

Basin man instrumental in tuning, trouble shooting and repairing N.S. pianos

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Ian Gillis, a piano technician, works on a piano at St. James Anglican Church in Halifax on Friday. (TIM KROCHAK / Staff)

When the sounds of Schumann's Traumerei emanate from a piano, it's a sign that Ian Gillis's work is done.

The registered piano technician from Chester Basin plays bits of the melody after he's completed a two- to three-hour home visit, which usually entails tuning and minor repairs.

The son of an Anglican minister, Gillis lived all around Nova Scotia while growing up. He graduated from Florida State University in Tallahassee with a master of piano technology in 2010.

He started playing piano at age 12 and went on to earn a degree in music and mathematics at Bishop's University in Quebec.

As a university music student, he spent about three hours a day practising, but soon realized that being a professional musician was pret tough as "there are a lot of extremely talented and underemployed musicians out there."

So after graduating, he went to McGill University to take a sound-recording program. He began working in the field as an audio-visual technician for corporate meetings. After about five years, he began exploring other options.

"I have a dual nature," he says. "I'd done some studies in math and some technical things with sound engineering, but I had an artistic side that I was not exercising so I thought about what would marry the two aspects."

He gravitated to working as a piano technician after wondering what actually took place after he touched the keys.

After completing the piano technology program at the University of Western Ontario in London, he headed to Florida State, which offers one of the only programs of its kind.

Through a friend, he met John Watson, conservator of musical instruments and mechanical arts at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, and was invited to do a post-graduate internship in the conservation of historical instruments in 2010.

In Williamsburg, he examined old instruments and determined what kind of treatment was required.

Some of the old instruments were very fragile and needed to be cleaned in a proper way so they could be put on display.

An old harpsichord was missing keys, so Gillis worked to remanufacture keys out of bone that would look like the original keys. Other instruments needed to be made playable, so he fixed broken strings and made other repairs.

Taken into consideration in every case was whether it was worthwhile to restore the instrument so it could be played.

He said Watson, who specializes in restorative conservation, is guided by the principle of having the least impact on an artifact. If too much intervention is required, it's best to leave it alone.

Gillis was asked to return to Williamsburg in the summers of 2011 and 2012 to create six models of actions for instruments from a 1700 spinet to a 1766 piano by John Zumpe, believed to be the earliest piano made in the English-speaking world and an 1831 Viennese action piano.

The models are part of Changing Keys: Keyboard Instruments for America, an exhibit featuring more than two dozen keyboard instruments from 1700 and 1831. The show lets visitors see the evolution of spinets, harpsichords and pianos. It opened Nov. 22, 2012, and is on until Sept. 7, 2014.

"The keyboard has been the same from 1766 to now, but the inside has evolved," Gillis explains of the task that he completed in August 2012.

"The action models illustrate six different kinds of mechanical actions. They all do the same thing, you play a key and the hammer hits a string and plays a note, but how it does it is different in each case."

The models of actions do not make sound; it requires a sound board to produce one. But the models, displayed behind Plexiglas, are interactive. Visitors can pull a lever to initiate the action.

In this way, the exhibit provides a hands-on experience without having to worry about wear and tear on the historic instruments.

Gillis is looking forward to returning to Williamsburg to see the display.

When that will happen will depend on his growing practice, which takes him from the South Shore, to the Annapolis Valley, Antigonish and Halifax Regional Municipality. "Most of the work is nuts and bolts tuning, trouble shooting and repairs for both private clients and institutions like schools and churches."

While he usually works on modern pianos, he mentions with delight working on a fortepiano at First Baptist Church in Halifax that was a reproduction of a Viennese action piano donated to Dalhousie University.

He recommends the average home piano be serviced a minimum of once a year and pianos used for concerts every couple of weeks.

It's a fact of life that pianos get out of tune, he says.

"A piano is largely made out of wood and the humidity level fluctuates. You can't stop a piano from going out of tune as the wood swells and shrinks. Pianos like constant humidity, near 45 per cent."

And while many people have pianos that have been in the family for years and for sentimental reasons want to have them restored, in most cases it's usually cheaper to get a new piano. The exceptions would be Heintzman and Mason and Risch pianos and grand pianos.

To reach Gillis, visit pianoservice.ca (<http://pianoservice.ca>).

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