

Lifetime music teacher 'taught the whole person': 'A very cultured man who knew about music, art, poetry, history, language, diction and style'

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Illustration: Photo: COURTESY OF ANNE SIMONS / Jan Simons didn't let his students get away with anything, but "he made you laugh at yourself." (EARLY EDITION PHOTO).

Jan Simons spent a lifetime teaching students to sing.

A founding director of the Festival Singers, a vocal instructor at McGill University, and for many years a commanding force behind the Canadian Amateur Musicians-Musiciens amateurs du Canada camp (CAMMAC), Simons died on May 7 at the West Island Palliative Care Residence. He was 80.

"He was passionate about so many things. He encouraged people from all walks of life to make music," his son Nicholas, the NDP member of the B.C. legislature for Powell River-Sunshine Coast, told The Gazette.

"He believed musicians should, first and foremost, play for themselves, to play for the love of it. He was exacting and expected the best. He was a father to all of his students."

Jan Hugo Simons, one of three children into a lawyer's family, was born in Dusseldorf, Germany, on Nov. 11, 1925. He grew up in The Hague. Wary of the growing Nazi threat in Europe, the family emigrated to Montreal in 1939, four months before the Second World War began.

Simons attended the High School of Montreal and made his stage debut singing Elgar's Land of Hope and Glory with a youthful Oscar Peterson as his accompanist.

Upon graduation in 1947, Simons went to New York where he took voice lessons for two years with Emilio de Gogorza. He returned to Canada to the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto and became a friend of pianist Glenn Gould.

Simons also enjoyed a career as a professional baritone. One of his most inspiring recitals was his debut with Gerald Moore at London's Wigmore Hall in the early 1950s.

In 1955, Simons was a co-founder of the professional choir that later would be named the Elmer Iseler Singers, in honour of its conductor.

That same year, he joined the CAMMAC amateur

music camp on Lake MacDonald in the Laurentians, where for the next 25 years he served as its general and artistic director.

He joined McGill's music faculty in 1963 and also taught at Marianopolis College and at Vanier College.

"He did not just teach singing, he taught the whole person," Michael McMahon, a former student who today is a pianist and vocal coach at McGill, told a standing-room-only crowd at the funeral on Wednesday.

"He was a very cultured man who knew about music, art, poetry, history, language, diction and style - and by style I mean musical style, not fashion - although he always had an opinion about a singer's dress.

"He could be very critical. Students joke about Jan coming up to them after a performance saying, 'Wonderful concert - but the diction was terrible!'"

Fiercely proud of his Canadian citizenship, Simons saw to it that a portrait of his father, Hugo Simons by Otto Dix, said to be worth \$1.6 million in 1993, remain in Canada. The family sold it to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts well below its market value.

Although Simons retired from McGill in 1995, he continued to teach at the university 11 hours a week until a few weeks before he died.

"He had an amazing ability to hone in on the weakness of singers," said a former student, Zarya Rubin, a New York neurologist.

"In master classes, he would often jostle your shoulder, flick your cheek, place his hands on your back to draw your mind to the root of the problem, to become aware of it and release it. It was genius the way a tight, screechy soprano high note would suddenly turn sweet in his hands," Rubin said.

"Jan did not let you get away with anything - a mispronounced syllable, a missed beat, a faulty note or false expression. But at the same time he made you laugh at yourself and take pleasure in it all."

Simons believed all of his students had potential.

"One of the most important things is to be positive with your students, even if you don't think they're that talented," he once said, "because if somebody really has a desire to sing, there's always something there."

He enjoyed the outdoors, liked photography and birdwatching, and was an enthusiastic hockey fan.

Last year, the Conseil quebécois de la musique awarded him its prix hommage.

Simons is survived by Winnifred (Scottie) Whittier, his wife of 45 years, their three sons and three daughters and by an older brother.

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