

WALTER ARLEN

b. July 31, 1920

d. September 2, 2023

COMPOSER & HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

"The music I have written is so heavily influenced by what happened to my family, the tragedies that befell me, the loss of everything ..."

**He was
composer, a
music critic,
and a Holocaust
survivor.**

Walter Arlen was an Austrian-born composer and music critic who fled Nazi persecution and settled in the United States. Although he composed 65 works, chiefly for voice and piano, his music was not performed publicly until he was 88.

Born Walter Aptowitzer in Vienna, Austria, he was the son of Jewish parents who owned a department store established by his grandfather. At 5, Arlen exhibited perfect pitch. He began piano lessons with Otto Erich Deutsch, a noted Schubert scholar, and was composing music by the age of 10.

In 1938, during the Kristallnacht pogrom, Nazis seized the family store and sent Arlen's father to a concentration camp. His mother suffered a nervous breakdown and later committed suicide. Some of his family, including his father, eventually fled to London. Arlen lost his first love, a boy nicknamed "Lumpi," in the Holocaust.

At 19, Arlen immigrated to the United States and settled in Chicago, where he supported himself as a factory worker. He anglicized his surname to Arlen, inspired by Harold Arlen, the composer of "Over the Rainbow" from the 1939 film "The Wizard of Oz."

Struggling with profound depression, Arlen turned to composing on the advice of a therapist. He studied composition with Leo Sowerby, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer, and won first prize in a student competition. He continued his education at Vanderbilt University and earned a master's degree from UCLA.

After graduating, Arlen worked as a music critic for the Los Angeles Times. He stopped composing at the time, believing that writing criticism presented a conflict of interest. In 1969, he founded the music department at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, where he taught and arranged music competitions. He developed friendships with renowned composers such as Carlos Chávez and Igor Stravinsky.

After retiring from journalism, Arlen began composing again in the 1980s. "It was as though it had been dammed up inside me for all those years," he later said. His music was performed publicly for the first time in 2008 at the Jewish Museum in Vienna. That same year, he received the Decoration of Honour for Services to the Republic of Austria. His works have since been performed in the United States and Europe and recorded on a series of CDs.

In 2013, at the age of 93, Arlen married Howard Myers, his partner of 65 years. Arlen eventually lost his sight and was forced to stop composing around 2000. He died in California at the age of 103. The New York Times published his obituary.



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