

MICK ANDERSON

mick@mickanderson.org

Writing Sample: Newspaper Feature Article

The World of the Piano concert series launches its sixth season in what promises to be an exciting year for the Conservatory. This year the series is housed under the umbrella of the inaugural season of the Performing Arts LIVE series. A particular highlight of the season is the appearance of the world-renowned Irish pianist, John O'Connor, who currently holds the position of Distinguished Visiting Artist on the Shenandoah Conservatory piano faculty.

Shenandoah is extremely fortunate to have such a luminary among its ranks. Mr. O'Connor is the Director of the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin and a noted authority on the interpretation of Classical and early-Romantic works. He was first prize recipient at the famous Beethoven International Piano Competition in Vienna in 1973, and has since appeared on the juries of many such competitions worldwide. A coveted performer and clinician, O'Connor maintains an extensive travel schedule (he has performed on five different continents). He will visit our campus and the Greater Washington area four times this year.

His first visit to the Conservatory was ten years ago when he performed a master class as part of a pedagogy workshop. Since then his relationship with Shenandoah has grown, particularly through his friendship with piano faculty member Miss Elizabeth Temple. "My first introduction to O'Connor was through observing his extraordinary work with students in a master class at the William Kapell Piano Competition in 1998. I determined in that moment that we must invite him to Shenandoah. As a result, he has taught or performed on campus for nearly 10 years, and in 2007-08 became Shenandoah Conservatory's first Distinguished Visiting Artist, placing our program in the forefront of music schools throughout the country," Temple recounts.

Having Mr. O'Connor as a Distinguished Visiting Artist affords the Shenandoah community many opportunities—one being the prospect for piano students to have him available as a coach. SU piano student Annie Hof relates: "I have worked with Mr. O'Connor during the past three years of his master classes at SU, and I was also able to participate in a master class with him in Vermont this summer. The first word that comes to mind when I think of Mr. O'Connor is "energetic." In spite of his enormous load of responsibilities at home in Ireland and abroad, he really goes all out to pour himself into his sessions at SU. I think a large part of what keeps him going is the joy of seeing students respond positively to his detailed instructions during their lessons. It's a give-and-take relationship. I have found that the more I try to put his instructions into practice, the more Mr. O'Connor pushes me to exceed my own

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expectations and reach for higher standards. Probably the most important principle I've learned from studying with Mr. O'Connor is how to listen to my own playing.

One of Mr. O'Connor's favorite questions to ask new students is, 'Did you like what you just played?' Like my initial reaction, many students respond blankly, 'What do you mean?' I have had to consciously train my ears to evaluate my playing in the practice room and during live performances, and I know I still have a long way to go. Of course, this is also a crucial element of Mr. O'Connor's playing and contributes to making his performances enjoyable and accessible to the audience."

O'Connor initiates The World of the Piano concert season on Sunday, October 19th at 3PM in Armstrong Concert Hall with a performance of works by Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Scriabin, and Irish composer John Field. This will be O'Connor's third time as a solo artist with the series. Three other The World of the Piano concerts will take place this year: The Anagnoson & Kinton Piano Duo will appear in November; Jon Nakamatsu, in February, and Alexandre Dossin in March. Tickets for all four concerts are available at the Box Office in Ohrstrom Bryant Theatre.