

Rita M. Fuszek  
1930 - 1996  
PROFESSOR OF MUSIC, EMERITUS

B.M., Butler University; M.M., Music, Michigan State University, August 24, 1956  
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1964 To July 7, 1991  
Birth: January 7, 1930; Death: March 26, 1996

Rita M. Fuszek, Emerita Professor of Music, California State University, Fullerton passed away on March 26, 1996. She had a long and distinguished career in music and education in California and Michigan where her career first began.

Born on January 7, 1930 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Rita was the daughter of Ferdinand and Frances (Greenfelder) Fuszek. Her early schooling was completed in the parochial schools in Ionia. Private musical studies began early in life, and while Rita was still a young child, she became organist for her parish--a calling which was to continue all through her life. Rita's undergraduate education was taken at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana where she was awarded her baccalaureate degree. Her graduate degree, the Master of Music, was awarded at Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI where she later was appointed to faculty status.

Miss Fuszek began what was to become a long career as an educator first in the Indianapolis Public Schools then at St. John's Public Schools. This was followed by her first appointment in higher education as Assistant Professor of Music at Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI. In 1964 Rita was asked to come to Fullerton for an interview with the prospect of filling a vacancy in the combined areas of piano and music education. Coming with high credentials and recommendations of musicians, educators and the MSU staff with whom she had worked, Rita began her appointment to the Music Department of California State University, Fullerton (then California State College at Fullerton) in the academic year 1964-5 just as the Department was moving into its brand new quarters in the Performing Arts Building.

Rita Fuszek quickly adjusted to her new California teaching assignment and began a series of innovative teaching assignments within a short time. At the outset, she taught two classes in music for classroom teachers (to prepare prospective elementary school teachers in music), plus class and studio piano for piano majors. One of Rita's great loves was being able to "reach" students with limited or no music background as exemplified by teaching a class called MU 101, "Music Theory for Non-Majors." Although she was not the exclusive professor to teach these classes, Rita organized hers in such a way as to help every student have a "hands-on" experience at the keyboard in order to understand by "doing" how music is structured. This was a very demanding class, but one to which students flocked since the "word" quickly got around that "if you studied music with Fuszek" you were bound to learn what it was all about. The success of her MU 101 classes were in part responsible for Miss Fuszek being named in 1966 as Outstanding Professor of the Year--the very first person from the Music Department ever to be so designated. Meanwhile, she also contributed much to successfully establish and

locate a Chapter of Mu Phi Epsilon, honorary women's music fraternity at CSUF. At the same time, Rita began work to successfully isolate mental and physical components of sight reading in order to teach a new class in Piano Pedagogy for aspiring studio teachers of piano. Her summer studies with Dr. Edwin Gordon at Temple University helped provide her with much of the necessary background in psychology to isolate specific elements of eye-ear-hand coordination. Her analytic experiments in "hemispheric laterality" of the brain as applied to sight reading became quite well known to pianists and teachers in the area, many of whom benefited greatly from their exposure to this technique.

There were numerous examples of Rita Fuszek's contributions to CSUF music activities. As a very versatile pianist, early in the 60's the Associated Students scheduled a black and white silent movie for showing in the then new Little Theatre. Rita thought it would be "fun" to add something from the silent picture theatre showings of the early 20's--and, with the help of something Professor Jane Paul, who also played piano, the two sat at twin keyboards to play selected musical "relics" of the old movie days. An extremely fun experience! For the first Rockefeller Grant performance on campus by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, Rita was asked by the Department Chair to organize an usher crew to help in the vast domain of the then new CSUF Gym. This was an altogether difficult job, since it entailed obtaining a large crew of student "volunteers" to assist people wishing to be seated for the performance. The production went off without a hitch, thankfully to Rita and her crew doing such an expert job.

In 1968, after the Music Department had presented two highly successful previous summer workshops for classroom teachers and music administrators featuring nationally known music educators, Rita helped to obtain another national figure, Mary Louise Lebow with whom she had worked at MSU. These sessions lasted four weeks and were attended by over 100 persons from as far away as Salt Lake City. She also conducted an outreach evaluation by CSUF for the Placentia Unified School District resulting in the appointment of the PUSD's first ever Music Coordinator and a considerable upgrading of the Placentia music education program.

Rita was a life member of the Music Educators National Conference and after retirement was elected State Secretary of the California Music Teachers Association. One of her major contributions to CMTA was designing the first state-wide certification examination for private teachers of piano. Her hobbies included reading, traveling and cooking. An avid reader, she especially enjoyed mystery novels of the little traveling lady, Mrs. Polifax, created by Dorothy Gilman. Among her many travels was a cruise aboard a Russian cruise ship in the Black Sea. She also traveled widely in England and in the continent, once visiting the former Czechoslovakia home of her forbears. Rita had epicurean tastes in food and loved to cook in her kitchen.

Although still very active as a teacher and performer, Rita decided to retire from California State University, Fullerton in June, 1991 to devote more time to independent pursuits. In this way she was to continue perfecting her skills as a performer and teacher of piano. Her students ages varied from very young to mature adults--one being a prominent Fullerton cardiologist whose son was so

inspired by Rita's teaching that he persuaded Dad to follow in his footsteps. She also served for many years as organist for St. Joseph's Catholic Church of Placentia where she and her mother were long-time members. Although a gifted and accomplished solo pianist, she had a great love for chamber music and accompanying and played with several groups and individuals during her California career. In fact, at the very moment of suffering her debilitating stroke, Rita was at home preparing for a concert to be given in her studio with one of her favorite chamber music groups. After she was hospitalized, this same group came to perform for Rita on the occasion of her 65th birthday, perhaps the one final musical event which she could enjoy.

Teaching and playing were the highest priorities in Rita's life. However, she will also be remembered for two publications, *The Bridge* written as an adjunct text for her MU 101 classes and a monumental *Index of Piano Works* which will serve as "one of a kind" in its field. The latter book occupied more than a score of years of Rita's "spare time" and took her to England and the continent to work in well known libraries to find authentic sources for her book.

Rita M. Fuszek was buried in her home town of Chesaning, Michigan. Speaking about his cousin Rita, Richard M. Greenfelder pays this tribute to Rita:

"I have known an enormous number of people to whom she has been a great inspiration. She was a generous person and a wonderful cousin. She lived her faith completely."

Rita was a stalwart friend and an inspiration not only to her students but to those of us who taught with her at the University. To say that she will be missed is a tremendous understatement! Although her final illness was indeed tragic, we know that she was sustained by her faith and the love of friends and that she passed away peacefully knowing she had fulfilled her destiny as a person and great teacher.

Submitted by  
Joseph W. Landon  
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