

Michael D. Richter

October 21, 2013

Michael D. Richter, who died today in Glenview, Illinois following a brief illness, gained international recognition in two unrelated fields in his 74 year lifetime: computer applications in space technology, and the preservation of opera recordings.

With only a Bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Chicago as academic training, in 1969 he was one of 100 civilian recipients of the Presidential Medal recognizing "those who made Apollo fly", for his work at M.I.T. Labs in designing micro-computer applications in the Apollo guidance systems, largely done before the first micro-computers had been built. After a brief stop at Commodore Corporation, where he designed proprietary software including the first letter-merging program and the first practical word processor for the Commodore 64 (the first widely marketed home computer), he moved on to the TRW Corporation's aerospace division in Los Angeles, where his work included theoretical computer applications that later became known as digital photography – which began when he used his own Commodore computer to correct over-exposed photos he had taken as a semi-professional photographer.

After a viral infection of the heart forced him to take permanent disability while still in his 40's, Mike began what he called his "second life", immersing himself the world of opera. Having been active on the internet since its inception as a link between the handful of universities and labs working on Apollo, he established "Opera-L", which soon became the second most active web site for opera enthusiasts – second only to the site sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera. He soon established a second web site as a means of information exchange between the most knowledgeable opera supporters, performers and behind the scenes professionals. Already well on the way to accumulating what would become one of the largest privately-held opera recording collections in the world, in the 1980s, Mike turned his computer skills to the preservation of opera recordings. Mike's computer enhanced Edison cylinders, otherwise unrecorded live performances made during World War II for servicemen in isolated posts onto CD's, and rare vintage recordings to clarify the sound to a level better than the original. As rights to these obscure and often illicit recordings could never be obtained, he then distributed a handful of copies at cost to a few serious collectors, with copies available to the public at the Library of Congress, The University of Pittsburg and at music evenings he often hosted at his home in Los Angeles. Although he never claimed the credit, more than one member of the opera community believes that his transcription of a secret wire recording of a class taught in the 1950s at the Met by Maria Callas was the inspiration for the Tony Award winning musical "The Master Class".

A heart attack in 2009 forced Mike to give up these activities, transfer his opera recordings to a distributor who is still in the process of cataloging and transcribing them for public release, and relocate to Glenview, to be near his brother's family in Deerfield and Highland Park. Over the last four years, while a resident at the Seasons of Brookdale, he has conducted both opera evenings and a weekly movie night for residents, even though his voice had been reduced in the last year to little more than a whisper. Just before his death, arrangements were made that his last collection of commercially available opera videos and recordings – numbering about 200 titles – will be put in circulation at the Northbrook Public Library.

No services will be held.