FAU Chamber Soloists to perform concert in honor of music collector

Jan Engelsen jengelsen@sun-sentinel.com
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Longtime musicologist Richard Beate Davis, a collector of rare, first and early editions, had a passion for music that thrilled him around the world amassing a collection of thousands of books and scores.

Before his death in 2009, Davis and his wife Gillian (nee Wilmot) bequeathed his life work and papers to FAU’s Wimberly Library, and in 1984 established a special ongoing collection of more than 700 items, called the Richard Beate Davis Music Collection.

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

The 225-seat 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 Beate Davis Music Collection.

Selections include music by Boccherini, Arnebery, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and Tchaikovsky.

“Music is a wonderful collection of music, and an opportunity for people to come and hear both known and unknown musical selections. Some of the music, like the Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and Tchaikovsky scores, have been rarely played in this area,” said Leonid Riner, 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 owned and taught dance on and off since 1956.

It was in 1970 that she met her soon-to-be husband, Richard Beate Davis, 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 shared piano for my dance classes. We were two halves of the same person,” she said.

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

She spent so much time as she can 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 copy of the first edition of the full score (a limited edition No. 12) of Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s “The Tale of the Samoan,” a Russian opera written in 1899, first edition of Rimsky-Korsakov’s Three Preludes, and operas by A. Sch., A. Rubinstein and N. Tchaikovsky.

The collected works also feature full scores of the 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. S. Hummel.

Upon learning that the Bequest collection of music (a well-known Russian music publishing firm founded in 1889) 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 Denisa Bessler, a granddaughter of the founder, now 91 and living in London. She taped an interview with her in June 2010 and on the tape, one can hear Bessler clearly saying, “Are people interested in the collection? Even in Florida?”

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

Robert Stewart, 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 so much of interest and value. I found a few rarities that I didn’t even know existed: a piece by Alexander Glazunov and another by Rimsky-Korsakov that are perfect for a classical concert. I was so excited, I jumped up and down for joy.”

The caliber and range of the collection, along with the musicalological and historical significance and rarity value all make these a unique asset for South Florida,” said Robertson, who is active in the music scene between South Florida and California.

Additionally, there are more than 50 chamber works by a variety of composers, and excess of 200 Russian scores, among the scores, 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 art works, letters, recordings and books of the English composer, a pupil of his teacher.

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

Joel Robertson, dean of Music at Lynn University in Boca Raton, has also spent time browsing the collection. “It’s a very powerful 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 intended his piece. For example, you can see Bowdler’s original manuscript markings and see the original tempo he indicated his piece’s

Gillian was instrumental in assisting her husband with his magnum opus, an extensive 288-page book, “The Beauty of Belvidere” (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 18th 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 www.muscsun.edu or call 561-297-3820. Suggested donation is $10. For information on the Besseld exhibition, call 561-297-3787.