

Creativity in Music

Background Reading

Elders' Creativity in Music

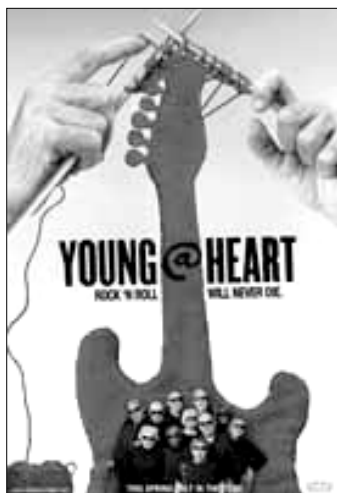
What tune have you written that you think is the best?

- Interviewer

Oh, the one coming up tomorrow. Always
- Duke Ellington
in A Masterpiece by Midnight

The structure of the screenplay, the use of significant visual metaphors, the contribution of sound and musical themes, the technical strengths of the art of the shot or the art of editing, and the power of actors to realize three-dimensional characters provide insights into the multiple levels of art that are brought to bear on depictions of the aging process. Films reveal the changes that occur gradually in the emotional and psychological development of aging individuals.

- Robert Yahnke
Heroes of Their Own Stories



What stereotypes has the poster artist used to examine creativity and aging?

Most of us have heard of particular famous elders who have continued to demonstrate a passion with music well into later life. Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan both won Grammy awards for recordings made in their sixties. Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald composed, performed and recorded into their seventies. At the age of 89 Pete Seeger led a crowd of hundreds of thousands in song at “We Are One,” the inaugural concert for President Barack Obama. Cellist Pablo Casals performed at a high level well into his nineties. Conductor Leopold Stokowski signed a recording contract at the age of 94. And composer Elliott Carter celebrated his 100th birthday at a Carnegie Hall concert by premiering a piece for piano and orchestra that he had written at the age of 98.

It is important to note that a great many other musicians who are not so well known still continue to be creative well beyond their 60th birthday. The Senior Concert Orchestra of New York, made up of retirees from the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, and the NBC symphony, plays free concerts for colleges and high schools in addition to performing at esteemed venues such as Carnegie Hall.

The Young at Heart chorus from Northampton, Massachusetts, whose work is profiled in one of the films in this curriculum, includes both professional and amateur singers. Its members have ranged in age from their 70s to 100.

The average age within the Senior Singers' Chorale is 80. The group has 120 members from three senior centers in the Washington, D.C. area. They have performed at such diverse settings as the Gerontological Scientific Conference, the White House Conference on Aging and the Kennedy Center.

Community Arts Promote Longevity

In 2001 the Senior Singers' Chorale agreed to participate in a unique Creativity and Aging study jointly supported by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and George Washington University. The project's final report described it as "a multisite national study with the aim of measuring the impact of professionally conducted community based cultural programs on the general health, mental health, and social activities of older persons, age 65 and older" (NEA, 2006, p. 1). This was the first such study to use an experimental model with an intervention group (a community arts group like the Senior Singers' Chorale) and a control group to measure outcomes. The study sample included 300 participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with an average age of 80.

Initial interviews with members of the intervention and control groups determined that they were well matched with similar levels of functioning as determined by physical and mental health and level of activity. The final report concluded that those elders participating in weekly participatory arts programs within the intervention groups reported better physical health with fewer



What message does this CD cover give about creativity, aging and attitude?

doctors' visits and less medication usage, more positive responses on mental health questions and more engagement with overall activities. The conclusion of the executive summary offered these reflections on the potential of community arts programs to support creative independence among elders:

These results point to powerful positive intervention effects of these community-based art programs run by professional artists. They point to true health promotion and disease prevention effects. In that they also show stabilization and actual increase in community-based activities in general among those in the cultural programs, they reveal a positive impact on maintaining independence and on reducing dependency. (NEA, 2006, p.6)

In response to these findings the National Endowment of the Arts initiated a grant stream entitled *Creativity and Aging in America*. The 2008 NEA grants funded community arts projects in music and literature with people aged 65 and older in community settings such as senior centers, community centers, retirement centers, museums, literary centers, performing arts centers, libraries, schools, and healthcare facilities (NEA, 2008).

The NEA's executive summary of its 2005 Mini-Conference on Creativity and Aging in America offered this opening quotation from Liz Lerman, Artistic Director of Dance Exchange, a company which invites elders to keep dancing in community throughout their lives: "In assessing the critical needs of older adults, it's very important to understand that art, imagination, physical expression, and creativity are essential ingredients not only to healthy aging, but to a healthy society" (NEA, 2005, Executive Summary).

