Camac Harp Factory Visit:

My experience at the Camac Harp Factory was an extraordinary one. I was initially only going to France for the French International Harp Competition 2018 as a junior competitor. However, I was asked my Ms Angela Yau, Co-Director of the World Harp Congress 2017, if I wanted to join her in a visit to Camac Harps. I quickly said Yes to such a wonderful and rare opportunity. I had never been to a harp factory before, and was quite eager to see what went on behind the scenes of the harp-making world.

When we first arrived, we were kindly greeted by the President of Camac Harps, Mr Jakez François. I was very happy to meet Mr François again as he had taught me before at a jazz improvisation workshop in Hong Kong. He is an amazing harpist, and I marvelled at how he could also run such a large company as well. We were then led to a room with a stage, and on the stage was a beautiful Elysée harp, with very elegant bronze moldings spiralling around the column. I longed to caress the strings and to play the gorgeous instrument, but I restrained myself in my seat.

Mr François smiled at me, as if he knew what I was thinking. I squirmed a little in my seat but smiled back. He introduced himself to the whole group of us and started by talking a little bit about the history of Camac Harps.

After that, our magical tour began with Mr François taking us to the wood storage area. I caught a glimpse of an eye-catching neon-orange lever harp and wondered if I could go back later to take a closer look.

The wood storage area was really cool. There were shelves of wood planks all around. Mr. François explained about how high-quality the different types of wood were, and also that they came from far-flung places all around the world.

We then looked at a huge, snake-like machine next to the wood planks. It looked like a giant 3D printer. It was emitting a screeching, high-pitched whine carving out the ribs for the harps. I had to use my hands to stop my ears because it was so loud! I tried not to look scared or run away.

Fortunately, Mr. François swiftly led us to where they made the harp columns. We came upon some shelves with hundreds of wooden blocks shaped like trapezoidal prisms, with slightly different dimensions. These prisms were put together and then smoothed into rounded cones and cylinders for the different parts of the harp column.

Then, we went to a large space where many lever harp soundboards and frames were hanging on the walls. There was a pungent chemical smell that reminded me of my mother's nail polish - but much stronger. We walked around the room for a while, looking at the different soundboards, and Mr. François told us about how they glue the soundboard together, and also about the varnishing process. We also saw a craftsman holding a tool that looked like a large staple gun. He seemed to be "stapling" the soundboard to the backboard of a harp. Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. He was so quick and nimble and accurate. It really was quite spectacular watching how expertly he worked.

In the next room, my heart skipped a beat! There was an unfinished harp - but it was instantly recognizable. It was the beautiful Canopée model harp. My dream harp! Mr François explained that each of the flowers, and petals on the Canopée were hand-carved out of different materials, and then put into the column by Jocelyne Réal, meilleur ouvrier de France ('master craftsman of France'). These inlays contain over five thousand tiny pieces of precious woods and mother-of-pearl, and each Canopée takes over six months to make. The waiting list to own one is years-long. I cradled the unfinished top part of the Canopée column in my arms like a precious baby. One day, this baby will be mine!

The next place we went to was a room filled with shiny gold tuning pins. We were shown the different parts of how a pedal harp moved. This included the revolutionary double-action in a pedal harp. On one side of the room, there was a machine with a giant magnifying glass on it. Mr François explained that the magnifying glass was there to inspect the quality of all the different parts of the mechanism. He then put a small screw underneath the magnifying glass. You could see that the screw had a few scraggly bits on the inside. Mr François said that if there were any parts with imperfections like these, they would be set right or be rejected. Only the best quality will do for Camac harps, he said.

We were then led back to the showroom that we started in. One of the other people in my group asked Mr. François how the Camac self-regulation system worked. Mr. François demonstrated to us how the regulation process worked on the gorgeous Elysée harp I had seen before. He asked for a volunteer to help him and then he picked me! He showed us the process was so easy that even a kid could understand how to do it. I enjoyed being his assistant very much! This concluded our tour of the Camac Harp Factory. Overall, it was a really amazing experience, and we all learned so much. It was definitely a highlight on my trip to the the incredible country of France.