

Exploring Period Keyboard Instruments with Prof. Gilles Comeau

by Amy Boyes, Convenor

Have you ever wondered how long the harpsichord can sustain sound? If the clavichord has the capability of dynamic changes? How light the touch on a pianoforte feels? How a pianoforte knee pedal works? The answers to all these questions were answered at the Spring Workshop - Exploring Period Keyboard Instruments.

On Sunday, March 11, Prof. Gilles Comeau led a group of excited young students and ORMTA teachers through a workshop/master class using the University of Ottawa's collection of period keyboard instruments. On stage in Freiman Hall were two clavichords, a harpsichord and two pianofortes. Prof. Comeau explained the history, design, and mechanism of each instrument and which instruments were preferred by well-known composers. The Bach family, for example, were very fond of the quiet and gentle clavichord.

Students of ORMTA teachers performed repertoire from the baroque, classical and early romantic eras first on the modern grand piano and then, following Prof. Comeau's comments on rhythmic, voicing, and balance issues, on the period instruments. The students expressed surprised that the period instruments took hardly any effort to play in comparison to the modern grand piano.

Prof. Comeau commented that pedagogical writings from the 1700 and 1800s that encourage an active finger touch must be kept in context to the light key action of the instruments from that era. Students also noted that the harpsichord had the potential to sustain tones for much longer than they had anticipated and that the clavichord, albeit a quiet instrument, had the capability of slight dynamic variation. Also, the knee lever damper pedal on one of the pianofortes did not need to be cleared as one would clear the damper pedal on a modern grand piano. These features suggested interesting interpretations for the performance of baroque, classical and early romantic repertoire on the modern grand piano. Prof. Comeau encouraged all of the students to explore different articulations, touches, and dynamic levels to create interesting effects.

The session concluded with an exploration session when all of the students were able to try the instruments.

Many thanks to all the teachers whose students performed and attended, to the event volunteers, and to Dr. Comeau who enthusiastically shared his love for period keyboard instruments!



Dr. Comeau and Workshop participants



Checking out the pianoforte