

arts & entertainment

...on the Semiahmoo Peninsula

White Rock Concerts founder George Zukerman passed Feb. 1 at the age of 95

Remembering an indomitable musical mentor

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The telephone conversations would always start the same way. "Alex? George."

Internationally acclaimed virtuoso bassoon soloist and impresario George Zukerman's voice was soft, cultured – a gentlemanly drawl that still reflected his British origins, decades after he left the country, as a young teen, at the beginning of the Second World War.

He could sometimes sound almost diffident, and retiring, even while conveying an unmistakable sense of taste and erudition.

But when he spoke, one listened. I learned years ago it was advisable. A call from George was always a welcome invitation to participate in the ongoing adventure that was his life, either by relating his touring exploits, or bringing attention to his latest musical enthusiasm.

It was inevitably a stimulating conversation – one that almost always resulted in a good story for the paper.

But more than that – I realize now – it was a subtle form of mentorship. To listen to George was to learn from him, and I know there are many who came to appreciate that gift.

Despite his quiet exterior, the long-time South Surrey resident was a veritable fount of knowledge, experience and enthusiasm, whether his current focus was promoting a touring artist or ensemble, establishing a new concert series, or simply boosting a year-end recital by the young students of his wife, violinist Erika Benedik.

He had an infectious chuckle, and delighted in sharing photographs and stories of some notable moments of his touring career – including an impromptu serenade to an elephant in South Africa, or exploits introducing classical music in small ensembles to isolated communities in northern Canada, which he did for many years as part of a federally funded cultural program he organized.

I don't know why it should come as a surprise to learn that George was mortal, like the rest of us. He was one of those personalities who seemed like he would always be with us.

Sadly this human dynamo was stilled – on this plane at least – by congestive heart failure on Feb. 1. Just shy of his 96th birthday,



George Zukerman, bassoonist and impresario, who passed on Feb. 1, founded the White Rock Concerts subscription series in 1956. (Contributed photos)

his increasingly frail body could no longer keep up with the vital force of his intellect. He passed at Peace Arch Hospital, Erika – his wife for some 34 years – by his side.

We who are left behind can only marvel at the list of his accomplishments.

The Order of Canada, The Order of B.C. Recipient of both the Golden Jubilee medal and the Diamond Jubilee medal. A member of the B.C. Entertainment Hall of Fame. Concerts as a soloist around the world. Highly regarded recordings of the classical bassoon repertoire on prestige labels.

Organizer of classical music river cruises in Europe. Writer and deviser of *The Great Mozart Hunt*, a popular show in which he enlisted an actor, portraying a Mickey Spillane-ish detective, to tell the story of an unknown piece, possibly by Mozart, he had discovered in a European archive.

Creator of Overture Concerts, which in its heyday was providing 70 communities in Western Canada with more than 400 classical concerts per year, through subscription series.

Without doubt the most successful of these series was White Rock Concerts, which he started in 1956 and for which he remained artistic director for 60 years.

It's still thriving to this day, under the artistic directorship of his hand-picked successors Marcel and Elizabeth Bergmann, also known as the Bergmann Piano Duo – for whom Zukerman had arranged many concert opportunities over the years.

In a recent conversation they remembered his friendship and guidance fondly.

"He has been such a great mentor to us,



and helpful to us in so many ways, both in our artistic directorship, and as concert organizers and performing artists," Elizabeth told me.

Even though he was officially retired, as artistic director emeritus he was still very much involved in the planning process for each season, the Bergmanns said, and they added they are still learning to do some of the things he did as a matter of course.

"One of the last things he organized was a tour for us, that is just about to happen," Elizabeth said. "He was always unbelievably meticulous with all of the details."

"He has left us with very large shoes to fill," said Marcel, also recalling how he and George could share a delight for some of the same pieces of music, including Mozart's lesser-known opera *Idomeneus*.

He noted that George's last appearance at a White Rock Concerts presentation was the Dec. 1 performance of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet with the Lafayette String Quartet and clarinet soloist James Campbell.

Marcel said there was a sense that it might be the last concert George would attend. "It was kind of an emotional evening," he said.

"George was very much into pleasing audiences," Elizabeth remembered. "Giving them something familiar, but also something that would challenge them to grow."

Although he was born in London, England in 1927, George's mother's family was in New York, and once the family had re-established themselves in the U.S., he attended the High School of Music and Art in New York.

He told me once his English reserve was at least partly to blame for his distinguished career as a bassoonist. The principal of the school announced that the students were going to form an orchestra, and that they should go to a room where instruments sat

in cases, and pick whichever one they liked. Not accustomed to American pushiness, he found that the other students grabbed all of the popular ones, leaving him only one, mysterious, long black box.

Asking what it was, he was informed that he was now the ensemble's bassoonist.

George's innate and impressive musicality came to the fore on the instrument – he had earlier distinguished himself as a piano soloist – and by the time he was 16, in the early 1940s, he was already playing professional jobs, one of them a recording with a then-unknown conductor named Leonard Bernstein.

In the early '50s he was picked by Bernstein for a chair in the Israel Philharmonic; in 1953 he and his first wife moved to Vancouver to join the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

Losing that job after a strike forced him into finding other ways to drum up trade for himself and other classical musicians. That, he once confessed, provided the driving energy behind creating subscription series in smaller communities – but it also started him down the path of developing a career as touring virtuoso on an instrument not known for touring virtuosos.

The establishment of concert series became an enduring passion – even after he was long-retired as a performing musician, resulting in the establishment, several years ago of Oceanside Classical Concerts in Parksville and Qualicum Beach.

And as recently as 2021, the indomitable impresario was still finding adventures on the road as narrator and commentator of another touring show he created, *The Young Beethoven*.

After playing a successful concert in Kelowna on Nov. 12 of that year, he and five other members of his ensemble found themselves stranded on the outskirts near Hope in the catastrophic 'atmospheric river' event that caused widespread flooding through the Fraser Valley.

Although they were unable to return home for three days, George was none the worse for wear for the adventure.

He cheerily told me he was impressed by the hospitality they received from residents of the area, including a restaurant owner who let them sleep on banquet benches in the establishment, and other residents who let them use a trailer at their home.

"If I were about 20 years younger, I would have organized a concert series right then and there!" he said.

