George Zukerman

FEBRUARY 1, 2023

George Zukerman 1927 - 2023

George Zukerman was a world-renowned bassoonist, impresario, and raconteur. As a young man who had played with first-class orchestras, he left for a career pioneering the bassoon as a solo concert instrument. His signature final bow to the audience was to present the instrument in the spotlight with himself behind it.

During his countless tours on 4 continents, he often proudly performed Canadian works, many of them written for and dedicated to him.

George's special love was the Canadian North, which he visited over 800 times with his bassoon. His easy way of communicating with everyone, young and old, helped underline his philosophy that he was not there to 'teach' classical music appreciation but to share his love of a musical genre rarely heard in those northern climes.

Meanwhile he also created Overture Concerts, a subscription concert network throughout the country. It was based on the American "Community Concerts" and soon became the second largest of its kind in North America. Not only did it serve smaller centres away from the big cities, but it created an important opportunity for young talented Canadians to perform.

For his contributions to music throughout every region of the country George received the Order of Canada in 1993 and the Order of BC in 1996. He wore both with great pride.

In 1980 he and his partner, violinist Erika Bennedik, decided to make their home in White Rock/ South Surrey. Naturally, one of his very successful series, White Rock Concerts, has been running for over 60 years with George at the helm for 57 of them.

George's last outing in Dec. 2022 was attending one of their performances.

He died on Feb. 1 after a brief illness.

There will be no formal service at George's request, but plans are being made for a celebratory concert.

(In lieu of flowers please consider a donation to UBC's School of Music where a scholarship in George's name will be established).
https://donate.give.ubc.ca

Messages of Condolence

My sincere condolences to Erika, all of George’s family & his vast network of friends and colleagues. I am very proud to have known George for many years as a mentor and friend, I will miss his wisdom, wit and wise counsel.

— David Douglas

George, what a good friend you were. On our walks through local parks you would entertain me with music stories and listen to my stories about plants and trees. We laughed together when the Kwomais Point eagles would fly past our bench at 3.30 pm. every time.
Fly with those eagles now, dear friend.

— Roger A Phillips

It was an honor to sit in "George's back row" at the White Rock concert series. This made it easy to thank him for the music and his wonderfully witty blog and program notes. It was great to see George on his bench at Kwomais, in view of the eagles' nest. We missed him tonight but will enjoy his legacy for years to came.

— Susan Lindenberger

We miss you already George! Last night, at our White Rock Concert, we missed your presence in the dressing room at intermission where you would always comment with "not bad" and a gleam in your eye and then continue to talk about the music you had just heard. You have been a great mentor and inspiration and we were honored to call your our friend. We thank you for ALL you have taught us and we will try to carry on in your spirit!

— Elizabeth and Marcel Bergmann

I am not sure how I came to know George, as we live on the opposite sides of the world. But one day about ten years ago he read something I had written and emailed me to discuss it. A friendship and correspondence then unfolded in which we shared our love of music and of story-telling and of the quirky side of life.

George knew Perth, as he had been Musician-in-Residence at the University of WA back in the 1960s, and had taken his bassoon on tour to little country towns and to schools. Fifty years later he is still remembered, both for his musical passion and his sense of fun. I spoke only recently to a woman who recalled the finale of his little seminar to high school girls, in which he dismantled his instrument, playing a tune on each remnant piece until only the mouthpiece remained.

George was a generous correspondent, passionate and witty, and always taking the time to explain something to me ("George", I would say "How is it that Bach's Italian Concerto is described as having four parts and two voices, but is played on one instrument?". The answer would be both erudite and comprehensible to a non-musician.

I am honoured to have been his friend.

Roger Underwood, Perth Western Australia

— Roger Underwood

George’s contributions to music, and in particular the bassoon world, were incalculable. He was a man of enormous character and exuberant wit and a huge influence on so many of us. We will miss him.

— Christopher Millard

We met George on an STI classic music river cruise in 2015, worked together on some music concerts at our church, Brentwood Presbyterian, and became good companions. Deep love to Erika and gratitude for an inspiring friendship.

— Brian Fraser

I remember George from a concert I attended when I was very young. It was the VSO doing a school concert at the local high school and we elementary kids were invited to attend. The conductor, Irwin Hoffman, used the occasion to introduce all the instruments of the orchestra and it was George who demonstrated the bassoon. I remember turning to my friend and saying “I heard that instrument in Peter and the Wolf - so now I know what it looks like!" Many decades later, after I got to know him at White Rock Concerts, George told me that he always enjoyed educating children …and of course, had continued doing this for most of his life with his performances and demonstrations all over Canada. To me, this is one of his finest lasting legacies. All of us benefited from his wisdom, wit and dedication to beautiful music.

— Susan Olsen

The humour, the generosity, the captivating story telling, the expansive outreach, the curiosity, the friendship, the passion, the work ethic - these were all characteristics of George, but what impressed me the most was his undying and sincere love of music. Until his last weeks he made the effort to listen, to encourage and to cherish the music and musicians whom he knew. He was a treasure in our country.

— Jane Coop

Dear Erika, as your neighbours we loved hearing you and George practicing, hence my beautiful gardens beside your house. Although this was long ago now, I still smile at the pleasure your friendship and the music you shared with us. Love to you Erika at this time of loss.

— Greg and Cheryl Donohoe

To my dear mentor, there are no words to express the sadness I felt when I heard the news of your passing. George, thank you so much for investing in and guiding me. You achieved so much in the music world through your talent, grace and vision. You were, are and forever will be a STAR RUBY!

— Bess Vasilakopoulos

Dear Erica,
I am so saddened by this news. George was my greatest mentor and beyond that, a dear friend. He always said things as they were but never nasty...just truthful and respectful. An amazing life and an amazing person and what a legacy. I will miss his wisdom.

— Paul Dean

As a young school-orchestra bassoonist in Flin Flon, Manitoba (1950s) I had occasion to attend concerts by world class performers who were part of a series of music to isolated communities. George was one of the performers who visited my isolated northern community. At one event, I introduced myself as the local bassoonist. He offered to give me some lessons that very evening and I gleaned wondrous instruction in the local community hall until the very early hours of the evening. Some many years later, I corresponded with George and he remembered, with great affection, his visits to Flin Flon. And I remember, with great affection, those visits.

— Dennis Rusinak

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