FAU Chamber Soloists to perform concert in honor of music collector

Long-time musicologist Richard Beattie Davis, a collector of rare, first and early editions, had a passion for music that led him around the world assembling a collection of thousands of books and scores. Before his death in 2008, Davis and his wife, Gillian (nee Wimbourne), bequeathed his life’s work and passion to FAU’s Wimberly Library, and in 1984 established a special ongoing collection of more than 700 items called the Richard Beattie Davis Music Collection.

As a special tribute to honor the memory of Davis, the Florida Atlantic University Chamber Soloists will perform a concert at 3 p.m. Sunday at the University Theatre.

The concert is titled, “FAU Chamber Soloists: Gems from the Davis Collection” and will feature music, some of it performed for the first time in South Florida, from the Richard Beattie Davis Music Collection.

Selections include music by Sinding, Arensky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and Henselt. “This is a wonderful collection of music and an opportunity for people to come and hear both known and unknown musical selections, some of which, like the Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and Henselt scores, have been rarely played in this area,” said Leonard Treer, professor of music and founder of the FAU Chamber Soloists.

Gillian continues to devote time to helping with the collection during her winters in Boynton Beach, where she has lived and taught dance on and off since 1956.

It was there in 1979 that she met her soon-to-be husband, Richard Beattie Davis, a former World War II tank commander and real estate appraiser, who was in Florida on business.

“At 47, I was lucky to meet the love of my life. For 26 years, we shared a professional and personal life and complemented each other’s skills. I helped him in his book research and he played piano for my dance classes. We were halves of the same person,” she said.

And thus began a new chapter in Gillian’s life and one that would blossom into a life-long passion and continue as a way to honor her husband’s efforts and memory.

She spends as much time as she can working on the collection when she’s in town.

The Davis collection comprises first and early editions of music dating from the 1790s to the first two decades of the 20th century.

Some of the highlights of the collection are a number of copies of the first edition of the full score (a limited edition No. 12) of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s “The Tale of Tsar Saltan,” a Russian opera written in 1899, first editions of Rimsky-Korsakov’s three penultimate operas, and operas by A.N. Serov, A. Rubinstein and N. Tcherepnin.

The collected works also feature full scores of first German editions of the nine Beethoven symphonies and several other of his orchestral works, a miscellaneous collection of 19th century editions of chorals, orchestral and piano music, and more than 60 editions of piano works by J.N. Hummel.

Upon learning that the Bessell collection of music is a well-known Russian music publishing firm founded in 1869 in St. Petersburg was in jeopardy, Richard drove his Jeep Cherokee from London to Paris to collect boxes of invaluable scores.

To this day, Gillian is in contact with Dinette Bessell, a granddaughter of the founder, now 81 and living in London. She tapped an interview with her in June 2010 and on the tape, one can hear Bessell clearly saying, “Are people interested in the collection? Even in Florida?”

The Bessell Archives that Richard secured are on display in the Wimberly Library through March 25.

Stevie Robertson, the music director of the Atlantic Classical Orchestra based in Stuart, recently spent time reviewing the archives in the Davis collection and was amazed and excited about what he found.

“The collection is a treasure trove of 19th and early 20th century music with some works of interest and value. I found two serenades that I didn’t even know exist; a piece by Alexander Glazunov and another by Rimsky-Korsakov that are a perfect fit for a classical orchestra. I was so excited; I jumped up and down for joy.”

The caliber and range of the collection, along with the musicological and historical significance and rarity value all make this a unique asset for South Florida,” said Robertson, who is Scottish and divides his time between Scotland, Florida and California.

Additionally, there are more than 60 chamber works by a variety of composers, and in excess of 200 Russian scores, almost all first editions, dating from the mid-19th century to the years leading up to the Russian Revolution.

The Thomas B. Pitfield Collection, the only archive of his work in the United States, includes musical and artistic works, letters, recordings and books of the English composer, a personal friend of the Davises.

Last, but not least, is a collection of 25 original manuscripts and compositions by American composer Nathan Lupu.

Jon Robertson, dean of music at Lynn University in Boca Raton, has also spent time browsing the collection. It’s a very important collection and very useful for performance practice,” he said.

“Over time, original scores have become interpreted by other composers and conductors, and while they can’t change the notes, sometimes they change the phrasing or impose other interpretations on the original score.”

“This collection gives us the opportunity to see what the composer had in mind. For example, you can see Beethoven’s original metronome markings and see the original tempo he intended for his pieces.”

Gillian was instrumental in assisting her husband with his magnum opus, an extensive 368-page book, “The Beauty of Belaieff” (the Russian music publisher), highlighting the Russian collection at FAU.

The book, which took eight years to write and another 12 to publish, is a definitive “who’s who” of 19th century Russian music composers and is fully annotated with 143 full-page color plates.

“Richard wanted to share his passion for music with everyone. He lived by Winston Churchill’s adage, ‘We make a living by what you get, but we make a life by what you give’,” Gillian said.

FAU Chamber Soloists will perform “Gems from the Davis Collection” at 3 p.m. Sunday at the University Theatre on the Boca Raton campus. For more information, visit fau.edu/music or call 561-297-3820. Suggested donation is $10. For information on the Bessell exhibition, call 561-297-3787.