

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Thursday, August 15, 2024

### **MISS FLORA'S ARRIVAL: A GAME CHANGER**

In the autumn of 1986, the Steinway Brothers New York factory produced an exquisite 9-foot model D concert grand who came into the world feeling confident that she would, assisted by some of the world's finest pianists, play some of the world's greatest music during her lifetime. Fortunately, she was recruited immediately to the Brandon University School of Music, where staff had painstakingly prepared her quarters that fall.

Once she had settled in, they realized that she was an exceptional protégé and joined with others who, enthralled with her many charms and attributes, named her after the respected and beloved first Canadian female foreign minister who had assisted in procuring the government grant to pay Steinway—Flora Isabel MacDonald.

In short order, Flora Isabel established herself as a prima donna in the department, and soon a remarkable nanny and Steinway technician Mark Cramer was hired to ensure her proper care. For the next 36 years she reigned as diva in the Lorne Watson Recital Hall of the Queen Elizabeth II Music Building. During those years, she rose to every occasion and often stole the hearts of visiting celebrities. One unforgettable evening, she and Marc-Andre Hamelin, considered by many to be the finest concert pianist of his generation, performed the entire and fiendishly-difficult Iberia Suite concluding to boisterous applause, with numerous encores. He ended the evening with a delicate Debussy encore he rarely played because most pianos were not responsive enough for it. In a later interview he said, "From the first note, I was immediately aware that this piano was responsive to my every whim." Several years later virtuoso and author of *The Classical Style*, Charles Rosen, joined Miss Flora and observed, "This may be the most evenly voiced piano I have ever played." He then asked for a felt pen and signed her bronzed-iron string-frame just next to Mr. Hamelin's autograph.

As luck would have it, Mark Cramer and pianist Andrew Armstrong became good friends who

greatly admired each other's devotion to classical music and skill with the piano. When the opportunity arose, Mark asked Andrew if he had the wherewithal to secure Isabel Flora as a permanent partner for his Beaufort series. With some trepidation--knowing full well that few small music venues can afford anything other than rental pianos, Andrew asked the Beaufort Chamber Board if there were any possibility that she could become a resident artist with the USCB program. Friends' habits formed over years of giving generously to both annual and endowment funding happily made the seemingly impossible, possible.

In July of 2022 Dr. Panu wrote a large check, and Staci Breton began the arduous and sometimes painful process of inviting Miss Flora to sally south to the Carolina Lowcountry. Reams of paperwork later, Miss Flora was transported by her private 18-wheeler across the border and arrived at the Art Center loading dock on October 17th. She was welcomed by Michael Johns, Jeff Herrin, and helpers. When she had her legs once more under her, she donned a Cramer-designed cover and special safety bumpers and retired to the temperature-and-humidity-controlled closet which had been especially prepared for her arrival to acclimate until the first weekend in November when she would make her Beaufort debut.

After Miss Flora's extensive beauty parlor appointment on November 4, an exuberant and admiring Andy arrived, adjusted his new hydraulic piano bench, and instantly began to play Chopin while enthusiastically extoling Miss Flora's myriad virtues. As many of those who were lucky enough to hear their first piece, "Claire de Lune," on the USCB stage that fateful Sunday can attest, these two do make magic together. When, some three months later, Andy greeted his great, good friend Gramophone's Artist of the Year James Ehnes to the stage, he was still in awe of James' amazing talent, but he was no longer green with envy of James' very fine Strad. As they began to play a Beethoven sonata, Andy simply smiled smugly and asked Miss Flora for a few extra flourishes. There is no doubt that Miss Flora has taken USCB Chamber Music miraculously to a new plateau in the classical music world. Her arrival has lifted the spirits of our resident pianist and the sound quality of each piece he so beautifully plays.

Come catch the magic this season: November 10, January 12, February 16, March 9, and April 6. Go online at [www.uscbchamermusic.com](http://www.uscbchamermusic.com) for complete information and to purchase tickets or call Staci Breton at 843-208-8246 dwh. The season's concerts are on Sundays at 5 at the USCB Center for the Arts at the historic Carteret Street campus.

*“It is no accident, no random bit of serendipity, that Miss Flora has a name. Only a tiny fraction of the world's great pianos are technically perfect and miraculously also have a soul and a distinctive voice. Luckily, she’s one of them. I love her; I love her without reservation; and I never play her without a flood of gratitude to and love for our extended USCB Chamber Music family who so generously brought her onto our stage and into my life.”*

Andrew Armstrong

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