

**Benefits of Music Participation for Senior Citizens:  
A Review of the Literature**

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**Abstract**



Music participation, a social activity by nature, has offered a world of benefits for senior citizens regardless of their health conditions.

Although health and wellness are important concerns for many senior citizens, music participation is considered as a beneficial activity even for the normal and healthy. Based on in-depth interviews of 38 (Hays & Minichiello, 2005a) and 52 (Hays & Minichiello, 2005b) senior citizens in Australia, aged 60 to 98 years, music participation was a central contributor to the seniors' subjective experience of good health. The seniors felt a sense of well-being and good health due to their musical participations. One of the participants in the study stated that music was stimulating for her brain (Hays & Minichiello, 2005b). It kept her awake, thinking well, and functioning well. Music participation might even be perceived "as a way of slowing down the aging process because it kept them occupied, focused and, as one participant stated, gave him 'a youthful outlook on life'" (p. 447).

Senior citizens who participated in a band for older adults in the United States were not much different from the Australians mentioned above. Dabback's (2008) qualitative study revealed that the older band participants in the United States negotiated an identity of healthy productive older individuals through social interactions in the ensemble. The band was described as the "fountain of youth" that helped them to live longer. The connection between health and identity was interpreted through Marcia's (1966) identity theory, which posited that those with strong commitments to an identity tended to be healthier and happier individuals. The older band members seemed to have a strong commitment to the band given its reported low attrition rate.

The age-defying benefit of music participation was not only claimed by subjective perception of music participants. Evidence was found in classical pianists in a series of two studies in the maintenance of cognitive-motor skills when playing the piano. The older pianists' average age was 60.3 years, with ages ranging from 52 to 68 years, in one study, and the average age was 71.4 years, with ages ranging from 60 to 81 years, in another study (Krampe & Ericsson,

creatively. These elements have been shown to enhance the quality of life of older adults (Coffman, 2002).

Some psychological or mental-health-related benefits of active music participation for senior citizens are accessed through the process of active music making (Chiodo, 1997; Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999; Coffman & Levy, 1997; Ernst & Emmons, 1992; Hays & Minchiello, 2005a; Jutras, 2006; Murphy, 2003; Wise, Hartmann, & Fisher, 1992). Other psychological benefits also result from music participation, but may not occur during the process of music making. These benefits may emerge

and develop over an extended period of time in which a person participates in musical activities, and can be divided into the subcategories of (a) benefits related to perception of self (Coates, 1984; Dabback, 2008; Hays & Minchiello, 2005a, 2005b; Ruud, 1997; VanderArk, Newman, & Bell, 1983; Wise et al., 1992) and (b) benefits related to continuity of music participation (Bowles, 1991; Chiodo, 1997; Cohen, Bailey, & Nilsson, 2002; Dabback, 2008; Patchen, 1986; Ruud, 1997; Sheldon, 1998; VanWeelden & Cevasco, 2009; Wise et al., 1992).

Table 1

Type of Music Participation	Effect on Physical Health	Reference
Singing	Improve respiratory function	Hays & Minichiello (2005a, 2005b)

accomplishment from learning new musical skills, and personal musical development) as perceived primary motivations for senior citizens to join the band. In addition, it is worth noting that Wise, Hartmann, and Fisher (1992), in a study of a volunteer community chorus in a senior retirement village, found that even though one goal of the chorus was to improve and master musical skills, a larger, more important goal was that of working collaboratively to make music. Hence, occasional missed notes or lapses in concentration by individual chorus members were tolerated or overlooked by the group.

Closely related to the challenges of acquiring new musical skills, seniors also receive



Finally, music participation in older adulthood can aid in the positioning of the social self within culture and history. Dabback (2008) found that older women who participated in the Rochester, New York New Horizons Band were able to transcend gender stereotypes and choose to play instruments traditionally played by men. One participant in this study related a prevailing view that “percussion instruments were

members from the same retirement village. The two groups did not have a significant difference in age, health condition, social class, education level, and religion. The average age of the entire sample was 64.1. The sample was described as upper-middle class, high school or better educated, Protestants, and in good health. Both the choral and non-choral groups scored near the top 20% in life satisfaction but the choral group showed greater homogeneity, meaning that the choral participants had a narrower range within the same high level of life satisfaction. In an earlier study





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