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Interview: Great Composers Prove Age No Barrier

Linda and Michael Hutcheon uncover the beautiful complexities of individual journeys, as they examine the final works of some of the world's greatest composers.

In Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, and Britten, a literary theorist and a physician reveal that creativity in older life is not only possible, but a powerful aid in meeting the challenges of the later years.

*To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. Linda Hutcheon at her home in Toronto.*

Ruth Dempsey: What drew you to opera?

Linda Hutcheon: Well, we both love it, because it has it all: music, drama and poetry!

But in a way it was also "neutral turf" for us to work on together — with each of us coming to it from non-musical perspectives, but different ones (medical and literary). Opera calls for this kind of interdisciplinary work because it is not only music (despite what some musicologists think). It consists of words and drama as well.

We also felt that opera is an excellent vehicle to study more general cultural phenomena over time. Opera has a long (over 400 years) history in the west, for one thing. But because it takes longer to sing than to speak a line of text, opera plots must be condensed and concise. So what you get is the distilled essence of the plot, combined with the extravagance of sung drama. The desires, but also the anxieties, of a culture stand out in this kind of structure.

RD: Why did you want to study creativity in old age?

LH: Later life seems to be a fraught topic, generally speaking, in our culture with its commercialized, anti-aging, death-denying ethos which aims to keep us all young forever. We all want to live to an old age, but we don't want to look as if we are aging.

But there is a more personal reason. Though we both retired from teaching (and medical practice, in Michael's case), we have continued to do research and write on opera. We realized that we are ourselves now living a new post-retirement age that hasn't existed for very long and for which there are precious few models. Where does creativity fit into this context, we wondered?

So we sought those models from composers with long creative lives. And we found inspiring ones of continuing creativity and of resilience in the face of the inevitable challenges of aging. Their examples have allowed us to think differently (and more positively) about our later years, and, therefore, to live our own lives differently than we might have before.

RD: Your book presents fascinating profiles of four of the world's greatest composers. You start with Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) and his rollicking *Falstaff*. What did Verdi want to do?

LH: Verdi, the great Italian composer of tragic opera, kept telling the press and his friends and family that he was writing *Falstaff* only for fun, for himself.

Why?

There were two reasons, in our view. One was to limit expectations, given that he was already in his late 70s and everyone (including himself) thought the previous opera, *Otello*, was to be his final one. But the other reason is that he was developing a lesson to teach the younger Italian composers to lure them away from their infatuation with the German composer, Richard Wagner, whose influence Verdi felt was threatening the Italian operatic tradition.

In this (new) final work, Verdi created not only his first comedy, but also a new style of operatic comedy that was very modern and very Italian — thereby consciously offering a model for those younger composers.

RD: Richard Strauss (1864-1949) confronted political and social turmoil in Nazi Germany, as he struggled to compose the self-reflexive *Capriccio* . . .

LH: *Capriccio* (1942) is indeed an opera about opera, in its themes and its musical recapitulating of the history of the form, from Gluck, Piccinni, Rameau, Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi and Wagner to Strauss himself.

While escapism is usually given as the motivating force for Strauss writing this during the war, we think this work can be seen as the start of the composer's musical "life review." The increasingly isolated and aging Strauss looked inward and began an ongoing retrospective self-study to review and assess his musical legacy.

Capriccio would review his operatic career and bring to a culmination his actually very Verdian experiments with a conversational style of opera. It would also place Strauss's own work in the context of the history of opera through its recapitulative echoing of himself and others.

RD: Olivier Messiaen (1908-92) was a devout Catholic who premiered his only opera, *Saint François d'Assise*, when he was 75. It seems Messiaen wanted to use his opera to bring God into the concert hall. Is that right?

LH: Yes, and from there into the opera house — not the usual place to see a work whose theme, according to the composer, is the "progress of grace in the soul of a saint."

When commissioned to write the work for the Paris Opera, he could not resist the chance to renovate what in his eyes was a moribund art form (opera). This he would do through all his own innovations in musical rhythm, melody and harmony. Along the way, he would also ensconce his faith in the unlikely site of the opera house.

By the time the frequently postponed *Saint François d'Assise* was premiered eight years later in 1983, Messiaen had been sorely taxed creatively, physically, psychologically and emotionally. This first and last monumental opera was to be his Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) and also his final testimony to his important musical innovations and especially his religious faith.

RD: Benjamin Britten (1913-76) was dealing with serious health problems, as he struggled to complete his masterpiece *Death in Venice*.

LH: Yes. Throwing himself utterly into composing of what he sensed was going to be his last opera, *Death in Venice* (1973), the ailing Britten made a pact with his family physician. He agreed to see a cardiologist and undergo treatment, if the doctor would keep him going with pharmaceutical therapy long enough to complete the opera.

At the risk of his life, he finished the work, and soon was hospitalized and underwent aortic valve replacement surgery (in relatively early days of such interventions). Not yet 60 years old, the combination of the surgery's failure to dissipate the debilitating symptoms of heart failure and a stroke suffered during the operation, led to major changes in the composer's life.

Britten composed fewer and smaller but equally fine works in his final years, proving that productivity and creativity are not synonymous!

RD: So what insights did you gain from writing *Four Last Songs*?

LH: We learned, first of all, that (despite the fact the everyone does it), it is as impossible to generalize about older age as about the young.

These composers' very different individual lives and careers, not to mention their creative imaginations, are unique. Yet their multiple examples of resilience in the face of the challenges of aging — physical, social, psychological, aesthetic — challenges that we all face, were inspiring to us.

RD: You give the last line in your book to British composer Ethel Smyth: "As long as breath is in your body life need never cease to be a creative effort."

LH: Yes, that seemed the very best summary of what these creative people had taught us — and the best advice we could imagine for everyone!

Study: Older Finns Tout the Benefits of Making Crafts

According to Statistics Finland, 67 per cent of Finns make crafts in their spare time.

In a new study, 60 female textile craft makers describe how making crafts adds zip and creativity to life. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 84 and came from both urban and rural areas.

The women's written narratives revealed that crafting:

- helped them develop a sense of self
- promoted cultural traditions, and
- enhanced well-being.

The research by Sinikka Pöllänen from the University of Eastern Finland appeared online in the *Journal of Leisure Research* (Vol. 47, no.1, 2015).

Sense of self

Crafting allowed women to live more expansive lives, an existence that included devotion to creating beautiful artefacts.

To start, it provided individuals with opportunities to express their creativity. As one woman explained:

Doing crafts I often drift into a "flow" phenomenon where time seems to disappear. I do crafts alone, not in groups. I do not need teachers. I design myself and I have learned almost all my knowledge and skills by myself . . .

Women described how family and home responsibilities blurred a sense of personal identity and how they used crafting to develop a new appreciation of self.

A 46-year-old participant wrote: "The most important point in craft making is the fact that I can create something visible. Cooking, cleaning and nurturing, they can also be done with care — but nothing visible will remain."

One 62-year-old participant, touted her pleasure in the finished product: "It is wonderful to see and think, 'I did it!'"

Many described the choice of raw materials as a source of pleasure and inspiration.

Essentially, participants carved out time and space for themselves through their leisure pursuit. Along the way, the women forged a new identity as craft makers.

Cultural traditions

Finland is known for its art galleries and stores offering locally fashioned hand-crafted wares.

Not surprisingly then, the participants described craft making as part of a strong cultural tradition that binds family, friends and communities. One grandmother wrote that in their family, grandmothers had always been providers of knitted objects.

For many, creating personalized, cost-effective and high-quality gifts for family and friends had special meaning. For instance, one woman described knitting socks for her husband when she first met him, he was so pleased that he did not have the heart to use them. So she knit him another similar pair.

Carefully fashioned handicrafts lend warmth and beauty to Finnish homes. Precious family heirlooms are passed from one generation to another.

As one 39-year-old craft maker wrote:

I'm aware of my own mortality; someday I will disappear from the face of the earth . . . but with luck, my handicrafts will stay in the world even longer than I will. They will remain in use among others or as decorative items in the homes of others.

Many of the craft makers were committed to sustainability and wanted to imbue this value in their children and grandchildren.

One mother wrote:

The most important idea in crafts is, among other things, ecology. This means that I use natural materials and that I and my family consider how to use purchased materials in a way that there will be as little waste as possible.

Well-being

With often hectic lives, the women described making crafts as relaxing — a way to put a brake on the fast tempo of everyday life.

A 44-year-old woman said crafting helped her cope with divorce:

When beginning a new work you should usually start on something small, but I decided to make it big and sew by hand. It was the tablecloth of my bad feelings and sorrow that became a beautiful field of flowers. As I was working on it, my marriage was already starting to fall apart and craft carried me from one day to the next. . . .

One participant found crafting a lifesaver when she lost her job. Another turned to making lace when she discovered she had breast cancer: "I got my mind off of cancer. It was more interesting," she wrote.

The calming effect of crafting came from working with the materials and the physical activity involved in banging the looms, crocheting lace or cutting up strips of carpet.

The study revealed that even when crafters could work no longer, they found viewing crafts and the memory of making crafts deeply pleasurable. As one 75-year-old woman with osteoarthritis in her hands put it: "Crafts are a friend, an entertainer and a comforter."

Interview: New Generation Pursues Spiritual Maturity

Tell me, what is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

— Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*

In The Spirituality of Age: A Seeker's Guide to Growing Older, a former Jesuit and a Jewish woman pose 25 seminal questions, and answer them candidly drawing on their own experiences and the latest research. Their illuminating point-counterpoint perspectives suggest the later years can be a time of growth and spiritual discovery.

The authors are Robert Weber, an assistant professor of psychology, part-time, at Harvard Medial School, and Carol Orsborn, founder of the web site Fierce With Age: The Digest of Boomer Wisdom, Inspiration, and Spirituality. Orsborn has also authored 25 books exploring adult development and quality of life issues.

*To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. Weber in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

Ruth Dempsey: Why did you want to focus on the spiritual aspects of aging?

Robert Weber: When Carol and I first met at the 2011 annual conference of the American Society on Aging in San Francisco, we found ourselves with similar perceptions and frustrations about today's prevailing views of the aging process.

Gerontologists refer to concepts like "activity" and "disengagement." The emphasis is on productivity. In our society, persons are valued for what they do. These models stress the external aspects of aging and ignore people's interior lives.

Our own experiences, as aging boomers, suggest that it is possible to continue to grow — to become more fully human, as we age. This realization means confronting the question posed by our colleague Connie Goldman: "Who am I now that I am no longer who I was?"

RD: What do you mean by spirituality?

RW: Spirituality is a dimension of our lives, like our bodies, our minds and our hearts. It is a crucial dimension that often gets short shrift in the rat race of a youthful productive life.

Seen this way, spiritual maturity is a stage in our development, that allows us to look life in the eye, intensely appreciative and deeply trusting, even as we embrace the shadow and uncertainties.

This entails a lifelong process of development, beginning at birth and continuing until our final breath. In later life, we have the potential to attain an inner freedom and sense of wonder, we may not have experienced since early childhood.

RD: *The Spirituality of Age* poses 25 key questions which the authors answer. Why did you want to use this approach?

RW: Carol and I did not want to write a self-help guide with "right" answers to people's anxieties about aging. Instead, we wanted to disclose our own efforts and struggles.

In fact, we believe our attempts to be honest about ourselves will encourage others to face their own unique questions, and recognize the spiritual opportunities inherent in the aging process.

RD: Let's look at the questions. Early on, you ask: "What is a psychologically and spiritually healthy vision of aging?"

RW: As a psychologist, working with patients in psychotherapy, I have come to realize that psychological and spiritual maturity are alike in many respects. As time has gone on, I saw that what I hoped for my patients was not unlike what I desired for myself in my spiritual life.

One of the first goals of psychotherapy is to move from a sleepy state of unconsciousness to a state of greater consciousness, so as to live more fully and freely.

A second goal is to correct the many distortions that are fostered by the unconscious state of life — distortions about myself, about others and about life in general.

The third goal of therapy is to achieve greater freedom by assuming more responsibility for our lives.

As we work through these goals, we slowly develop a deeper sense of our own worth and value as a human being.

This sense of congruence between psychology and spirituality was reinforced when I began to read the work of Anthony de Mello. A psychotherapist, de Mello is also an Indian Jesuit priest and a spiritual director.

Writing in *Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality*, he says that spirituality involves:

- waking up
- getting rid of illusions
- never being at the mercy of any person, thing or event, and
- discovering the diamond mine inside yourself.

His concept of spirituality is resonant with the psychoanalytic paradigm, but for de Mello and me, this view includes one other essential element which Sigmund Freud did not include — God.

As we pursue our spiritual journey, we have an opportunity to integrate all the pieces of our lives: the good and the bad. This integrative process can lead to wisdom, enabling us to live life more vibrantly.

RD: You also explore the question of freedom . . .

RW: Sociologist Wade Clark Roof has called baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), "a generation of seekers."

Research shows baby boomers put a high value on freedom. They have been pushing the envelope since the 1960s, and they are still intent on determining their own destinies. But as social scientists and spiritual teachers are quick to point out: freedom is often easier to imagine than to achieve.

We struggle to shed the opinions of others that we no longer want or need in our lives. And we find it difficult to cope with the limitations we've imposed upon ourselves.

Achieving inner freedom means adapting to the changes that come with age. A strong spiritual life provides an anchor, bolstering our courage in times of uncertainty.

RD: Another question asks: "How can we become more fully ourselves?"

RW: I think of Michelangelo. When he was asked how he actually created his sculptures, he is reputed to have said that he just removed everything from the marble that was not the sculpture.

In our later years, we have a chance to complete the creation of ourselves as a work of art by ridding ourselves of much in our lives that no longer matters.

To help readers, we have included many of our favourite exercises in the book.

RD: Finally, you ask: "What is the value of aging to society?"

RW: At this stage in our lives, many of us have the energy and the desire to give back. We feel the pull of legacy: what psychologist Erik Erikson has called a passion for "generativity".

The later years also offer time to develop aspects of the self that have been neglected for too long. Some want to embrace a more contemplative life.

In short, aging as a spiritual path is a deeply personal journey, but it also has implications for society at large.

Perhaps this vision is best caught by Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, an international federation of communities for mentally disabled adults.

Writing in *Community and Growth*, he says:

There are two ways of growing old. There are old people who are anxious and bitter, living in the past and illusions, who criticize everything that goes on around them. . . . But there are also old people with a child's heart, who have used their freedom from function and responsibility to find a new youth. They have the wonder of a child, but the wisdom of maturity as well. They have integrated their years of activity and so can live without being attached to power. Their freedom of heart and their acceptance of their limitations and weakness make them people whose radiance illuminates the whole community.

Older Gardeners Adapt to Changing Climate

All my life, the garden has been a great teacher in everything I cherish.
- Stanley Kunitz, *The Wild Braid*

Gardening is highly popular among older adults, offering a host of emotional and physical benefits.

So how will a changing climate affect older gardeners?

Australian researchers examined how gardeners in central Victoria, a state in south-east Australia, coped through a prolonged period of drought. Led by Joanne Adams from La Trobe University, researchers drew data from in-depth interviews with 10 experienced gardeners, aged 60 to 83.

Results showed gardeners adapted to new conditions, and they became more involved in environmental issues at the community level.

The findings appeared online in the December 2014 issue of *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*.

Engagement

Three themes, central to understanding older people's everyday experience in the garden, emerged from the study. They are engagement, connection and a sense of well-being.

Researchers found that each older adult was inspired by their garden in different ways.

Vanessa said her plants became almost like children: "All the new plants are like babies and you watch for the first new sprig on it or the first new flower . . . I think it's just fantastic — I just love it."

Several of the participants organized their day around the garden, finding endless opportunities for hands-on environmental learning.

As Phillip explained:

The plants . . . that might have done alright as seedlings or small plants once they got bigger they didn't cope at all. So they were pulled out and replaced with something that I assumed or thought would be better.

Gardens also provided opportunities for social interaction and conversation. Participants shared plants with neighbours and friends. Some were members of local gardening clubs such as the Native Plant Group.

How did drought change older people's engagement with the garden?

The researchers found prolonged drought conditions took a toll on older gardeners. For example, water restrictions meant they had to cart buckets of saved water from indoor use, outside. Some purchased water tanks.

As June explained:

I still liked the garden, but it was just a job — like it was a real worry to keep everything going all the time and I had my tanks then which everyone that didn't have tanks or anything struggled.

Connection

Several older people had fallen in love with the garden as children working alongside their parents. "I was given my own little garden patch," one woman said. "It was an area that I had I could choose what I wanted to put in."

For some, even today, certain smells, sights or plants evoked strong memories of gardens from when they were younger, or of family and friends associated with those gardens. For instance, the birdbath in one woman's garden came from her mother's garden. Every year, Carolyn placed the first daffodil and the first tulip from her garden on her mother's grave.

As well, participants said their connection to the garden helped them cope with disappointment and feelings of sadness.

Wholeness

For these older gardeners, wholeness involved a sense of well-being. They perceived gardens as having meaning beyond themselves. And they linked this sense of meaning to the spiritual nature of gardening, in which all living things are connected and form part of a cyclic process.

Many described the garden as therapeutic, providing a means of relaxation, peace and a sense of balance.

Impact of a changing climate

The study concluded that older people's capacity to maintain a garden through a period of prolonged drought was severely hampered, reducing their sense of well-being.

That said, these gardeners showed remarkable resilience, and acceptance of change. As Oliver put it, "I just walk around and I just look at my garden and think how beautiful it is."

Roundup

COOKERY CLASSES A HIT WITH OLDER MEN: In the United Kingdom, cookery classes are booming, thanks to older men.

At Harts Barn cookery school in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, a group of over-60s are learning how to cook a curry from scratch.

[Age UK](#) has launched Kitchen Kings, a project sponsored by the City Bridge Trust in London. The hugely popular project serves as both a skills-based class and a lunch club.

In the morning, the men make dishes such as Spanish omelettes and bread and butter pudding. At lunch, they eat the food they have prepared, tell jokes and make new friends.

Veronica Burke, founder of Bread Matters, which also runs bread-making courses, says classes in January are full of older men who have been given the course as a Christmas gift. Many of them remember their mother making bread at home.

Waitrose, a British supermarket, is planning to run cookery courses aimed specifically at men. Claire Lanza, one of the company's chefs said: "We find skills and meat-based courses are very popular with men in general and with retired men in particular." Elsewhere, pastry and sauces workshops are also filling up.

Meanwhile, "How to cook the perfect steak" is a favourite with older men at the Seasoned cookery school in Walton-on-Trent, Derbyshire.

Source: with notes from theguardian.com

LEISURE PATHS TO A VIBRANT RETIREMENT: An optimal leisure lifestyle leads to a high quality of life in retirement says Robert Stebbins, professor emeritus at the University of Calgary and a leading leisure expert.

In *Planning Your Time in Retirement*, Stebbins provides a compelling guide to cultivate a leisure lifestyle that suits your needs and your pocketbook

An optimal leisure lifestyle includes three types of leisure:

1. Casual leisure may be a one-shot activity: a bungee jump; walking in New England's colourful countryside in the fall; attending a sports event; visiting a museum; or spending an evening at the theatre.

2. Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of an activity as an amateur, hobbyist or career volunteer. Stebbins explores the three options in separate chapters, each brimming with ideas and suggestions.

Amateurs are found in the fine and entertainment arts and in science and sports. An individual may have fallen in love with the dream of becoming a cellist, discovering a new planet or climbing a mountain. These activities require significant effort, skill and knowledge, and they are driven by a deep long-term commitment.

Hobbyists: This world is populated by collectors, such as doll, stamp and rare book collectors. Other hobbyists include quilters, makers of model planes, rockets, wood sculpture. Still others focus on outdoor pursuits such as kayaking and cross-country skiing.

Career volunteering requires knowledge and experience. It demands a commitment of time and energy. For example, volunteering as a guide at a historical site, teaching English to newcomers or working effectively with autistic children.

3. Project-based leisure activities are usually one-off undertakings, such as producing a skit, constructing the family genealogy or helping with the community arts festival.

Of course, the road to vitality will be different for each person. Stebbins says the trick is to choose an activity that is to your taste and that you have some aptitude for: "Give

priority to serious leisure, but also make time for rest and a change of pace. In the long run, vitality and a high quality of life flow from leisure pursuits that enable people to reach their full potential."

AGING PRIESTS HAPPY IN THEIR VOCATION: A new U.S. study has found older Catholic priests happy with their lives, despite more responsibilities and fewer priests than 50 years ago.

The researchers interviewed 18 men over the age of 45. All had been priests for a minimum of 20 years. In reviewing their lives, the priests measured their success by:

- the effect their ministries had on their congregations
- the quality of their spiritual lives, and
- the important friendships in their lives.

The priests enjoyed providing pastoral services to their community. They appreciated the support of parishioners. And they cherished their friendships with local priests and other priest friends.

However, more than half reported difficulties working in parishes at some point in their ministries. Most of these difficulties were related to just one or two individuals, but in two cases, particular groups of parishioners sought more conservative approaches to church life. The participants viewed the conflicts that sometimes erupted in these situations as failures in their ministries.

Priests also talked about their spiritual lives. About half were comfortable with their spiritual growth over the years, the other half felt they needed to spend more time in personal prayer and reflection. Some of the priests gave growing demands on their time as reason for their spiritual shortcomings.

Michael Kane and Robin Jacobs reported details of their study online in the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* (Vol. 27, Issue 4, 2015).

NEW LEARNING A THRILL: Discovering something new is always a thrill whether it's discovering a new restaurant, music or even a new type of apple.

According to the *New York Times*, 150,000 men and women in the United States participate each year at more than 119 Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes.

Take the Osher program at John Hopkins University, for example. It has 1,200 members, and 500 on the waiting list. Full membership costs about \$500 in annual dues. Learning instructors tend to be retired professionals.

On offer in 2016: explorations in history, science, literature, economics, music, philosophy and more. Currently, classes taught by journalist Eleanor Clift, including *On the Road to the White House*, are attracting large numbers.

Along with challenging subjects, programs emphasize the social dimensions of learning, offering space to learn with passionate like-minded people, who often become new friends.