

GERAGOGY!

The Joys Of Teaching Older Adults

By Gaili Schoen

When I began teaching piano lessons 34 years ago, I taught many children and an occasional (often frazzled) parent. Some kids were eager, and some were tentative, while others were clearly being forced to play by their parents. I started teaching older adults in 2010 when a recently retired architect was looking for new activities to fill his days and keep his mind sharp. He recruited a few friends, and I was soon teaching some of the most fun, appreciative and enthusiastic students I had ever worked with. Admittedly, older adults are not as cute as the little ones and will probably not go pro if they are starting late in life, but they love their lessons, appreciate their teachers and care deeply about making progress.

Let's face it, not all of our students will become virtuosos. In fact, it is a rare young student that will even go on to study music in college. Most of the time, private music teachers are catering to the hobbyist. Our young students often take lessons because their parents know that learning to play an instrument will enrich their children's lives and

hope it will boost their IQ. Much of our task is to motivate these active, device-addicted, often over-booked kids to practice. This is not the case with older adults.

When adults take music lessons later in life, it is 100 percent their choice. Older adults have heard from multiple media sources about the brain-enhancing benefits of taking music lessons: piano lessons can increase attention, concentration and memory¹ and delay onset of Alzheimer's Disease.² Many have also heard that practicing a musical instrument can improve mood and promote relaxation.³ Generally, older adults primarily choose music lessons because they have been dreaming about it for years, maybe even decades ("when I retire," or "when my kids leave for college"), and by the time they are ready to begin, they are veritably bubbling over with anticipation and excitement. What a pleasure it is to teach students who see their lessons with you as their special "me" time, and their practice as their passion. Most hate missing lessons and want to reschedule if they are ill or will be traveling.

Often, however, it is difficult for older adult students to find teachers who are as excited about working with them as they are to start lessons. Our collegiate music programs train students in pedagogy (read: "how to teach kids"), leaving new music teachers feeling ill-equipped to work with the silver set. In this article I'd like to open your mind to the possibility of working with adults older than 50, and I'll explore what I call a "geragogical" (read: "how to teach older adults") approach. I will use examples from my piano studio, however these geragogical principles can be adapted to all instrumental and vocal lessons.

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What's So Great About Teaching Older Adults?

They practice! Paying for their own lessons makes adults more motivated to learn. Many in this age group have more money to spend. According to the *U.S. Consumer Expenditure Survey*, adults older than 50 own more than 65 percent of the net worth of all American households.⁴ They have lived long enough to know that to learn a new and difficult skill, they must put in years of effort. Older adults also have more time. If their kids are away at college or they have retired, they want to find new, stimulating and enriching activities to fill their time. One of the greatest perks of teaching retirees is they can take morning and early afternoon lessons. I enjoy being able to teach during the day leaving my evenings and weekends open to be with family.

Another benefit of teaching older adults is they are often incredibly

interesting and fun to work with. It might seem cliché to say, but it's true: older adults can be genuinely wise and wonderful. Most have learned to laugh at themselves and to trust that they can deal with whatever challenges life presents. Those who seek out music lessons are already interesting people by definition! Older students enjoy their lessons, are deeply grateful for a competent and supportive teacher, and are usually willing and able to pay more for their music lessons than a young parent might be.

What Is Different About Teaching Older Adults?

The *pedagogical* model is teacher directed. Teachers choose repertoire that is appropriate to the child's level and teach musical concepts in a preconceived sequence.

The *geragogical* model is a partnership. Lessons are driven by the student's needs and goals, guided and supported by the teacher. Older adults often come to lessons with the desire to play a particular song or piece, or style of music they love. As their teacher, my goal is to try to get them playing elements of that piece or style as quickly as possible. If they haven't yet learned to how to read music, I can write the letters on the page and help them to learn the rhythm by ear. It is best to refrain from making discouraging comments such as, "That's too difficult," but rather to find a way to make the music they love accessible to them, wherever possible. I think of myself as a coach rather than a teacher. I keep an open mind and encourage, respect and facilitate their musical dreams.

Three Components Of Teaching Older Adults Using A Geragogical Model

Teachers might find that a good method book will help introduce adults to musical principles in an organized and progressive way. Even the student who took lessons as a child will appreciate brushing up on musical symbols, note values, rhythm and the like. Be sure to choose a slow- to moderately paced method book that has been written specifically for adults or for older adults. Pages should be easy to read, without too many distracting images.

Then, and most importantly, we create a list of songs and pieces the student has always loved. In the beginning, it doesn't matter how difficult the piece is, only that the student feels a connection to it. If the piano student, for example, wants to play Beethoven's *Für Elise* at the first lesson, I say, "Great!" I purchase a copy of the piece, then proceed to write a bit of the main theme using letters on a piece of paper or in a manuscript book. The following week I might add a few more notes of the theme, and the week after that, I might add a couple letters for the left hand like this:

Für Elise

RH:

E D# E D# E B D C A E A B G# B C

**Lower octaves in blue*

LH:

A E A

Hold For 3

Hold For 3

Hold For 3

If the piano student is a first-time beginner, I can put a letter strip behind the keys, and I might use different colors to indicate different octaves, or put colored stickers on the keys. Students can use their ear to guide them on the rhythm, instead of counting, initially. I might write in directions such as "hold for 3" (counts) and draw lines between melody notes, and I sometimes add lines correlating bass notes to treble notes. Other instrumental teachers can similarly use letters instead of, or in addition to, notes when a student is first learning a melody.

The piano student understands that she cannot play *Für Elise* in its entirety, but can enjoy playing a few bars of

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her beloved melody just the same. She feels motivated to practice playing a melody line she knows and loves, and she learns the keys faster. Eventually her study of music notation will enable her to use notes for these simplified melodies.

A third important component for the older adult piano student is learning chords. Most students want to learn to play a little bit of everything—some classical, some popular and some jazz standards. Books such as Hal Leonard's *Easy Fake Book* series, and the *Rise Again Songbook* make it possible to sing lyrics while playing simple chords, which is a great way to get adult students playing songs quickly.

At the first piano lesson I assign pentascale exercises visually for each hand, ending with a major triad/minor triad/major triad:

C D E F G F E D C E G E C

G	G	G
E	E ^b	E
C	C	C

Over the course of the following weeks and months, students learn to play this exercise in all 12 keys thereby increasing dexterity while learning chords. To play from fake books, piano students need to know major, minor, diminished and augmented triads, plus their inversions. Once they have learned the four triad sets and their inversions, they can start learning 6th and 7th chords in the context of playing all 12 major scales. In fake book sheet music I often write in simplified 7th chords if they haven't yet learned sevenths. Other instrumental teachers may also want to teach chords to older adult students for them to be able to eventually improvise over chord changes in a popular or jazz tune.

Physical Considerations With Teaching Older Adults

- **Eyesight**—After age 50 most adults need to use “computer” or “middle distance” glasses at a piano or music stand. They will also appreciate larger notes and lyrics where available.
- **Hearing**—If a student has diminished hearing, the teacher can point to whatever she is referring to, face the student when speaking (to enable them to read our lips), and can speak a little more loudly, if need be. If a student asks the teacher to repeat something, try to rephrase it. It may not be a hearing issue, but rather the student having difficulty understanding what the teacher is talking about.
- **Memory**—Unlike children, older adults appreciate and have patience for lots of review. Cognitive psychology shows that varying practice styles boosts memory retention and brainpower.⁵ Therefore, encouraging the

student to practice phrases and exercises in various ways including: *forte*, *piano*, *largo*, *allegro*, *staccato*, *legato*, forward, backward and with eyes closed, will stimulate multiple areas of the brain resulting in better and deeper learning. A fundamental principle of cognitive psychology is that “spaced practice” is the best way to retain new information; if you want your student to learn a difficult musical passage, keep circling back to it between playing other things and again at the end of the lesson.⁶ (This applies to all ages!)

- **Psychomotor Skills**—(Fine-motor skills mediated by the brain) If the older adult is a first time beginner, finger control and dexterity can be challenging. Piano students practice one or two measures of a difficult musical passage slowly and evenly, in various styles (*forte*, *piano*, *eyes closed* and the like) to gradually learn the placement of their fingers. Students are encouraged to practice before bed, as sleep helps to embed new psychomotor skills into long-term memory.⁷
- **Other Health Issues**—Diseases such as arthritis make it more difficult for older adults to move their fingers. However, playing the piano is often prescribed by doctors to increase flexibility and lessen the pain of arthritis.⁸ Teachers can empathize and help modify music to the needs of the student by omitting certain notes and simplifying rhythms.

Emotional Considerations With Teaching Older Adults

- **Insecurity**—Research shows the greatest impediment to musical progress is an older adult's lack of confidence in his or her learning capacity due to a perceived age barrier.⁹ The truth is, in spite of some diminishing short-term memory function, most older adults learn as fast or faster than children because they have been listening to music their whole life and because they practice. Without being disingenuous, the teacher can be very encouraging, observing all of the things the student has improved upon and emphasizing the progress they have made so far. Remind them not to compare themselves to child prodigies they see on YouTube, but to honor their own pace and celebrate their own achievements.
- **Performance Anxiety**—Some older adults are terrified at the notion of performing, even in front of their piano teacher. It is of the utmost importance for teachers to build trust with adult students, treating them with respect and empathy, while offering encouragement and gentle praise. I hold quarterly in-home “Piano and Poetry Parties” (rather than the using the dreaded word “recital”) during which students can either play a piece or recite a poem if they don't feel ready to play. No one is pressured to attend, and the

option of reciting a poem lets the student ease into the idea of performing. Never pressure your adult students to play at your young students' recitals, unless they express an interest. Most older adults are mortified at the idea of playing in a recital with little kids who might play better than them!

How To Acquire Older Adult Students

- **Donate** a few lessons to silent auctions for charities, clubs and organizations in your area that attract older adult members. Join your town's Chamber of Commerce, women's club, masonic lodge or rotary club.
- **Accompany** or join a choir, and let them know you teach piano.
- **Use social media to network** with the older adults in your life, and ask them to like your accounts and spread the word. If you set up an *Instagram* account for your studio, follow accounts in your community, and follow the people who follow those accounts, so they can learn about your studio. Similarly with *Facebook*, set up a business page and invite people who follow community pages to like your page. According to the *Pew Research Center*, retired adults are the fastest growing group of social media mavens. In November 2016, they found that of all adults aged 50–64, 61 percent use *Facebook*, 24 percent use *Pinterest*, 13 percent use *Instagram*, 21 percent use *LinkedIn* and 18 percent use *Twitter*, and those numbers have been rising steadily.
- **Contact** your local community college and music store to see if they would be interested in having you teach individual or group classes catering to older adults.
- **Volunteer** to perform or lead a singalong at senior centers (which usually cater to ages 50 to 90s), Active Retirement Communities (55+), parks with adult recreation programs, YMCAs, local Silver Sneakers (fitness programs) or AARP events, and let it be known that you specialize in teaching older adults. Do research on the many cognitive and mood-enhancing benefits of music lessons for older adults and speak about them, or hand out flyers quoting the research.
- **Take flyers** to community concerts—the audiences are usually predominately older than 50. Pin up flyers at libraries, doctor's offices and markets, or wherever you see a community bulletin board.
- **Advertise** inexpensively in the local free community newspapers. Older adults read these papers and will most eagerly respond to ads targeted to them! Offer a free first lesson, and you are guaranteed interest. Write a weekly music appreciation column for the paper, including your specialty, website and email in your byline.

Older adults come to you to learn to *play* an instrument. Play, as in FUN! Get students to play right away, and teach them music theory and technique gradually. Give them music listening assignments and talk about the music. (As a sideline, you can set up group music appreciation classes. Older adults are interested in learning about music history and fundamentals almost as much as how to play it.) Set up concert field trips so your students can meet and support each other. Make it joyful to play in your studio. It's OK if the rhythm isn't perfect and some of the notes are incorrect. Remember, we are not molding virtuosos! We are nurturing music lovers. If you reach out to older adults, you will soon fill out your schedule with lovely, passionate, diligent students, who will deeply appreciate and acknowledge your worth. And hopefully, that sentiment will be mutual. ♪

Notes

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