Dave Roper never aspired to fame, although he had the talent for it, because he did not wish to leave the Lehigh Valley.

Roper, a Lehigh Valley music treasure, died April 8. He was 82.

Over the years, the pianist built a substantial following for the Dave Roper Trio’s many years at the Hotel Bethlehem, and before that, for 15 years at the now-closed King George Inn in South Whitehall Township.

Roper also played many times, usually annually in the “Jazz Upstairs” series in the Rodale Community Room, Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown. He last played there July 19, 2019.

Roper was a modest person with high musical standards. His piano work was smooth and effortless, so much so that listeners could forget how good it was.

He was something of a traditionalist, not showing an interest in electric, modern or avant garde jazz.

But he was never a jazz purist, and never hesitated to play pop tunes.

Paul Rostock, bassist in the Roper Trio, recalled the huge reaction Roper would receive when he played “Through the Eyes of Love” from the film “Ice Castles,” or “Send in the Clowns,” or a selection from the musical “Evita.”

Roper might mix a classical piece with a jazz standard. One of the last shows he did at Moravian Village included a solo performance of George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.”

“He just loved to play,” says Rostock, who along with drummer Gary Rissmiller was a member of the Dave Roper Trio for more than a decade.

“He was content to do what he was doing,” Rostock says in a phone interview. “The whole scene has changed so much. You have to be much more aggressive with self-promotion.

“He didn’t even have a web page or an electric piano,” the latter becoming more of a necessity as well-maintained acoustic pianos become less available at performance venues.

“He was a funny, witty guy,” recalls Rostock. “He was very easy to work with. We would just follow him. We never rehearsed or brought in sheet music. We did everything from memory. He had a familiar repertoire. The gig was like a throwback to another era.
“He didn’t want to travel.” Rostock says.

Roper even hesitated to go to the prestigious Deer Head Inn jazz venue in Delaware Water Gap, where the trio played twice.

The trio played at Hotel Bethlehem twice a month, cut to once a month for the last few years, the last time in February.

Julie Brooks, author of the memoir, “Uncertain Survival,” first met Roper at a teacher orientation at Emmaus High School. Roper taught English there for 30-some years, where he was also the coach for the high school team for PBS39's “Scholastic Scrimmage” TV show.

In her obituary for Roper, written for the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley, Brooks recalls, “Dave became a member when he was hired to play the piano for a service one day.

“The minister at the time neglected to inform him that he not only had to play an introduction and a postlude, as well as accompany the hymns, but also something during the offering.

“As the ushers began to pass the plate, the minister kept looking at him and nodding in a significant way. He desperately searched for inspiration, and then launched into ‘Pennies from Heaven.’

“The congregation broke into laughter, and so enticed the previously unchurched accompanist to join us.”

Roper lived with his wife, Barbara, along East Market Street in Bethlehem for many years. They moved a few blocks away into a house in the retirement community, Moravian Village, where Roper kept a piano in the basement.

Although last summer he became a hospice patient and needed to use oxygen, he continued to perform occasionally at Moravian Village and other places.

Brooks recalls that he played for about three hours on New Year’s Eve, despite the physical demands it required.

Roper died in his sleep after a struggle with illness.