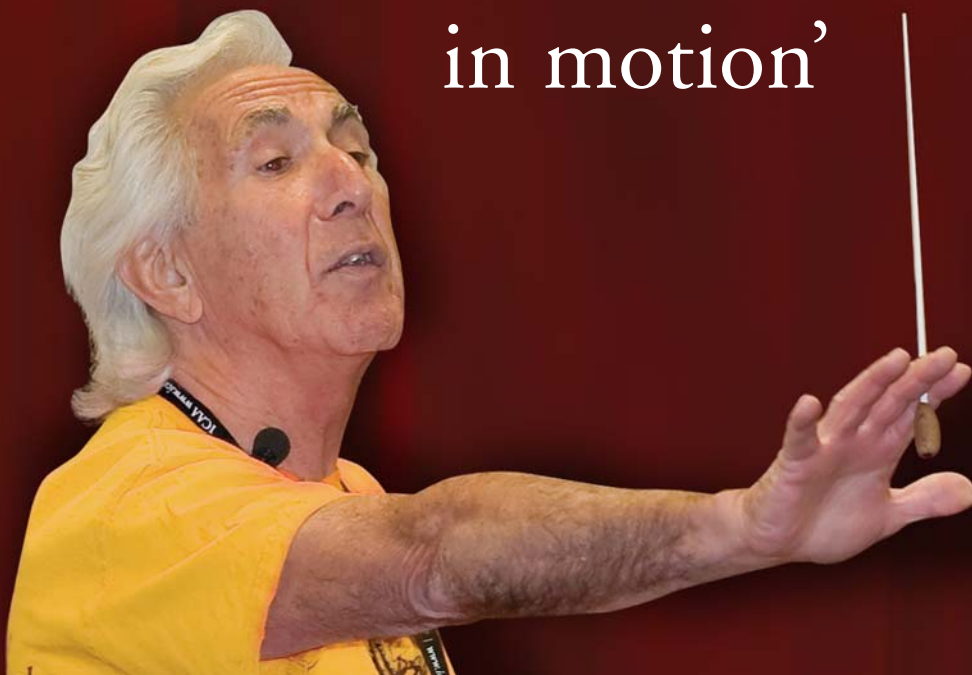


Conductorcise: keeping older adults 'engaged, thinking and in motion'



Maestro David Dworkin introduces Conductorcise to active-aging professionals at the International Council on Active Aging Conference 2008. Photo: Brian Ebner/Optic Nerve. Image courtesy of Athletic Business

This program fuses ‘the energy, motion and magic’ of classical music with the movement and mental focus of conducting for a multi-dimensional workout

This is the fifth article in a series of eight profiling the recipients of the 2008 ICAA Innovators Awards. Presented by the International Council on Active Aging®, these awards honor excellence and creativity in the health and wellness field, and recognize organizations that have created cutting-edge offerings for active aging. In 2005, the awards program expanded to include the Equipment Innovator category. ICAA is an association that supports professionals who develop wellness and fitness facilities and services for adults 50 and over.

If you were looking for an active-aging poster child, you might choose David Dworkin. In 2002, at age 68, Dworkin founded a unique “symphonic aerobics” program, which has since become internationally recognized. Conductorcise®—

a *Sound Workout for Mind, Body and Soul*—is “a symphony performance, music history lesson and aerobics workout all rolled into one,” suggests *The Times-Picayune*, New Orleans’ daily newspaper.

A graduate of The Juilliard School and Columbia University, Dworkin channeled his passion for music and interest in physical fitness into this innovative program. Conductorcise, it turns out, is the next act in his long and distinguished career as a symphony conductor, clarinetist and music educator. (Dworkin has performed or conducted with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the American Symphony Orchestra, and many other symphonic organizations.) In the last seven years, he has traveled widely to lead Conductorcise workouts for audiences of all ages and abilities. From community events, to senior living communities, to hospitals and community service organizations, these uplifting, energizing sessions have met with positive responses from groups as diverse as preschoolers, teenagers and older adults.

Participants enjoy “an invigorating upper-body workout, learn basic conducting techniques, improve listening skills, and find out about the lives and work of the great composers,” Dworkin explains. He applies the same basic approach to each Conductorcise session, but tailors the challenges and level of effort for each group. Sessions for healthy older adults can be longer and more vigorous, with some lower-body movements, for example. With individuals who have Alzheimer’s disease, Dworkin chooses slightly shorter classical musical pieces that participants are likely to know, helping to connect them to the activity.

In each session, the maestro brings what he calls the “energy, motion and magic of music” to participants, who wave batons along with him as they move to the music of Tchaikovsky, Strauss, Mozart and more. These workouts also stimulate the brain in a way that improves cognition, relieves stress and enhances well-being. Interestingly, Dworkin has found that, among the groups he has led, participants with Alzheimer’s and other dementias respond with intense interest to the workout. In the end, “Conductorcise is extremely effective in getting participants enthused about classical music, and keeping them engaged, thinking and in motion,” he says.

Dworkin sees conducting as “a physical and a spiritual experience, both athletic and esthetic.” The physical benefits include, among others, increased blood flow, upper-body stretching and strengthening, improved cardio endurance, and the growth of new brain cells. That means Conductorcise participation can help improve physical health and function, while enhancing intellectual, social, spiritual and emotional wellness.

“Conductorcise is a winner, because many people do not think they are exercising when performing the program,”

Dworkin observes. “Not only are they moving their bodies in a way many have never done, but they are also stimulating their brains by being made aware of colors, conversations and rhythms in the music.”

The *Journal on Active Aging*[®] recently asked Dworkin to delve into his Conductorcise program for readers.

JAA: *In your view, what key factors contribute to creating a successful healthy aging program?*

DD: The key factors include:

- Preparation. By this, I mean really feeling comfortable with your program. I did two years of pro bono programs all over the United States. I would lead the Conductorcise program anywhere a group or a friend could get me into a venue—HUD [US Department of Housing and Urban Development] housing in Los Angeles, Ys in Tennessee and New Orleans, venues all over. Why? I wanted to feel comfortable myself. I wanted to see the results. Each time I learned.
- Knowledge. Continue to learn. Read; reach out to professionals in all fields, be it exercise, medicine or research. You will be surprised at the help you will receive.
- Network. For example, being involved with ICAA has helped me further my program.

JAA: *Where did you get the idea for Conductorcise?*

DD: Conductorcise was a natural progression from my career as a professional conductor and clarinetist. I sensed the relationship between the sounds and movements of music and mental and physical well-being. I wanted to combine these things into a learning experience.

JAA: *When did you officially create Conductorcise, and why?*

DD: Conductorcise began in 2002. I wanted to take a right turn in my life’s work and reach out to the masses with a program that I felt very comfortable with and that allowed me to meet new people and learn new things. I am devoted to music and passionate about all the benefits it brings to people.

JAA: *How do you describe Conductorcise?*

DD: Conductorcise is a program of mind and body. All participants move and use their brains, and all smile. People strengthen their hearts and open their ears. The program activates both body and brain in a very natural way.

JAA: *How do Conductorcise workouts promote mind/body wellness in adults over 50?*

DD: By beating simple conducting patterns, participants are moving to the music. This movement creates healthier circulation. Blood goes to the brain as well, which results in a myriad of benefits. Joy and humor are also a great part of the program. Everyone smiles. Plus they all feel energized by the workout and the music.

JAA: *Please tell us about the different elements you incorporate in a Conductorcise workout.*

DD: Participants each receive a baton, and I teach them simple conducting patterns. Then we all conduct away to classical music. I have a constant patter of explaining the music, composers, time period and the like to participants, so while they are moving, their minds are constantly working. Humor is important. And I keep that uplifting conversation going at all times.

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JAA: *How do you modify the Conductorcise workout to make it accessible and engaging for older adults with varied physical and cognitive abilities?*

DD: People can do the program standing or seated. The beautiful thing about this program is that each individual can go at his or her own speed. I provide the energy. I find that working with people who have dementia, as an example, I talk less and the music does the magic—they respond to the music. Everyone responds to music for the most part.

JAA: *How have different populations of older adults responded to Conductorcise? What do participants say to you?*

DD: I have had only positive responses. I have had individuals come up to me after a program and say such things as, “My husband died six months ago, and this is the first time I have smiled since.” Or “I have a friend who was just put in an Alzheimer unit and I’m unable to see him as often as I wish. I’m so depressed. But this program allowed me not to think of him for one minute, and I have smiled and feel good. I feel I can take on *this day* with renewed energy.”

JAA: *Have you found any barriers to participation by older adults, or challenges in encouraging participation? And if so, how have you addressed them?*

DD: I have been very fortunate. I have not experienced any negative vibes. The challenge of getting large audiences falls mainly on the venue in which I will perform. Great PR helps within the community. Some are reluctant to attend because they have no idea what they are going to do. That can be a positive. They come in because they are curious, and once in, we all have a ball.

JAA: *How has the profile of Conductorcise increased over the years? And what do you think is responsible for its growth, particularly in senior living environments?*

DD: Conductorcise has continually drawn attention since its launch in 2002. Word of mouth, the ICAA Innovators Award and presentation, and ICAA’s national conference have been extremely helpful to the program’s growth. Active-aging organizations are recognizing that older adults not only love the idea of learning and doing something new, but they also love an alternative way of moving their bodies and using their minds. The program has benefited as well from exposure on NBC and Retirement Living TV, and from being featured in the *New York Times*, *Women’s Wellness Today* (Dr. Susan Lark’s newsletter), *Town & Country* and *Symphony* magazines, as well as so many more national and international publications.

JAA: *Conductorcise recently unveiled an authorized certification program. Why have you introduced certification now? And what is involved?*

DD: Now is the right time to introduce this certification program. I can be at only one venue at a time and the demand is increasing daily. I want this program to continue for a very long time in many parts of the US and the world.

This simple certification program is for anyone with a liking for music and people, and a passion for what they are doing. Among the steps involved, applicants are asked to send us some materials to review, then a company member or I will do a brief phone interview with them. Once certified, applicants will receive a start-up kit for their use. This kit contains a program DVD, CDs, instructions and tips, music playlists, and access to an online networking group. Both individual certification and group licensing are available.

JAA: *What were your initial goals for Conductorcise? And how do you feel about where the journey has taken you and your company all these years later?*

DD: I wanted to create a program that would spread throughout the world. A crazy dream! Yet Conductorcise has gained international recognition, not only with the media, but also with professionals. The success is greater than my expectations. But I continue to work, reach out, learn and travel. 🍷

The Journal on Active Aging thanks David Dworkin, of Conductorcise, LLC, and Elizabeth Dworkin, of Dworkin & Company, for their help with this article. Go to www.conductorcise.com to learn more about the program and instructor certification, and to see videos of Conductorcise in action.

Five key lessons learned in creating a classical music fitness experience for older adults

1. Prepare. It’s just like music or anything else in communication. Go over and over and over your program. Ask yourself, Is this the best way I can do it? Don’t be afraid to change, add, etc.
2. Reach out to all. Learn from colleagues. Reach out to physicians (both alternative and traditional), social workers, wellness professionals.
3. Give of yourself 150% all the time.
4. Never lose your sense of humor. Laugh at yourself. Make people smile.
5. *Passion.* You must have a passion and love what you are doing.