

How Music Connects Us to Life

by

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Music connects us to life in four important ways. It connects people to the past through listening to music that brings back memories and feelings from the past. It could be *Pomp and Circumstance* bringing back the memories of a graduation day, a piece bringing back memories of a wedding, or some other music related to an important life event. I recently attended a Barry Manilow concert in which people loved singing music from the 70s.

Music connects people to the present by playing or listening to music right now. It could be singing in a choir, playing in an orchestra or band, or listening to music that has special meaning.

Music connects musicians (anyone who regularly plays or sings music) to the future by practicing to perform a concert or go to a music camp. Musicians may practice to be able to perform a piece that represents personal accomplishment. I know one older person who aspires to play the Mozart clarinet concerto. There is a feeling of

accomplishment in a rehearsal, “That was good. We made a big improvement.”

Most of all, music connects us to other people. People who regularly sing or play in a group have a feeling of belonging. Feelings of loneliness decrease. Music groups become like good families, with people getting to know each other and caring for each other.

From the 1950s to the present, about twenty percent of high school students have participated in school music groups. That means that about twenty percent of adults need beginning instruction in order to participate in a music ensemble.

Before 1991, it was generally believed that playing a musical instrument was something that had to be learned in elementary school. If you missed that window of opportunity, you missed your chance. In 1991, I started a band for retirees, The New Horizons Band, at The Eastman School of Music with support from The National Association of Music Merchants. The purpose of New Horizons Music is to create an entry point to music making for adults, mainly retirees, by offering beginning instruction.

Some of the retired people who choose to start music instruction told me why they hadn't participated in their school music program. One said, when I wanted to be in the elementary band my dad said “I don't have any talent,

your mother doesn't have any talent, and you don't have any talent, so forget about learning how to play a trumpet." Another said, "My school vocal music teacher told me to move my lips but don't make a sound." Yet another said "I don't know if I can do this, but I want to try."

About 40 people joined the first New Horizons Band. The expectations could not have been lower. When we played the first piece that was recognizable there was a feeling of jubilation. When we played our first concert, I told the audience "Some of our musicians have only been playing for a few months and some will be playing solos tonight. I don't know when, but we will probably be hearing some people playing when there should be silence." My message to the musicians was "Your best is good enough." Now many New Horizons bands and orchestras are on the same level as good high school or even college ensembles.

The first New Horizons Band received a lot of national publicity. Older people learning to play instruments was big news, covered first by an article in *The New York Times*, a feature on the NBC "Today Show," and then followed by stories in many other many other major newspapers.

During the 30 plus years since 1991, the New Horizons Music movement grew to more than 200 bands and orchestras, involving more than 10,000 people in the United States, Canada and several other countries.

Now my goal is to create bands for veterans. Some veterans have difficulty adjusting to civilian life, they don't feel that they belong to anything, and sadly, about 24 veterans commit suicide every day.

I believe that belonging to a band would give a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and new friendships. They will be an important part of a team, working towards goals in the future. Like the rest of the adult population, most will need beginning instruction.

The first band for veterans is off to a very strong start at The University of Texas in San Antonio. It will be the model for starting bands for veterans in other locations, potentially making life better for thousands of veterans and reducing the suicide rate. My dream is that someday we will see a band for veterans marching in a presidential inauguration parade or The Rose Bowl Parade, experiencing the cheering of crowds as they march proudly in the parade.