



manuel berberian
revives *music* in the gables

by Larry Luxner

born in Greece of Armenian heritage, raised in Argentina and educated in Canada, Manuel Berberian is a walking United Nations of international business experience.

He spent most of his professional career in Puerto Rico as an executive with Coleman, the camping-supplies manufacturer. But recently, Berberian, 61, decided to parlay his lifelong interest in violins and music into a full-fledged enterprise.

"For the past 30 years, I've been collecting violins," he said. "In May 2002, I bought Allegro Music Center and turned my hobby into a business."

Allegro, in existence for over 40 years, has changed locations various times. Most recently it was located on Bird Road, but Berberian and his Armenian wife Marina brought it back to the Gables, where it currently occupies a 3,000-square-foot building at 4357 Ponce de Leon Boulevard, a few blocks from the new Village of Merrick Park retail complex.

Allegro boasts the largest collection of sheet music in South Florida, with over 21,000 titles. Many of these are for piano, followed by guitar and string instruments. The store is filled with music books that

teach students how to play everything from Bach to Beatles; there's also a large selection of Latin American salsa, bolero, tango and mambo.

Yet sheet music now consists of around 70% of Allegro's business, down from 95% when Berberian took it over. That's because he's now selling more string instruments—mainly violins—than his predecessors did.

"When the megastores came to Miami, they shrank the operation because they couldn't compete any longer," he said, noting that Allegro's biggest competitor is the New York-based Sam Ash chain, which has 30 outlets around the country, including megastores at Miami's Dolphin Mall, Miami Lakes and Margate.

Sam Ash also started out with one small music store in Brooklyn. But Berberian, whose office in the very back of the shop is cluttered with violins, musical-instrument parts and paperwork, says he doesn't dream of building a music-store empire.

"My customer base consists of teachers, students and musicians. Just about every student, musician or

teacher at one point or another has been to this store," he told Gables.

The store has four part-time employees plus Berberian's wife, Marina, whom he met during a vacation in Armenia 12 years ago. Marina, a classical pianist, also works as a music professor at the Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart in Coconut Grove. Berberian said she is an "integral" part of the operation.

In 2002, Allegro had less than \$300,000 in revenues; in 2003, sales were "just shy" of \$500,000, he said. "I was in international business for 28 years and I negotiate very hard with my suppliers and pass the savings on to my customers."

The Greek-born businessman is fond of quoting Aristotle, who more than 2,000 years ago wrote that "music has the power of producing a certain effect on the moral character of the soul, and if it has the power to do this, it is clear that the young must be directed to music and must be educated in it."

Berberian should know. As a child growing up in Buenos Aires, he was exposed to many kinds of music, including the tango.

"I started playing the violin when I was 5. My father was very religious. The only thing he wanted me to play was church music. By the time I was 9, I could play all the church music, inside and out," he recalled. "I wanted to be a musician, but my parents never encouraged me to play. I came from a poor family; my first and second violins were given to me. So I used to find teachers who would teach me for free. After I moved to Canada, I played five years in a semi-professional orchestra in Windsor, Ontario."

Berberian, who speaks Armenian, Turkish and Greek in addition to Spanish and English, not only plays violins but has been collecting them since the early 1970s. He now has nearly 80 violins in his collection, including a Nicolas Lupot worth around \$100,000.

"Except for my violin, the Lupot, the rest is for sale," he said, clutching a Canadian-made copy of a Guarnerius that's about 22 years old and is valued at around \$10,000. "I'm gonna bleed inside when I sell this one."

Berberian also knows quite a lot

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