

Sharp's Steinway finds a good home

U of O music department honoured to accept late politician's bequest

BY CHARLES ENMAN

Tomorrow afternoon, the University of Ottawa's department of music will formally welcome a new addition — the Steinway piano the late Mitchell Sharp, long-time Liberal cabinet minister, played until the day he left home for his final stay in hospital.

"We've had the piano since July," said Lori Burns, chair of the music department. "It has a sound of wonderful warmth and impact, and we're going to keep it in a special studio for our most advanced piano students."

Fittingly, that room will be called the Mitchell Sharp Studio.

For Jeanne d'Arc Sharp, the late politician's widow, the piano could not find a better home.

"This was the very first bequest in Mitchell's will," she said. "He loved the idea that the instrument he loved so much would be used for teaching and for practising. There was nothing in the world that he loved so much as music."

The piano, a six-foot walnut Steinway made in 1969, has been professionally examined and found in pristine condition, Burns said.

Sharp last played the piano on February 22, 2004. That day, he spent more than an hour working on a Beethoven sonata with results that didn't satisfy him. He asked his wife to put on a recording of the music so he could retune his approach, but, following her to the CD player, he tripped and fell. As a safety measure for a man of 92, he was rushed to hospital, where he died, after a cascading series of medical problems, on March 19.

"The very last thing Mitchell was doing before he was taken to hospital was playing that piano," his wife said. "To me, that is wonderful."

She says he did not frequently play for people in their home. But years ago, when as a cabinet minister he was mentoring the young Jean Chrétien, the two



DETAIL OF A SKETCH BY BERNARD POULIN

Politician Mitchell Sharp was captured at the piano in a series of portraits by Ottawa artist Bernard Poulin.

would sometimes retire to Sharp's home — then on Monkland Avenue — where, after discussion of political problems, Sharp would play favourite pieces for his protégé.

"Mitchell told me they were always much the better for the music," said his wife, who entered Sharp's life in his late 80s.

In public, Sharp loved to show what he could do at the keyboard. In 1970, at a benefit concert, he played a movement from Mozart's *Elvira Madigan Piano Concerto* with the Toronto Symphony.

"I tell you — that was the great moment, the apex of my life," he told *The Citizen* several years ago. "Becoming a cabinet minister didn't rank with it in any way."

On July 26, 2003, Sharp was a surprise guest performer at the gala opening concert of the Ottawa International Chamber Music Festival. His piece that day was *The Fairy Wedding Waltz*, taught to him nearly 86 years

earlier by his mother.

"There was no other piece so deeply in his fingers, but he practised and practised for that performance," Mrs. Sharp said.

His last speech, given on Nov. 26, 2003, to the Canadian branch of the United Nations Association, was entitled: How music brings good will among nations.

"Mitchell told the association that, if he were secretary general of the UN, music would be a priority in schools all over the world," Mrs. Sharp said. "That showed how much benefit he believed music brings to human beings."

She laughed when she recalled how Sharp chose the condominium that they shared in his last years.

"He looked at that sunken living room and he said, 'Ah, that is where the piano will go.' And nothing else about the condo mattered."

Now, that living room seems strangely empty.

"You know, at first I wanted the piano to go. When it stood mute, day after day, it reminded me that Mitchell was gone.

"But now that it — and Mitchell — are both gone, the room has no soul."

Mrs. Sharp's loss, Burns says, is the music department's very great gain.

"We need more pianos of this calibre. But beyond that, we appreciate Mr. Sharp's gesture. He was a politician who always said that the arts, and especially music, matter. We expect artists to say those things, but from a politician's mouth, the words may have more impact."

Besides the piano, the Mitchell Sharp Studio will have memorabilia of Sharp, including photographs, music scores, books and his diploma from the Toronto Conservatory.

A plaque on the door will pay him alliterative tribute: "Politician, pianist, passionate Canadian."