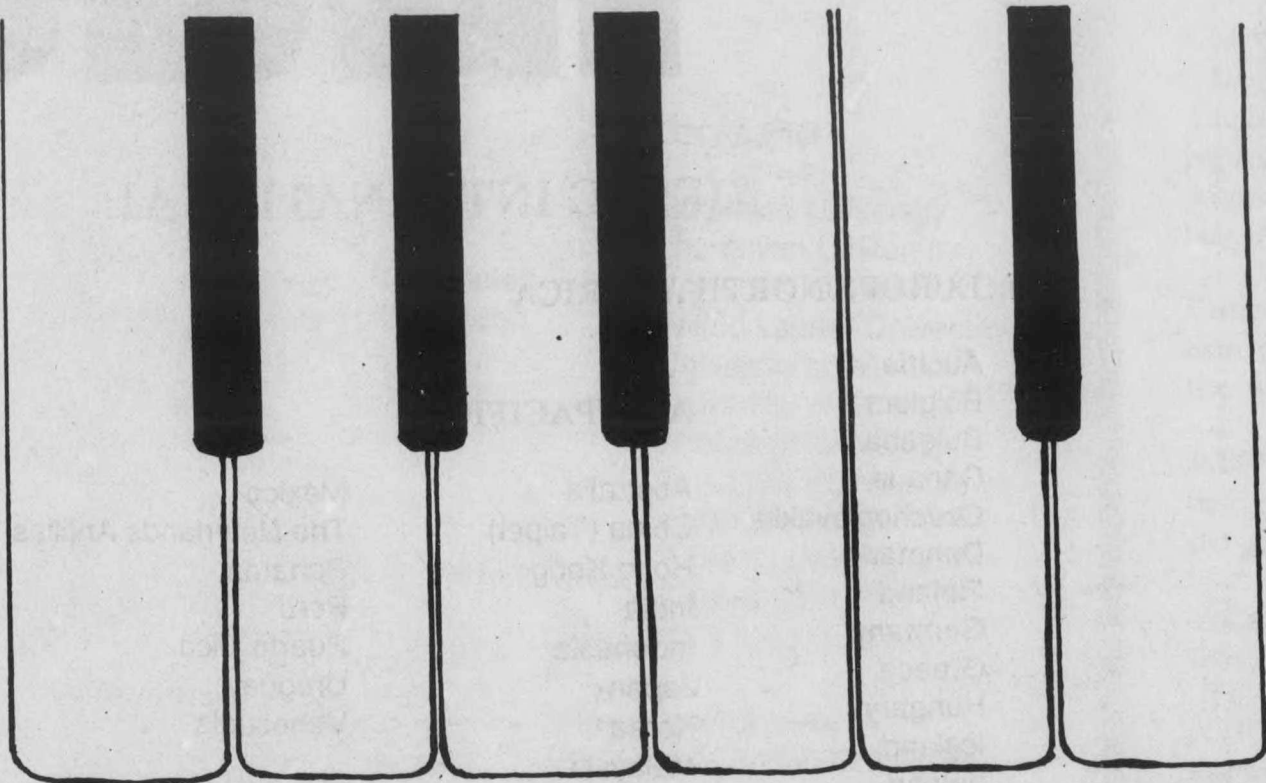


Get Classical

Piano Week at UNB...



by Paul Campbell

It looks like this week is "Piano Week" at UNB. There are three concerts on campus this week, and the piano is at least prominent in all of them. In one, that of world renowned Jon Kimura Parker, the piano stands proud and alone. With all this piano-centered activity on campus I have decided to devote this column to the instrument, and to the people who play it.

When the Forte-piano, the fore-runner of our modern Piano-forte, or simply Piano, first appeared in the early years of the 18th century, I doubt that its inventor (Christophori? Pleyel?) could have had any idea of how much influence his invention would have on the music to be written in the next two centuries. He most certainly knew that this

instrument was an advance on the clavichords and harpsichords available to the keyboard player of his day, but due to early technical problems with the instrument, it was nearly a century before it was apparent just how much better the piano was. The clavichord never was popular as a concert instrument; its sound was too small, but it was relatively cheap to make, and it could be played very expressively. The key of the clavichord rested on a pivot point which permitted a certain amount of lateral movement, and the string was struck by the edge of a small brass plate. This brass "tangent" defined vibrating string length, and therefore pitch. By varying the force of the striking blow the volume of the note could be varied, and by wiggling the key sideways, the pitch could be changed, so it

was even possible to play with vibrato. Sounds great, but can you imagine just how out of tune and uneven that must have sounded from any but the most expert players? The harpsichord on the other hand had a fixed string length, so once tuned it played in tune, at least for an appreciable length of time. It made its sound by plucking the string each time a key was depressed, giving a slightly twangy, tinkly sound. Since most harpsichords had at least two sets of strings, and it was possible to couple together the pluckers (plectrum) of different sets, volume could be varied quite a bit from the weakest (lute) stop of "all stops out" on a large concert instrument, which often had pedals like an organ as well as several keyboards, one above the other.

The advantage of the piano

was that it used a felt-covered "hammer", which was thrown at the string (of fixed length), but once having struck the string, rested far enough away not to impede its vibration. When the finger was removed from the key, a damper would prevent further vibration of the string, but the dampers could be lifted independently by a pedal, permitting notes to ring as long as the pedal was down. In short, pretty much our modern idea of a piano. But it was an idea beset with problems. We expect the action of a modern piano to be even, so that using the same touch on each note from bottom to top will give a uniform progression of sound. Early pianos were far from even, with some notes sticking out and others having different sound colours. To get notes to repeat fast enough was a big problem (and sometimes still is), and to get notes to play reliably when played softly was another. Perhaps it was these problems of a teething technology that slowed the popular adoption of the piano; it took the sonatas of Mozart, and above all, of Beethoven, to establish the supremacy of the piano as the most influential keyboard instrument: the one in nearly every parlor, the one on which most compositions were composed for nearly two hundred years, and the most popular of all solo concert instruments.

One of these epoch-making Beethoven Sonatas will be the first work on the program given by Jon Kimura Parker next Sun. and Mon. evenings, Nov. 4 & 5, 8:00 p.m. at Mem. Hall. Other works will be by Schumann, Chopin, and the exciting young Canadian composer, Alexina Louie. Jon, of all our young Canadian pianist, has probably the best established international reputation. The winner of the prestigious Leeds Competition in 1984, he has performed with many major orchestras, and toured most parts of the world. Wherever he goes he generates excitement, not only

from the quality of his music making but from his warmth and likability. We are lucky to have Jon here for two evenings: if you can pry yourself free on one of them (particularly Mon; I understand your chances of getting a ticket are better that night), go. You really don't want to miss the chance to hear him.

The other pianist visiting the campus this week, Dr. Frances Gray (Fran to all), has had a distinguished career in her own right, and what's more is almost an 'old friend' status for many of our concert-goers. Fran has had an international career, with considerable performing in Europe as well as North America, and is now teaching piano at UPEI. Her concerts here last year won rave reviews, both verbally and in the paper, and we eagerly anticipate her return. She will join me in the second of my Wednesday Noon Hour Recital Series concerts, in a program of two violin-piano sonatas. The Brahms G major is a very internal work, sensitive and beautiful. The Copeland Sonata, written during the Second World War, is a surprisingly simple and open work, accessible to the first time listener, but growing with repeated exposure. Do come to welcome Fran back, and to enjoy some fine music making. Wednesday, Nov. 7, 12:30, Mem. Hall.

The third piano-prominent concert this week is, of course, that of the Duo Pach. Their visit to Bohemia will bring the pleasures of the Dvorak Sonata, and four pieces of violin by Joseph Suk. Today, Nov. 2, 12:30 at Mem Hall. Next Friday Connexions will visit Russia with a potpourri which includes the marvelous Prokofiev F minor Sonata. Try it, you will love it.

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