Musical fleet sails in

The College’s aging armada of ivories is replaced with a polished new fleet of Kawai pianos

by Ron Hamilton
Inside Instructor Ashley Hawkins’ Class Piano lab, college students bounce excitedly in their seats like kindergarteners. As Hawkins explains the features of the new Kawai electronic keyboards that sit in front of each of her pupils, comments like, “Wow,” and, “This is great,” are the commentary of the day as the young men and women learn the capabilities of their instruments.

The Music Department’s new piano lab is just one of the benefits the College gained since it became a Kawai EPIC partner. EPIC, which stands for “elite performing instrument collection,” is also a good word to describe the effect the new partnership is expected to have on the school’s music program, according to Music Department Chair Dr. Toni Anderson.

“Educationally, the impact is off the chart,” Dr. Anderson says.

Thanks to a $296,565 grant from Callaway Foundation, Inc., the College took ownership of 34 new Kawai pianos in September.

“Before, we had an insufficient number of pianos, and many of them were so old they were no longer effective instruments for our students,” Dr. Anderson says of the school’s prior fleet of 11 upright and grand pianos, which carried an average age of 62 years old.

“All our music students use pianos, whether they’re composition students or vocalists,” Dr. Anderson says, “and there just were not enough quality pianos to fill our needs. So in a way, we were handicapped.

“With the arrival of our new Kawai, the image of our department has gone up a hundred notches because people will come in and see this new fleet as a sign of the commitment the institution has to excellent music instruction.”

An array of instruments

The new pianos that were shipped this fall include two Shigeru grands, seven baby grands, 11 uprights, 13 electronic keyboards, and perhaps the finest instrument ever seen on the Hill, the Shigeru EX nine-foot concert grand.

“The Shigeru EX is an instrument that positions us to realize our goal of being a premier program,” Dr. Anderson says.

According to Kawai, the Shigeru EX takes 18 months to build and features soundboard wood that is air-dried for 15 years before it’s ready for installation. Each component is hand-refined by Kawai’s highest level artisans, using the finest materials.

Only 38 Shigeru EX pianos have been built by Kawai over the years, and now the College owns just the second one in Georgia.

“The Shigeru EX has a well-established reputation in the elite music world,” Dr. Anderson says. She points out that the College’s instrument will be used only during special concerts and that it will be stored in a climate-controlled room in the back of Callaway Auditorium when not in use.

Freshman Miho Tokuda was one of the first to have the opportunity to try out the new Shigeru EX.

“When I played that piano, it was like a dream,” she says. “It’s the best of the best. I was very impressed.”

LaGrange Piano Instructor George Mann, a noted pianist who performed during an Oct. 17 ceremony recognizing the Callaway Foundation’s generosity, was also pleased after working with the Shigeru EX.

“It’s a beautiful instrument, and it’s a very high quality instrument,” he says. “I think it’s wonderful that we have it.”

Superior sound

According to reports, the arrival of the new fleet has been a boon for the Music Department. Miho says she was bowled over when she first saw the new Kawai pianos.
New concert series begins

With a Nov. 20 concert by acclaimed Cuban guitarist Manuel Barrueco, the College launched the inaugural season of a new performance schedule dubbed the Callaway Concert Series.

“While we have always had wonderful concerts, we’ve never had the funding base to consistently host artists of international acclaim,” said Dr. Toni Anderson, Chair of the Music Department. “This year, thanks to the generosity of the Callaway Foundation, we are able to welcome artists of the highest caliber to Callaway Auditorium.”

According to Dr. Anderson, Callaway Foundation, Inc., contributed $30,000 toward the performance series that she says “is a gift to the campus as well as to the entire community.”

The series continues Feb. 17 when the first brass ensemble to win the prestigious Naumberg Chamber Music Award, The Empire Brass, takes the Callaway Auditorium stage. The five musicians perform more than 100 concerts a year in cities from New York to Chicago, Zurich to Tokyo.

On March 31, The Shanghai Quartet closes out this year’s concert series. Originally formed in Shanghai, this group is known for its passionate musicality, virtuosic technique and multicultural innovations.

Tickets for each of the performances are available for $10, $20, $25 and $200 for a box. LaGrange College students get in free, but will still need to reserve a ticket. Other students may purchase a ticket for $5. Tickets can be bought securely online at www.lagrange.edu/callawayconcertseries, and starting Nov. 6 they also may be purchased by phone by calling (706) 880-8107.

Epic benefits

In addition to the new piano lab, the EPIC partnership also provides the College with assistance in maintaining its improved fleet.

“Over the next several years, Kawai will send their master technicians to us on an annual basis to assess our fleet and make sure everything is in top working order,” Dr. Anderson says.

She described Kawai as “one of the best brands out there” and said the Korean-made pianos tend to be equal with the Steinway as the piano preferred by many international competitions.

“Kawai was the piano of choice for the Beijing Olympics,” she says.

Anderson and Mann both agree the new fleet should be an asset when it comes to student recruitment.

“With this new fleet of pianos, the school should be competitive with any college in the state for the student who’s hunting a smaller, more personal atmosphere to study music, and I’m very excited to be a part of this,” says Mann, who was named the Georgia Music Teacher Association’s Teacher of the Year last year.

Dr. Anderson adds, “We believe the new pianos will be a tremendous asset in attracting prospective students. Now we have the caliber of instrument to match the caliber of instruction we believe we’re providing.”

“I thought, Wow those pianos look so artistic,” she remembers. But as impressed as she is with the aesthetics, she’s even more satisfied with the acoustics.

“I practice to polish my sound every single day to try and become an accomplished pianist,” she says. “The new pianos are more communicative. They inspire me and help me make more colorful sounds.”

Miho says she’s also delighted with the feel of the new instruments.

“I was born and raised in Japan where the Yamaha piano is so famous,” she says. “When I play a Yamaha, the touch is so light it’s like a feather touch, but the Kawai is a solid, heavier touch—like a Steinway. It’s what I always wanted to play.”

While Miho believes the new pianos are helping her improve her skills, Mann says that the Kawai’s are having a positive impact on his teaching efforts.

“In the room I teach in, I have a Shigeru and another Kawai side by side, and that’s a wonderful arrangement in a teaching situation. The new fleet is better in every way. It’s just a big improvement.”

Miho Tokuda mimics a few of Instructor George Mann’s deft touches on a Kawai grand during a one-on-one instruction session.