

Allan Ronald Keiler *November 8, 1938—February 26, 2024*

Our distinguished colleague and my beloved friend Allan Keiler, emeritus Professor of Music, died on February 26 at Newbridge on the Charles in Dedham. His passing is mourned by his relatives, his loved ones, and an abundance of academic children who, sustained by his teaching and affection for them as graduate students, have gone on to careers at many of the leading research universities and conservatories in this country.

His academic legacy reflects a remarkable era in the history of the Brandeis music department, which has been the locus of world-class contributions to music history, theory, composition, and performance. Its achievements, and his, have brought honor to this University.

Allan was a student at the University of Michigan, where he was the first person to receive an undergraduate degree in linguistics. He then received a Ph.D. in linguistics from Harvard University, where his dissertation supervisor was Roman Jakobson, this in an academic circle in Cambridge at a time when the field of linguistics was in ferment. He returned to Michigan and received tenure there.

At this juncture, with a successful academic career in linguistics launched, Allan did something absolutely remarkable. He quit. He left his tenured job, with all of its professional and personal assurances, to become a graduate student in music at the University of Chicago, motivated by his longstanding passion for music, and believing that his training in linguistics could facilitate a greater understanding of music theory. He came to Brandeis in 1975, and was also a visiting professor at several other established departments.

Allan was a man without interest or acumen in academic pretense or politics, yet he was unflinching in his academic self assurance. No story underlines this strength of character more than that of a graduate course he took at Chicago with a renowned musicologist whose name I'll omit, except to say that there are musicology prizes named after him. Allan wrote a paper for this course, and when the said professor returned it, he told Allan that it was excessively difficult to read. Any first-year graduate student would have taken this rebuke as an admonition to write more clearly. But Allan was no ordinary grad student—he'd been a faculty member for years. So he responded to this professor, "Read it again." Allan burst out laughing when he told me this story.

Chicago insisted Allan take the graduate student foreign language test, but he demurred: he spoke or had reading knowledge of French, Latin, Spanish, Italian, Sardinian, Romanian, German, Yiddish, Hungarian, and Sanskrit, and probably a few others. When Roman Jakobson wanted to teach his seminar in Russian one day, Allan confessed that he couldn't speak Russian, and Jakobson said, "Try!" Allan befriended Brandeis physics professor Stephen Berko and University President Evelyn Handler because he could speak Romanian and Hungarian with them.

As a music theorist, Allan challenged the conventional views of Schenkerian and other formulations of music harmony and composition, and was a critic of a variety of linguistics-based musical theories that were ignorant of deeper applications of linguistics to the discipline of music. He was in a position to judge that few music theorists could claim.

Allan was a critic of the popular biographies of Franz Liszt and their psychological mythologizing. After substantial academic coursework at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute, where he was accepted as a rare non-clinician, he elaborated his doubts about these works and their naiveté. In 2014 he gave the Silberger Prize lecture at the Psychoanalytic Institute, titled “Liszt as Romantic Hero: Imposturing and the False Self.”

As a music historian, Allan’s greatest love was his musical biography of Marian Anderson, the iconic twentieth-century American contralto, who the famous conductor Arturo Toscanini called “a voice that comes along once in a hundred years.” Allan’s definitive biography, subtitled “A Singer’s Journey”, remains the only biography of Anderson to have appeared in three decades. He was an advisor to several documentaries about Marian Anderson, in which he appears as an historical authority. Allan met Marian towards the end of her life—she said to him, “You know more about me than I do!”

Allan’s teaching was both profound and enthusiastic, for which he received the Dean of Arts and Sciences Mentoring Award in 2010. His student Peter Child, emeritus professor of music at MIT, wrote of his experience that “Musicology and composition graduate students who started at Brandeis in the middle 70s were captivated by Allan’s intellectual vigor, his originality and scope, and not a little bit by his iconoclastic nature. We were witnessing the birth of something new and important in music theory and in historical studies of music theory. Above all, Allan’s belief that this was vital, serious, and important work was infectious.” Allan taught undergraduate courses on Beethoven and on opera. And more than that—he took his students to the opera. His teaching was intellectual and also emotionally and aesthetically compelling—not only to study beauty, but to be moved by it.

I met Allan in November 1987 on the commuter platform at Porter Square, taking the train out to Waltham. Without introduction, I approached him and made fun of his wearing Birkenstock sandals and socks when it was freezing out—which I only did because I was wearing exactly the same thing. Soon he was coming to dinner at our apartment and playing four-hands piano with my wife Anne. At the Porter Square station I often had to compete for his attention, where like a Pied Piper, he was habitually surrounded, giggling, by a gaggle of grad students in music, whose affection for him was only too evident. A cherished guest in our house, Allan held our sons, Gabriel and then Simon, in his arms when they were newborns, so Anne and I could eat dinner.

Allan was also a devoted uncle and grandfather to his beloved Felicity Kucker, daughter of his dear friend Marion Wasserman—another Marion!—and to Sebastian Unglaub, the son of his dear friends, our colleague Jonathan Unglaub and his wife Naoko Sugiyama. Sebastian played the cello for Allan only days before he died, and Allan clapped enthusiastically. And Sebastian dressed up as Franz Liszt for Halloween last October—recall Allan’s psychoanalytic lecture, “Imposture and the False Self”—how Allan must have laughed when he saw Sebastian!

Allan’s student Peter Child recently offered to drive Allan anywhere he wanted to go—and he said to Peter, take me to Brandeis. It was the venue of his life’s work, where he succeeded in being the person and the scholar that he wanted to be. He was not a saint or an apostle—he did what he wanted and what mattered to him. I am so fortunate that his life crossed with mine. The affection that he showed to those he loved, the devotion that he showed to music, and the loyalty that he showed to this institution, are a collective blessing for all of us.