



Michael White, Composer, Scholar, and Legendary Professor, Dies at 90

Michael White, composer, scholar, legendary professor, and father, died peacefully on January 24th 2022 in New York City at the age of 90. Born Hirsch Michael White on March 6, 1931, in Chicago to Beatrice (nee Fisher) and Gerald White, he found warmth and intellectual connection with his grandfather and mentor, Harry M. Fisher, one of Chicago's first Jewish Superior Court judges and the president of the Zionist Organization of Chicago.

Shaped by the antisemitism of his youth and the wars that contoured his generation, Michael focused on leading a creative life from a young age. Defying his father's wishes, he pursued the study of music composition at The Juilliard School, where he was the pupil of Peter Mennin and Vincent Persichetti and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees. A recipient of three Ford Foundation Fellowships, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and myriad grants and awards, White shaped his career over five decades of vibrant composition and publication, with operas produced in Seattle (*The Dybbuk*); Philadelphia (*The Metamorphosis*); London (*Through the Looking Glass*); and Riga, Latvia (*Diary of a Madwoman*), as well as many performances of chamber and vocal works in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Chicago. Michael's brilliant concerto for viola and orchestra was premiered by violist Masumi Rostad and the Juilliard Orchestra in Avery Fisher Hall under the baton of James DePreist. In recent years, Michael concentrated on composing a series of chamber works inspired by traditional Jewish music, both Sephardic and Ashkenazi, as an expression of his own Jewish identity and his abiding love for Jewish musical traditions. These and other works by Michael were performed at annual faculty concerts at Juilliard for several decades.

As dedicated to teaching as he was to composition, Michael was a beloved, admired, and respected faculty member at Juilliard since 1979. For many years he was the chairman of Juilliard's lauded music theory department, then known as the Literature and Materials of Music (L&M) Department, and he evolved to teach across the school's undergraduate, graduate, and evening divisions. Michael was an extraordinary—indeed, a legendary—teacher of music. He combined his profound and vast knowledge of the repertoire, of composers' lives, and of the scholarly literature about music with his unparalleled love and passion for the music he taught. He was himself a lifelong learner who never stopped studying, reading about music, and analyzing works by many of the major composers of the Western canon, including Mozart, Monteverdi, Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Chopin, Bartok, Britten, and many

more, all of whom were among his favorite topics to teach. His classes inspired generations of students, many of whom later went on to have major careers as performers, composers, and music pedagogues. Michael taught celebrated graduate courses on the music of Mozart and Bach, and his boundless love for Mozart was a constant throughout his life. His colleagues at Juilliard looked up to him as a guiding light and role model. Starting in 2007, Michael also taught every summer at the Wintergreen Summer Music Festival in Virginia, where students of all ages flocked joyfully to his classes. Wintergreen is now the repository of Michael White's compositions and papers.

A true New Yorker at heart, Michael lived his last four decades in a 600-square-foot apartment containing a single bed; a writing table; both an upright and a baby grand piano; and a life's worth of books, recordings, scores, and manuscripts. There, he dedicated himself to writing music, learning, and teaching—all of which he energetically embraced to the last day that his body would allow. His love for these pursuits—and for art, poetry, baseball, movies, and ice cream—fueled the boyish spirit that shone bright in his genuine joy and laughter, as well as his dedication to dispelling all forms of hate and standing up for creativity over commercialization.

Michael's attunement to the beauty of music and the joys of teaching flourished in the face of the antisemitism he experienced as a child; conscription into the Korean War (from which he was ultimately spared by his asthma); and the loss of his parents, his beloved younger sister, Ann, and many of his cousins. His creative energies also endured the events and aftermath of 9-11, which displaced Michael from his home in Battery Park City for months, and, finally, the isolation of the coronavirus pandemic—a challenge he met by converting his small living space into a classroom from which he taught remotely until, in October 2021, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

Always eager to share his love for Juilliard as a home for friends and talent, his belief in kindness over criticism, his deep passion for Mozart, and his exuberant appreciation for a well-made dessert, Michael brought inspiration, meaning, and joy to so many people. Michael would have been happy to live another ten years if he could continue to teach, write, be with his family, and watch the Yankees. However, given that those simple pleasures can't last forever, may his departure inspire not sorrow but only celebration of his life and an invitation to embrace all that is interesting, joyful, challenging, and beautiful in the world.

Michael filled his ninety years with the richness of heeding one's calling while being kind and generous to others. Alongside his constant commitment to music and the arts, he was a loving and determined father; a warm and attentive grandfather; and a beloved uncle, cousin, teacher, and friend to so many wonderful souls here and departed. A deeply committed parent who extended his gift for mentorship to his children and grandchildren, his advice to always embrace the things that bring joy and human connection profoundly shaped his children's paths and encouraged their own creative pursuits. Michael's life is a model for being just stubborn enough not to follow expectations at the expense of personal contentment and meaning.

Michael White is survived by his former spouse Barbara White (nee Vaughn), his daughter Jessie White and his son Charlie (Stephanie) White; his grandchildren Zula and Ezra; and his cousin Danny (Daniele) Roberts. Memorial contributions can be made to Doctors Without Borders, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, or the Juilliard Scholarship Fund.

Image: Rehearsal for Michael White's Piano Quartet at Wintergreen, 2009. Photo by John S. Taylor