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John Lubrano

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Portrait of a Collector Interview with John Lubrano

Transcribed by Kate Browne

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Speaker: Good afternoon, J & J Lubrano.

Meg Miner: Hi, is John Lubrano there?

Speaker: Yes. May I ask who's calling, please?

Miner: My name is Meg Miner.

Speaker: Oh, sure. Just one moment, please.

Miner: Thank you.

John Lubrano: Hello?

Miner: Hi, John.

Lubrano: Hello.

Miner: This is Meg Miner. How are you today?

Lubrano: Hi, yes, thank you Meg.

Miner: Is this still okay?

Lubrano: Yeah, yeah, this is fine.

Miner: Okay. Well, thank you so much for agreeing to the interview.

Lubrano: Sure.

Miner: Okay. Are you clear on the object parameters? Do you want me to go over any of that with you? Or just information I sent?

Lubrano: No, you ask me whatever you want to ask me.

Miner: Okay, well I would love to hear everything you know about Minor Myers Junior as a book collector. So start with that. How did you, how did you get to know him? Did you know him before--?

Lubrano: Yeah, yeah. We're talking about 30 years ago at least.

Miner: Oh my word.

Lubrano: When he first, uh, when we first made contact with him was, I'm guessing it's a long time ago. Um, in any case, I think that he...I mean, I don't have any records of anything like this, but I imagine that

he may have come to us after our acquiring a business in new York in 1979. We bought another antiquarian business for another fellow who was—he was sick and he was closing up his business. In fact, he died and his wife offered us the business. So we obviously got his mailing list as well. And I'm guessing that Minor Myers was on that mailing list. And my guess is that we got it. So sometime after '79 we would have first gotten contact with him. And he started, uh, ordering things from us, from our catalogs and, um, through that contact we become, you know, friendly. Or we would speak on the telephone with some frequency. And he, as you know, was most interested in English music of the 18th century. In terms of collecting, anyway. And really, English imprints. And I think that also, um, and I don't really know much about his academic or scholarly background, but I think that tied into other aspects of 18th century English scholarship that he was interested in. all sorts of literary connections. Economic, historical, and so forth. And I think he was interested in the music as well. I don't remember if he had any particular interest in Johnson or not. I think he might have. But he was fascinated with English music printing. And those composers, a lot of whom are not very well known today but of course in the 18th century there were so many composers who had their music published and so much both professional, semi-professional, and amateur music-making going on that it's a wealth of material. Um. So, uh, that's what he collected. 18th century musical imprints. And, uh, that is scores not books about music. But scores. I bet he had a library of books, but I don't remember him buying too much in way of books from us. He may have scholarly reference books relating to that period but where antiquarian was concerned it was really the music. He was interested in the printers. He was interested in the individuals, the performers, the composers. And I think that, uh, the typography that is apparent in the British and English music of that period. And it's all—you know, it's really quite elegant. I don't know how familiar you are with music printed in that period in England, but, uh, you know, there is some very fine examples of simply—of printing, uh, from that period.

Miner: Oh my. So that's quite a range of possibilities of interest. Um. The, the kinds of things then that he was purchasing from you, was he asking you for specific composers or printers or was he coming and soaking it all in and selecting from that?

Lubrano: He was comprehensive. Anything that was, uh, major—published by a major or minor composer he was interested in. He wanted to amass as much as he could. Because it—I think he felt that it told a story. Not just Handel or, you know, Corelli was published in England. There are very nice editions of Corelli's music. And various other composers. You know, a lot of the Italian composers and French went to England to further their professional careers. And, of course, the opera was, in 18th century England, was a very successful venture from the early times. From, you know, 1750s thereabouts onward. King's Theater was a major center. So, you know, I think he just wanted to acquire as much as he could from that period because it was just—I think London was next to Paris the—certainly in the musical circles a very major center. There was so much going on here. So he didn't specialize in any particular composer to answer your initial question, Meg. Um.

Miner: But he didn't also have specific people in mind when he was looking or he would—I'm just kind of getting a sense—

Lubrano: He would—yeah. Uh, I think more the genre of what, uh, you know, he was particularly interesting in instrumental music. Less, less as though maybe even vocal music from my memory. And that may have also had to do more with his own playing. I don't really know but I think he, he did play.

Miner: Mm hmm.

Lubrano: I don't know if he played the harpsichord. And he may have also played the violin but I'm not sure. But he may have just wanted to also have the music to play. I don't know.

Miner: So when he would purchase from you then it would be, you said, through his catalogs.

Lubrano: Through our catalogs. When did he become president?

Miner: It was 1989.

Lubrano: Well, I can't tell you exactly when, when we started selling to him but it's gotta be sometime after '79. Now where was he—what was he before he was president. Was he still at--?

Miner: He was at Hobart William Smith.

Lubrano: Yes, that's sounding vaguely familiar.

Miner: And he completed his dissertation in '72 and went to Connecticut College.

Lubrano: Okay. What was his dissertation on?

Miner: It was on British laws of nature.

Lubrano: On laws of nature?

Miner: Yes.

Lubrano: Okay. All right. And do you know if he was a musician?

Miner: He was, yes.

Lubrano: I mean, he was. And what did he play?

Miner: Harpsichord and violin.

Lubrano: Oh, he did? Because I didn't know that for sure. I was just making some assumptions based on what I knew about him. Okay. All right.

Miner: Yes, he also had a piano on campus.

Lubrano: Right, right. He, you know, he had a wonderful American manuscript. A really important American manuscript. 18th century. And while he didn't normally collect American things, or at least didn't really buy them from us. He may have bought a few but I can't recall. He told me where he got this from somewhere. He had it for many years. I think he found it in, again, I'm losing my memory. I'm

not actually positive about this. I think he found it in an antiquarian, used bookshop somewhere or other. And when he told me—in fact, now that I'm thinking about it was a manuscript of harpsichord music. 18th century American. And fairly earlier. I'd say sort of 1740s to 1760s. That's really, really unusual. And quite important. I mean, today, we're talking about probably 40, 50 thousand dollars at least. And not just the value. Just in terms of its rarity. And finding something like that is just an exceptional, uh, exceptionally...rarity is suppose is really what I'm trying to get to. If it was English, no, that's, no. It would be significant and very interesting but it wouldn't be of any great rarity. Whereas an American, uh, manuscript that was written in the colonies at that time. At that time, um, is really quite something. And I have a feeling he donated it—might have even been to Colonial Williamsburg or may have been to one of the Smithsonian or maybe even the Library of Congress. 'cause I seem to remember we did an appraisal for it. But when he told me he had this and we talked about it quite a lot, I remember I was quite astounded.

Miner: That sounds wonderful, wow.

Lubrano: It was, yeah, yeah.

Miner: So if his primary interest was in English printing and English music, when he would come across something like that, what do you think the attraction was? I'm really struggling this because I'm really not at all the kind of collector that, um, I, I have to portray him as, so.

Lubrano: Right. Well, I mean, you know, in this particular instance, the relationship between the, uh, tradition—the British tradition and what would have been that manuscript that would have had it's—most likely its basis in the British tradition, uh, is very interesting. And the, the, um, you know, I can't recall whether the—who was the, uh, who was the scribe. If any of the music was original. It may have very well been. But it would have been—it would have been, come down, so to speak, uh, intellectually through the British tradition.

Miner: Hm.

Lubrano: So I can see where he would have found that very much in his own milieu.

Miner: Wonderful. Do you know—did he ever sell you anything?

Lubrano: Um. I don't remember buying anything from him. He may have, he may have, you know, something that he wanted us to sell from him. Nothing of any great significance or no quantity of things, anyway.

Miner: The reason I'm asking—

Lubrano: Hm.

Miner: The reason I'm asking is—I have a few interviews about what he collected and why he collected which are very, of course, in line with what you're saying. But he had so much more in his collection and

I'm just trying to figure out if he just amassed things and never redistributed what he acquired or if there was some sort of method that I haven't been able to discern yet.

Lubrano: Right, right. Well, I certainly don't think of him as a collector-seller. You know, or a dealer or anything. He certainly didn't do anything like that. But I wouldn't be surprised if he maybe sold other things. I imagine he must have collected other things besides music, but I didn't have any connection to him as regards to anything he may have collected. Do you know if he collected other subjects?

Miner: Well, I think, um, I think the best way to describe it is the 18th century, honestly. But he had things in his collection that, um, extended to, uh, much earlier and much later periods, so, um. Yeah.

Lubrano: And what happened to those things?

Miner: Well, most of them went at auction. Um, after he died, the University purchased his collection from the family.

Lubrano: Yeah, Okay. All right.

Miner: And I recall you and I—I don't think you and I ever spoke, but you and I corresponded because you were looking for specific things and I was creating a sort of database of things I was seeing and so I went and found something that we then shipped off to you.

Lubrano: You're right, okay. I can't remember any of that.

Miner: So it was much wider than music, but one of the things that I'm trying to, to do in my project is, is, um, understand how he connected with people through all of these interests. If there's even a way to say that. I'm not really certain myself. But there are a lot of stories that are floating around.

Lubrano: Right, right. He seemed to be well aware of the world of the antiquarian collecting—book-collecting world. And, um, I don't know whether he went to any, um, book shows. I believe he did. And I don't know who else he dealt with. Though I'm pretty sure he was known and dealt with other dealers, obviously. In other fields. I don't know about music but certainly in other fields. But he seemed to be quite acquainted with the whole antiquarian book world. So, um, it's not so different from collectors who are sort of passionate about what they collect. Um. They, uh, they have certain areas that they collect in. They find the dealers that deal in the materials that they're interested in. And over a period of years they build up relationships both collectors—with dealers and other collectors. I don't know what sort of relationships he had, if he had any for that matter with other collectors but I wouldn't be surprised if he did. Certainly acquaintances. So yeah, I don't know. I think that, you know, when he was traveling and certainly I remember him talking about being in England and visiting dealers there. So he was pretty much the typical book collector, I think.

Miner: That's great. Yeah. And I'm just trying to get a handle on that exact sort of thing. Did he ever talk to you about a purpose for building the library that he had, or is that not something that you would really go into with?

Lubrano: Well, I think that the thing that came to my mind is some sort of—a lot of his things—he wasn't terribly concerned about condition. Uh. And even in many cases whether things were complete. He just wanted to have a, a mass. A mass of materials that fitted into a certain period and I guess to a large extent a certain genre. And now that I'm thinking about instrumental music. As far as we're concerned. As far as our dealings with him are concerned. Um. And that, they were sort of, uh, the driving force. I know he'd say to me that, well, I'd rather have, um, you know, ten or twenty pieces by a single composer even if they're not complete or even if they're in poor condition, but demonstrated to me this particular composer's works and the printing and the history of the publishing rather than one very fine copy of something. That's not what I'm really trying to do here. I think amassing the quantity and then looking at the whole by virtue of the, the many, many examples was something that was of particular interest to him.

Miner: Hm. That's great. That's—that comes nearer to describing why he came up with the range of materials that I think I found yet. Wow. That's great. Did he ever talk to you about libraries? I know you said you were involved with the music library association. Did he ever talk to you about their role in having or exhibiting these kinds of works?

Lubrano: Not that I recall. I mean, we very well may have spoken along those lines, but I can't remember specifically any conversations that we had.

Miner: Um. So let's see. You weren't aware that we auctioned his collection. But I'm also sort of interested in what people think who knew of him as a collector what he thought of that decision that our school made not to keep his library in tact.

Lubrano: Um. Well, I, I think he's pretty practical. I don't know if he had any—I mean, I'm assuming that—you purchased the collection, right? It wasn't a donation.

Miner: Right.

Lubrano: Right. Well, and you purchased it through the family. You didn't purchase it from him while he was alive, obviously. I think, if anything, and again I'm guessing. This is just a guess. I don't have any factual to back this up except my impressions, but I think he would have liked the idea of his collection meaning something to some institution in some way as representing his particular collecting interests. Now, I also imagine—I mean, he seemed like a fairly practical guy also, that the way the world is, these things get broken up for some reason for another or it doesn't make sense for them to be together. So if one part was sold off, or if one individual part was sold off that's just what happens. I don't think he would be terribly upset at all about that. He may not be upset at all about that. I really don't know. I think in terms of the music, the problem with the music—it's not a problem—in his mind it wasn't a probably. In my mind it was a problem I suppose where things were things were incomplete. Let's say—some of things in his collection were very rare. He had some Vivaldi first and early editions. I mean, Vivaldi is very rare. And he had—but they're missing one or two voices or instrumental parts.

Miner: Hm.

Lubrano: I've seen these things sell just the way they are. Individual voices sell just by themselves. Individual parts. But ideally for me as a dealer and obviously for most collectors they would be very disappointed that the other parts aren't there but it didn't seem to worry him so much. He just wanted to have the idea of having some Vivaldi in his collection. It was very exciting to him. And, you know, there are very few people who are collectors who have any Vivaldi at all. But he managed to get some. Now, he wouldn't have paid, you know, the ten or twenty thousand dollars it would have cost even then to buy a set, a complete set, but he found somebody or the other who—in fact, I'm pretty sure I know where he got them from—as an incomplete part and that they're willing to sell at a pretty good price for him. You know, and that would have made it affordable. He didn't tend to buy—for us at least, expensive things. Things that were mostly in the hundreds of dollars of things. He may have bought more than that occasionally but it would have been fairly, relatively inexpensive. And I think he would have thought that he was getting a great deal on 18th century material. And some of it very rare.

Miner: Yeah. Yeah. Well, and it's interesting—the piece about cost and auctions together I think is an interesting aspect of this because I was told that you don't have any knowledge of this yourself, but that he purchased in lots at auctions so there seemed to be some sort of synergy or appropriateness, I guess, in selling his collection at auction for good prices as he would have said.

Lubrano: Yeah, yeah. And that would go along exactly in my mind as to what—his reasoning. Because if he could buy a lot, you know, an assemblage of a box lot or whatever it was and there was sufficient quantity there that he would pick up some goodies there that people didn't see or just because it was so much. That, in my mind, would have some attraction to him.

Miner: That's great.

Lubrano: And provided it was material that he would be interested in, of course, you know.

Miner: Right. And I've often wondered if that was how he got some of the sort of outliers of his collection too.

Lubrano: Yeah. You're probably right. And, in fact, we may have even bought some lots of him like that. You know, we represent—over the years—we don't do it much these days, but we represented a lot of individuals and institutions at auctions and we bid on their behalf and he may have asked us to bid for him on a number of things. I really just don't remember. It's too long ago.

Miner: Oh, that's interesting. I hadn't thought about that. Huh. Your sense of him as a collection. And I don't even know if this is the right way to phrase this question, but I mean, you had a front door sea, or a front row seat to a lot of different types of collectors. Is there a way you could—that you categorize--?

Lubrano: Yeah. I would call him an academic collector.

Miner: Okay. Well, that wasn't hard at all.

Lubrano: Selecting very much from the point of view of content not collecting it for individuals prizes or he's not a boutique collector or a collector who wants to, you know, have something very flashy to show

off in front of his contemporaries or anything like that. I think he wanted these things for, collect these things for the, uh, the potential. The intellectual content. In whatever regard that made him interested in it.

Miner: Gosh, that's a great summing up, there. Is there anything else I should know about him from your perspective?

Lubrano: I think I mentioned in my email to you that I always remembered him being, um, so enthusiastic. One time when he told us about Dawn Upshaw performing. I don't know if he said he found her, but he came all—he really was excited about this young singer who wasn't well known. Who was going to be performing at the University and I think he had a lot with this. Do you know about this?

Miner: I do.

Lubrano: Okay. Well, I don't know if my, my memory or my interpretation is correct, but he was very excited about it and he was bang on. I mean, talk about—she'd become—she obviously became a big name.

Miner: She did, yeah. Yeah, she's a Wesleyan alum. So that may have been another reason.

Lubrano: Oh, is she? Was she still actually there when this happened? When she gave the performance?

Miner: No. She, but she—well, I don't know which performance you were talking about, but she graduated in the early '80s.

Lubrano: So it may have been four or five years later, then. Probably was in the '80s that he was—but I remember that.

Miner: Did he send you a CD?

Lubrano: Yes, he did. He did send us a CD. That's right.

Miner: I've heard other people say he did that too.

Lubrano: Yeah, no, and I can only say he was a gentleman. It wasn't all business around him. It was a pleasure to talk with him. We would chat on the phone. It wasn't all business. I don't even know if I met him in the flesh, to be honest.

Miner: Oh really?

Lubrano: Maybe once or twice at a meeting or something. At one of these library meetings or something like that. Or a scholarly meeting when I used to go to those but I can't see him in my mind, so if I did meet him, I probably only met him once.

Miner: Interesting.

Lubrano: But this is not unusual. We have customers that we—we started in '77. So forty years. We have people that we've been dealing with and got to know quite well but we've never gotten to know him face to face. So obviously the mail and more recently email. The phone. This way and that way. But it's funny the sorts of relationships you have with people long distance.

Miner: Boy, I'll say.

Lubrano: But when—and it's so personal about what they collect. Well, some of them are. And you do develop a certain—there's a certain relationship between the dealer and collector. When you hit it off with a collector and you're talking the same language. Even though it's customer and supply. But you do often develop something of a rapport and a relationship. It's really pleasant. And he was just one of those guys who was pleasant and a pleasure to talk to.

Miner: Well, fantastic. Are there other people you think I should be talking to about this that you might have known in common?

Lubrano: They're all dead.

Miner: Oh, dear, okay.

Lubrano: Yeah, the other dealer I know. I know he dealt with Avi Rosenthal. In England. Very occasionally, but he did. And I know he dealt with—Avid died, I don't know, six, seven years ago. And he also dealt with—what's his name? Reeves. William Reeves. And he's long gone. And probably a couple of others and they're either retired or they're no longer around. And that would be scarcely if he did, English dealers but I don't know about anybody else in this country. I mean, I'm sure there are, but they there aren't any other music dealers anymore. Um. So I can't, I don't even know who that would be. But in other fields you might find other people who knew him, but I don't know what else specifically he collected, so. But if it's economics of British history there would have been other dealers that he would have known.

Miner: Sure. I'm just collecting referrals from everybody.

Lubrano: I don't know who else at all. I certainly don't remember speaking to other dealers about him at all. No reason to.

Miner: Well, is there anything else you can think of to add?

Lubrano: Oh, gosh. I presume you've spoken to his wife.

Miner: I'm actually hoping to meet her in person within the next month, so.

Lubrano: Yeah, she was a very nice lady. We only met her, of course, after he passed away. She moved to Rhode Island and we went up to see her. I guess, and that's how come we bought the collection because we bought the collection from her.

Miner: So you actually traveled there?

Lubrano: Yeah, well, Rhode Island. Well, we had actually just come to New York and that was fifteen years ago when we bought the collection. So I'd say we knew him for the previous fifteen years. In any case, um, what was I going to say...no, can't think of anything else about him at all. Or relative to, uh...not really. I think that's pretty much covered as far as I know.

Miner: Well, I really appreciate your time out of your day for this. And if you think of anything else I'd be delighted to hear it.

Lubrano: Of course, I'd be happy to.

Miner: That's great. Okay. Well, thanks. I'm sure there aren't any uncrazy times of the year. Sounds like it was a particularly busy one. Thank you so much for your time.

Lubrano: You're very welcome, Meg. Best of luck on the project.

Miner: Safe travels.

Lubrano: Thanks, you too.

END TRANSCRIPT