

Chicago Tribune

Lita Grier OBITUARY

Lita Grier, a revered composer with a wide-ranging career in the world of classical music, died in Chicago on March 17, 2024, soon after her 87th birthday. The cause was multiple malignancies, according to her son, Jonathan Dubman.

Lita was born in the Bronx, New York, on March 14, 1937 to European immigrants. Her father, Morris Lipschutz, was a professional violinist for the Erie Philharmonic who had studied in St. Petersburg and lived in Berlin in the 1930s. He left at an opportune time; nine siblings perished in the Holocaust. Lita's mother, born Vera Cohen in the city she knew as Vilna, sang folk songs at home from her own childhood.



Lita, a musical prodigy with perfect pitch, started by accompanying her father on the piano at home. This piano was tuned exactly a quarter tone off, and for the remainder of her life she could sing a quarter-tone scale. She attended the High School of Music and Art, now LaGuardia Arts, forming lifelong friendships with other artists and musicians, composing the exquisite “3×2 for Flute and Clarinet” in 1953. She had her stage debut in a summer stock production of “Gigi”.

She was admitted to Juilliard at the age of sixteen, studying composition with Peter Mennin. As a first year student in 1954, she was awarded First Prize in the New York Philharmonic Young Composers Contest for “Three Episodes for Piano”, performed at Carnegie Hall and published by Carl Fisher. This work remains in performance today in its original version, 3×2, along with most her other early music, including her Sonata for Flute and Piano, composed at age nineteen, which the late flute virtuoso Julius Baker described as “...a new classic in the standard flute repertory.”

Following her graduation from Juilliard, she spent a summer at Tanglewood, attending master classes with Aaron Copland. Lita arrived with her own distinctive style fully formed, sometimes recalling French impressionism, but a common strain of a celebratory and uniquely American sound, characteristic of that period, seems to thread through their works. Fellow composer Leo Smit, who was close with Aaron Copland and, like Lita, set many Emily Dickinson poems to music, became one of her closest friends.

At 21, she married mathematician Morton Dubman, who was hired to work on the Apollo project, and they relocated from Cambridge, MA to spend over a decade, the entire 1960s, in Los Angeles, where she thrived in a dynamic social milieu of artists and scientists, crossing paths

with Stravinsky. Lita held the Beatles in the highest regard, while the classical music world was preoccupied with twelve-tone music, serial music and atonality that never resonated with her.

She earned a Masters degree and an Atwater Kent Prize from UCLA, where her son was born in 1968, and studied under Lukas Foss and Roy Harris. She continued to compose art songs and even a film score, but was rejected as a PhD candidate while being told flat out, “Women are not composers”, which she later spent decades proving wrong. She found work, playing piano for dance, teaching, and working at Columbia Artists Management. She fondly recalled racing comedian Jack Benny through Hollywood in her Mustang when he was running late for a show.

In 1970, Lita relocated to Chicago, focusing her creative energies on raising her young son, to whom she dedicated the 1972 work “Sneezles” in the middle of what was otherwise an extended hiatus from composition. She explored a side gig writing commercial jingles, writing the uplifting song “We are Chicago” that presaged some of her later work in musical theater, and worked in public relations at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, for which she also authored program notes for many years.

Her forties were a tumultuous time, starting in the late 1970s, with her composition career on the back burner, a divorce and remarriage, and life-threatening bouts with cancer (both husbands were heavy smokers.) She survived and thrived, calling herself a miracle of modern medicine. During this period, the world of classical music evolved to be less rigidly atonal, and, slowly, more gender-inclusive. Approaching sixty, with increasing demand for her early works, Lita returned triumphantly to composition, starting with the fittingly named “Renaissance” Concertino for full orchestra.

Without a background in business, she was thrust into running the business she co-founded in 1987 with her second husband, Dean Grier, when he passed away suddenly in 1997. Inter-Continental Media, Inc. (ICM) had developed into a leading independent producer of classical music programming, serving over 400 public radio stations and some 40 commercial stations. ICM imported musical programming from Austria, France, Italy and the Netherlands to the US. Lita authored scripts and helped produce, working with actors Jeremy Irons, Tony Randall and Werner Klemperer in the studio. ICM introduced the Salzburg Festival, L’Orchestre de Paris, Royal Concertgebouw and Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestras to American audiences. ICM also exported American programming, bringing “Great American Orchestras” to an overseas audience of over 50 million. In 1998, under Lita’s sole leadership, ICM presented the first-ever American broadcast series by the Vienna Philharmonic.

Lita’s reputation as a composer continued to grow, with an ever increasing count of performances, recordings and commissions, including four from the Ravinia Festival, whose President Welz Kaufmann wrote: “Of all the many joys of my two decades at Ravinia, there is no question that my time with Lita Grier was a highlight. As a composer, a coach, and a friend she opened my ears to new ways of listening to, and understanding, music. And all with a joy of life that was irrepressible. Our connection began when I asked her to look at Spoon River Anthology to determine whether she thought some of Edgar Lee Masters 1915 classic (especially the poem Anne Rutledge) would be suitable for song. This idea came out of planning for the Lincoln Bicentennial... Lita jumped at the chance and quickly chose what she wanted to set. She

introduced me to the incandescent soprano Michelle Areyzaga and we three – Lita, Michelle and I – began a fruitful artistic collaboration including the Cedille recording of Spoon. This project – and especially the recording process which Lita led with kindness, encouragement and steely determination – set us off on a fantastic musical journey.”

Her music has also been heard at The Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, New York’s Lincoln Center, Chicago’s Symphony Center, Indiana U. in Bloomington, Northwestern, Northern Illinois University, De Paul University, Roosevelt University, and the Chicago Music Institute. Her Flute Sonata, performed worldwide, is taught at major music schools in the US and Europe. Her music, published by Theodore Presser, has been recorded on several labels, most prominently Cedille Records, which has issued five albums featuring her music, including an album entirely devoted to her vocal works: “Songs From Spoon River, Reflections of a Peacemaker and Other Vocal Music by Lita Grier”. Ruth Bader Ginsburg became a fan.

Lita Grier has also composed five works for Music Theater, all of which have been produced. She recruited Bob Keeshan, aka Captain Kangaroo, to MC a children’s concert. She wrote “Elegy for Flute, Viola and Harp”, premiered by flutist Mathieu Dufour, for her friend the former dancer Fredda Hyman, who for years hosted Chicago’s Music in the Loft series. She wrote “Winter Songs” for the William Ferris Chorale, conducted by Paul French.

Lita composed “Requiem Missa Brevis” for the children lost to gun violence in Newtown for the project “Healing the Brokenhearted”, performed under the direction of Doreen Rao and broadcast nationwide. Inspired by reading the brilliant work of a young poet who died at 14 from a rare neuromuscular disease, Mattie Stepanek, she put his poetry to music, “Reflections of a Peacemaker”, performed at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park.

Lita identified strongly with Chicago, starting the day she first rode a bike along the lakefront while visiting, and was named a Chicagoan of the Year in 2005 by the Chicago Tribune. In her seventies, she felt called to civic activism, helping to lead a group working to protect children’s health and equal public access in Lincoln Park, taking on the private school her own son had attended, while speaking out to the press under the pseudonym of “Greta Lear”. For a decade, she moonlighted in public relations for classical music station WNIB, growing the audience for classical music in the region.

Her sublime work “Sonata for Double Bass and Piano” composed in 2013 reveals her at the pinnacle of her game in her final decade. She lived independently until her last few months, frequently attending Lyric Opera, symphony and chamber music concerts with friends, and passed away peacefully, with her son at her side.

Lita is survived by her dear brother, Leonard Lipschutz of Jersey City, NJ, and son, Jonathan Dubman, of Seattle, WA. A graveside service will be held at 10:00am on Friday, May 10, 2024 at Graceland Cemetery in Chicago. A memorial concert in her hometown of Chicago will be scheduled at a future date and publicized on her website.