

Former Flames organist heals through music

Besse hopes afternoon shows help seniors

Stephen Hunt, Calgary Herald

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They say there's a first time for everything. Ninety-eight-year-old Agnes Williams decided to put that one to the test.

The Calgary resident, born in 1910, was one of the crowd at Steinway Hall, the performing wing of Irene Besse Keyboards's main store, one recent Tuesday afternoon when Besse and her staff hung a shingle on the door of the store, then spent an hour performing for a group of local seniors.

The concert featured a diverse roster of tunes, ranging from Tennessee Waltz to Have I Told You Lately That I Love You to a Brahms concerto, performed with concert hall-like precision by pianist and employee Carlos Foggin, who turned in a stellar performance that left the septuagenarians in the house applauding wildly.



Irene Besse, left, shows Marion Foat, 80, a few tunes on the piano.

Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald

And while Besse has been performing the concerts in one form or another since 1993, this was Williams' first time attending.

"It was beautiful," said Williams. "I can't wait to come back." (The next show is in mid-April)

For Besse, a vivacious woman who has been performing for seniors since she sang for her grandfather every Sunday when she was three, the afternoon concerts represent an

opportunity not only to entertain seniors, but to heal them a little through the balm of music.

"I've seen a lot of miracles over the years with music and of late, lived it," she says.

Besse -- whom many Calgarians may recognize as the former Flames organist (and the organist at the 1988 Winter Olympics) used to deliver her performances for seniors, going on the road to play at as many seniors homes as she could, but that proved cumbersome.

"I used to drag this big organ along," she says. "I once made 43 (senior home) visits in one month (including four in a day). Just about killed myself."

In 1993, she moved into her present 11 Street S.E. location, which contained Steinway Hall, and bolted the organ to the floor (figuratively speaking). Ever since, seniors have made the trek to Steinway Hall to listen to Besse and her talented posse of employees play, creating what she calls "the umbilical chord of music."

While Besse has always preached the therapeutic powers of music, there is growing research being done on music therapy to support her.

According to the Dr. Carole-Lynne LeNavenec of the School of Nursing at the University of Calgary, studies have been done recently in which Alzheimer's patients responded with increased alertness after listening to music. LeNavenec also said music is helpful in facilitating relaxation, enhancing motor function, alleviating depression and relieving pain in the elderly.

"I'm a great believer in listening to what old people tell us," said LeNavenec, who is a nurse in addition to having a Ph.D.

Another concertgoer at Besse's afternoon show, 80-year-old Marion Foat, agreed with her belief in the healing power of music.

"You feel more vibrant when you play the piano," said Foat, who started playing at the age of 11 or 12, on an organ in a schoolhouse just west of Cochrane. Foat used to play every Saturday night in Arizona, where she spent winters with her husband from 1977 to 1990.

"I got a lot of good out of my music," said Foat, whose health is fine aside from a macular degeneration in her eyes. "They used to listen to me play and say, Give her another drink," Foat added. "But I didn't need a drink to have a good time."

Besse's lifelong passion for performing music and its therapeutic affects became personal over the past several years. First, her 14-month-old nephew was hospitalized, and Besse made sure he had music played inside his room, which helped calm him.

In December, 2007, Besse's brother Michael was hospitalized in a palliative care centre in Edmonton. Besse moved into his room there for two weeks, sleeping two or three hours a night, as her brother lapsed into a coma. But she also brought music for him to listen to -- various philharmonics and orchestrations.

Before he died, "he said the music made him feel so good." And then, as if to emphasize the therapeutic value music provides, she repeated it.

"He didn't say 'sounds so good,' " she said. "He said 'feels so good.' "

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