

A gift that brought much joy

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PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED INSPIRATION: Rita Miles brought much joy to the people around her through her musical abilities.

Rita always enjoyed the company of talented staff and the enthusiasm of bright young students.

THE inspiring story of Rita Mile's life began in Stanthorpe in 1938.

Rita was the first child of William (Sol) and Eileen Osbaldeston, whose home in Stanthorpe provided a loving, nurturing environment in which music was very important. Rita's father, mother, brother, uncles and cousins were all musicians; and she was known locally as a child prodigy at the piano.

An old saying states that when the student is ready, the teacher appears.

So it was that in Rita's early years at St Joseph's Convent, an excellent music teacher, Sister Mary Gerald, recognised the great talent of one quiet little girl who presented for piano lessons.

A very productive relationship developed between Rita and her piano teacher, lasting for decades.

Rita topped the state in performance for LTCL music exams under her teacher's guidance.

During her school days, Rita was asked to give a private recital for Mrs Menzies, wife of Australia's longest serving Prime Minister Robert Menzies, when they visited Stanthorpe.

Mrs Menzies asked to hear the local child prodigy so Sr Mary Gerald arranged a recital for the famous lady, something Rita always remembered with pride.

As an adult, music was never forgotten by Rita, but her family life took precedence for some years.

Eventually though, she became the accompanist for many productions of the Choral Society and, as Rita Fletcher, she really thrived in this genre, receiving great applause from an appreciative public.

The Choral Society staged many successful productions of popular musicals such as Oklahoma and My Fair Lady in the big, new Stanthorpe Civic Centre.

Then a wonderful musical development unfolded for Rita, an unparalleled partnership that she established with Betty Harrington in their duo-piano performances.

Betty had a fine record in Brisbane as a pianist of distinction and once she and Rita met, they quickly formed a unique bond of friendship with an intuitive understanding of each other and the music they presented.

This charisma became obvious to enthusiastic audiences in public performances.

Dressed identically, Betty and Rita walked out elegantly on stage without printed music, the two pianos positioned where eye contact was maintained.

Then a whole repertoire of beautiful light classical and popular music poured forth from these two wonderful pianists.

Such was the local enthusiasm for their music that supporters quickly raised funds to buy two new grand pianos for the Civic Centre purely for Rita and Betty's use in public performances.

This inspiring friendship and partnership in music, with the great applause at the performances with Betty was one of the highlights of Rita's life.

Rita had made two enjoyable trips overseas with her good friend Dulcie Hansen.

In 1981, local orchardist and wine-maker Gino Zanatta, invited Rita to join a group of Stanthorpe people he was taking on a six-week tour of Europe.

In the early stages of this trip, Rita and another Stanthorpe resident, Eric Miles, came together in a loving relationship.

In Amsterdam, they visited the Concertgebouw for a classical musical recital.

Afterwards they were inspired by beautiful paintings from the Old Dutch Masters in the famous Rijksmuseum.

Rita and Eric were both moved by exposure to many wonderful works of art, especially in music, sculpture, painting and architecture on the continent and London.

Back home after such a memorable experience, it became obvious to Rita and Eric that their lives had changed forever.

Six months later they were married and moved to Toowoomba.

Rita found her opportunity for musical work at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (DDIAE) once her abilities were recognised.

Later on Rita was appointed as a repetiteur for the Music Theatre Workshop in the annual McGregor Summer School in Toowoomba.

She was involved in this intensive annual workshop for more than 20 years, another high point of Rita's remarkable musical career.

During three years in Toowoomba, Rita was very happy in her music at the DDIAE and with Toowoomba Choral Society as accompanist.

But Eric had completed his degree and hoped to move to Brisbane to gain further qualifications.

Rita was reluctant as she had found so much pleasure in life and success in her music in that city.

Moving to Toowoomba had been a big step for them and each had begun to flourish there.

But the move was made to Brisbane in January 1985 and Rita secured some engagements in the city including piano solos for lunchtime concerts in the City Hall.

Then Rita gained an accompanist position at the Conservatorium, working there contently for more than 20 years.

One of the teachers at the Conservatorium was Donald Smith, the famous opera singer.

Donald had left the world stage but was still in fine voice.

Recognising the quality of Rita's performance at the piano, Donald soon asked Rita to accompany him in public performances.

When Brisbane staged the very successful World Expo 88, promoters booked Donald Smith and another famous singer, June Bronhill, on several occasions, with Rita Miles as accompanist.

At their final performance midway through the programme of solos and duets, Rita was asked to play a piano solo.

This unplanned solo, beautifully played, also received the same rapturous applause as the famous singers.

Rita was one of the founder of the Accompanists' Guild of Queensland.

This organisation of professional pianists was established to promote excellence in all aspects of the art of accompanying and in 2011, Rita was made a life member.

A number of professional singers have commented on Rita's unique ability as an accompanist to support them during their performances.

She was so attuned to each singer that she supported them and “filled in the gaps” unobtrusively.

Rita always said this special ability was a gift from God.

It was Rita’s work at the “Con” that claimed more of her musical interest and enthusiasm.

She accompanied students for auditions, lessons and exams, and also vocal coaching.

Rita always enjoyed the company of talented staff and the enthusiasm of bright young students.

A former colleague Giuseppe Sobello, decided to record a range of his songs for a CD in 1997.

Giuseppe was a lyric tenor who loved to sing. He and Rita often collaborated well as he truly respected Rita’s special talents.

Thus Rita readily agreed to accompany him for this new CD, Songs of Love and Hope, recorded live at the Conservatorium Theatre.

The CD was a triumph for both artists, one of many enjoyable experiences in Rita’s career.

Another highlight came in the Donald Smith Farewell in the Lyric Theatre at QPAC, sponsored by Bundaberg Sugar.

This was a special occasion for Donald, one of Australia’s greatest ever singers.

The Queensland Symphony Orchestra was providing music, but Donald insisted Rita played for his solos.

Thus with the grand piano on stage, Rita accompanied Donald Smith for his solos on this grand finale of his public career.

The final item of the evening was a chorus from Verdi’s opera, Nabucco, in which all performers joined.

A wonderful evening for Donald Smith, an unforgettable one for Rita.

When Dame Joan Sutherland, the world famous singer visited the Conservatorium, she offered to give a master class for the singing students at the Con.

Rita accompanied the famous diva and such was Rita’s ability that she always performed admirably at the highest level.

After more than twenty years of satisfying work at the Conservatorium, Rita decided to retire.

At her farewell on August 15, 2010, Rita was presented with a valuable gift and card that said: This is a small thank you for the huge contribution you have made to decades of singers at the Queensland Conservatorium. We will undoubtedly miss your friendly presence and your extraordinary musical skills, with our love and warmest good wishes”.

Finally, from Fr Dan Carroll, Parish Priest of Jindalee Catholic Church on Rita’s retirement as church organist.

“Dear Rita, on behalf of the parishioners and myself I thank you with all my heart for your outstanding service to the Music Ministry in the parish.”