

Ask Hedy! *On a regular basis, Hedy Ciocci, B.S.N., Administrator of the Selfhelp Home will answer some of the many questions we have around aging. Hedy specializes in dementia care, has extensive experience working with families and elderly patients, and is a registered nurse. She is a frequent lecturer on issues of aging.*

Recently, Hedy interviewed Gerald Rizzer, founder, artistic head, and pianist of the Chicago Ensemble, a performing arts group for more than thirty years. Hedy and Mr. Rizzer talked about some of the beneficial aspects of listening to music as we age.



Hedy Ciocci

Q: What are some of the benefits of listening to music for elderly people?

A: I think it makes contact with both their intellectual and their emotional selves. In that sense, it's important for everybody and for the elderly, it helps to keep the mind active. Listening to a great composer requires attention, but also, it will reach emotions one can't always tap into in any other way. People are moved by listening to music and have associations with experiences in their lives. This can be very positive for people and bring back fond memories.

Q: So, music helps us to get engaged emotionally and mentally. Are there some ways to encourage the elderly to listen to music with more appreciation?

A: People in a retirement or nursing home may not appreciate a long lecture, but it's good just to point out a few themes that they can listen for; also, to say a little bit about the background of the composer.

Q: In your experience of making music for many audiences from children to adults, how do you think music affects the quality of our lives as we age?

A: Many people grow up listening to music. So, it isn't just that they came to it at an older age. It's something that has been cultivated, usually from an early

age. Which is not to say that only the people who went to concerts can enjoy music; many of us develop an appreciation for music from listening to recordings or the radio.

Q: When a person moves into a retirement facility, is there any music equipment that you would recommend that they buy or take with them? How else can you incorporate music into this new home environment.

A: Absolutely. Nowadays we have earphones, and if they choose to listen to music, they're not going to disturb their neighbors if they wear earphones. From a facility standpoint, I think it's good to have a piano and in fact, it should be a requirement. Residents should have the opportunity to do some kind of participation in music, whether it's singing or something else. Certain percussion instruments don't take much skill and a creative teacher can develop a small group that can perform using instruments that are not all that difficult to learn.

Q: Do you have any advice for people who are hearing impaired and still want to listen to music?

A: Having a hearing impairment doesn't affect listening to music as much as it does with speech. I think that people can continue to enjoy music with a hearing impairment and there are certainly people in my audience with hearing aids.

Q: If older people say, "I never really made time for music, but I'd like to get more into music..." What would you recommend that these people listen to?

A: I would suggest they listen to a variety of music styles and decide what appeals to them the most. I don't feel that classical music is the only avenue. I have no problem with listening to Broadway musicals or jazz, or favorite hits. As for classical composers...I think one should try a variety of styles.

Q: So, who would go on your list?

A: I would choose some good operas. There are dozens of videos available and one can see the whole performance. I would try something like La Boheme by Puccini, or Mozart's Marriage of Figaro. Among the instrumental pieces, I would include piano works by Chopin, which are usually intense in expression and short in length.

Q: What other examples come to mind?

A: Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." Some famous piano concertos could be Rachmaninoff's 2nd, Grieg's or Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. Beethoven symphonies, at least a movement at a time; the 7th in "A" major is one that's bound to be engaging for most people.

HEDY: You also mentioned Broadway musicals, what would you suggest?

A: Rodgers and Hammerstein or Lerner and Lowe, for example, The Music Man or Showboat.

Q: What other classical combinations?

A: Chamber music. Mendelssohn Trio #1 in "D" minor for viola, cello and piano. Or a Schubert piano trio. There are some beautiful selections of songs by the 19th Century Romantic composers such as Schubert and Schumann.

Q: What about jazz?

A: Absolutely. The first two eras of jazz, which would be Dixieland, as well as King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, from the 20's into the early 30's. And then the Big Bands like Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Count Basie.

Q: What do you think is the special benefit of a live performance of music?

A: I think live performances make a tremendous difference. Picking up on the excitement of the performance and watching the movement of the interaction of the performers is always intriguing. It is a communication, and the communication is better when it's live. People are more likely to share their experience with their neighbor. It is a social experience, the intimacy of a concert experience.