In Memoriam: Paula Fan

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Paula Fan, Regents Professor emerita of music, a prolific concert pianist who taught piano at the Fred Fox School of Music for 40 years, died on Feb. 23. She was 71.

Fan accepted a position at the University as an adjunct instructor in 1974, one year after earning her Bachelor of Arts in music from the University. She joined the faculty in 1976, was named a Regents Professor in 2005 and retired in 2014.

"Paula had a knack for quickly coming to understand the unique affinities and potential of each student," Rex Woods, professor emeritus of music and one of Fan's students, wrote in a tribute on the Arizona Arts website. "She helped every student choose repertoire in which they could shine."

In 2010, Fan helped found the University's Confluencenter for Create Inquiry, a research center housed under the Research, Innovation & Impact office that sponsors interdisciplinary projects targeting complex issues in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

A prolific concert pianist, Fan performed on five continents and served as principal pianist for the Tucson Symphony Orchestra for 31 years. Throughout her career, Fan recorded 20 albums and performed on the BBC, NPR and Radio Television China, according to an obituary published in the Arizona Daily Star.

She also had a knack for telling stories and sharing her passions through nontraditional performances.

As part of her work with the Confluencenter, she developed the "Creative Collaborations" series, which paired music with topics ranging from hospice care to cooking. At one Valentine's Day-themed event, previewed in this 2015 Lo Que Pasa story, Fan and David Sbarra, professor of psychology, combined music and psychology to discuss the science of love.

"Everyone can think of a love song, celebrating the things that attract the one who is in love, both in the case of the successful conquest and the unsuccessful," Fan said at the time. "Everyone can think of a breakup song, lamenting the end of love. These songs date to the beginnings of lyric poetry and are written every day in every style."

Fan also used music to fuel her passions for issues including wildlife and environmental conservation. She was a founding member of the Arizona Research Initiative for Solar Energy's Solar Storytellers, a trio of musicians who played instruments powered by solar energy. She also spent many of her summers volunteering on expeditions with the global environmental nonprofit Earthwatch.

"I am having a difficult time putting into words the depth of loss I feel at her passing," Woods wrote in the tribute. "I realize that I am only one whose life she lifted among tens of thousands."

Fan is survived by her brother, Michael. Services are pending.

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