

Tafelmusik

THE PLEYEL PIANO

by Marcel Lapointe

The **1848 Pleyel piano** that Janina Fialkowksa is playing this week was restored by the Quebec City-based husband-and-wife team of **Marcel Lapointe** and **Isabelle Gagnon**. Marcel has travelled to Toronto with the piano, tuning and maintaining the instrument for the rehearsals and concerts, and offers a description of the instrument and the restoration process below.



The Pleyel piano you see on stage this week is the same model as that used by Chopin when he gave his last concert at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in 1848, one of very few to survive. The instrument sat abandoned in the basement of a small "*hotel particulier*" in Paris for over 100 years. When I first saw it, it was about to be destroyed – it was in such poor condition that it would need to be completely rebuilt in order for it to be playable.

My wife and I are both members of the Piano Technicians Guild, and it so happened that, in 1998, the Guild President proposed that each member plan a personal project for the year 2000, in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the birth of the piano. We chose our project –

to give new life to this abandoned 1848 Pleyel!

The biggest problem with the piano was the pinblock, which had literally exploded. It was made from a species of wood that was not strong enough to hold the string tension. After much thinking, we decided to replicate the pinblock using sugar maple from Quebec. The new five-ply pinblock was made specially for us by Piano Bolduc in the Beauce region. Installing the new block was very challenging: in pianos from this time the pinblock was built right into the structure, with the front rim of the piano and any decorative veneers glued over it. We therefore had to “unbuild” the front of the piano with a wood chisel. You can imagine the rest ...

Once the new pinblock was completed, we installed new strings supplied by historic specialist Malcolm Rose in England, made from the same sort of soft iron used in the 1840s. The bass strings were supplied by special order from Arledge in Tennessee. Finally we installed new hammers – exact replicas from Fugère in Paris.

The pianos from this era are very different from the modern piano. The sound is not as loud, the action lighter, and the keys smaller. The octave span is narrower, and the key dip is eight mm, compared to ten mm on a modern piano. The biggest difference is the tone colour. On a modern piano the sound tends to be homogeneous, but on a Pleyel you have three distinct sections with distinctive tones, giving the pianist many different colours with which to work.

In this Chopin anniversary year, we wanted to do something special. Our piano has travelled only three times this year: for Jean Saulnier at Orford, for Ronald Brautigam at Lanaudière, and this week for Janina at Tafelmusik.