

MUSICAL ACTIVITIES IN THE THIRD AGE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY WITH AMATEUR MUSICIANS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore a) the musical and social background of members of seniors' amateur ensembles, b) the functions and rewards of making music in seniors' amateur ensembles, and c) age-related restrictions of musical activities and coping strategies with these restrictions. A total of 550 questionnaires were mailed to 46 seniors' ensembles in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, 308 valid questionnaires were returned and evaluated. The age of respondents ranged from 40 to 97 years, the mean was 71 years ($s = 7.89$). About one third (38.4%) were women. A proportion of 44% had an academic degree. The vast majority (90%) had no professional education as musician. A majority of 80% started to play an instrument in the first 20 years of their lives. 70% of the respondents grew up with their mother and/or father playing an instrument. The paramount reward of making music is an increase in enjoyment of life, quality of life, and happiness, and furthermore the establishment of social contacts, a sense of community, and challenges. Other very important functions are relaxation, the expression of feelings and giving a sense to life. Half of the respondents (52%) reported age-related restrictions in making music. Several coping strategies were mentioned to cope with these problems. Implications of these findings are discussed in the following.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea that the development of musical skills, interests and activities is a life-long process is a generally established view in music education and music psychology today. While we have a rich body of research on the musical development in childhood and adolescence, there are only a small number of investigations on music in adulthood and in the third age. (There are different definitions of the term third age; in this context it indicates the period of life after retirement without definition of an upper age-limit.) According to the growing interest of adults and elderly people in musical activities there is an increasing need for knowledge about developmental processes, musical interests and learning in adulthood and in the third age. Due to the rapid increase of the elderly population and the increased life expectancy, musical

activities in the third age are going to play an even more important role in the future than they do today.

Perhaps most of the studies on musical activities in old age were carried out in the context of music therapy (see Koger, Chapin & Brotons [1], Söthe [2] for an overview). Other studies using interview techniques explored the motivations, functions and gratifications of making music in old age (e.g. Hartogh [3]; Beckers [4]). Pickles [5] studied the musical tastes and practices of members of some UK University of the Third Age music groups. From these studies and from everyday life observations we know that particularly the social functions of making music with others are of special importance for elderly people. Another important aspect of making music in old age is the limits and possibilities of musical performance in this stage of life. Due to age-correlated constraints, they are to be expected in cognitive, sensory and motor areas (e.g. Park [6] Park & Gutches [7]). A related question is whether and how these constraints can be compensated in musical practice.

The problem of age related constraints and their compensation concerns soloists, professional orchestra musicians as well as amateur musicians. In the case of professional musicians, this problem seems to be a kind of taboo. This problem clearly exists in practice (Schmitt-Ott [8], 2008), but has been brought up very seldom among professional musicians. Baltes & Baltes [9] suggested the SOC-principle as a coping strategy with age-related constraints in performance. This principle highlights the importance of selection, optimisation and compensation as coping strategies. Baltes & Baltes illustrated the SOC-principles with some statements of the pianist Arthur Rubinstein, who said that he played less pieces (selection), which he practiced more often (optimisation). Before fast passages he would insert a ritardando, which makes the following appear faster (compensation). This principle seems to be very convincing, but in the musical practice it is often not valid, because an orchestra musician can neither choose the pieces to play nor the tempo of its performance. The situation may be different for amateur musicians, because an amateur orchestra does not perform under the pressure which is typical for a pro-

fessional orchestra, which works under very competitive conditions.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIMS

The objective of this study is the functions, meanings and problems of musical activities in a seniors' orchestra. The following questions are to be examined:

- Who plays in an orchestra for seniors (demographic variables, musical background resp. education, general educational background etc.)?
- Function and meaning of musical activities
- Age-related constraints and how musicians cope with them

The project aims, on the one hand, to contribute to fundamental research by providing an empirical clarification of these questions and, on the other, to gain music educationally important insights into how to design musical activities in the third age. A further intention of this survey is to gather arguments for musical performance in the third age which are relevant for educational policy.

3. METHOD

In order to clarify these questions, members of different seniors' orchestras were interviewed with a standardized questionnaire. It contained mainly questions about the demographic background, musical preferences, functions and significance of musical activities as well as the self-evaluated performance. Other questions referred to age-related constraints on making music and how they were dealt with, reasons for interruptions of instrumental activities, problems when musical activities were started in adulthood, and others.

Through internet research, 46 orchestras for seniors in the German speaking area were found out. All of these were written to and asked to participate in the survey. A total of 43 seniors' orchestras from Germany, Austria and Switzerland agreed to take part and ordered a number of questionnaires corresponding to the number of orchestra members. About 550 questionnaires were sent out together with postpaid, pre-addressed envelopes. The data collection was completed in mid 2007. As much as 308 valid questionnaires were returned (rate of return about 56%). Telephone inquiries by the orchestras showed a high interest in the survey. We also received photos, sound documents and written documents (such as newspaper articles, information material) by some orchestras as well as – offers to perform. The quantitative data were analyzed with the statistical software SPSS. Answers to open-ended questions were transcribed, categorized and evaluated content analytically.

4. RESULTS

The age of the respondents ranged from 40 years to 97 years. The large majority (82%) of the respondents were between 60 and 80 years of age (average age 71 years, $s = 7.89$). The share of male orchestra members amounted to 62%, the share of women to 38%. The majority (44%) had graduated from college or university, almost 13% had a diploma from a secondary school qualifying for university admission or matriculation and 43% had a lower school leaving certificate. So we can say that the level of education of the members of the seniors' orchestras was above-average.

By far the majority (90%) of the senior musicians did not have an education as professional musicians. Almost 80% of them had learned their instrument in the first 20 years of life (23% between 5 and 9 years of age, and 55% between the ages of 10 and 19). As much as 70% grew up with music in their parent's house, with either one or both of the parents playing an instrument. One third (35%) reported that their parents were the deciding impulse to learn their instrument. In some cases (4%), the decisive impulse came from brothers or sisters. These results show that a musically active home is of essential importance as a trigger to start with an instrument and that playing an instrument in one's youth is a vantage point for musical activities in old age. The most common instrument was the violin (32.1%). A share of 7.3% played cello, all strings together reached a percentage of 44%. The brass instruments had a share of 13.2%, the flutes 11.3%, and piano / keyboard 10.3%.

The interviewed senior musicians had instrumental lessons for an average of about 7 years (with large variations; $s = 5.6$). Over 90% had interrupted their musical activities between the ages of 20 and 60. The mean interruption time amounted to nearly 20 years. Job, family and education of children were the most frequent reasons for long interruptions. The average membership in a seniors' orchestra was 9 years ($s = 8.0$). Most of the members did not currently attend instrumental classes. Only 14% had lessons at the time when they were interviewed. Two thirds would **not** consider taking instrumental instruction if available. Almost one third (30%) reported that they would like to take lessons if they were offered. The interest in instrumental lessons appears to be strongly age-related: The older the respondents, the lower their interest in music lessons. This corresponds to the fact that the participation in education programs generally declines with age (Kühnemund [10]).

It is very interesting how the respondents assess the quality of the performance on their instrument. The personal best performance on an instrument is by no means localized only in younger years (see figure 1). Instead, it is identified within the first three decades of life and between the ages of 60 and 69. This may be contributed to the fact that most of the respondents did not make music

in their middle years. (Of course, this distribution would look different with professional musicians.)

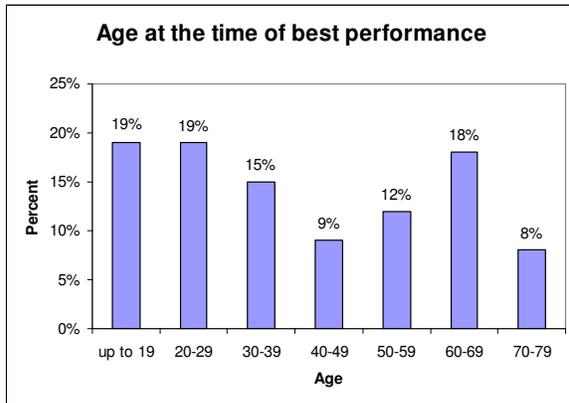


Figure 1

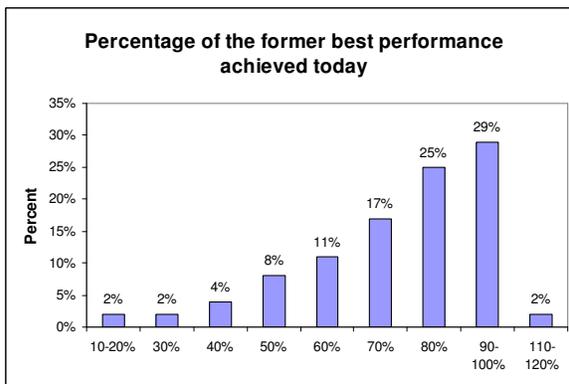


Figure 2

It is also remarkable that almost 30% of the respondents reported that they currently reached 90-100% of their best instrumental performance (see figure 2).

One important aspect of age(ing) is cognitive, physical, and other age-related constraints, which inevitably have an impact on musical activities in this period of life. A good half of the respondents (52%) reported that they felt age-related constraints on their musical performance. These constraints increase with age (see figure 3).

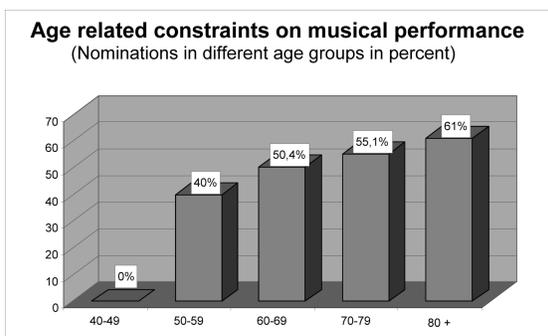


Figure 3

The kind of constraints mentioned by the respondents can be allocated to the following categories: physical problems, a slowing down in various areas, cognitive problems and sensory constraints (see figure 4).

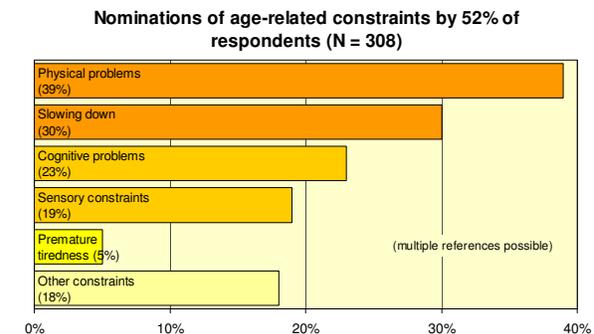


Figure 4

The following constraints were subsumed to the category „physical problems“:

- Problems with gross and fine motor skills
- Problems with neck, shoulders, back, legs
- Pains / restricted mobility of fingers, hands, arms
- Muscle tensions and cramps
- Reduced strength
- Respiratory problems
- Problems with embouchure, lips, tongue
- cardiovascular problems

The slowing down (which is, of course, especially impedimental with musical pieces that have to be played fast) has become particularly noticeable with the motor system, finger mobility, reaction time and score reading as well as learning ability. In the cognitive sector, respondents reported primarily lack of concentration and memory problems. Constraints on the sensory organs referred mainly to a decrease in audition and vision. It is hardly possible to separate the single categories from each other. For this reason, it is obvious that constraints in reaction time and in score reading may also be connected with cognitive and sensory constraints.

Which strategies did the respondents use to compensate for the constraints they felt? The answers to this question were partly surprising. In the following, they are divided into physical, mental and musical compensatory strategies (which are, however, hard to isolate from each other). Respondents reported the following physical compensatory strategies:

- Training of muscles, joints, and back
- Physiotherapy, gymnastics
- Loosening-up and relaxation exercises

- Gymnastics of hands and fingers
- Respiratory exercises
- Many physical activities, exercise before concerts
- In case of sensory constraints: Glasses, magnifying glass, music stand light, hearing aid
- Pharmaceuticals, medical treatment
- Playing in a sitting position

Mental compensatory strategies that were reported:

- Acceptance of constraints, adjusting to them, not losing courage, tolerance
- Ignoring constraints
- Calmness, patience
- Trying to play well anyway / to do everything right
- Humor
- Trusting in God
- Social recognition motivates to go on
- Pleasure from music compensates strains
- Not putting oneself under pressure
- Mental memorizing of music, learning by heart

Eventually, the following musical compensatory strategies were mentioned, too:

- Practicing more often, more efficient practicing techniques, shorter practice sessions, practicing difficult parts more often (optimization)
- Reducing the number of musical pieces / activities / engagements; playing only what can be done, suitable pieces (selection)
- Reducing the practice time
- Leaving difficult parts to others
- Playing more slowly
- Skipping fast passages and single tones (compensation)
- Reducing musical demands
- Compensation through increase in expression
- Simplifying difficult parts and notes
- Concentrating during practice and play
- Giving up soloist play
- Playing from the score instead from memory

Another interesting aspect regarding musical activities from a life-span perspective is the meaning or importance of music and its changes throughout the course of life. Figure 5 shows the retrospective ratings of importance of music in different decades of life. There are three striking characteristics: First: For the large majority of musically active seniors, music has been important or very important at every period of their lives. Second: From the age of 20 until 50 or 60, the importance of music

is clearly decreasing. The reason for this is that other factors such as job, family and children are given priority. Third: At no other stage in the respondents' lives was music as important as in old age. What makes music activities so important, especially in old age? Respondents were asked to evaluate a number of statements concerning the issue on a rating scale. Figures 6 to 8 give an account of these statements according to their degree of approval.

Change of importance of music throughout life (Ratings "important" and "very important" in percent)

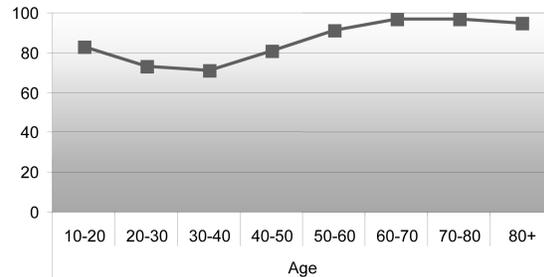


Figure 5

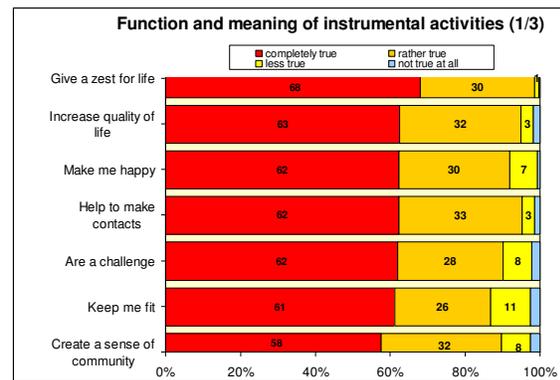


Figure 6

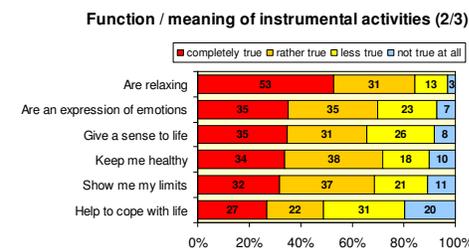


Figure 7

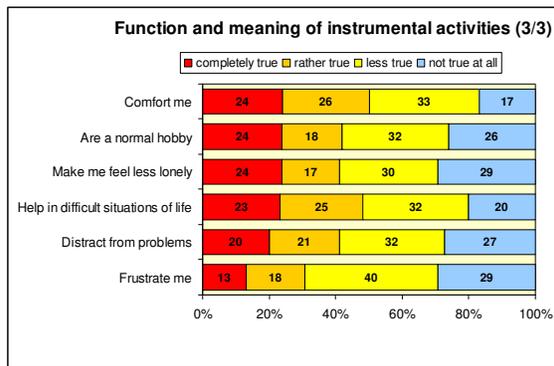


Figure 8

In sum, it can be concluded that among the most important meanings and functions of participation in a seniors' orchestra are increased vitality, quality of life and happiness. Similar important are social aspects like contacts with others and a sense of community. As playing an instrument in an orchestra is challenging, it is an opportunity to keep fit. Furthermore, relaxation and the expression of emotions are among the most important things provided by musical activities.

5. DISCUSSION

Summing up, the results of this study account for the high individual and social impact of musical activities in old age. The gratifications of making music in old age include areas such as social contacts, sense of community, health, happiness, quality and sense of life. These aspects are some of man's most important goals of life. Music makes them to become a little bit more real, and this is maybe one of the most important functions music can have for the individual. This may be one reason, why for the respondents of our survey the importance of music clearly increases and becomes so important especially between the ages of 60 and 80.

With respect to the inevitable losses in performance connected with ageing and to the fact that more than the half of the persons aged 60 and older mentioned age-related constraints, one of the most striking results is the relatively positive self-assessment of the performance in later years compared with the performance in the first two decades of life. More than 50% of the amateur musicians feel that their performance attains 80-100% of their best performance. Nearly one-fifth of them believe that they attain their best performance between 60 and 69 years of age. Independent from their actual performance, this seems to be an indicator of a positive self-perception and self-concept, both of which are important for motivation and activity.

Concerning the coping strategies with age-related constraints, the results confirm the importance of the principles of selection, optimization and compensation. In addition to these principles, the mental attitude to the experienced constraints seems to be an important factor in handling the restrictions connected with ageing. Behav-

iours like acceptance of constraints, accommodation, tolerance, patience, and humour help to overcome the possible disadvantages experienced in old age.

The survey led to another interesting insight: Playing an instrument in old age is usually preceded by a musically active home and instrumental activities in childhood and adolescence. Apparently, musical activities in childhood and adolescence are a very good investment with respect to old age. With regard to the life-span perspective on musical development and concerning educational aspects and matters of education policy, it is an important result that a music loving home and musical activities in childhood and adolescence are of decisive importance for musical activities in old age. Last but not least, making music in a seniors' orchestra not only can enhance the quality of life in many respects; it also contributes to the cultural life of the community.

Acknowledgements

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