

# They're playing our song

Enjoying music can be instrumental in increasing your quality of life, as growing numbers of older people have found

By Liz Lightfoot

If music be the food of love, then play on – and lower your cholesterol, release pleasurable hormone dopamine and improve hearing ability in the process. That's what scientists say, backed by an increasing portfolio of research into the effects of music on the brain.

Not only does learning a musical instrument improve the reading ability and grasp of new languages in children, it also improves memory and hearing in later life, according to Dr Nina Kraus.

Studies by Kraus, the director of the Auditory Neuroscience Laboratory at Northwestern University in Illinois in the US, found 45- to 65-year-old musicians had significantly better memory for sounds and were more able to hear speech in noisy environments than those who did not play an instrument.

"Older people commonly complain that they have difficulty hearing speech in noisy places and it can lead to social isolation and depression," she says. "Playing music

**"Playing in a band where no one takes themselves too seriously gives you the chance to just be yourself" – Ann Mundy, sax player**

involves identifying and picking out relevant patterns, such as their own instrument, harmonies and rhythms. This musical training fine tunes the nervous system and bolsters the elements that combat age-related communication problems."

But for the thousands of older people who take up instruments, singing and even conducting as adults, the motivation is far from medical. Freed from the duties of bringing up children or employment,

they have the time to practise either an instrument they learnt as a child or master a completely new one.

Music appreciation, bands and ensembles are popular activities with members of the University of the Third Age (U3A). In Bedford, for example, the poetry and folk group called the Willing Warblers has been going strong for nearly five and performs regularly in public.

Keith Richards is a founder member of a U3A group in north London. Taking up the cello has proved to be one of the most challenging experiences of his life.

"Starting to learn the cello is for people of seven, not 70. To really master it you need to start young," he says.

But start to master it he did, with the help of regular lessons, and he has gone on to join a music ensemble of like-minded people that meets every week. Now 79, the retired English literature teacher and lecturer says the joy of playing music with other people has less to do with age than the freedom to learn away from the regime of tests, exams and targets.

His experience reflects Kraus's US research. "I have become increasingly deaf when it comes to hearing people speak, but I don't have a problem listening to music or picking out musical instruments. Playing has made me a better listener," he says.

Hobby musicians of all ages and abilities attend courses, seminars and concerts at Benslow Music Trust, a charitable trust in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, and while players in their teens and 20s join the busy programme of day and residential courses, most students are beyond retirement age.

Funded by its 1,500 members, legacies and donations, Benslow Music attracts many prominent musicians, composers and conductors such as Sir Peter Maxwell



Bedford's Willing Warblers – still going strong

Davies, Master of the Queen's Music, to lead its events. The residential aspect of activities is also very important, providing a sense of solidarity and mutual adventure, according to Stephen Pettitt, Benslow's director of music.

"We have people of great spirit and huge enthusiasm who end the day utterly exhausted but exhilarated by what they have achieved," he says. "Music isn't just sound but sound plus different qualities of silence. It's sensing those gradations, if you like, which make the process of listening and playing so deeply engaging.

"The real art of listening – either as audience member, player or singer – involves bringing all your intelligent and sensory resources actively into the process so your brain can assimilate sounds and silences and make sense of them."

Those musicians who go on to form amateur bands and musical ensembles find themselves much in demand – and age is no bar. Both the clarinet and trumpet players for Stoke-on-Trent's Sweet Melody Dreamboat Band are in their mid-80s.

Meanwhile, saxophone player Ann Mundy, 56, took up the instrument years ago

Benjamin Ealovega



Another string to their bow: making music at Benslow

after buying it for her children who rejected it as too heavy.

"They were having clarinet lessons and I asked the teacher if he would teach me the saxophone. I got to grade six and then I stopped in my mid-40s because I didn't want to carry on taking lessons and doing exams," she says.

When she was about to take early retirement last year from her high-powered job as a quality manager for a brewing company, Mundy heard about how the band was being formed by U3A members so she went along one afternoon to play with them. "We meet every week and it is something I really look forward to," she says.

"At work I had to put on a corporate image, which did not leave much room for self-expression. Playing in a band where no one takes themselves too seriously gives you the chance to just be yourself," she says.

For band leader Chris Latham, 72, who plays the sax and arranges the music, he is following a family tradition which he rejected as a child. His grandfather set up one of the first dance halls in Stoke and persuaded all his children to play instruments and form a band.

"My father played the violin and he was out playing three or four nights a week. I admired him greatly, but I didn't take up an instrument," he says. "However, later in my 30s, I taught myself the flute and played in a wind band and then took up the violin when I was 65, followed by the saxophone."

Just before he retired from his job as the managing director of a UK branch of a multinational gold refining company, he added the harmonica to his repertoire. He started a U3A harmonica group for beginners and, to his amazement, 25 people turned up.

Before long he was putting out feelers for musicians to form a band. Five years on, Sweet Melody Dreamboat is in great demand, playing a broad range of dance, swing and modern music.

"I'm never going to be a brilliant player, but I'm having fun and there is a huge social element to it," he adds. "It's good to take up new things at any age, it keeps the brain cells working and the thing about retirement is that it gives you the time to do it."

To find out more about Benslow Music go to [www.benslow.org](http://www.benslow.org), and for the U3A visit [www.u3a.org.uk](http://www.u3a.org.uk).