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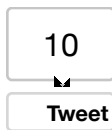
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## So You're Thinking of Learning an Instrument? Read This First

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[Jan 11, 2013](#) Posted by [Meredith Deliso](#)



They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks. But if your New Year's resolution is to pick up a few tunes on the piano as a party trick, finally learn "Stairway to Heaven" on the guitar, or become proficient enough to join that weekly ukulele jam session, don't let the saying discourage you.

Like language and the latest technology, children are able to learn instruments a lot more easily than most adults. It makes sense, too: kids have more time to devote to practicing, have more elastic memories, and are creating muscle memory while they're still developing. But while an adult isn't likely to become a virtuoso, there are many advantages to learning an instrument past the optimal age, from having a longer attention span to better coordination. Though what will likely help you out most of all is the desire to learn.

"Sometimes, people have wanted to do this their entire lives and haven't had the chance," said Roy Ernst, founder of the [New Horizons International Music Association](#), which organizes group music lessons and camps for adults around the world. "So the desire to do it is pretty strong."

Jason Konopinski is living proof. The Pennsylvania-based copywriter has long had a love of old-time blues and bluegrass music. In his early 20s, he decided to start cold and learn how to play the mandolin and dobro, two instruments popular for the style. A decade later, he's proficient in both.

"I don't have any aspirations of cutting an album or being a professional musician, but this is something I enjoy," said Konopinski, who regularly participates in bluegrass festivals in his area. "I'm pretty good, but I know my limitations."

Danno Sullivan is another success story. The 48-year-old Harvard, Mass., resident picked up the ukulele for the first time 10 years ago with few musical bones in his body. Today, he teaches beginning ukulele courses at his local adult education center and heads up the group [Boston Uke](#), which holds regular jam sessions, or "strum-alongs," for its more than 400 active members, almost all of whom have picked up the instrument as adults.



*Danno Sullivan*

“The uke is easy to get started on, but is also capable of real music, so it draws beginners (as well as) folks who have bigger dreams,” said Sullivan.

Both Konopinski and Sullivan used almost every means available to them to master their instruments, from books to live jam sessions to online tutorials. That just touches the surface of what’s out there, with the Internet especially providing more opportunities than ever before to find lessons, tutorials, and willing teachers. A quick search on YouTube for “guitar lessons” brings up about 730,000 results. Students can connect with music teachers via webcam. Websites like [ZOEN](#) and [StrumSchool](#) even facilitate this practice, connecting music students with professional music teachers across the country for live lessons. There are plenty of in-person options, too, from one-on-one and group lessons to adult music camps run by organizations like New Horizons and the Toronto-based [Lake Field Music](#).

While online resources like YouTube make tutorials and lessons readily available at any time — and, most important, for free — both amateur and professional musicians emphasize the value of a real live teacher.

“There’s nothing worse than sitting down with a four-, six-, or eight-string instrument and saying, Yikes, where do I put my fingers first,” said Sullivan. “A couple starter lessons can put you in the right direction.”

Konopinski relied on online tutorials when he was first starting out, but soon realized it wasn’t enough to get to where he wanted to be.

“I kind of plateaued pretty quickly,” said Konopinski. “You can only reach so much with a book or a video series or online forum. In a perfect world, everyone would have a teacher.”

It’s no surprise that music teachers themselves also advise beginners to seek out professional instructors who can help them correct technical mistakes that might otherwise frustrate them enough

to quit.

“As a music teacher, my opinion, of course, is that online info is a great supplement yet not a substitute for a real teacher,” said Susannah Kamer, who teaches private violin and piano lessons to both kids and adults at the Vermont Institute of Music. “Often, when someone is learning on their own, they know what the problem is but have no idea how to find the solution.”

Finding the right instrument is just as crucial as picking a teacher. When you're starting out, the temptation is usually to go with the cheapest option, but that could backfire in the end.

“There's nothing more frustrating than buying a really cheap instrument,” said Konopinski, who, generally speaking, recommends buying the best instrument that you can afford with the help of a more advanced player or music shop to find the right fit. “You're not going to have the muscle memory or the frame of reference to know when it sounds good, but if you compound that with a lousy instrument that doesn't sound good anyway, you're going to be frustrated really quickly.”

And speaking of frustrated — learning an instrument is hard work. There's a reason not everyone can play “Für Elise” perfectly. So putting in that hard work through regular practice is key. Exactly how much you should practice, however, will vary from one teacher to the next. Some may recommend at least 10 minutes a day, while others at least an hour. But however long it is, getting in that daily practice is vital.

“Even after 30 years of guitar playing, if I sit with my guitar for 20 minutes I can see something I never saw musically,” said Marc Amendola, a music coach based in Connecticut.

Rather than set time requirements, music teacher Dara Blaker establishes realistic goals for her students that they can achieve with each practice session to continually motivate them.

“I take it one goal at a time,” said Blaker, founder of the Southern Florida-based music education company [Colour Me Music](#). “It's something tangible. Students can realize what they're working towards.”

Because the desire to learn is so strong in adults, Ernst has found that they are rarely likely to quit. Still, with every scratchy scale, flubbed chord, or wrong note, that temptation might arise. So as you learn, it's also important to remember why you wanted to start in the first place to get you through those low points.

“I know why I enjoy it,” said Konopinski. “I'm not doing it for fame or anything else. At the end of the day, if I don't enjoy it, it's not worth me doing it.”

So bottom line — as long as you're willing to shell out for a decent instrument and a few music lessons to get you on the right track, put in the practice time, and set realistic goals for yourself, it's not too late to pick up an instrument. And don't forget to have fun, too.

“You're never too old,” said Blaker. “You might not get to the same level (you would) if you started when you were 6, but it's never too late to start and get joy out of it.”

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**Chris Becker** · Staff Writer at Consumer Media Network

Great article! A lot of people don't know this but the ukelele was a standard instrument of choice for amateur musicians in the U.S. back in the 1920s. It was cheaper and more portable than a piano, and was a part of many pre-WWII jazz ensembles.

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