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PREVIEW

THE APTITUDE OF ELDERLY PEOPLE FOR LEARNING THE PIANO

by

J. Wilgus Eberly

A THESIS

**Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Educational Psychology and Measurements**

Under the Supervision of Dr. Warren R. Baller

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The question of when a person is too old to begin the study of piano is a logical parallel to the often-heard question of when a child is old enough to begin the study of piano. There is a dearth of gerontological studies available by which to answer the first question. The best one can do at present is to base his judgments upon a few general studies in gerontology which have been well done and which have produced findings which are in reasonable agreement, though not directly applicable to the study of music. In the field of music research practically nothing has been done with people sixty and over. Music education is not generously supported with good research at any level and what there is has dealt mainly with school-age populations. Some studies of piano learning have been conducted with younger adults and middle-aged adults by pioneers in the field like Dr. Raymond Burrows, of Columbia University. But people over sixty years of age have been totally neglected. Dr. Burrows, in a recent letter to the author, confirmed the need of studies in which older people would serve as subjects.

The purpose of the present study was to learn as much as possible about older people as they actually participated in the experience of learning to play the piano. The sub-



jects were persons who had no previous musical training. How well they would learn and how they would react in other ways to the experience was the central question of the study.

The Need for the Study

Several aspects of the present status of gerontology stand out quite definitely. First, there is the dearth of research pertaining to it. Experimental evidence on aging and the aged is limited. Quite naturally experimentation with human learning has been concerned primarily with school populations and, to a much lesser degree, with young adults and middle-aged adults; with the consequence that the aged have been neglected. What was begun by Galton in attempting laboratory measurements of individual differences has not been developed to include all ages with equal effectiveness. It has been principally since 1914, when Nascher wrote his book Geriatrics, that most of the research with older persons has been done, and even today gerontology is lagging far behind other areas of study. (34)¹

Second, population statistics show that there is a rapidly increasing population above the sixth decade of life. Due to the advances in medical and health science, life expectancy has greatly increased in recent years. The increase, too, is in proportion to recency, for in the Roman Empire the average life span was 23 years and in 1850, 40

¹ The citations which appear in parentheses have reference to the publication mentioned in the bibliography. The number preceding the colon indicates the reference; the number or numbers following the colon indicate the pages.

5

years, an increase of 17 years. In 1945, the average life span was 65.8, showing an increase since 1850 of 25.8 years. Estimates reveal that we might expect further increase. The need for information about this growing part of the population is quite apparent. (44)

Third, research studies which are available suggest that there is real need for objective data to determine the validity of popular conceptions of the characteristics and abilities of later maturity. (12) Leaders in the field of adult education have felt for some time the need for more penetrating information, based upon reliable research data to take the place of sheer opinion. Popular opinion of the type referred to here is illustrated by such expressions as the following: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks"; "Oh, I'm too old for such things"; "You know, I can't learn like I used to"--these are samples of what old people themselves often say. Old age has, as illustrated, a bad reputation associated primarily with decline. Careless opinion does not trouble itself to pay attention to any compensatory elements. (44)

Fourth, older people, being sensitive to social hostility, are made fearful because of prevailing attitudes towards growing old. (29) They are so convinced of their decline and so uncomfortable because of the intolerance of younger persons that they overlook what some of their peers have done and are doing. No one claims that Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Dewey, Bernard Baruch, and Arturo Toscaninni are in any

way average. What must be remembered is that these men and many others did some of their best work after the age of sixty. Studies of attitudes (12) have shown that old people share an opinion about themselves which frequently finds expression among college students and other young persons, namely that the social climate in which old people generally find themselves is not conducive to the normal demands of security, usefulness, adequacy, and adjustment.

Fifth, old age falls far short of realizing its potentialities because of a negative or renunciatory attitude. Cicero wrote in De Senectute, "The harvest of old age is the recollection and abundance of blessings previously secured." Students of gerontology see this attitude as destructive for elderly people. They need instead an attitude of self-assertion, personal fulfillment, and self-projection. (25) Jan Struther's comment is appropo. "How comforting and clarifying, in times of loneliness and perplexity, is the companionship of inanimate objects, the touching or handling of wood or stone; and when larger problems seem insoluble, how steadying to the nerves, how infinitely soothing to the troubled heart is the painstaking performance of small, familiar, manual tasks." (25:174-5)

The gist of the foregoing five points is that in line with the emphasis today on human growth and development there should be greater application of such thinking to the study of people in later life. College and secondary school curricula

are geared to a day when life expectancy was not what it is today. "Preparation for senescence through education has not kept pace with the changing social order." (44:22)

We may expect then to see increased demand for a wide variety of educational offerings for older people. Socially, culturally, and even vocationally much will have to be done to train in some instances and retrain in others for the new and changing lives which people live in their advancing years. It has been found that adults in good health can and do learn new things at any age. (35)

Definitions

Some interpretation of terms is necessary for satisfactory understanding of the facts in this area of study. Research on aging is found in journals and books of medicine, psychology, and sociology and key terms should not be differently defined elsewhere or considerable confusion would be likely to follow.

Man is an aging organism. (44) He is infinitely complex and no part of the life and change of an organism is isolated and complete in itself. A perspective of the relation of facts to each other and to the whole is necessary. Aging is a process of the whole life of an organism and not something to be associated only with the latter part of life.

Aging is correctly associated with change. Aging and change proceed together as attributes of the living organism. "Aging involves every one of the innumerable aspects of life.

It begins with conception and ends only with death.....
 Pediatrics and geriatrics are closer than many realize.
Gerontology is the science of aging in its broadest sense.
 The aged and aging are not the same; the aged are people,
 aging is a process.....Geriatrics is that branch of medical
 science concerned with the physiologic and pathologic
 problems of older individuals. Geriatrics is thus but a
 part, a sub-division, of the broader field of gerontology."
 (44:2)

Senescence can be defined as the period of decline, more
 commonly, the age-period in human beings from about 60 onward,
 when physical and mental capacities have declined from
 maximum level and are continuing their involutionary course.
 In addition, senescence is the process of normal decline
 associated with advancing age.

Population Trends

"For the first time in human history people over 60 years
 of age now constitute a significant proportion of the popu-
 lation." (29:17) Older people constitute an increasingly
 large group both numerically and in proportion to the total
 population of the United States or almost any other country.

There are now around fourteen million people (one out
 of every ten) 60 years of age or over in the United States.
 It is estimated that in 1960 the number will grow to fifteen
 million and in 1975, twenty million. (12) Maves and Cedarleaf
 report the following figures showing percentage of people
 60 years of age and over: (29:17-22)

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-------------|----------------|
| 1850 | 3 % |
| 1900 | 6.4% |
| 1920 | 7.4% |
| 1940 | 10.5% |
| 1949 | 11 % |

Stroup (46:336), basing his tabulations upon the United States Bureau of Census, shows the percent of people 60 years of age and over since 1880. He projects his calculations up to 1980. His data are summarized below.

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-------------|----------------|
| 1880 | 3.4 |
| 1890 | 3.9 |
| 1900 | 4.1 |
| 1910 | 4.3 |
| 1920 | 4.7 |
| 1930 | 5.4 |
| 1940 | 6.9 |
| 1950 | 7.9 |
| 1960 | 10.2 |
| 1970 | 11.9 |
| 1980 | 14.4 |

The evolution of the population of the world is shown also by the increase in average life span since the days of the Roman Empire. (44) (29)

| <u>Time</u> | <u>Average Life Span</u> |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| Roman Empire | 23 years |
| 1800 | 35 |
| 1850 | 40 |
| 1900 | 50 |
| 1930 | 60 |
| 1940 | 63 |
| 1945 | 65.8 |
| 1970 | 70 (Estimated) |

Increase in median age of the population of the United States since 1890 is indicated as follows: (46:335)

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Median Age</u> |
|-------------|-------------------|
| 1890 | 21.4 |
| 1900 | 22.9 |
| 1910 | 24.0 |
| 1920 | 25.2 |
| 1930 | 26.4 |
| 1940 | 29.0 |

From these figures it seems that elderly people are with us in ever-increasing numbers. "This marked change in the constitution of the population, unprecedented in human history, poses a number of questions. Unquestionably it will necessitate more far-reaching social adjustments in American society than have yet even begun to take place." (29:44)

Can Old People Learn?

What might we expect of elderly people in their attempt to learn some new skill such as playing a musical instrument?

Is it a warranted hypothesis that people over 60 years of age can learn to play? Are not people of this age group in general beyond much achievement in such an activity? Are not Baruch, Dewey, Ford, and Toscaninni truly exceptional cases in that they possessed the ability for superior achievement at any age? How right was William James when he asserted that "Few men got any new ideas after the age of 25?" (2)

It was not until E. L. Thorndike published his work Adult Learning in 1928, that anything was really definitely known in this area. "The catalytic effect of Thorndike's work upon the scattered thinking that was going on justifies one in saying that a genuine belief in the power of adults to learn effectively was established by this publication." (2:49) Thorndike's work, however, was largely based upon adults who were younger than those presently being considered.

Real encouragement to elders to learn is given by studies conducted by Lorge. (28:75) He suggests that age should not be the first consideration in the selection of an activity, for "an adult at any age after 20 can learn the same kinds of things that he was able to learn at 20." The older adult must make some adjustments, however, because of a certain speed loss. "The power ability suffers little if any loss."

Stolz (45) warns of the danger of negative attitudes toward learning. When a person subsums to the idea that his

mind is static he is intellectually "dead". The author emphasizes that a fundamental quality of human nature is elasticity; and he goes on to stress the idea that old people as well as young people can learn. At no stage of life is the normal individual hopelessly static. The decisive factor is the will to learn and a reasonable measure of health. What impedes the learning process in old age, according to Stolz, is not incompetence and age itself as much as indolence, sensitiveness to ridicule, and the lure of popular misconception about old people. Activity is the key word, according to Stolz. Inactivity is a deadly opponent to achievement.

It is the responsibility of the individual to avoid letting himself be marked as an old person in the popular concept. That these issues can be met by old people themselves is shown in the reduction in adult neuroses during World War II in England and is further evidence "that new interests and responsibilities can be developed after middle age." The conditions and issues need to be met frankly by old people and they need to become "ingenious in discovering near-at-hand values" toward which their efforts can be directed. (47:427-8)

World War II provided additional evidence of the activities of older people. In the urgency of the need for manpower, thousands of older people went to work in industry and agriculture, doing work from which they had lately been excluded. Their responses and their productivity were amazing. (29)

7d. 2nd

A project at the University of Michigan has shown what people in the later age brackets can do. In the spring of 1948, the University offered a course on adjustment to aging. The course met twelve weeks for two hours a week. The age of the students ranged from the late teens to the 80's with a mean age of 61. The class was divided into three project groups. All of the groups made a very dynamic approach to the problems presented for investigation but "in each group, the oldest members (75 to 80 years of age) were the most active, in spite of the fact that none of them could drive an automobile and public transportation was not readily available." (10:53)

One ideal of any culture is that all people should work toward their greatest efficiency and meaningfulness. Merely adding years to the end of life is far from realizing this ideal. If older people will accept the responsibility as well as the privilege of increased longevity, they may add significantly to a greater cultural maturation.

Gaps in our Present Knowledge of Aging

Research in the area of learning in music is not extensive. Few studies exist to provide a scientific foundation for the study of music education. As far as the upper age groups are concerned the research is practically nonexistent. There have been, of course, isolated cases of older people studying the piano, but under such circumstances no compilation of data has resulted and, as far as reference

is concerned, might never have existed. Dr. Raymond Burrows, of Columbia University, has conducted numerous experiments with adult groups of varying ages, but in a recent letter to the author he said, "I know of no studies dealing exclusively with people 60 and over."

More general research on the relationship of learning to later maturity does exist. Medicine has contributed to this development with the resultant new field of geriatrics, and considerable research has been done. "Up to the present time the greater proportion of the information about the nature of the older learner has come through the contributions of the physiologist and the physician. The magnificent volume, Problems of Aging, edited by Cowdry, summarizes the major facts about the aging process. Stieglitz, too, in his Geriatric Medicine, has emphasized the physiological and medical aspects of the aging process. (28:74)

If one takes his cues from statements scattered throughout the present literature on later maturity he might conclude that such topics as the following need to be brought under systematic study. (11) (12) (28) (48) (41) (51)

1. Genetic study of developmental characteristics and intellectual ability beginning at age 45.
2. A study of attitudes and the problems and methods of changing and improving them by education.
3. Old age counseling experimentally conducted.

4. The training of personnel especially equipped to deal with this age group.
5. Methods of teaching older people and evaluations of the results of learning.
6. The inter-relationship among the characteristics of the learner, the content, and the procedures for teaching and learning.
7. Expansion and development of the principle of individual differences into this area.
8. Mental testing for the aged. Criteria of measurement for adults. The search for a metric comparable at successive years of age.
9. The nature of the learning process.
10. The utilization of available information in the planning of programs of instruction for the aged.
11. A comparative analysis of the process of handling intellectual tasks by children, youths, and adults.
12. The nature of mental deterioration.
13. An analysis of emotional changes.
14. The allocation of responsibility for adult education between higher educational institutions and public schools.
15. Techniques for group instruction. Class versus individual instruction.
16. Analysis of the attitude of adults toward continued learning.
17. A study of interests.

18. Motivation.
19. Effect of personality factors upon learning.
20. The conservation of human resources of advanced age.

Concluding an article, "Research Needs", Lorge (28:73-79) writes: "The dearth of material on the learning of the adult is a most serious deficiency. The greatest necessity is to utilize research talent to expand this area."

Perhaps, in concluding this section of the present thesis, it would be well to remind the reader of its purpose. It is to learn as much as possible about the aptitude of older people in learning to play the piano.

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