

# The Boston Globe

## Martin Boykan, a composer and Brandeis professor who was ‘a great sage,’ dies at 89

By [Bryan Marquard](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 15, 2021, 7:07 p.m.



In addition to his work as a teacher and composer, Mr. Boykan was the pianist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the mid-1960s. SUSAN SCHWALB

Music, composer [Martin Boykan](#) once said, offers a route to a fuller life.

“Since time passes slowly in music, we are immersed in a world that is richer and more eventful than ordinary life,” [he wrote](#) in “Silence and Slow Time: Studies in Musical Narrative,” his 2004 book.

“Every musician knows how much is packed into a single minute,” he said, adding that “only if we are focused on the issues of the moment (as they are colored by past experiences) can we absorb such an abundance.”

A childhood piano prodigy who was an inspirational professor at Brandeis University for more than 50 years, Mr. Boykan died March 6 in his Manhattan home of cancer. He was 89 and previously had lived in Watertown.

To study with Mr. Boykan “as you are thinking about devoting your life to the art of music was like being in the presence of a great saint or sage, which he was. He was a great sage,” said [Scott Wheeler](#), a composer who teaches at Emerson College.

ADVERTISING

During his Brandeis tenure from 1957 until 2009, when he retired as the Irving G. Fine professor of music emeritus, Mr. Boykan taught generations of students.

He also engaged in a wide array of other musical endeavors. He accompanied soloists, was the pianist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the mid-1960s, and founded the Brandeis Chamber Ensemble.

Through the decades, Mr. Boykan composed solo works, song cycles, and choral music, along with pieces for trios, string quartets, large ensembles, and orchestras.

Those compositions sometimes brought him into new musical realms.

“Some of the time you’re told what to write,” he told Christian Gentry in a [2013 interview](#) that is posted online.

“Commissions very frequently give you a timeline for the piece and the instruments,” Mr. Boykan added. “I’m writing a piece for guitar, about which I know nothing. I had to go to guitarists and say, ‘I need a couple of lessons.’ ”

Meanwhile, composing music and teaching composition went hand in hand. Teaching, he said, made him a better composer, and vice versa.

“Looking at student pieces, I make sure I know what they want and see how, if it’s not working for me, what interferes, because on principle what the student wants is what should happen,” he said in the 2013 interview.

Figuring out what interfered with his students’ composing aspirations, he said, “sharpens your ear.”

“He had an ability to see exactly where something was going wrong,” said [John Aylward](#), a composer who had studied with Mr. Boykan. “He could pinpoint the note that needed to be changed because it was interfering with the flow, it was interfering with the pacing.”

[Eric Chasalow](#), a composer who is dean of the graduate school of arts and sciences at Brandeis, said that upon meeting Mr. Boykan “what I was aware of right from the start was that this was a very rare kind of person. He had a really penetrating musical mind. He could look at a score – even newly written by a student, very young – and get to the heart of the issues.”

He added that Mr. Boykan “really was very helpful at asking questions that would lead people to making interesting findings for themselves, to sort of discover who they were as musicians. It was never about him. And I think that with artists, that is rare.”

Born in New York City on April 12, 1931, Mr. Boykan was the son of Joseph Boykan, a dentist and Russian immigrant, and Mattie Caspe.

Mr. Boykan spent much of his childhood in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Upper Manhattan. His older sister, Marian Pour-El, became a [noted mathematician](#).

“He always talked about a park that he went to, and a bridge that he used to walk across, where he would dream about the composer he would be,” said his wife, Susan Schwalb, a silverpoint and metalpoint artist.

When he was a boy, a cousin who was part of the Metropolitan Opera would sneak him in to performances on Saturdays. He attended few other concerts, however, so “he learned all of his music from scores,” his wife said.

“He went to the libraries and studied scores,” she added. “When I met him, I assumed he would have an enormous collection of records and CDs. He did not. He had an enormous collection of scores. Marty could sight read anybody’s piece and sit down and play it. And he would zero in on the exact spot that needed work.”

In January 1947, at 15, he gave his first recital, playing selections from Mozart, Schubert, Chopin, and Liszt, among others, at Times Hall. “The young artist displayed an authentic talent, notable in his feeling for the content of the music,” The New York Times said in [a review](#).

Returning to Times Hall two years later, he included pieces by Schoenberg, Beethoven, and Bartok. Mr. Boykan “had nimbleness of finger and sweetness of tone to spare,” the [Times review](#) said.

After attending the Fieldston School in New York, Mr. Boykan went to Harvard College, bringing along his Steinway piano.

“He would tell me how he would chase roommates away by playing Bach and Beethoven half the night so he could have his own space,” Schwalb said.

Mr. Boykan, who studied composition with Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, and Paul Hindemith, and piano with Eduard Steuermann, graduated from Harvard with a bachelor’s degree in 1951 and from Yale University with a master’s in music in 1953.

He then studied in Vienna on a Fulbright Fellowship before teaching at Brandeis. His honors included the Jeunesse Musicales award for his String Quartet No. 1 and the League ISCM award for “Elegy.”

Mr. Boykan, who was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters [in 2011](#), was often commissioned to compose pieces, and he also had received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

He and Schwalb met in 1981 at the Yaddo artists’ retreat in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. They married in 1983 and collaborated on artist books that combined “metalpoint drawing with a musical score,” according to her website.

“His whole life was music,” said Schwalb, who is Mr. Boykan’s only immediate survivor.

A funeral has been held and Mr. Boykan was buried in his family’s plot in Mount Hebron Cemetery, in Queens, N.Y.

“He really dedicated himself to his music, his students, to a life of the mind,” said Chasalow, who recalled that at Brandeis, Mr. Boykan used to devote an entire course to studying a single piece – Schoenberg’s String Trio.

“He spent a whole semester going through this piece in detail, in a very Socratic way,” Chasalow said. “It was so famous that people came from other schools to sit in on that seminar – from Yale, from Harvard.”

For Mr. Boykan, “music was a deeply human endeavor. Music was deeply human, period,” Aylward said.

And for former students such as Wheeler, Mr. Boykan’s guidance will continue to resonate with students he’ll never meet.

“Every student of mine has studied with him,” Wheeler said. “That’s absolutely true.”