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A mysterious man and 15,000 records

Recluse's estate bequeaths collection to Salve Regina University library

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Mark Malkovich was skeptical when he got wind of someone interested in unloading a record collection. The last time he was on the receiving end of some hand-me-down albums, he had to spend hours scrubbing away dirt and mildew.

But Malkovich, director of the Newport Music Festival and an avid record collector himself, agreed to take a look. He would set a value on the discs, and maybe even consider taking them for the music festival library.

Nothing could have prepared him, though, for what he would find when he arrived at the tidy, story-and-a-half cape in the Boston suburbs.

"I was just overwhelmed," Malkovich recalled in a recent interview. "Everywhere you looked there were bookcases, boxes and plastic milk cartons stuffed with recordings, many still in the original cellophane packages.

"I found they were not only in good condition" he said, "but mint condition."

The collection, valued by Malkovich at \$250,000, was amassed by a reclusive Natick resident, Russell C. Whitaker, who was killed last year in a freak accident involving a runaway motorcycle. It contains more than 15,000 LPS, from medieval chamber music and opera to Mable Mercer, Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra.

When Malkovich realized the scope and depth of the collection, he helped arrange for it to go to Newport's Salve Regina University, which has just built a new \$11-million library. It took a crew of seven working from morning until well into the evening, and two moving vans to transport the massive collection to Newport during the Memorial Day weekend.

The recordings, packed in 200 carefully labeled cartons, are now in a basement storage area of the library, waiting to be catalogued. They will eventually be available for public listening in the library.

Whitaker's heirs also donated more than 2,000 books to Salve Regina. Though not quite as large, Whitaker's library was as eclectic as his record collection, covering topics as far-ranging as Indian art, philosophy and travel.

There is no question Whitaker, who was 60 when he died, had a mania for collecting. But just who he was remains somewhat of a mystery. Few people got close to this private soul, who spent his life immersed in music, philosophy and poetry.

Little family contact

Jim Spirakis, whose mother was a first cousin of Whitaker's and who was the administrator of Whitaker's estate, said that while Whitaker had kept up contact with Spirakis's mother, he had not spoken to his other two cousins in more than 40 years.

Spirakis, an Arlington, Mass., photographer, said that Whitaker shared the tidy cape on Bacon Street with his mother, Grace, until she died in 1985. When friends and relatives dropped by to visit his mother, Whitaker would retreat to his room.

According to Spirakis, Whitaker's father was co-owner of a Natick mill and an accomplished pianist. But when a 5-year-old daughter died unexpectedly, the elder Whitaker forsook music and got rid of the family piano.

Nevertheless, Russell, who was born after the death of his sister, developed a passion for music, though he apparently did not play an instrument. He majored in business at Babson College, but wrote his master's thesis on the record industry.

Eva Amoroso, who lived next to the Whitakers for almost 40 years, said she thought Whitaker worked in a local bank at one point, and Spirakis recalled jobs with Boston bookstores. But for most of his adult life, he did not hold a regular job, said Spirakis, and was able to coast along on family money.

"He referred to himself as a writer," said Spirakis, "but I have yet to see anything he has written."

Amoroso, who is 87 and now lives on the southern Maine coast, said she recalls UPS trucks making regular stops at the Whitaker household with the latest installment to the ever-growing collection. At the time of Whitaker's death, recordings filled every corner of his modest house. Bookshelves stuffed with Puccini, Bach and Tchaikovsky wound their way from the living room into the kitchen and breakfast nook, all arranged by type of music and in alphabetical order.

Closets had been emptied of clothing, and were fitted with shelves crammed with albums of Broadway hits and chamber music. Still more records were stored in cartons on the floor.

"Had he lived," said David Kim, head of Salve Regina's library, "he would have had to move to a bigger house in a couple more years. No question about it."

Whitaker was also an accomplished magician, and had been planning to go to Arizona to judge a magic competition just before his death, said Spirakis.

Fatal walk

Although he traveled to Europe and India, where he fell in love with the art and culture, he stopped driving years ago, according to Amoroso, after his mother sold the broken-down family car.

"He walked everywhere," said Amoroso, who struck up a regular phone correspondence with her former neighbor after Whitaker's mother died.

It was during one of his walks last June,

along Route 9, when Whitaker met his death. The teenage motorcyclist lost control of his bike, hit a Jersey barrier, and was thrown to the opposite side of the busy highway.

The driver survived, but the powerful motorcycle continued to roar down the road, struck the curbing and careened through the air, hitting Whitaker "chest-high," according to Natick police. Whitaker, who was thrown about 120 feet, was conscious when help arrived, said Spirakis, but he died in a hospital of internal injuries 13 hours later.

Spirakis spoke on behalf of his distant cousin when the driver of the motorcycle was sentenced last month to two years' probation. The defense had tried to paint Whitaker as a faceless bachelor, with no immediate family and few years left to live, said Spirakis.

"I wanted the judge to know he was a real person, that he loved music and magic and that his death has been very upsetting to those who knew him."

Collection reflects life

Perhaps it is the thousands of records and books that Whitaker left behind, though, that form the best portrait of this solitary man.

Whitaker appears to have had a restless, inquisitive mind, with tastes in art that ran from medieval manuscript illumination to the abstract expressionistic canvases of Dutch-born painter Willem de Kooning.

And his knowledge of music must have been encyclopedic. He collected recordings of African and Indian music, plus music from other foreign nations. One entire bedroom was devoted to recordings of Bach, and his opera holdings were exhaustive.

"I consider myself somewhat knowledgeable in opera," said Malkovich, "and 20 percent of the collection I had never heard of. I not only wasn't aware that it was recorded, I never even knew these operas existed."

Malkovich said that, as a "litmus test," he looked for albums by Claudia Muzio, the Italian dramatic soprano who died in 1936. "She's my favorite singer and I thought I had everything she ever recorded. But I found a first act of *Tosca* that I never knew existed."

Malkovich said he then went looking for what has become a "sort of cult recording among the cognoscenti," a collection of Corsican folk songs sung by Martha Angelici. Whitaker not only had the album, which came out around 1950 on the Angel label, according to Malkovich, but he owned the 10-inch, French-produced original from which the Angel release was made.

"I don't think anyone knew about the original," said Malkovich.

Malkovich, who had heard about the collection through a mutual friend of Spirakis's, was instrumental in channeling the recordings to Salve Regina. Once he learned of the scope of the collection, he realized it was too important to end up in private hands. To sell it off in chunks to dealers would have "desecrated" it, he said.

Spirakis said he had discussed giving the collection to Boston University and had contacted several dealers, but with compact discs now the rage, the response he got in most cases was less than enthusiastic.

Salve was also seen as a fitting recipient, because Whitaker had converted to Catholicism years ago.

Kim, Salve's librarian, said the school is thrilled with the unexpected windfall. He said when he learned the recordings were coming to the Salve, he contacted a colleague in charge of the music library at Tulane University.

"He told me he had spent 10 years building a collection at Tulane and it wasn't as good as this," said Kim.

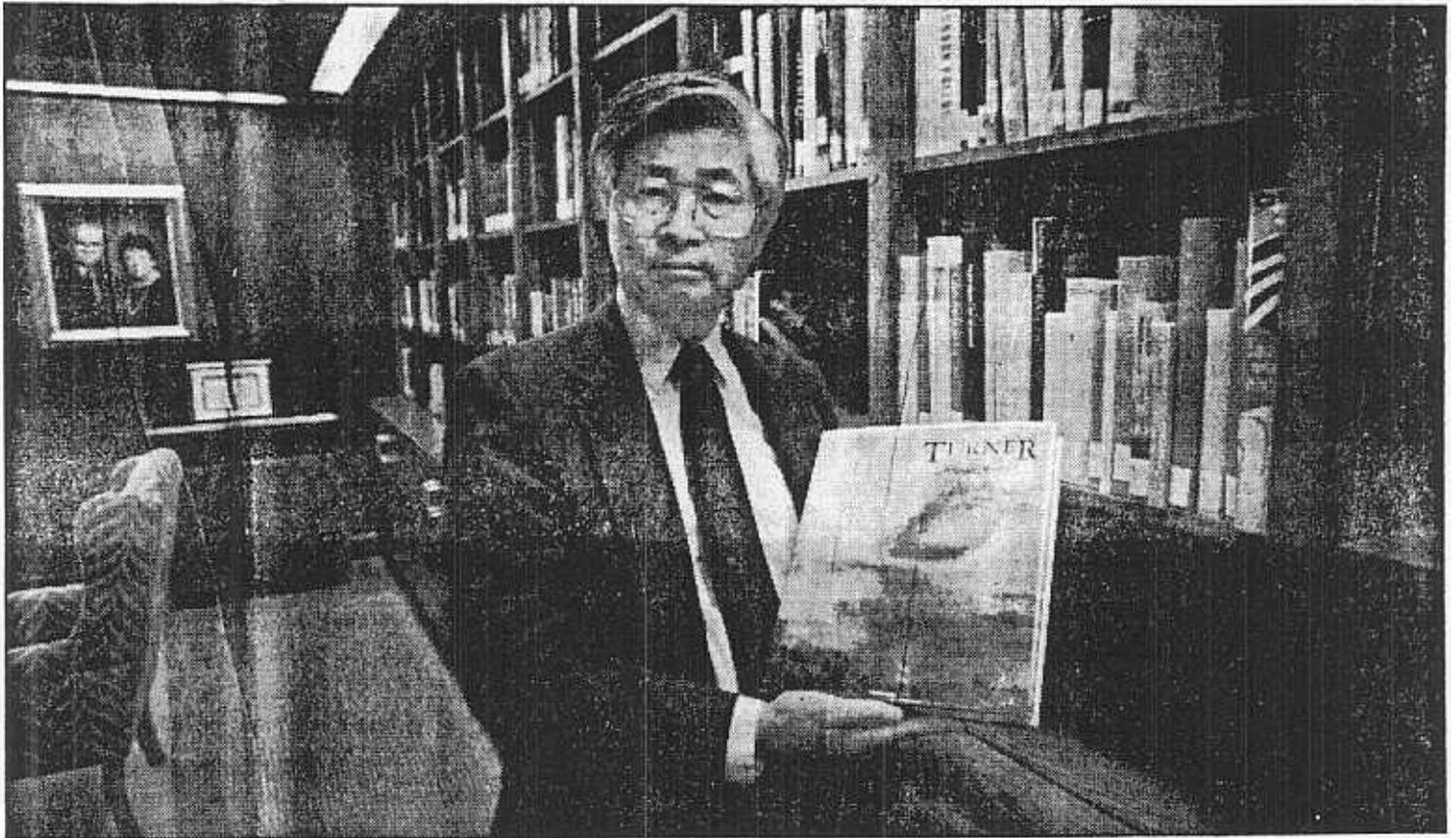
"It was a totally personal endeavor," said Malkovich, of Whitaker's vast collection. "Little did he know that now it will give pleasure to thousands of people.

"But the good Lord has a way of taking things and turning them around."



Journal-Bulletin/TIMOTHY BARMANN

SILENT WAIT: Boxes holding Whitaker's record collection wait in the library.



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THOUSANDS MORE: Dr. David Kim, Salve Regina University Library director, holds a book from the collection of Russell C. Whitaker. In addition to records, the Whitaker bequest included more than 2,000 books.