

# “I kind of get lost in it”: Experiences of learning to perform music in older adulthood

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This study reports data collected as part of the *Rhythm for Life* project in the UK. Running from 2010-12, *Rhythm for Life* provides free programs of instrumental music lessons to adult beginners aged 50 or above. Through phenomenological interviews and analysis, the paper aims to understand the experiences of learning to play a musical instrument in older adulthood. Based on semi-structured interviews with ten adult learners, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed four emergent themes that characterize the learners' experiences: (1) learning music as offering enhanced social interaction, (2) learning music as offering enhanced (musical) self-confidence, (3) learning music as a form of self-regulation of mood and emotion, and (4) learning music as offering scope for transcendence. This paper considers each of these themes in turn to discuss an emerging “model” of how learning to play a musical instrument in older adulthood is experienced by learners.

*Keywords:* older adulthood; learning; wellbeing; instrumental music; qualitative research

The *Rhythm for Life* project, based at the Royal College of Music (RCM), aims to enhance wellbeing among older adults through creative music-making. Running from 2010-12, the project provides free programs of instrumental music lessons to adult beginners aged 50 or above, facilitated by specially-trained RCM students. Taking the theme of the conference as a point of departure, this exploratory paper discusses an emerging “model” of how learning a musical instrument in older adulthood is experienced by learners.

Research in this area, while rapidly developing, remains somewhat limited. Much current literature exploring the role that music plays in the lives of older adults has focussed on the therapeutic uses of music, casting the participant in a passive role of listening to, or consuming, music. Indeed, listen-

ing to music is shown to play a large part in the lives of older adults and particularly as a self-regulator of wellbeing (Laukka 2007) or in order to give meaning to life's experiences (Hays 2005). Another body of research has begun to investigate the impact of *making* music on aspects of wellbeing. For example, Koga and Timms (2001) reported decreased anxiety, depression, and loneliness in those that participated in music lessons, while Cohen *et al.* (2006) conclude that sense of control, as well as social engagement, is enhanced through participation in arts programs. Furthermore, piano instruction has been shown to increase cognitive abilities related to attention and concentration (Bugos *et al.* 2007), and more recently, Clift and Hancox (2010) reported increased wellbeing among 1124 singers drawn from Australia, England, and Germany.

Despite an increasing focus on the role of lifelong learning in the mental wellbeing of society (see Field 2009), however, there is little UK research that explores this in specific relation to learning a musical instrument, nor that seeks to understand beginner adults' experiences of such endeavour (for a useful exception, see Taylor and Hallam 2008). This paper, then, aims to meet these gaps by qualitatively understanding the experiences of learning to play a musical instrument, from beginner level, in older adulthood.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION

### Participants

Ten older adults were recruited to take part in the study (mean age=66.7 years; eight women and two men), all of whom had participated in a 12-week *Rhythm for Life* program of free instrumental lessons between April and July 2010. Four of the participants were djembe drum learners (all group learners; labeled henceforth as D1, D2, D3, D4), three keyboard learners (two individual learners and one group learner; K1, K2, K3), and three recorder learners (two individual learners and one group learner; R1, R2, R3). All described themselves as beginners, with little or no previous instrumental learning experience.

### Materials

Working within an interpretative framework, the study adopted a phenomenological approach. A semi-structured interview schedule elicited spoken responses to participants' subjective experiences of learning a musical instrument in older adulthood. Specifically, the interview schedule focused on

(1) subjective experiences of learning an instrument and (2) subjective experiences of the link between music and wellbeing.

### **Procedure**

The ten participants were sampled from a larger group of 33 older adults who had participated in the *Rhythm for Life* program. Sampling was predominantly convenience, with emphasis also placed on equally representing the instruments being learned. Participants were interviewed individually by the first author either at their homes or at RCM offices. All interviews took place following the learner's final lesson, were recorded with permission, and fully transcribed. Analysis was guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to construct emergent and preliminary themes that elucidate the topic under study from the learners' perspectives.

## **RESULTS**

Preliminary analyses reveal four emergent themes, each of which unpacks different aspects of the experiences of learning a musical instrument in older adulthood. Here, they are presented in order of qualitative strength.

First, learning music appears to offer an opportunity for enhanced social interaction. For group learners, this manifests itself both in and out of the actual lessons: "Just being part of a group is really good.... Learning together is really good" (D4). "We often, not too long, but often sit outside [of our homes] on the bench practicing together" (D3). This effect, however, is not limited to those learning in a group. For one-to-one learners, regular interaction with their teacher—and the regular appointment of their lesson—also appears to be important, both in mitigating against loneliness (R1) and in providing a point of enjoyable social contact: "these lovely people come into your house, and they are so nice and sweet and so on and they lighted your life" (K2). For both group and individual learners, then, their music lessons provided a welcome enhancement to social interaction.

Second, learning music operates as a means of enhancing (musical) self-confidence: "I just played it and I think I obeyed all the instructions, and it sounded good and I was really chuffed with myself you know" (K1). "Now I feel more confident I can go, and even if it's no good I can still—that is where it has helped out, confidence and expressing myself" (D2). Indeed, while fun and enjoyment are pivotal to the learners' experiences, this is balanced with a strong sense of seeking, and achieving, progress: "It gives me personal involvement with music and a way of concentrating on certain pieces and the satisfaction of knowing that I am making some progress however slow in the

special subject of my choice” (R2). For these adults, many of whom have waited many years for an opportunity to learn music, being able to make—and recognise—progress emerges as an important part of their experience.

Third, learning music appears to act as a form of self-regulation, or as a catalyst for changing or monitoring one’s emotional state or mood. At one level, this seems to operate by offering a form of release, “[it] relieves tension for one thing” (D1), or through providing a means to “transform your mood” (K2). At another level, though, it also provides a means for learners to *connect* with emotions that may hitherto have been suppressed:

I think with something like learning...to play the recorder, it will help me to express emotions which otherwise it, how do you say express an emotion, you can cry, you can eat too much or whatever but there is the very fine sensibilities of a sensitive person. Well, in business that is not an asset you know and in various things you do you suppress that, and you’re sort of being something else; you are decisive or you are being, talk firmly and loudly blah blah blah, but with music it is quite okay to be sensitive, so I think this is a good side of things (R1).

For this participant, learning the recorder has provided a “way in” to an emotional world that enables him, and permits him, to express his emotions. While such self-regulation has been observed in *listening* to music (Laukka 2007), these findings suggest that the same may be true for *making* music.

Finally, learning music emerges as a form of transcendence, or the opportunity to move beyond everyday worries. This transcendence appears to be manifest through a sense of becoming “lost in it” (K1), with attention focused solely on the multiple demands of learning music: “you can’t think of anything else but the music itself” (R2). Furthermore, learning an instrument can offer learners the chance to “escape” from the day-to-day: “I think if you’re ever feeling a bit down or got some problem you forget about it for a little while because you are having a bit of fun” (K3). Indeed, fun or enjoyment was a recurring focal point within the interviews, as captured by one of the drummers: “I really enjoyed it. I loved it. I just loved the rhythms and the sounds and working together and just creating the different rhythms. Yeah it was really exciting. I really enjoyed it. I loved it” (D4). For these participants, then, learning music can be said to create a space in which it is possible to transcend the day-to-day.

## DISCUSSION

While preliminary and small-scale, the insights generated in this study suggest that learning a musical instrument in older adulthood is experienced as offering (1) enhanced social interaction, (2) enhanced (musical) self-confidence, (3) a form of self-regulation of mood and emotion, and (4) scope for transcendence. Cutting across this entire emerging model is the strong presence of individual motivation, life circumstance, and musical history in shaping what, and why, adults experience when they learn music. Knowing this, provision in *Rhythm for Life* and other such initiatives can be tailored to maximize the positive impacts of learning music in older adulthood. In particular, the results indicate that learning music can provide a valued “space” for fun, enjoyment, escape from everyday concerns, self-regulation of mood and emotion, and social interaction. Additionally, learning music is something that participants take seriously, that allows them to fulfill often long-term goals, and that contributes to musical and non-musical confidence. It appears important, then, for provision for older adults to respect both the space for transcendence and the space for progress.

Our ongoing research continues to unpack the themes described here, extending the dataset in order to draw comparisons between individual and group learning. Additionally, a quantitative dataset is also being compiled in order to permit a mixed-methods approach that will allow for triangulation and development of these emergent findings. Preliminary results, though, indicate that learning a musical instrument in older adulthood is a multi-faceted experience that can bring with it powerful benefits to aspects of wellbeing.

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