

NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN AN INSTRUMENT

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If you have the urge to make music but never had lessons as a kid — or quit before you got any good — don't despair. Sure, most professional musicians started when they were young. But neuroscientists and music teachers alike say it's never too late. And it turns out, the biggest hurdles aren't stiff hands or an aging brain.

For adults, the desire to play an instrument is often awakened by a great piece of music. For filmmaker David Murdock, it was a tune called "George's Dilemma," performed by trumpet player Clifford Brown.

"The more I listened to him, the more I thought, well, maybe I could play this," Murdock says. "So, I bought myself a trumpet and an instruction book, and started teaching myself how to play."

But Murdock was living in a crowded apartment building in Manhattan and practicing quietly was a challenge.

"To really play well, you have to cut loose and blow," he says. "I got a mute, but that didn't work very well. So, I'd do things like blow into a pillow, or go into my closet and blow into my coats and clothes. But once in a while I'd practice really loudly."

One day he returned home from work and found that his apartment had been broken into. The door frame was splintered, and the door itself was practically ripped off the hinges. When he called the police and explained that the thief had taken the trumpet, the officer suggested that it might have been one of the neighbors.

And that, Murdock says, was the whole investigation. He never got another trumpet. He figured that was his last chance to learn it.

Norman Weinberger, a neuroscientist at University of California Irvine who has done pioneering research on the auditory system and the brain, says that while it's harder for the mature brain to learn an instrument, it's not impossible.

"A lot of people believe the brain isn't very plastic after puberty. In fact, the brain maintains its ability to change," Weinberger says. "Is it as easy to learn something when you're 65 as it is at 5? No. But can it be done? Yes."

For an adult beginner, it can sometimes feel like trying to learn Arabic and ice skating at the same time.

Think about it: When you're hunched over the piano or bowing a violin, you're using your muscles and most of your senses. And your brain is working really hard: You're reading the notes, counting out the rhythm and trying to keep a steady beat and make it sound like music.

That's why, unlike with language, there is no single music center in the brain — rather, there are a lot of them.

"When brain scans have been done of musicians, you find the enormity of the areas of the brain that are actually being activated," Weinberger explains.

Children are growing new brain cells all the time, so when they're learning music, some of those brain cells are devoted to playing their instrument. Adults, on the other hand, have to work with the brain cells they already have and create new connections, or synapses, between them.

Scot Hawkins, a piano teacher in Silver Spring, Md., says that ability is low on the list of what's required for adult students. Instead, attitude — especially patience — is everything.

"Adults come in with exorbitant goals about what they can accomplish, and how quickly," he says. "We want to skip steps one through five and get to step six."

And, unlike children, no one forces adults to practice, so they may never get around to it.

But adults have advantages, too. They can see and hear things in the music that completely escape children.

Architect David Conrad is one of Hawkins' students. He started learning the piano with his son Simon when Simon was 8. When learning a new piece, Conrad spends hours analyzing the music before he sits down to play it. He wants to understand the chords and rhythm and structure of the piece, to figure out what the composer is trying to say.

Conrad says he wanted his son to see him struggle, but he wasn't quite prepared for the fear.

"I played in church one time, and I almost fell onto the keys. My eyes got blurry, like a windshield before you've turned on the wipers," Conrad says.

Hawkins says fear of failure is a big issue for his adult students: "We don't want to be seen as incompetent or struggling with a task, because we are so competent in so many areas of our life. We do so many things well, so to start with something we don't do well is a real challenge."

Still, for those who are willing to practice and settle for something less than virtuosity, there are real payoffs. Playing music is great mental exercise and can keep brain cells alive that would otherwise wither and die. And it's fun.

David and Simon Conrad have had their musical setbacks over the years, but they haven't quit. Simon, who is now 16, still takes lessons occasionally. A few months ago, he started teaching himself the saxophone. His dad learned some jazz chords, so now, when Simon needs a break from his homework, they play duets.

It may be hard — and humbling — but playing music with someone you love or pursuing a lifelong goal can be infinitely rewarding.