

The ORBit

Official Opening of the Piano Pedagogy Research Laboratory

by Ann Empey

On October 14, I was thrilled and honored to have had the opportunity to attend the Official Opening of the first research laboratory in the world specializing in piano pedagogy at the University of Ottawa. This four-year project, headed by Dr. Gilles Comeau, was definitely an extraordinary undertaking and has opened the door to so many possibilities - I'm still overwhelmed by my experience.

After a wonderful opening ceremony, we were given the opportunity to explore the various rooms (spread over three floors) that are a part of this amazing facility in the Perez Building. On the first floor we entered a *Period Instrument Studio* that houses a forte-piano, two harpsichords, an organ, a clavichord and a butterfly piano! We were encouraged to try these fabulous instruments and were informed that a new clavichord and a harpsichord are currently being built that will also be part of the lab. On the third floor, our own John Hutchinson gave us a tour of the *Resource Centre*. This room is small but full of exciting music - old and new. Not everything is

catalogued yet, but it will be. Like kids in a candy store we continued our tour.

The second floor is where the hub of excitement is located. While in the *Conference Room*, we had the opportunity to talk live with Dr. Philip Donner in Finland. Through this alliance, Trans-Atlantic piano lessons will be conducted. Also, we witnessed a recording of a lesson taught by one of U of O's graduate students to a class of Inuit children in Northern Quebec. I also had the opportunity to don a fluorescent orange glove on my right hand and imitate piano playing on a keyboard. Through the application of thermal imaging, my movements were monitored and displayed on a computer screen - much like a plot graph. The *Multi-Media Centre* was full of recording equipment, cameras and various other high-tech equipment.

The best part of the day was our tour of Dr. Comeau's studio. The studio contains two 7'6" acoustic pianos with optical sensors and integrated MIDI operating systems. This allows immediate playback, with the instrument performing like a player piano so you could observe your performance! Video camera's and LCD screens gave an immediate visual representation. Specialized software collected and generated data to give teacher and student instant video replay!

After a lovely lunch we had the opportunity to attend a Symposium in Freiman Hall where we were fascinated by the work presented by various researchers involved in the project.

Not only did I have the opportunity to spend time with Dr. Comeau and other distinguished professors, researchers, ORMTA colleagues, dignitaries and business people, but I was also honoured to meet some of our famous and favorite Canadian Composers - Ann Southam, Mary Gardiner and Nancy Telfer. I felt very special being amongst such amazing and important people.

As this laboratory is of global importance, the only one of its kind in the world, located right here in our own backyard, I highly recommend that you go and visit this futuristic home of piano pedagogy.