

Oct. 04, 2009
Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal

NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN: People who learn instruments late in life find it relaxing, fun

By SONYA PADGETT
LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Since she started learning to play the piano a year ago, Earnestine Howell, 75, feels mentally sharper, less stressed and physically relaxed.

"It's been a pleasure and I think maybe it's been good for me," Howell says.

There's no maybe about it; an extensive body of research has found that music is good for your health and can even stave off dementia in the elderly. According to a Stanford University study, leisure activities, such as playing a musical instrument, are associated with a "reduced risk of dementia" in subjects older than 75.

There's a big connection between music and the brain, says Kathy Kavanaugh, a local musician and Howell's piano teacher.

For several years, Kavanaugh, 62, worked as a harp therapist in California. She went to hospitals and care facilities, playing her harp for premature babies and senior citizens. In Las Vegas, she teaches piano and harp lessons at senior community centers and the Blind Center of Nevada. She also plays at local Alzheimer's facilities.

"They may not talk or remember what they ate for lunch, but they remember the music," Kavanaugh says.

And, as Howell proves, it's never too late to learn to play an instrument. About 60 percent of Kavanaugh's students are seniors and many of them express the same thought: They've always wanted to learn how to play but thought they were too old.

"I started from scratch, I knew nothing," says Howell, adding that learning hasn't been easy, but it's worthwhile. "I could hear music but couldn't read it or play it. I've worked very hard."

Older adults learn differently than young people taking their first music lessons, Kavanaugh notes. They're not as coordinated, but they have more time to practice.

Rhythm is the hardest thing to teach older students, says William Brown, a musician who teaches guitar at Las Vegas senior centers.

"Rhythm is knowing when to start and when to stop," Brown says. Older adults may know how and when, but actually doing it is another matter. That just means they have to practice a little more and lower their expectations of becoming the next Eric Clapton, Brown says.

Playing an instrument also has emotional effects, an important benefit for older adults who may have reduced mobility or chronic illnesses, Kavanaugh says.

Moritz DeLauder, 62, says her father was ill and depressed when she introduced him to her easy-play organ recently. He was so intrigued, he wanted to learn to play it, says DeLauder, who helped him purchase his own for his assisted living facility. Since then, his attitude and health have improved.

"He's just so much better," DeLauder says. "I'm sure the music is a large part of it. When we left him yesterday, he said, 'I'm so happy.' "

After her husband died two years ago, Nola Cox, 83, used her easy-play organ as a lifeline. She began taking lessons in 2005 and credits her daily habit of playing as integral to her recovery after brain surgery and knee replacement surgeries.

"I was in my walker, wasn't walking very good and I said to myself, 'I can do that,' " Cox says of her decision to learn the organ. "After I lost my husband, I had to have something in my life."

Cox says playing a musical instrument helps with stress and keeps her mind active. She also feels closer to her late husband when she's playing.

Cox started playing the Lowrey organ when she signed up for membership in a senior program operated by an organ dealer. For \$49 a month, she gets weekly lessons and access to social events such as field trips and pancake breakfasts at the Memory Lane Music store, 10720 S. Eastern Ave.

"Our whole program is really customized to a 55 and older group," says Memory Lane Music owner Michael Cooney. "The emphasis is on personal enjoyment, it's a hobby. We're not teaching a bunch of theory. They're socially fun classes."

New students can get six weeks of lessons and a small loaner organ to take home for \$20. After that, students must buy a Lowrey organ if they want to continue playing in their homes. Prices start at \$1,000 and go as high as \$85,000.

"We have a little instrument we put in their home during the six-week class. We don't try to sell it to them," Cooney says. "We do it because we know out of 15 people, 10 will continue."

But seniors who are interested in learning to play an instrument don't always have to purchase one. Most centers have instruments that can be used by students while they are in class. Rentals are available at local music stores, Kavanaugh notes.

Local senior centers also offer classes for a fraction of the going rate for music lessons, Brown says.

The average rate for private guitar lessons is about \$50 an hour, he says. His hourlong Monday classes at Doolittle Senior Center, 1950 N. J Street, are free.

While senior center classes are taught in groups, some instructors offer private lessons and will negotiate the fee, Kavanaugh says.

GETTING STARTED

Several city of Las Vegas senior centers offer music classes at reduced rates or for free.

Here are a few of the available classes:

Derfelt Senior Center, 3343 W. Washington Ave. Phone 229-6601: Beginning guitar class on Thursdays, 10 a.m.-noon. Cost is \$1 per class.

Doolittle Senior Center, 1950 N. J St. Phone 229-6125: Beginning guitar class on Mondays, 12:30-1:30 p.m. Cost: free. Guitar club on Mondays, 1:30-2:30 p.m. Cost: free

East Las Vegas Community/Senior Center, 250 N. Eastern Ave. Phone 229-1515: Beginning guitar on Wednesdays, 10:30-11:30 a.m. Cost: \$5 per lesson. Piano or keyboard on Wednesdays, 1:30-2:30 p.m. Cost: \$5 per lesson

Howard Lieburn Senior Center, 6230 Garwood Ave. Phone 229-1600: Guitar class on Wednesdays, 9:30 a.m. Cost: free.

Las Vegas Senior Center, 451 E. Bonanza Road. Phone 229-6454: Beginning ukelele on Thursdays, 11 a.m. Cost: \$3 per class. Intermediate guitar on Thursdays, 4 p.m., Cost: \$3 per lesson .

HOBBY CAN BE PRICEY

The music she plays on her easy-play Lowrey organ gave Nola Cox, 83, a reason to get up in the mornings after her husband died in 2007.

"It makes me more than happy," Cox says, adding that playing the instrument is one of the first things she does every day.

And it isn't just any organ, it's the top-of-the-line recreational music-making instrument, the Lowrey Prestige, which cost \$85,000. She had it delivered on the one-year anniversary of her husband's death.

Some might balk at that price; Cox's adult sons did, at first.

"I've had people come in who aren't in the hobby," says Michael Cooney, the organ dealer who sold Cox the instrument. "There's a tendency to think someone may be taking advantage of them."

But the cost of the instrument reflects its quality, Cooney says.

Cox and other Lowrey organ owners interviewed say the enjoyment and satisfaction they get from playing their instruments is worth every penny.

Chet Cox knew that his mother's music classes were important to her, especially after his father died. But he became concerned when he heard about her plans to buy an \$85,000 organ, especially since she already owned one. Nola Cox says she started out with a smaller, less expensive organ, paying about \$5,000 for it.

"Yeah, it's always in the back of your mind, how many of these are out there and how many people get sucked up into that because it becomes their only vice, so to speak," Chet Cox says of his initial resistance to his mother's plan. So he and his brother checked out the Lowrey company and found that the local prices were consistent with stores in California and Utah.

And though the Prestige may be an expensive organ, he says his mother can afford it. He

has attended several of her concerts and met other Lowrey enthusiasts. His mind is at ease, he says.

"These people have the disposable income to spend on organs," Chet Cox says. "It's like buying an expensive car."

Find this article at:

<http://www.lvrj.com/living/people-who-learn-instruments-late-in-life-find-it-relaxing-fun-63472747.html>



Students learn to play the harp during their class at the Blind Center of Nevada. Musician and instructor Kathy Kavanaugh teaches weekly classes there. She also teaches guitar and keyboard at the East Las Vegas Community/Senior Center, 250 N. Eastern Ave.

Photo by [Gary Thompson](#)



Kathy Kavanaugh, standing, teaches students to play the harp at the Blind Center of Nevada. Learning to play a musical instrument can help seniors reduce stress and improve their memories, she says.
Photo by [Gary Thompson](#)