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Perfect harmony

Many years after she gave up practicing piano scales for a love of the outdoors, Elizabeth Swallow bravely called professor Eric Ruple and asked for lessons. Swallow, a retired Harrisonburg physician, will protest that she never made beautiful music during those piano lessons. But what happened next could certainly be described as perfect harmony -- which comes about when a donor sees a need at the university and has the desire and vision to make a difference. School of Music Director Jeffrey Showell says this performance "will help people realize what's been true for some time -- that JMU has an extraordinary School of Music."

The million-dollar idea

"I called Eric because I had listened to him play for years, and why not the best?" Swallow, who lives near campus, would often walk to concerts given by the School of Music. When friends gave her an antique piano, she was compelled to return to the keyboard.

Every couple of weeks, Swallow would sit at Ruple's piano and play the notes she had practiced again and again. "If I didn't practice enough, I'd distract him with questions about the school," Swallow says. In turn, Ruple shared the news and events of JMU's School of Music. After hearing of the difficulties of recruiting students to play oboe and bassoon, Swallow made a gift to create the Double Reed Scholarship.

Ruple introduced Swallow to the school's director, Jeffrey Showell, who told her about his dream of JMU's becoming an All-Steinway School, a designation held by only 50 colleges and universities in the world. Swallow soon made the decision to anonymously donate \$1 million to elevate the school to All-Steinway status. The gift, along with the Steinways already at JMU, means the school would have more than 100 of the elite instruments.

The faculty brought home 12 new handmade pianos from the Steinway and Sons Factory in New York for a special "purple carpet" welcome, and more will be purchased once the new Performing Arts Center is complete.

Ruple says Steinways really do make a difference. "There are really good pianos of other brands, but in my opinion -- and most pianists would agree with this -- you can be more emotionally connected to the sound than with any other piano."

One-of-a-kind

Energized by the piano purchases and contact with Steinway officials, Swallow envisioned other projects. Running each morning through campus, she became convinced that she had an idea that must be given life -- a one-of-a-kind Steinway Art Case painted with an ethereal, timeless view of JMU's Quad.

Swallow is devoted to JMU and the Harrisonburg community, where she lived and practiced until her recent retirement. She says she enjoys the mountains and how they beautifully frame the campus. "That's what we tried to do ... to capture the emotion, the timelessness, the good feelings and serenity" of JMU, she says.

She chose local artist Mia LaBerge ('92), who was hesitant about the project at first. Not only had she never done architectural drawings, she certainly had never painted a piano. A painter whose preference is oils, LaBerge had to experiment with faster-drying alkyd oils. She began work on a practice piano located in the School of Music.

LaBerge, who had spent a number of years teaching art in schools, had left education to devote herself to her fine art full time. "I wasn't even sure I would even be able to do [the art case project] at all. Something that really surprised me was



Elizabeth Swallow and Eric Ruple with her creation at Steinway Hall in New York City.

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how much I grew into the project itself and how well I was able to sit with it," she says. "The project has really been life-changing for me. It's been a transformation from a struggling artist not knowing if things are going to work out to things working out."

Jonathan Luster did the lettering above the keyboard. The Bluestone inlays on the legs of the piano, identical to the Bluestone used on the buildings of the JMU Quad, were cut with a water jet by Steve Brydgc of Brydgc Works from stone donated by the Frazier Quarry of Harrisonburg.

Limited edition

As JMU prepared to unveil its [Centennial Art Case Steinway](#), Swallow had still more in mind. Why not sell other pianos to raise money for the School of Music? She conceived of selling 100 limited edition Steinways -- in all shapes and sizes -- with a painting by Mia LaBerge on the piano's music stand to raise money for School of Music scholarships. The limited edition pianos -- one for each year of JMU's history -- constitute the first limited edition Steinway series to commemorate an All-Steinway School of Music. Swallow has agreed to match gifts by Steinway purchasers to the school's scholarship funds up to a total of \$100,000.

To promote the art case and the limited edition Steinways, Swallow knew she could no longer be an anonymous donor. "I'm much better being quiet, but this is something that I've made my peace with to help raise money for the music school and the Performing Arts Center. I'm part of the story, and I can help," she says.

The limited edition pianos are signed and numbered and include JMU and the centennial's seal. Andy Perrine, associate vice president for communications and marketing, says there have already been inquiries about purchasing limited edition pianos with certain graduation years.

The art case Steinway premiered at the Kennedy Center in April, then traveled to Steinway Hall in New York for a performance by Ruple, who also is a Steinway artist. The piano will be on tour and be a central part of the university's centennial celebration, Perrine says. When the centennial year is finished, the piano will be sold, and the proceeds will go to the School of Music.

"It's just really important to have the best equipment and training materials for students and performance media for faculty," Swallow says. "It attracts better students and makes it easier to recruit good faculty members."



Mia LaBerge ('92) painted the art case.



The Wedgwood-colored Madison Bluestone Steinway Art Case with its views of Wilson Hall and the buildings on the Quad made an appearance on the Quad for a performance by professors Carrie Stevens and Eric Ruple during the opening faculty/staff meeting of the fall 2007 semester.