



Cartwright's passion isn't just a collection; it's a wall-to-wall history of recorded music.

## A CHAMBER OF MUSIC

*Jim Cartwright of Austin owns 25,000 classical records. Then there are the ones for sale.*

**W**ithout a good set of directions it is easy to get lost in this quaint old neighborhood on the west side of Austin. The arched and gabled brick bungalows have not all been discovered by the fashionable fix-up set, so some of the lawns are shaggy and the houses look their age. When you finally find the address you are searching for, 1404 W. 30th Street, it's a cottage out of one of the more realistic German fairy tales. The door is painted green. On it a small brass plate reads, "Immortal Performances, Classical Records, Bought/Sold."

Jim Cartwright, a tall, scruffily bearded man who is a little shy, is the guardian of the house's secrets. For those enchanted by record collecting, there is unimaginable treasure in every cranny. There is also clutter—boxes of records on the floor, stacks of catalog pages to be assembled. "Don't set anything down," warns Cartwright. "The house swallows things." With a bit of coaxing he will show you around before he takes you out to the garage, where he keeps the rest of the records—the ones that are for sale.

An ancient talking machine sits across from the door of the living room; when Cartwright goes on a picnic, he takes it along and plays old records by Arthur Pryor, John Philip Sousa's assistant bandleader. A pair of superb Dahlquist speakers with black grille cloths are the only visible components of his modern stereo rig. They flank an egg-shaped white lamp that illuminates a battered oil portrait of Cartwright's mother, which leans on the mantel. Scores by Chopin litter the Steinway baby grand.

A crowded hallway to the right leads to an alcove hiding stacks of elaborate stereo equipment—tape recorders and turntables, an equalizer, pre-amps and amplifiers, and a Packburn Noise Suppressor (designed to cut out ticks and pops on old records). Across the hall is the sanctum sanctorum, a library that holds Cartwright's private record collection.

As a longtime collector of classical records, I learned years ago never to trust a dealer who isn't a collector himself. By this criterion Cartwright is eminently trustworthy. Though there is no way of knowing exactly (who would have the pa-

tience to count?), he estimates that he has 25,000 records. Of these, only a third are LPs. Most are 78's, the recorded legacy of the legendary performers of the early years of this century—thus the name of his business. His collection, organized by category (vocal, orchestral, piano, violin) and by artist, contains the bulk of the output on 78's from all the famous classical musicians.

In the midst of everything else sits one of Cartwright's four Edison cylinder machines, devices that play "records" about the size and shape of the cardboard core of a roll of bathroom tissue. Some of these odd records are durable cylinders of celluloid over a plaster of paris core; others are wax, which deteriorates with use and can be broken into pieces that write like crayons. The wax cylinders can be shaved down, and then new material can be recorded on the smoothed surfaces. If a visitor shows a hint of interest, Cartwright will put something substantial—perhaps an antique cylinder of the great Italian baritone Antonio Scotti, recorded circa 1906—on his 1910 Edison Amberola A, which has its horn built into

the cabinet. Scotti sings the tiny aria from Verdi's *Falstaff* three times through on the one recording. Nobody sings it with such elegance today, and therein lies the reason for Cartwright's ardor.

His collection includes some real rarities, such as an aluminum 78 disc by Kirsten Flagstad that was recorded from a radio broadcast and a 1931 Victor LP—direct to disc, yet—of Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra in Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. But rarity is not nearly so important to Cartwright as is an outstanding performance. One of his favorite records is a 1919 "Ah, fors'è lui" (from Verdi's *La Traviata*) by Amelita Galli-Curci. Another of his treasures is an early Wagner recording that he discovered when he bought most of a Florida dealer's collection; on the way home he stopped and took the record out just to admire it.

Cartwright was born into a very old Texas family in Terrell 39 years ago. After growing up in Beaumont, he studied music at North Texas State University, but he got his degree in business administration. Later, after a hitch in Viet Nam, he started selling records on a small scale out of his house in Austin. In 1972 he adopted the name "Immortal Performances" and added a mail-order business.

Since then his garage has become an obstacle course of unsorted records. He goes through them one by one, checking for scratches and marking prices. He buys discs for 75 cents to \$1.50 apiece and sells them for \$2 to \$4.50, if they are in good shape, and for much less if they are damaged.

Several times a year he sends out a catalog of more than a hundred pages, listing more than two thousand items. The catalogs go to about two thousand customers, some as far away as England, Australia, and Japan. Only about a fifth of them go to addresses in Texas. The catalog's cover bears a picture of pianist Ignace Jan Paderewski framed by an art nouveau drawing of keyboards and lilies and discs. Within are extensive listings of private recordings (reproductions of rare 78's or concerts surreptitiously taped from radio broadcasts or live performances), used LPs at bargain prices, and items for auction. The auction records require interested parties to submit bids starting at \$2 for 78's and \$5 or \$10 for LPs. Cartwright waits for a reasonable period of time—refusing to sell even to a high roller who walks in off the street, so as not to lose his credibility—then sends the records out to the highest bidders.

Interspersed with the lists are record reviews by a Houston friend, Michael Leone, comparing performances by divas like Renata Tebaldi and Maria Callas, for example, and discographies compiled by Cartwright himself. A recent catalog had his ninth discography, that of violinist

Maud Powell, who was the first woman, as well as the first American, to achieve fame on the instrument. Cartwright generally does research for his discographies at the RCA archives in New York. The devotion that goes into putting together such lists and the friendly chattiness of Leone's reviews make the catalogs a substitute for the rapidly vanishing connoisseur's record shop, the sort of place that is part shrine and part salon, where people can go to talk about music and argue about performances.

Cartwright warehouses his retail stock of about 25,000 records in his garage. Only a fraction of them are available for browsing. Above the bins that contain the large selection of private recordings are autographed photos of some of Cartwright's heroes and heroines: the great Wagnerian singers Lauritz Melchior and Lotte Lehmann, the Italian tenor Giovanni Martinelli. Lily Pons, the coloratura soprano who lived in Dallas in her later years, stares down, dressed in the bare-midriffed costume she wore as Lakmé. Cartwright got to know Pons when he was studying at NTSU, and she gave him tickets to the concert she sang in New York when she was 74.

The private recordings are the only new, unplayed albums that Cartwright sells, and he offers them at prices considerably lower than those at the few other Texas stores that carry them. The ones he most often recommends to new customers are the famous Salzburg performance of Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, conducted by Cartwright's favorite maestro, Wilhelm Furtwängler, and starring Kirsten Flagstad; a 1925 version of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* conducted by Felix Weingartner; and Brahms' Symphony No. 2 led by American Walter Damrosch ("I had heard he was so bad, but this performance has so many nice details, I've fallen in love with it"). Cartwright must be circumspect in expressing his opinions, since his customers are often fervent partisans of one artist or another.

For some collectors, variety in the repertoire is more important than having the same aria sung by ten or twenty different sopranos (or the same soprano on ten or twenty different recordings). Such collectors shy away from places like Immortal Performances, except for an occasional visit to satisfy their curiosity. But there are trends in the record business that may make them look again. If the digital compact discs that are coming out this year usurp the LP market the way the LP did the 78 market, much of the music available on LPs will vanish from catalogs of new recordings. Already, deletions by the major companies are decimating available performances month by month. It may be years before many of those works turn up in the new medium—if they ever do. In the meantime, for those to whom music is important, second-hand recordings may become precious indeed.