

The Gift of Music: The Legacy of David DiChiera



OU Associate Professor of Piano Tian Tian, DMA, rehearses on the donated DiChiera piano in Varner Hall. For more information about the Beethoven piano sonata series of ten concerts, please contact Dr. Tian at ttian@oakland.edu.

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Child piano prodigy. Oakland University professor. Composer. Founder of the Michigan Opera Theatre and Detroit Opera House. Legend.

David DiChiera, Ph.D., was many things to many people in southeastern Michigan and around the world. A foremost expert on opera, DiChiera brought the art form to Oakland University and



To honor his life's work, the family of David DiChiera donated his personal piano to the OU School of Music, Theatre and Dance. The gift also includes his personal papers, compositions, letters and programs. All will be accessible to students, faculty and community members through Kresge Library's archives and special collections.

Detroit, while fostering the careers of many talented performers.

DiChiera died in September 2018, leaving behind a wealth of materials from his extensive musical career, plus a beautiful grand piano. To honor his life's work, the family of DiChiera donated his personal piano to the OU School of Music, Theatre and Dance. This gift also includes personal papers, compositions, letters and programs that will be accessible to students, faculty and community members through Kresge Library's archives and special collections.

Leaving California for Michigan

Born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, DiChiera moved with his family to California at the age of ten. There he developed his love of music and studied to become a pianist, composer and musicologist with a concentration in 18th century Italian opera, eventually earning a Ph.D. from UCLA. In 1962, Chancellor Woody Varner called DiChiera to offer him a job at OU. Although he had received offers from Stanford University and Columbia University, DiChiera took the job at Oakland because he saw an opportunity to join a music program in its infancy and play an influential role in its development.

"Woody Varner made it clear to him that he could have a leading role in what should be offered to students," says DiChiera's daughter, Lisa DiChiera. "I've met many people who tell me how taking my dad's history of opera class introduced them to the beauty of opera. He believed everyone should have a place for music in their life."



David DiChiera, Ph.D., pictured in 2017, during an interview with OU Magazine.

During his 10 years at OU, DiChiera became chairman of the music department and helped establish the Meadow Brook Theatre and Meadow Brook Music Festival. An advocate for connecting with the community, DiChiera also created the Overture to Opera program. This consisted of staged opera scenes and one-act operas that he narrated and toured to hundreds of schools across the region. Many Oakland University students and alumni participated.

Bringing Opera to Detroit

While at OU, DiChiera began to imagine creating Michigan's own professional opera company. That dream came to fruition in 1971 when he established the Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT).

An advocate for Detroit and its renaissance, DiChiera worked with city leaders to support MOT's purchase of the Music Hall, which served as the company's home for ten years. Later, MOT purchased the abandoned Grand Circus Theatre (originally Capitol Theatre) and refurbished it to become the Detroit Opera House in 1996, making MOT one of only a handful of American opera companies to own its theatre.

“My dad was insistent that as a cultural institution MOT had to be in the heart of Detroit,” says Lisa. “It was during his years at OU that he was able to plant the seeds for MOT as an organization that continues to have an impact in the state and beyond.”

DiChiera garnered acclaim during his long and distinguished career, receiving the National Endowment for the Arts Opera Honors Award for extraordinary contributions to opera in America, The Kresge Foundation Eminent Artist Award and the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic.

Champion of Diversity

Through the Michigan Opera Theatre, DiChiera was an advocate for elevating artists, particularly artists of color.

“He always believed that in order for the arts to prosper and be relevant, you needed to bring in performers who reflected the community,” says Lisa. “My dad saw that opera could be an art form that spoke to all audiences about themes that were relevant to them.”

Determined to present an opera representative of the local community, DiChiera commissioned Richard Danielpour to compose an opera based on Toni Morrison's novel, “Margaret Garner,” about a fugitive slave in pre-Civil War America and commissioned Morrison to write the libretto. This piece became the first world premiere on the Detroit Opera House stage in 2005.

A Special Piano

The piano gifted by the DiChiera family to OU will be used in a dedicated piano practice room located in Varner Hall.

“My dad loved things of beauty, and the piano he chose had this beautiful warm, golden wood to match his living room,” says Lisa. “It was always the centerpiece of entertaining in his home. Performers such as Andrea Boccelli, Denyce Graves and others have stood around that piano and sang. It is also the piano that he used for composing his opera ‘Cyrano.’”

Rebecca Happel, D.M.A., instructor of piano at OU, knew DiChiera personally and understands the impact his piano will have on advanced piano performance students, faculty, and at special concerts and events.

“We try to have our piano majors practice on the best instrument possible,” says Happel. “This piano is a symbol of what hard work and passion can achieve. I believe David would be so proud to know that OU students will use it now and into the future.”

The piano department of Oakland University's School of Music, Theatre and Dance will soon be celebrating 250 years since Beethoven's birth with a series of performances. The campus community will recognize and honor the DiChiera family at the second concert of the Beethoven piano sonata series on Sunday, November 10, at 3 p.m. in Varner Hall. The concert is free and open to the public.

Legacy of Learning

Happel is excited about the treasure trove of compositions dating as far back as the 1960s that the family donated to the Kresge Library, including DiChiera's own handwritten pieces. She says all of those items, as well as other documents and correspondence will be useful to those studying how great works and dreams evolve at the hands of an artist.

“David was his own historian and he kept everything,” says Happel. “He considered the opera he composed to be his crowning achievement. The fact that we have all these different scores of his various compositions at different stages of production is important to someone who is majoring in composition or drama.”

Oakland University President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, M.D., a pianist herself, is proud that OU will house so many important artifacts from the DiChiera collection at the Kresge Library. “David’s music is a lasting gift to all of us who love music and opera,” says Pescovitz. “Scholars from around the world can delve into the work of a true genius, and gain invaluable insights into how he created works of art that continue to impact our community in so many meaningful ways.”



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