

Barbara York

Biography

The Pittsburg State University music community, joined by musicians around the world, are mourning the passing of Barbara York, an internationally renowned composer and musician who worked in the Department of Music as a piano accompanist for countless rehearsals, student recitals, and other performances. After a year-long battle with pulmonary fibrosis, York died Friday at her home, surrounded by her family and with well-wishes pouring in from coast-to-coast — including a “Virtual Hug” video created Thursday by Sigma Alpha Iota International Music Fraternity. She was 71.

For years, musicians — particularly those in “low brass,” or baritone, euphonium, and tuba — have been recording albums of York's songs. Doctoral students have been basing their theses on her compositions. The SEK Symphony and other campus ensembles have performed several of her works, and the PSU Wind Ensemble already had planned to feature her piece, “River of Stars,” in its Nov. 19 concert at the Bicknell Family Center for the Arts.

Musicians say she changed the landscape of music for those who play low brass — instruments often relegated to depict large mammals while the musicians who played them sat in the back row.

*“It’s as if she gave us permission to play beautiful melodies and invited audiences to enjoy them,” said PSU alumnus **AJ Beu**, who went on to become a music teacher, band director, and performer. York wrote went the extra mile to write letters of recommendation for him, he said, without him even asking.*

“She revealed potentials and built confidence in each of us and made many, many fine artists through her inspiration,” he said.

Supporting students

Many of her pieces have become standard repertoire in the world’s top music schools and conservatories, including a top Harvey Phillips composition prize from the International Tuba Euphonium Association.

But it was her presence on campus in her role of supporting students, noted many — after all, how many students are accompanied by the composer who wrote the music they’re playing? — that was special.

***Ivan Vasquez**, a former PSU drum major who is now a Petty Officer Musician 3rd Class in the U.S. Navy, said when he was at his lowest, she helped him grow into the musician he is today. **Justin Crossman**, a former student who now works at R.E.W.*

Music and gives private lessons, said she always approached each student from a teaching viewpoint and gave advice with kindness.

Other alumni noted that she was always willing to go the extra mile for them as they learned her music, meeting them at The Mall Deli to help them gain insight into a piece she had written before they performed it.

As word spread that her remaining days were few, musicians across the country picked up instruments to perform one of her works in her honor.

A composer at 7

Growing up in her native Canada, York began piano lessons at age 5, when a music teacher came to her home to give lessons to her two older sisters.

“My mother had her take five minutes off of one sister’s lesson and five minutes off the other sister’s lesson to start me out with 10 minutes,” she said in an interview a few years ago. “I learned to read music at the same time I learned to read words.” She always knew that music would become her career.

“In first grade, I wrote an essay about what I wanted to be when I grew up: a music teacher,” she said. “I never wanted to be anything else.”

At age 7, she began composing. York went on to become a music director and arranger, vocal coach, wrote theatrical shows, and worked at the National Art Centre of Canada.

Achievements

Her score and lyrics for the Canadian musical “Colette” won Canada’s version of a Tony in 1981, and she received commissions from symphony orchestras and soloists across the U.S. and Canada. She presented compositions at three World Saxophone Congresses and at the 2003 International Double Reed Symposium. Her piece titled “A Butterfly in Time” was nominated for a Juno Award in 2006.

Several of her compositions have been on national and international competition lists and are on the contest lists in several states, as well as being available in recordings through [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), CDBaby, and iTunes.

*It was when her daughter, **Megan Potter Gabehart**, began her music degree at PSU, that York began traveling to Pittsburg to serve as a rehearsal and piano accompanist. She was so taken with the area and the music culture here, she decided that she and her husband would make it their final home. She became a fixture in McCray Hall.*

Gabehart, now a Southeast Kansas music teacher, area orchestra conductor, became a frequent collaborator with York, particularly through Pittsburg Community Theatre.

Instead of a funeral, Gabehart says York wanted a memorial concert of her works. She plans to organize such a celebration once COVID-19 allows. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests memorials to the Pittsburg State University Department of Music. Memorials can be mailed to the PSU Foundation, P.O. Box 4005, Pittsburg, KS 66762.

“In the meantime, please support living composers. Purchase and perform their works, commission pieces from them, and reach out to them about their music,” Gabehart said. “Barbara's legacy lives on through her music.”

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[Music world, especially alumni, mourns loss of composer, accompanist \(pittstate.edu\)](http://pittstate.edu)