



Mona MacPhail

June 18, 2025

Music defined the life of Sarasota's Mona MacPhail, who died on June 18 at age 78. She loved performing music, conducting it, teaching it, listening to music in concert halls and dancing to music in ballrooms.

The only things she loved more were her husband, Bob Kellaway, and her wide circle of friends, who included many former students who stayed in touch for decades.

"Friends felt safe, special and loved by Mona," Kellaway said. "Once that love was established, it was there for life. Her energy, together with her enthusiasm for life, were contagious. There were never enough hours in the day for Mona. Carpe diem was her mantra."

Kellaway met Mona in 2007 at a ballroom dancing class in Sarasota. "I was struck by her grace and beauty as she danced," he said. "She clearly was no beginner, but here she was dancing with beginners. That's the essence of Mona: always giving, always striving to enhance the life of everyone she met."

Marco Jimenez studied piano with Mona for 12 years in Sarasota before going on to Juilliard and Columbia. "Since I was little, my musical and personal life have been shaped by her," he said. "She always approached teaching with such verve, passion and inspiration...her approach to music and life is something that I genuinely regard to be soul-changing."

"Mona had an infectious smile and laugh," Jimenez continued. "And she was one of the most giving people I've ever met. She was there for me every step of the way, from the time I was a little child, into my teenage and college years....Her spirit will always live on in my memories, and her influence, approach to life, love, compassion and kindness will continue to guide me, always."

Mona was "an extraordinary teacher, and I think it's fair to say she touched all of us

beyond teaching,” said Sharon Pidgeon, a student at The School of Music, which Mona founded for high school students in 1982 with the cooperation of The University of Tampa. Pidgeon said Mona arranged concerts, gave rides to students who needed them, provided coveted college references, and was even their social coordinator.

“She was our cheerleader and our inspiration,” Pidgeon said. “Her friendship and her caring nature lasted a lifetime and lives on through her students. We will have to learn to face the music without her.”

Mona impacted the families of her students, too. Carroll Shephard, who knew her for more than 35 years, said she “deepened your soul and brightened your life.... the world is brighter in her absence because of her thousands of students, friends and family members who will keep her love, laughter, and music going.”

Mona served as education director of the Florida West Coast Symphony (now the Sarasota Orchestra) from 1992-1999. Gretchen Serrie, who hired her, said she knew immediately that she was the perfect fit.

“She was the kindest, most loving person that I’ve ever known,” Serrie said. “She really identified with the idealistic goals of our education program. She was the consummate teacher. We called her Mona McMozart, because of her musical talent and taste.”

Mona left the education position for health reasons but continued to be a sought-after piano teacher for decades.

Born in Brooklyn, NY, Mona was a graduate of Brooklyn College but was not initially a music major. However, she worked at the campus radio station and constantly picked the brains of musicians who came in for interviews. A friend recalled that Mona said one of those visitors, renowned composer Aaron Copland, was so impressed that he suggested Mona change her major to music, which she did.

She went on to earn her master’s in music from the University of Wisconsin, where she conducted several choral and orchestral groups, including the university’s symphony orchestra.

She returned to Brooklyn College as a faculty member and later ran the music department at the prestigious North Carolina School of the Arts.

After meeting at that ballroom dance lesson, Mona and Kellaway were married in 2012. It

was her fourth marriage, and his third. On and off the dance floor, theirs was the perfect partnership.

“I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have met and married Mona,” Kellaway said. “She introduced me to so many good friends, activities, and most of all, music, her passion in life. I will be forever grateful for the way she enriched my life.”

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to a favorite charity. A celebration of life will be scheduled in the fall.

Tribute Wall

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“Mona brought the joy and insight of music to hundreds of students over the decades, including our family.

Her ear and eye for excellence helped us improve as musicians and equally as people. To sit with Mona on the piano bench for music lessons was to be truly seen and heard as a young person. You could not help but be in wonder at her small and muscular hands—the hands of cultivated strength and practice. As a kid you saw actual muscles on fingers — how could fingers have muscles? — and how those small hands could stretch to play an entire piano with power and grace.

This kind of experience for kids to be truly loved and truly seen should not be rare, but it still is. For someone to set aside the entire world, and take the time to be fully present, just for you. This was about so much more than her knowing immediately (!!) if we had practiced our scales and our pieces — we often hadn't!! We could never get anything past her sharp, quick New York wits, and her compassionate eagle eyes.

She listened with her whole body, and more than anything she wanted to hear: How are you? How are you truly doing? How are you living your life?

As her students, we did not know she was often in great physical pain when we had music lessons. As lifelong adult friends, we were always in awe of how, every time, no matter the medical difficulty she was managing, she fully showed up.

She fully listened, and she still wanted to make sure: Were we making thoughtful choices to live our best lives? Were we looking out for those around us? With her gone, will we ever be able to be there for others, fully loving and fully present, the way that she was there for us?

Equally amazing, she somehow always looked beautiful, with New York style and grace, all while managing chronic illness. We saw her in hospice, and she still looked beautiful. Only Mona! We love you and miss you! -Chris Shephard

Chris Shephard - June 23, 2025 at 09:32 AM

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“ Soon after Hedi and I moved to McClellan Park I received a call from Mona. She wanted us to come over and meet the two loves of her life: Bob and the giant Banyan tree in the backyard. While we were enjoying a glass of champagne she commented that she primarily purchased the property because of the tree. The house was an add on.
I often walk my dog, Henry, along McClellan Parkway. When I see the tree I will always remember Mona.

Donald Perry MD - June 22, 2025 at 12:54 PM