

living WELL

MAKING THE MOST OF THE SENIOR YEARS

It's Music to Their Ears

Learning to play an instrument has multiple benefits — at any age

By BOB YOUNG
SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTIONS WRITER

Ever fantasize about dusting off that trombone you played in high school or learning to play the guitar for the first time? The benefits can go far beyond the joy of jamming in a band. A recent medical study at the University of Miami, in conjunction with Michigan State University, claims playing music can reduce anxiety and depression as people age, as well as boost energy, concentration and sex drive.

"We feel very strongly that the work we are doing here suggests that abundant health benefits can be achieved by older people learning to play music in a supportive, socially enjoyable setting," said Frederick Tims, chair of music therapy at Michigan State and a principal investigator on the study.

Music making has clearly struck a chord with baby boomers as well as others. The nonprofit New Horizons Band Institute, the brainchild of Roy Ernst of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, has launched 110 community bands for the 50-plus crowd across the U.S. and Canada. The bands have produced more than 5,000 musicians — many of whom had never picked up an instrument before.

The band members have discovered music's multitude of benefits firsthand.

"Reading music and playing an instrument are wonderful and effective ways to exercise your brain and stay sharp," said Gretchen Ostergren, a surgical nurse who plays French horn for the Prime Time Band, a branch of the New Horizons Band Institute based in Santa Barbara. "So many different parts of the brain are involved. And the feeling of so many people working together to make one beautiful sound is just incredible. I suppose it's comparable to playing a team sport."

A colleague who plays in the band sparked the 52-year-old's interest in joining the Prime Time Band, and Ostergren remembers counting down the months until she turned 50 and was allowed to join. The Prime Time Band is a local fixture in the Santa Barbara area, playing free community concerts in school auditoriums and parks. The band plays as a complete orchestra with about 80 musicians and also breaks off into smaller groups, including the Dixie Dads and Saxophone Quintet. The Prime Timers perform lots of Dixieland, swing and pop standards from the '40s through the '60s.

Another 45 members, mostly beginners, are in the Prime Time Silver Band, almost a farm team where first-timers are welcome and helped along by more experienced players. When there's an opening in the main group, a Silver Band member fills in.

Prime Time member Ed Piceno, 62, said playing the trombone has increased his lung capacity. The hand and arm movements also have made his upper body much stronger.

"Playing music keeps us young and healthy in lots of ways," the Santa Barbara resident said. "We joke about how we used to sit in the audience and listen to our children's recitals, and now they're sitting out there listening to us. Because of me, now my 10-year-old grandson wants to learn the trombone. Any chance to get together with your grandson is a great thing."

The camaraderie, a sure-fire remedy for loneliness and boredom, might well be the most important benefit, said fellow band member Lee Schmedes, 78, of Goleta, who took up the trombone for the first time five years ago.



"The feeling of so many people working together to make one beautiful sound is just incredible."

- Gretchen Ostergren

MUSIC: Learn a new skill

Continued from Page 1

"We're like a big family," Schmedes said. "We socialize a lot and have picnics and banquets together. If one of us falls ill, the rest are right there to give our support."

Prime Time Band director and founder J.B. Vander Ark, 71, agreed that the social aspect is a big attraction for New Horizons members.

"The first goal of our band is to have fun," said the Santa Barbara resident, who has brought a lifetime of experience as a music teacher to his beloved 10-year-old band.

"Practice and rehearsals are very important, though. We work hard but we're not at all competitive with each other. We do it strictly for the enjoyment, and we don't make a dime," he said.

Each member even pays \$25 a month to play in the band, according to Vander Ark. The money is used to buy sheet music, rent rehearsal and performing space and pay travel expenses, as necessary.

To join a New Horizons band, you don't need to know how to read music.

"Most of us relearned instruments we played as kids, out about one-fourth of our members are completely new to music," said Vander Ark.

As with many versatile Prime Timers, band manager Kathy Bartkowiak, 72, of Santa Barbara, went on to learn new instruments — the piano, organ and accordion — aside



The Prime Time Band, which plays as a complete orchestra, is a local fixture in the Santa Barbara area, playing free concerts in school auditoriums and parks.

'We work hard but we're not at all competitive with each other.'
— J.B. Vander Ark



from her primary instrument, the clarinet, which she played for three years in high school.

"There is a real sense of accomplishment in learning a new skill," she said. "Taking up a new instrument for the first time, or learning [one] all over again, can be a great source of

pleasure."

The closest New Horizon bands to Los Angeles are in Santa Barbara and Carlsbad. People who would like to strike up their own bands should contact Roy Ernst, founder of New Horizons, at (607) 962-1125. For more information, visit the website at

www.newhorizonsband.com.

For information on the Prime Time Band, call J.B. Vander Ark at (805) 965-4755 or e-mail info@ptband.org. The website is www.ptband.org.

Bob Young is a freelance writer based in Glendale.

Some sound advice

Learning to play an instrument at any age can be a rewarding, enriching experience, but it's important to follow basic guidelines to avoid pitfalls, said Roy Ernst, founder and head administrator of New Horizons and a professor of music at Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester. Here is some advice from him:

■ "Choose an instrument that evokes strong feelings in you, if at all possible," Ernst said. "A student once told me there's something about a saxophone that gives him a certain warm feeling in his chest. Respect those feelings. It will make the experience so much more rewarding."

Physical conditions — mainly arthritis and dental problems — occasionally preclude certain instruments, but that's rare, Ernst said.

"If you really want to play a particular instrument, it can almost always be done," he said. "Many times certain physical limitations can be overcome, like with a shoulder harness to help support a saxophone."

■ If you want to hire a teacher for personal instruction, seek recommendations from experienced musicians and make sure the instructor meets the right criteria for your purposes.

"It's a good idea to find someone who has a lot of teaching experience and isn't simply a performer," he said. "Teachers who also have performing experience are best, but make sure they understand you're learning for pleasure, at your own pace and aren't interested in learning complex virtuoso pieces."

■ Rent an instrument in the beginning to minimize financial risk in case you have a change of heart down the line.

Many music stores have rent-to-own programs, with the monthly rental fee — normally from about \$30 to \$50 — applied to the eventual purchase price.

"So many people try to learn on poor-quality used instruments and get discouraged quickly," he said. "But it's not them, it's the instrument holding them back."

■ Be careful if you buy a used instrument — especially at garage sales. Similar to having a mechanic evaluate a used car before sealing the deal, have the instrument checked out. "Take it to a repair shop to have it looked at, or let a seasoned musician or music teacher inspect it," he said. "Ask the seller if it's OK to get it checked out first. If the answer is no, go elsewhere."

Unlike a used car, however, quality instruments age very well when taken care of properly and usually hold or even increase in value over decades.

"I bought a flute for \$800 in 1960 and sold it for \$3,000 in 1980," Ernst said. "It's possible to find . . . quality used instruments, regardless of their age."

— BOB YOUNG