

Obituaries

BARBARA TIAO | 1934 - 2008



Barbara Tiao helped start the Chinese Fine Arts Society. She moved to Chicago in 1982.

Her life was devoted to spreading culture

Piano teacher used the music of her homeland to teach students here about the world beyond their doorsteps

By Trevor Jensen
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Barbara Tiao, a Chinese-born piano teacher, started a cultural festival in the early 1980s to expose young musicians to the world beyond Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.

Mrs. Tiao, 73, died of lung cancer on Wednesday, March 12, at her Hyde Park home, said her daughter Vivian Polishuk.

Mrs. Tiao moved to Chicago in 1982 when her husband, George, a professor of statistics, took a job with the University of Chicago.

At a recital commemorating Teachers Day, a Chinese tradition of showing respect for teachers, Mrs. Tiao was struck that the students exclusively played works from the Western musical canon, said her daughter Julie Ma.

That led her, with the help of a few friends, to start the Chinese Fine Arts Society. Since 1984, the society has sponsored the annual Music Festival in Honor of Confucius.

Students ranging in age from pre-schoolers to teenagers are required to play works from the Chinese musical repertoire, in addition to a selection from Western composers.

"She felt there was a void in terms of Chinese music, and she saw this as an opportunity to share a culture she loved with a community she loved," Polishuk said.

The festival in its early years featured just a handful of players, almost all of them Chinese-American. Last year, more than 200 pianists,

cellists and violinists from throughout the Midwest, most with no Chinese heritage, participated.

Winners in several categories perform in a public recital, which in recent years has been held in Preston Bradley Hall in the Chicago Cultural Center. Performances are also given at Chicago schools, community centers and nursing homes, furthering Mrs. Tiao's goal of promulgating Chinese culture.

"A lot of Western people only understand Chinese through Chinese food. They don't realize our culture is so deep and so involved," said Mei Syun Lin, who has been with the Chinese Fine Arts Society since its beginning. "If you can understand other people's culture, you can live peacefully together."

In 2000 and again in 2005, Mrs. Tiao spearheaded an international composition competition sponsored by the Chinese Fine Arts Society. Composers were asked to write a piece of music based on a Chinese theme or icon. In 2005 the theme was the Great Wall. Winning works were premiered in a recital by top musicians, including violinist Rachel Barton Pine and members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

"She was a pioneer in making sure this music went beyond the Asian community," said MaryE Young, former deputy commissioner of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs. The Chinese Fine Arts Society is "one of the cultural gems of our city."

Mrs. Tiao was born Pao-Shing Chu in Shanghai, where she first took up the piano. At a missionary school, she was given the English name Barbara. Her father was a businessman, and with the takeover of the country by Communists he fled with his family to Taiwan in 1949, Polishuk said.

In 1957, Mrs. Tiao came to the U.S. to study at Skidmore College in New York. She married in 1958 and lived in Madison, Wis., where her husband taught at the University of Wisconsin, until coming to Chicago.

In Madison, Mrs. Tiao taught piano and organized Chinese cultural events and a Chinese language school, primarily for her children and others of Chinese descent, Polishuk said.

She continued to give piano lessons, employing the Suzuki method, at her home in Chicago, and also taught at the Sherwood Conservatory of Music.

Mrs. Tiao's interest in Chinese culture extended to her homeland's art, which covered the walls of her home. She also was an excellent cook, with a recipe called "eight treasure sweet rice" one of her specialties.

Mrs. Tiao is also survived by her husband, George; two sons, Gregory and Paul; two brothers, Paul and Boyer Chu; a sister, Dora Lu; and nine grandchildren.

Visitation is set for 2:30 to 9 p.m. Friday at Lakeview Funeral Home, 1458 W. Belmont Ave. A service will be held at 10:30 a.m. Saturday in the University Church, 5655 S. University Ave.