Shul donates renowned chazzan’s music collection

Frances Kraft, Staff Reporter, Friday, February 1, 2013

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Toronto’s Beth Emeth Bais Yehuda Synagogue has donated the bulk of Cantor Louis Danto’s music collection to Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, which is home to one of the largest Jewish music collections in the United States.

The world-renowned cantor, who died in 2010, served the congregation for 25 years. He was known for his bel canto style of singing, a demanding 17th-century technique that he studied in Rome after World War II.

A native of Suwałki, Poland, Danto survived the war because he was sent to Minsk in 1939 at age 10 to study music on a scholarship. He and his fellow students were relocated when Germany invaded Russia.

Over a five-decade career, Danto amassed a vast amount of sheet music, records, tapes, CDs and books. The cantor and his wife, Rouhana, donated the collection to the synagogue in 2005.

But according to Beth Emeth’s executive director, Pearl Grundland, the Jewish music archive at the 50-year-old university can provide “proper exposure and accessibility to people around the world” that the synagogue can’t match.

“The cantor was really beloved by Beth Emeth and all the members,” Grundland said. “There’s a lot of emotional attachment to the collection, but I would say anyone involved in this decision made the decision believing that this would be the best long-term home for the collection.”

Aaron Kula, the FAU libraries’ director of music performance and education, said he has known the Danto family since he was a child, because his father was also a prominent cantor.

“We always kept in touch to see if there was any possibility they might interested in gifting the collection to Florida Atlantic University,” he said, adding that the school’s music archive grew in large part because of the number of donations from Jews who had moved to South Florida after retiring.

The Danto collection includes books of sheet music dating back to the 1800s and cantorial, Yiddish and opera recordings that are “almost considered priceless,” Grundland said.

Danto travelled the world to perform in concerts, and wherever he went, he looked for special music, Rouhanna Danto said. “What he really wanted was for it to be used.”

Kula told The CJN that Danto built “an amazing world-class library… [with] sheet music in virtually every European language that exists, and there’s a wealth of one-of-a-kind cantorial music [in manuscript form] that he used. Those pieces are not published. They were handwritten… and they must date back to at least the early 19th century.”

Kula called the collection “a major acquisition” for the library.

As of last week, the 97 boxes of music were still waiting to be shipped from Toronto, pending resolution of customs details, Kula said.

There are at least 10,000 pieces of sheet music, according to Kula. Each of them will be put into a searchable database, although the time frames for completing the work depend on how many people will be involved.

As well, recorded music will go to the university’s recorded sound archives.

“I think the goal of the Danto collection will be not only to preserve it, but to use it in performances,” said Kula, whose responsibilities include creating performance events using the university’s print music collections.

“Cantor Danto was not only a cantor but a concert artist, so his library represents a performance library,” Kula said.

“I’m very excited about getting it. I can’t wait for the boxes to arrive.”

The university’s print music collection is online at http://www.library.fau.edu/depts/spc/spc/printmusic.htm, and its Judaica sound archives can be found at http://faujsa.fau.edu/jsa/home.php.