

Sharing the Gift of Music through a New Scholarship Program Mildred Kayden '42



When Mildred (Goldstein) Kayden '42 was eight, her mother took the \$50 paycheck her father earned from his embroidery business and, instead of buying groceries, used it to purchase an upright piano. It was a luxury for the Brooklyn family, but a decision that inspired Kayden's lifelong passion for music and storied career as a composer, lyricist, teacher, and radio host.

After three months of piano lessons, her teacher suggested that Kayden enroll at the Brooklyn Music School. By the age of nine, she was performing publicly and soon after began studying at the Juilliard School in Manhattan.

The valedictorian of her high school class, Kayden applied to Brooklyn College, Vassar College, and Cornell University, but her heart was set on Vassar.

"I loved the elegance of the school, and at the time," she says, "it was all girls, so we could keep our minds on what we were there for. You could be a student and think of the world and what you could give it."

Her desire to give back and share the deep legacy of music in her own life recently inspired Kayden, her family, and the Kayden Foundation to establish the Mildred '42 and Bernard Kayden Scholarship Fund for Music.

"Music is one of the most pleasant parts of life, especially in the world we live in today," Kayden said. "We wanted to give a student who couldn't afford it the opportunity to study music at Vassar. I had a wonderful experience there, and we hope to make that possible for others."

The scholarship was awarded to its first recipient this fall.

In addition to studying alongside kindred spirits during her college years, Kayden met a few mentors who strongly influenced her musical pursuits. One was her composition teacher, Ernst Krenek, an Austrian composer who came to the United States just before World War II.

"He wrote one of the first jazz operas, *Jonny spielt auf* (Jonny Strikes Up), and that fascinated me," Kayden says. "Why and how did New Orleans black rhythmic jazz find its way to Europe and inspire a musician like Krenek to compose a jazz opera?"

Kayden was captivated by jazz. Following in her mentor's footsteps, she collaborated with playwright Ed Bullins—thought to be one of the most prolific dramatists of black theater in the 1960s—to compose the score and lyrics for the theatrical production *Storyville*, with book by Bullins.

The musical, titled after the famed red-light district in New Orleans, is about the birth of jazz near the French Quarter in the early 20th century. The production debuted in San Diego in 1977 and, after productions at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, the Miami Shores Theatre, and the San Diego Repertory Theatre, finally came full circle to Kayden's hometown with a well-reviewed Off-Broadway New York premiere at the York Theatre Company several years ago.

Although she was a woman in a male-dominated field, her talent and serious dedication to her work earned Kayden the respect of her peers. She composed the music and lyrics for several other productions, including *Call the Children Home*, *Sepia Star*, *Oh! My Giddy Aunt*, *Cut the Ribbons*, and the 1974 Off-Broadway show *Ionescopade*, based on the plays of Eugene Ionesco, the Romanian-born French dramatist. *Ionescopade* was recently revived to positive reviews at the York Theatre.

After pursuing an MA at Harvard, Kayden returned to Vassar as a music instructor. She taught music history alongside Professor George Sherman Dickinson, who devoted 37 years to Vassar's music department. After his death in 1964, Kayden and her husband, Bernard, established the Dickinson-Kayden Fund in her colleague's memory.

The endowed fund, she says, was meant to "spread the joy of music" through concerts and performances on campus. Its mission carries on a half-century later with events such as Modfest, the college's annual celebration of 20th- and 21st-century arts, approaching its 15th year.



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"We wanted to bring the pleasure and appreciation of music to everyone in the college community, including nonmusical students," Kayden says of that gift.

In 1950, Kayden married Bernard, a real estate lawyer and investor, and later embraced her role as a mother of two children, Sanda Kayden Lambert '73 and Jerold Kayden.

"It's important for women to be able to do double duty: to be a wife and mother, and to contribute to the universe," she said. "I was fortunate to be in a field in which I could do both."

Kayden found that the ability to write music around her children's schedules—along with the unwavering support of her late husband—made it possible to balance her family and career.

"Bernard was not a musical person," she says. "But he loved music and was always behind me 100 percent in everything I did."

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Kayden hosted a weekly talk show on WEVD radio and interviewed more than 100 luminaries in music, theater, dance, and other arts. The experience, she said, gave her "a panorama of the world beyond music" through the lenses of some of history's most well-known talents, including composers Aaron Copland and Stephen Sondheim, jazz saxophonist Julian Cannonball Adderley, singer and actress Lotte Lenya, conductor Leopold Stokowski, and poet W. H. Auden, among others.

At age 94, Kayden continues to compose music in her home in Boca Raton, FL. Next on the horizon is publishing two operas she wrote years ago, "Mardi Gras" and "The Last Word."

"The music still plays on," she says.

—Claire Curry

Claire Curry is a freelance writer based in New York.