. But "we'll teach you how to put the instrument together, how to read music, how to create your first sound. That's what keeps people coming back: They can measure their success. And they're part of a team."

Many participants point to the relationships formed in an orchestra as one of the best reasons to join one. Trudy Cochran in Setauket, N.Y., first picked up a cello at age 61. Now 78, she plays in the Senior Pops and the Island Symphony Orchestra in Brentwood, N.Y. A retired computer

programmer, she says playing in an orchestra provided solace when her husband died a year and a half ago. "There were 200 people to console me," she recalls. "Every time I walked into the room, I got a hug."

Amy Dennison, assistant dean and director of the College-Conservatory of Music Preparatory Department at the University of Cincinnati, started a New Horizons orchestra there in January. She describes members mingling over a snack break of chocolate-dipped strawberries. "They'll say, 'How was your trip? We missed you. Did you get this piece of music?' " It's akin to a "quilting group," she says.

Dr. Taylor at Columbia likes the term "no-fault collegiality": playing with adults of all levels in a noncompetitive setting to make the best music possible. And there's a bonus. "As an 'instrumental restarter,' playing in an orchestra offers a bit of cover when you're just rebuilding your skills," she says in an email. "If you can't quite play a portion of the part, someone else will!"

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