

# Music, Socializing, Performance, and the Web of Social Ties

Dawn C. Carr

**ABSTRACT.** This qualitative exploration sought to understand how older adults ascribe meaning to their lifelong participation in instrumental music. Seven adults between the ages of 72 and 85 participated in one-time in-depth interviews. Analysis of transcribed narrative responses indicated that these individuals uniformly believed that instrumental music participation was meaningful in their lives because it provided an opportunity for personal growth and expression and because it connected them to others and to society. Four themes emerged in support of this thesis: (1) participants' long-term involvement was associated with positive childhood music experiences and family support for music involvement; (2) music was associated with a good quality of life; (3) participation created social ties with other musicians, helping generate a sense of efficacy, belonging, and mutual respect; and (4) music was perceived to have an emotionally therapeutic function. doi:10.1300/J016v30n03\_01 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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**INTRODUCTION:  
ART IN THE LIVES OF OLDER ADULTS**

For many years, gerontologists have examined issues of aging and retirement in light of activity theory, which has supported the creation of arts opportunities at places like senior centers and community centers, mainly due to their ability to keep older adults busy and engaged (e.g., Adams-Price, 1998; Carlsen, 1991). In the medical field, art therapy research has documented the effectiveness of the arts as a method for helping older adults cope with diseases, illnesses, psychological conditions, and end-of-life issues (e.g., Aldridge, 2000). However, there is a dearth of research examining the value of the arts in old age beyond keeping people busy or helping individuals cope with illnesses.

The field of gerontology progressed in light of the “problems” associated with the aging process (e.g., Cowdry, 1924). Much of the early gerontological research examined causes for decline in old age and ways to prevent “problems.” The Kansas City studies in the 1950s focused on problems associated with retirement, examining how adults spent their time (Hendricks, 1994). The ideas surrounding activity theory emerged during early studies, but the theory was formally articulated in response to the Kansas City studies. This theory examined activity level and associated effects on aging, positing that participation in activities has a positive effect on aging, and that participation in certain activities can and should replace old ones so that a person can understand and relate with their new role in retirement/old age (Katz, 1996).

Being involved in certain regular activities during old age is presumed to be very important because it is believed that the more active persons are, the more “successfully” they age (Fry, 1996; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). That belief shaped the formation of the Older American’s Act in 1965, which initiated community-based arts programming for older adults in senior centers. As a result, arts opportunities that emerged during that time focused on helping older adults stay busy rather than supporting their ability to create high-quality art. This model is still evident in most community-based arts programming (Carr, 2005).

The arts have been recognized in the medical field as a valuable tool for coping with health conditions. Art therapy research has demonstrated the positive effects of artistic activities for patients suffering from various physical and psychological conditions (Malchiodi, 1999; Peters, 2000). Art therapy research investigates the arts and older adults through the lens of a medical model, studying the way music or art

therapy may assist in the health of often institutionalized, sick, frail, or cognitively impaired older adults (e.g., Aldridge, 2000).

Not much literature on the arts and aging examines the personal experiences and meaning attached to participation. The prevailing activity theory model was functional in creating arts opportunities for older adults initially, but may need to be reexamined to meet the needs of a more highly educated and healthy older population. Art therapy, through the lens of the medical model and the “problem” approach to aging research, continues to focus on measurable results. The problem-centered approach to arts and aging research is limited, however, because it does not allow for a broad understanding of personal experiences and meaning, the essential ingredients of long-term participation in the arts. A deeper examination of the meaning that older adults ascribe to participation in the arts may provide just the tools for developing arts opportunities that more effectively support personal growth in old age. Examination of the way arts opportunities influence social and emotional dimensions of the lives of older adults is important because it moves the focus of arts and aging research away from a problem-orientation to one that recognizes the positive aspects of aging. Examining the perceptions of lifelong musicians provides a unique opportunity to study how arts participation may promote positive aspects of aging.

### ***BACKGROUND AND RELATED RESEARCH***

A broad base of research on the arts suggests that the process of learning music helps individuals: Develop skills and knowledge that increase self-confidence/self-esteem; develop socially through meeting and interacting with others with similar interests; and ultimately develop a lifelong commitment and support of the arts and their role in artistic endeavors (Costa-Giomi, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Wilder & Weisberg, 2001). Research involving art participation among older adults has often neglected these benefits as well as the deeper meaning behind art participation in favor of focusing on art simply as a method of keeping older adults occupied (e.g., Banks, 2000). The problem-based focus on arts and aging research, however, does provide measurable evidence of the positive aspects of arts participation and is a necessary foundation for extending attention to the personal meaning associated with arts participation.

An ongoing, coordinated research project involving George Washington University’s Center on Aging, Health, and Humanities, AARP

(American Association of Retired Persons), the National Endowment for the Arts, and other nationally recognized organizations is suggesting a strong correlation between participation in the arts and improved physical and socioemotional health among community-dwelling older adults (Cohen, 2001, 2004). This groundbreaking study, in combination with Cohen's other work (2000) provides evidence to support the need for arts opportunities for people of all ages, but specifically older adults. In examining the benefits of arts participation among institutionalized or ill older adults, Cohen and associates examined *healthy* older adults, moving the focus of arts and aging research in a new direction. The recent attention given to "productive aging" and "successful aging" emphasizes the importance of creating valuable and meaningful opportunities for older adults to participate in society, and gives indication that research on meaningful activities is a necessary shift in gerontological research.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of selected seniors' long-term involvement in playing a musical instrument, specifically exploring the social and emotional dimensions of involvement with music through the eyes of the older adult musician. Music participation is an art activity that requires group participation and social interaction. Exploring how music participation in social settings affects the lives of older adults may be useful to the important task of bridging the social sciences and the humanities, and may provide valuable insight into the experience of music making. There have been few attempts in this direction; only a handful of articles have provided such contributions. In one instance, Shepherd (1991) suggested that art, music experiences in particular, is personal but functions as a social symbol. Another example, Zolberg (1990) discussed art as "objects," historicizing or deconstructing particular genres of music or musical structure (melody, rhythm, harmony, etc.). When investigating the arts, social scientists often employ methods or techniques associated with their own discipline, thus contextualizing the art form within the lens of that discipline. Zolberg addressed macro concerns, such as funding access and social class composition of audiences, which is valuable and effective for certain purposes, but it does not bring us to the experience and meaning of music participation to individuals and how it may unfold through the life course. Shepherd, while examining the meaning of music, focused on the influences of the meaning as a reflection of society, not the individual experiences and values.

A classic example includes a well-known and highly respected 20th century composer, Paul Hindemith. His book, *A Composer's World*

(Hindemith, 1954), provided a model of how the humanities explain the musical experience. Although Hindemith used extensive musical jargon, his book attempted to provide a vocabulary for the power of music to influence and shape the way we perceive and understand the world emotionally. This vocabulary is helpful in linking gerontology, the social sciences in general, and the humanities because the arts are directly related to the well-being of many older adults for reasons other than that discovered by medical research and proves more meaningful than simply an “activity.”

Research that has attempted to critically explore the experience and meaning behind arts participation among older adults is scarce. Hindemith, Shepherd, and Zolberg together have provided a starting point for connecting the social sciences and the humanities, and Gene Cohen has provided a foundation for understanding the benefits of art participation to healthy older adults. However, understanding the personal meaning behind arts activities requires a focus on the significance that an individual ascribes to his/her experiences, realizing the value of the activity beyond keeping people busy or improving/maintaining their health. This study intends to promote research that focuses on the positive aspects of aging, bridging gerontology and the humanities to uncover mechanisms for understanding the meaning of arts participation in old age.

### ***Methodology***

The qualitative analysis employed in this research is based on interviews with seven people between 72 and 85 years of age (mean age = 78). The interviews were semistructured, that is, some specific topical areas were guided by eight questions (Appendix), but the conversations had an open format. “The Long Interview” method described by McCracken (1988) provided the framework that guided this research. This method, often associated with ethnographic research, allows the “expert,” or participant, to lead the research with narrative that is structured by the researcher. The goal of the interviewer is to guide the conversation as little as possible. The interviews, lasting from thirty minutes to an hour and a half, were taperecorded and transcribed. The resulting total of 56 single-spaced pages of text constitutes the empirical basis for this analysis. Analysis of the interviews was guided by the conceptual framework that Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe as grounded theory, an inductive approach that reveals themes that emerge from the data. In this phenomenological ap-

proach, each interview informs the next, centering on close attention to language.

“Snowball” sampling was used to identify musicians who were actively playing music on a regular basis. Snowball sampling is “a method of sampling in which sample elements are selected as they are identified by successive informants or interviewees” (Schutt, 2001:134-135). At the start of the project, 25 music organizations were selected from a national listing of music organizations. These organizations included symphony orchestras, community (volunteer) organizations, and other performing groups. Organizations were unwilling to recommend individuals to participate in the study because of legal concerns. However, three organizations that consisted solely of participants over the age of 60 did identify participants. Of those contacts, three individuals agreed to participate, with additional participants identified through snowball sampling during the course of the study. Sample size was determined when the analysis revealed no new major themes (saturation). For this study, saturation occurred following analysis of the seventh musician. The final sample consisted of amateur (those participants who were not playing music for income) and professional musicians (those participants playing music for income).

All participants were active musicians, and although each of them played music in retirement, they varied in the intensity of their lifetime involvement with music. Four participants were professional musicians and had been so throughout their lives, that is, taught and/or played, or are playing instrumental music to earn a living of some kind (including, in some cases, composing music). The other three were categorized as “amateur” musicians; they earned a living outside of music but were involved with music at various points throughout their lives. Although there was an effort to include diversity, all participants were middle-class and Caucasian. Five of the participants were female. All participants were college graduates, with four of the seven holding graduate degrees. Five participants identified chronic health problems (i.e., arthritis, macular degeneration) that made playing music and certain parts of life a bit challenging; however, all participants indicated that they were in good health overall. During the course of this study, differences among the participants (i.e., gender, musical experience, and education) were critically examined.

The principal investigator resided in the metropolitan area of a medium large Midwestern city. Five of the participants lived within 150 miles of the principal investigator, and therefore, they were interviewed in person. The remaining participants were interviewed by phone. Prior

to interviews, all participants received phone confirmation and a written description of the project, and each signed a letter of consent. All interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, were taped and later transcribed verbatim.

Allowing seniors to articulate the kind of role music participation plays in their lives as it relates to their overall well-being has not been investigated previously; relevant work has not integrated social gerontology or attempted to bridge the humanities with the social sciences in this form. Research questions were selected based on their power to reveal the story of, and variables contributing to, each participant's lifelong experiences related to music. The questions were specifically targeted to help elicit discussion about the reasons why these individuals remained involved with music and a description of how their participation evolved over their life course, and to make sense of the role music has played in their life.

### ***Results: Interpreting Music, Meaning, and Biography***

Four themes emerged from the narratives: (1) Lifelong learning, starting music in childhood; (2) description and meaning of a good quality of life; (3) social ties; and (4) wellness and music. The themes provide insight into the meaning to musical participation in old age. This study provided an opportunity for older adult participants to tell their story about music in a very personal and emotional way. Although each participant described very different approaches to integrate music into their lives, various themes were identified and provided a deeper understanding of this kind of artistic activity. The themes that emerged from the narratives contained a common thread, that these lifelong, instrumental music participants associated their participation to the social world—connecting with others, connecting with experiences and emotions, and their role in society as a whole.

#### ***Theme 1: Lifelong Learning: Starting Music in Childhood***

Consistent with the work of Myers (1992) and Larson (1985), the participants in this study credit their childhood music activity as the strongest reason that they continued to play music into retirement. During the interviews, each individual shared the way in which they began their lifelong participation with music. Although each story was unique, every participant had family support that allowed them to get involved

and stay involved in music. It was obvious that music was something valued in their households, and interwoven with significant relationships and often rituals.

Most of the participants had several family members who were also musicians, either professional or amateur. The following three excerpts exemplify how family participation supported these participants when they began playing music as young children. It should be noted that this group of individuals began their musical experiences during the Depression, which may have reinforced the extent to which strong family support and often sacrifice were necessary to allow such a privilege.

I had an older brother that has [recently] died that played music, and I also had an aunt that taught piano where we lived in Wisconsin. . . . And I had a brother who was accomplished with marimba and drums . . .

I was I think about ten years old and of course it was during the Depression, and the teacher came around that was going to give piano lessons in the school. But, they only had one piano and this was to be a class thing. So we had cardboard things we had to play on and I did not have a piano at home, so I had to go to my grandmother's every morning before school to practice . . .

I think my father, who was a part time musician, thought I should be interested in music. I don't remember the beginnings of it that well except that my mother taught me piano lessons . . . she wasn't as good a musician as my father, and his parents were musicians, but mostly self-taught . . . So I started . . . when I was five or six or something like that. And I worked at it sort of haphazardly for a while and then a local piano teacher who was a friend of my father's, said she would like to have me as a student . . . It was the Depression and my parents had practically no money . . . Bad time, two and half-dollars a week for a lesson was just too much. Uh, so she said never mind, you'll pay me when you can. And my father did over the years, repay her. And when I went away to college to the Eastman School of Music, she sent my father a check saying, here is the money that you have paid me for E's lesson over the years. I think she might need it when she goes to college. I don't know if it was all the money, but any of it was a lot, because she didn't have very much.



Music, unlike some school activities, requires some investment and usually some talent or ability, or at least a highly motivated parent or student. The participants touched on the subject of whether or not musical interest or ability is inherited, a question that cannot be settled here. However, whether it is the emotional or economic support offered by family members, these participants had family members who shared their commitment.

I've also said I inherit my musical ability from my daughter, who I started teaching piano to when she was seven and she used to ask for lessons in between . . . I never had to tell her to practice. She had a little toy piano, we got it when she was about six years old . . . In a year's time I had to turn her over to really a good piano teacher.

Learning the piano seemed to be the most common beginning with music for most of the participants. One participant suggested that it was as common during the time he grew up to have a piano in the house, as it is today to have a television. All but one mentioned the piano as part of their early experiences with music. One participant discussed her excitement about beginning the piano.

I can remember the joy even before I started private lessons as a first or second grader, probably first grade. And there was this music book and I'd never seen a music book and it was just so thrilling to hold this music book.

Although piano may mark the start of music in the lives of these participants, it was not the only influence. In fact, one participant suggested, like many others, that it was her environment that opened her eyes to music: Her friends, family, as well as the music she listened to. At the time, the participants were learning music and toward the start of their career life, arts education and performance had a high public profile. It was highly recognized and becoming an important ingredient in the richness of the opportunities available to the middle class (for example, The Young Peoples' concerts with Leonard Bernstein and also the folk revival and Beatle phenomenon raised the public cultural visibility of music.)

I can recall maybe when I was about ten or twelve loving to listen to opera records when they were . . . 12 inch, you know, breakable

vinyl . . . of Faust, Carmen. I listened a whole lot. So you know, in some way I liked music . . . And I had started taking piano at 8, but that didn't really turn me on to music. That was just a lot of hard, boring work . . . But I did love to listen to opera . . . But, raising a child then, I came to perk up again in the 60s, Bob Dylan and the Beatles, and Joe Baez, and Judy Collins, and I thought, this is better than sliced bread. This is really, really the right stuff. And a friend of mine had gone somewhere and . . . uh, found out about guitar lessons and said, why don't we do that? And so we did . . .

Like the previous participant, this participant also found his inspiration through his environment. However, like other participants, the support offered to him by his family allowed him to continue playing.

[W]hen I was seven years old I heard Del Staigers play the Carnival of Venice with the Goldman Band in New York City and it was on the radio. If you remember, there were no TVs or anything like that. So I told my father that that's what I want to be. So from that point on, I studied cornet with one of the members of the Sousa band that played third cornet in the Sousa Band, and he was the director of the community band in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Opportunities for lifelong learning of music are important for both the current and future needs of learners (Myers, 1992). Jacquelyn Boswell (1992), who has done pioneering research on adult vocalists, suggests that one of the most important characteristics of music education and involvement starts with helping children develop the desire to continue to make music throughout life. Although all of the participants have unique experiences marking the start of lifelong participation with music, many have got their inspiration from their family and their social environment at a young age. Maybe as a result of the time with which these individuals lived, the piano served as an impetus to their start with music. Positive childhood experiences shared by these participants stress the importance of music to their development.

### *Theme 2: A Good Quality of Life: What Does It Mean?*

To further understand the reasons why the individuals in this study continued with music throughout their lives, I explored the meaning they attributed to musical involvement, employing a widely used term/concept, quality of life. There are many definitions of quality of life,

often with physical health as the central point of departure. However, a good quality of life is not limited to physical health, and there are several definitions that capture the subjective dimensions of quality of life.

The Center for Health Promotion at the University of Toronto (1998) developed a conceptual model, defining quality of life as the degree to which a person enjoys the important possibilities of his or her life. Significant gerontological research has referred to quality of life in other terms. The “wellness model” is the most recent and dominant gerontological model of exploration in quality of life, exploring holistic well-being. This model includes six dimensions of personal wellness: Social, emotional, intellectual, vocational, spiritual, and physical (Assisted Living Success, 2003). One of the challenges of the wellness model is its inability to articulate the tension between the dimensions of an individual’s needs and the negotiated connection between that individual and society in addressing holistic, personal wellness. Music participation provides a unique example of an activity that often involves solitary participation yet assumes a social connection through the eventual performance of the music with or for others.

Studies have shown that people are inherently happier when they are active and able to express themselves through the activities in which they involve themselves. Nordenfelt (1993) suggests that the things a person values, the people one associates with, the things one enjoys doing, and what gives a person the most “pleasure” are the contributing factors to a high quality of life. The University of Toronto researchers (1998) concluded that these components are subjective and contextual, and can only be understood according to the values and terms of the individual experiencing them. This approach suggests the distinctive value of interpretive approaches to social inquiry, based on narrative interview in which language can serve as a window to experience and perception (Polkinghorne, 1988).

The participants in this study convey the belief that a good quality life is one that is full of activities and interests, and is characterized by being able to stay involved.

[A] quality of life would be having joy and satisfaction and challenges and performances of music you’re learning as opposed to sitting in front of a TV all day. Or just maybe if you had to work hard and not have any relaxation and enjoyment, it would be a very dull quality of life. I guess that’s quality of life, the things that make it enjoyable.

I interpret quality of life where I'm free to and have the abilities to continue life on a normal scale . . . and I have all this music available, which is a wonderful thing for retiring . . .

Nussbaum (2001) suggests that music participation meets our basic human needs because music has deep connections to our emotional lives; the sources of individual meaning reside at the core of intrinsic motivation, and deep meanings give a sense of purpose because they govern what people search for and do in life. One participant, who has played music for over 78 years, discussed his belief that playing music shaped and defined the quality of his life by providing a connection with others.

[Music and quality of life are] tightly bound, I mean it's never changed since I was seven years old. But it's always had to do with great feeling toward other people. I mean, you know, you have a great sense of wanting to help people.

It seems that life is not full without some kind of "outlet" according to one participant.

[Y]ou've got to have; I think some type of art. In fact . . . a lot of that depends on what you consider to be art. An outlet for me would not necessarily be the same outlet for you or for someone else.

Quality of life involves music more indirectly as well. According to this participant, musical training helped create a way of thinking that transferred to other parts of life, developing a deeper emotional connection to other people and other things and making life more enjoyable because of it.

I wish I had that picture here that goes above the fireplace. I love it, it's being reframed, a silkscreen canvas. And I think that if I hadn't been a musician I don't believe that I would have looked at that with the same kind of perception that I do because I am. Quality of life includes music.

Although quality of life is a subjective concept, the participants in this study linked it to their participation in music. These individuals have explained music as the reason for having quality of life and enhancement of their lives. It helped them see the world with different

eyes; it allowed them to give of themselves to others, and it offered a meaningful activity with which to participate throughout their lives.

### *Theme 3: Social Ties*

The participants in this study discussed many benefits of their participation in music. The benefits of being a part of a musical organization are similar to those of any group in many ways. Due to the fact that much of what makes life enjoyable are the people we interact with, organizations become particularly important during retirement. The social aspects of musical participation is not the only reason people continue to stay involved with music over a long period of time; however, it appears at least for the participants in this study, it is a very important part of their experiences with long-term participation. This may be due to the fact that musical participation requires a shared understanding and appreciation for the arts and provides a shared emotional experience.

Performance often creates strong emotional bonds among participants. Due to the nature of a performing musical group, when a commitment is made to accept responsibility for performing one's part, there is also a commitment to contribute to the success of the whole group. Under these circumstances, camaraderie frequently develops among the participants (Clair, 1996). In this study, musical opportunities introduced the participants to many of their current and long-standing friends. Five of the participants identified their closest friends in retirement as those they met through various performing groups or musical circles.

Of course it's always more fun to do the things with your friends . . . It's just like if you feel like you want to share music with people, then you share your life with people, really. You get a tremendous bang out of being involved with would you say a team member . . . it's great to play with people who love to play . . . Well and of course one of the most important things I think is that if you love what you do and you love to share your musical feelings with other people, then that becomes the rapport between you and your friends. And . . . it changes everything.

I've met some of the most wonderful people. That's primarily it, getting out and meeting other people, which I enjoy . . . There is a group of us that after we give a concert, we frequently stop and go

to dinner some place. And sometimes we've gone down to the symphony to hear a special soloist.

One participant described the profound effect that music has made on her life because she has always been extremely introverted and has had difficulty in meeting people.

Well, it helped me to make friends when I played in the band in high school and college and in the music club. I made new friends. You might not have even met them but you have this interest in common and your friendship grows. And my best friends are my music club friends . . . so it helps to make friends . . . it just expands your social life and makes life fuller and more enjoyable.

As with many artistic activities, musicians often create a unique communication style or language. The use and understanding of both musical jargon and a shared way of thinking can be empowering when shared with other musicians. This participant discussed how she valued the friendships she developed with musicians in her life because she was able to connect through a shared understanding of music and musical activities.

I must say that my very favorite people have been musicians, for very many years. When I worked at this one particular place, a whole bunch of teachers around, and we got to know each other, outside of class, too. And they, they're just different than other kind of people. One outstanding characteristic, we're all happy to share what we know to somebody else. You know, it's our livelihood; we give away what we do . . . Somebody, I'm still in touch with people from back in the days when I taught at the Village Music Store . . . And yet we have many other interests besides that, but we just know what we're talking about . . . there's no misunderstanding when I talk in the manner that I talk in. Musicians seem to understand me.

A music group in retirement may be interpreted as a replacement for the workplace as a source of making new friends and offering a feeling of attachment to a group that is important to a person's well-being (Ernst & Emmons, 1992). For these individuals, music seems to provide a great example of creating and exploring their role in society.

Musical experiences contribute to a sense of community. Group members begin to show concern for each other and are attentive as they respond to each other's personal needs; it is quite common to share during times of joy, sadness, fear, or grief (Ernst & Emmons, 1992). The following participant discussed how she as well as others in her performing group appreciated music because of its ability to introduce them to groups of people with shared interests.

You know so many retired people, their surroundings close in on them and it's difficult for them to reach out. So, for retirement, it's just been wonderful because you have all these opportunities to reach out and be with other people and so on. And that's true, I think, in probably every phase of your life also, but, very important in the retirement aspect of it.

For these participants, music making and socializing go hand in hand. Playing music offered a way to meet friends for life and created a network of social support, and a place to feel accepted.

#### *Theme 4: Wellness and Music*

The therapeutic benefits of music participation are well documented through research on music therapy, which employs the lens of a medical model, linking music to improvement in health conditions. More broadly, participation in music has been shown to promote *psychological* as well as *physical* well-being (Clair, 1996). Learning to play music in a supportive, socially enjoyable setting has been shown to play a key role in minimizing some of the negative effects of aging as well as increasing the quality of life for active, healthy adults (Myers, 1992).

Two studies exemplify some of the positive changes in *physical* health that can result from musical involvement. A project begun in the mid-1990s (Tims & Bruhn, 2000), called Music Making and Wellness, studied the effects of music making on healthy, active older adults. Specifically, this study demonstrated that older students learning music improved the quality of their lives and general well-being, became more relaxed, felt better, responded in positive ways to stress, and had enhanced immune system function. In June 1999, this project produced a second round of positive results showing that participants in music also showed an increase in the human growth hormone (hGH), which positively affects aging phenomena such as energy levels, wrinkling, osteoporosis, sexual function, muscle mass, and aches and pains (Tims &

Bruhn, 2000). Additionally, the School of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Rochester studied the effects of music performance on brain activity yielding evidence that intellectually stimulating activities such as music can prevent or reduce the loss of brain function often considered an inevitable aspect of aging (The New Horizons Band, 2004).

It may be deduced then, that music therapy, shaped by the medical model, produces positive effects on *physical* and *psychological* health among frail or ill individuals. However, noted by the participants in this study, “well” individuals find music to be an integral part of their *overall* well-being. Clair (1996) suggests that when people are involved with music they frequently see progress and improvement; this success produces feelings of accomplishment. She determined that these feelings often overcome negative outlooks and may ultimately relieve depression. This was also noted by participants of the New Horizons Band who felt that playing music lifted their spirits and helped contribute to a positive attitude (Ernst & Emmons, 1992).

Music had very personal significance in the lives of each participant in this study. Although it was clear that every musician interviewed had strong reasons to include music as a part of his or her life, some were clearer about how it affected them. The most deeply moving answer from each individual, a unanimous comment, was that music was therapeutic. Participants had different stories of how music had served them during hard times throughout their life. Of those interviewed, four had lost spouses and used music to cope with those losses. The others used music as a kind of therapy during other difficult times. One participant discussed how music helped her through her husband’s illness.

I guess I was almost 50 years old . . . my husband was, I say bedfast, he had MS . . . he couldn’t get up. . . . It was the year before he died that TB, who still lives in O, organized the O Community Band. And I read it in the O Press, and I said to my husband, oh boy, I’d love to play in a band again. . . . So, I arranged to have someone [come stay with him] and I went to band rehearsal. And you don’t think about a single trouble, you don’t think about anything but this music that you’re enjoying playing. So, my mind was relieved for an hour and a half every Tuesday night, you know, because I’m absorbed in the music. . . . So the therapy, the getting the troubles out of the mind was a great relief.



Many participants indicated the difficulties they experienced as a result of widowhood. Music has served not only as a coping mechanism, but also contributed to making life worth living.

I'm alone now, my husband has died three years ago and a significant other in my life subsequent to his death has died about ten months ago and I miss the company. And I have never enjoyed practicing as much as I do now. I'm in fairly good shape so I'm fairly; I'm practicing pretty well. . . . And now I have it to do when I'm lonely. Well you know, most widows when their husband has died paint the kitchen and all I did is practice. . . . I can't imagine how I would have handled widowhood without it, and I'm not doing all that well, but it's better with it than it would be without it . . . And you know as well as I do that connection to music is therapy, music is therapy. And sometimes, particularly in the last three years, it's been a great comfort but also . . . inducive to tears, which I think is fine.

The narratives revealed that music offered new conceptions and structures of time, giving structure and temporal shape to emotions. This participant was able to use music to connote emotional moods in connection to composers and pieces. She discussed the way music assisted her during challenging times in her life and helped her cope with her losses.

I lost my husband three years ago to lung cancer and I had played with the Symphony of the West Valley, of course up until the time he was ill, but after that I went back to the symphony, and I teach privately, and I play in another orchestra and do programs. It has been a godsend for me, for this period, this new period of my life when I'm alone. Great inspiration for music . . .

She went on to say later:

Well, I remember back thirty-five years ago or forty now when I lost my parents. I drew upon the Bach Cantata, this is my bible you know, when my husband was sick, it was the Beethoven Violin Sonata that just meant so much to me to get me through this. It's just a resource and it will be different for each thing that happens to you, you know, and it's just a creative outlet, this harmony within your life that you can open up and there is power and strength that

comes through that. . . . Life would certainly not been, it would have been darker if I had not had the music and I don't know how some people go on without this uplift. But music is such a wonderful uplift for the spirit and the soul. . . .

For some, music served a less life-altering purpose, but nonetheless helped during troubling times.

When I was growing up if something went wrong here or there or, you know, at school or a girlfriend or whatever, you always had your horn. So you could go back and play a few licks and stuff. Take it out on the music.

[music is] definitely a spirit lifter. There's a song by Nancy Griffith and one of the lyrics says if you can't find a friend, you've got the radio. . . . And that's pretty much true. If you can't think of anything to do, you can sit down with an instrument, or so, and I would say, I can just lose myself and look up and say, oh my gosh, I can't believe it's that late. I really lose myself. . . . Just sitting down playing was therapy for me. It really was. It's been that, it's been a great friend. . . . You know it was a friend to me when I needed all that kind of stuff. . . . You can lose yourself in it. You don't have to think about your problems all the time; you can push it aside and play a little.

According to these participants, music was extremely therapeutic to their lives. It can help ward off illness, as is suggested from much research, but it appears to help some individuals cope with emotional challenges in life. The individuals in this study felt strongly that music gave them a way to vent their feelings and emotions, a way to understand certain challenges and find ways to cope with these challenges, and a place to find comfort when it could not be found anywhere else. Most importantly, it provided them with a way to make sense of the rest of the world and a connection with those around them.

### ***SUMMARY***

This study explored the unique qualities of musical participation that provide personal meaning for seven older adult participants. The meaning they attached to their participation resulted from artistic growth and

expression as well as from an essential connection with others. These narratives revealed several aspects of music participation that were an important part of how they defined their lives in retirement. What makes many participants' lives *enjoyable* includes being involved in activities that make them happy and offer them a creative outlet. What makes many participants' lives *meaningful* was activity that gave them more than just something above and beyond the mundane activities of life, rather something that enriches their lives and the lives of others. The themes and conclusions described in this paper are echoed by a recently published article based on a qualitative study that examined the effects of music listening and playing among older adults in Australia (Hays & Minichiello, 2005).

The informants in this study were involved in music for many reasons, though all of them had positive experiences starting at a young age. This beginning provided a deep connection with their roles as creative or musical individuals. Many of the participants started by learning piano during the Depression, which manifested strong family support and often familial sacrifice for the opportunity to play. Additionally, many participants indicated a shared family commitment to music; many of the participants identified other relatives who also played music.

Musical participation often requires group performance opportunities and other group situations involving other people who also play music. The common bond that developed between the participants and those they shared music with might be viewed as a replacement for other formal social structures/networks, such as the workplace, as a source for making new friends, offering a feeling of attachment to a group as was suggested by Ernst and Emmons (1992). For most participants in this study, however, being actively involved with music throughout their lives resulted in lifelong friendships with people who truly understood them. It also meant never being alone during difficult times, and always having a place of belonging.

Research involving music and older adults has focused primarily on *physical health* (e.g., Aldridge, 1996; Tomatis, 1991; White, 1992). This research revealed little mention of physical ailments (though some clearly existed), but rather a focus on a very deeply touching part of musical involvement, *emotional health*. For these individuals, music was therapeutic. It helped many through the loss of their spouse or some kind of grief. Playing music was not just a creative outlet, but also a way to cope with life's challenges. This was the most resonating response to the reason why music remained a very significant part of their lives.

Without music, many did not know how they could have coped with the challenges of the past, or how they would cope with those yet to come.

Although each of us defines a good life differently, these individuals articulated how a meaningful activity could bring a lifetime of fulfillment. Music participation might provide a reason to get up in the morning, something to be proud of, a form of expression when words are not enough, and most importantly, a connection with others.

Deep meaning refers to whatever drives us and governs our sense of purpose . . . it includes our needs for social relationships and an emotionally rich life. (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 27)

### *DISCUSSION*

This work exemplifies the way in which musical participation can extend beyond the confines of a job or a hobby into a dynamic, socially and emotionally meaningful role. Gerontological research that investigates arts participation typically places art in the same category as “leisure” activities, “arts and crafts,” or as a service provided (much like meals or getting one’s hair done). For some older adults, the arts may serve only as a way of keeping busy, but for the participants in this study, it did far more than that. It helped these individuals create a strong bond with others. During a time when social cohesion and solidarity is in question (e.g., Putnam, 2000), the narratives from the present study suggest that music brought people together in a meaningful way, which may have been central to the therapeutic nature of musical participation that the participants described.

Art therapy research, as described previously, indicates that music is useful for older adults who are viewed as ill, either physically or psychologically. Extending the work of Cohen (2001), this study goes beyond the immediate physical and socioemotional benefits of musical participation by more deeply examining personal experiences. The therapeutic nature of music described by the participants further supports one of the aims of this research, bridging the humanities and the social sciences. Taking into consideration the social nature of music may suggest that music has a unique ability to connect people with others through the experience of music making itself. While this study cannot draw conclusions beyond the narratives that frame this work, further re-

search might examine the association between social connectedness with others and the therapeutic nature of musical participation.

This work suggests a reasonable alternative to activity theory. The participants in this study describe their “activities” as important because of the individual meaning associated with music and the connection it created with others, not because it simply gave them something to do. Therefore, we can critically examine the influence of certain activities in the process of further understanding the positive aspects of aging. Activity theory created the rationale for social engagement opportunities that resulted in publicly supported social programs. This article calls for a reexamination of the kinds and amount of services that both support maintenance of physical and psychological health (as supported by Cohen, 2001 and Snowdon, 1997) and explore the possibilities for supporting older adults as they seek meaningful experiences.

Expanding music opportunities is in keeping with gerontology’s emerging focus on lifelong engagement and participation in activities, demonstrating older adults’ contributions to society (Weiss & Bass, 2002). However, beyond the policy and research implications of extending work like this, it is important to consider the most valuable message that the participants in this study conveyed: That musical opportunities are an important component of the quality of many older adults’ lives. Practically speaking, older adults reside in a variety of different settings from the community to an assisted living or nursing home. It is challenging to determine the kinds of arts opportunities and the degree to which an older adult can participate; however, this is an important and necessary first step in linking participants’ backgrounds with meaningful activities. In order for participation in activities to have profound personal meaning, this study suggests that it may also be important to identify the personal background of participants, lifelong musicians in particular. Knowing this background can help activity staff to personalize arts programming, enhance existing opportunities, and proactively move beyond activity theory in supporting a new model that supports old age as a period of growth, not just decline.

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## APPENDIX

The following questions were asked to the participants of this study.

1. Tell me the story of how you first became interested in music.
2. What does music do for you?
3. Imagine your life without music. What would that be like for you?
4. How has music affected your social life?
5. In what ways do you find that music allows you the ability to lead a more active life?
6. How has music been able to offer you a great understanding and meaning in your life?
7. How has the involvement of music increased the quality of your life?
8. What does “quality of life” mean to you?