

Totally in Tune

Irene Besse: Founder/Owner, Irene Besse Keyboards

BY COLLEEN SETO

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES HOPE

A lover of music since childhood, Irene Besse has turned that love into a successful career of performing, teaching and selling. Once a big-band musician who rubbed shoulders with the likes of Tommy Banks and the organist for sporting events including Calgary Flames games and the 1988 Winter Olympics, she has gone on to build a one-of-a-kind business, Irene Besse Keyboards, now with two Calgary locations. The main store houses a music school offering the full gamut of music instruction to more than 800 students, a concert hall to seat 300, a complete piano service and restoration centre, along with the largest selection of instruments in the country. There is no other facility with the same level of service anywhere else in the world. Besse continues to spread the word about the importance of music, but she does claim to have retired. That means she works five days a week instead of seven, and starts at 9 a.m. instead of 8.

AV: How did your love of music start?

IB: I always had a love for music. I took piano lessons as a child, but we couldn't afford a piano so my mom made me one out of cardboard. I practiced on cardboard for a year before my teacher knew.

Did you want to become a piano teacher?

I was told to always share my gift of music or I'd lose it. It really stuck in my mind. So I started teaching when I was 14.

How did you get into selling pianos?

It really started off as a favour to friends and family. As I was teaching, people would say, 'Irene, we're looking for a piano. Why don't you help us?' I developed a real keen interest because it wasn't selling; it was helping somebody find the appropriate instrument for their needs. A music store in Edmonton caught wind I was doing this and asked me to work for them. Next thing I knew, I was doing as much selling as teaching and performing.

Which do you prefer – teaching, selling or performing?

When I'm on stage performing, it's another



CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: Irene Besse educates her clients first and then comes the sale

world. I get completely lost. I have a rapport with my audience and I love it. I can communicate with music. I can make them go nuts.

You sure did that at Flames games.

I would really experiment there. I'd play a low bass that got the crowd going. If the boys were having a bad time on the ice, I'd play faster music and raunchy stuff. It was fun, I tell ya.

You've always given back to the community. Why is that important?

One hand receives and the other gives. You need to keep that balance. That philosophy has been how I have grown my business. And it's what's kept my feet on the ground among the accolades. I became very involved with playing at retirement homes and children's hospitals. Even to this day, I still do that.

What makes your business different from other music stores?

We have all the concepts under one roof: education, retail, service and a concert hall. It's a one-stop shop. When people start their musi-

cal journey, we make sure they get the right instrument, and teach them how to play it. We'll also help maintain that instrument and after they've achieved a certain level, they can perform in our concert hall. It's a very unique circle. The president of Steinway New York told me he's never seen a facility that has all of these components.

Sales secrets?

I present my product as an educator. People who come in are so innocent. You have to show them what works best for their needs. If you do that every time, you'll get more referrals down the road because you're building a trust. Sixty-seven per cent of my clients have been referrals. When we went through tough times in the '80s, if it hadn't been for my referral base, I probably would not have survived.

What's one wish you'd like to make?

I'd like to see every person from childhood experience some form of music because it does so much for you. Society without the arts is a sad society. **AV**