

Gary is keyed up for piano contest

THE Dublin International Piano Competition, which runs from May 15-26, is one of the top five of its kind in the world. That's not just because of the generous prize, but the dizzying list of prestigious engagements it guarantees for the winner.

This year, 66 young pianists from 18 countries will compete and be adjudicated by distinguished members of the music profession. The competition is chaired by artistic director, John O'Connor.

Among the pianists will be 21-year-old Gary Beecher, from Cork, one of just six Irish participants whose standard of playing met the rigorous requirements. Beecher, who studies at Cork School of Music with Jan Cap, is quietly excited about the event, as the calendar brings it ever closer.

"This will be my first international competition, so I'm a little bit nervous. I do enjoy playing in public, though, and I think I become a different person when I'm up there on the stage. But there's no denying that I'll be up against a pretty strong international field."

Beecher grew up with music. "My mother is a music teacher and my earliest memories are of sitting on the floor, doing jigsaws to the accompaniment of her piano-playing. I started studying properly when I was six, here at the School of Music. That was when I saw my first grand piano. I hadn't known anything but the old upright at home, so that was quite an experience."

Now, the young musician has his own much-beloved and much-used grand piano, the gift of a grand-uncle who recognised his gifts. "He's passed away now, but I think of him every time I play on it. He lived in Cahir, and when I was young, and used to go up to play at the Feis Ceoil in Dublin, we'd always call in on the way home and show him any prizes



Gary Beecher will perform at the Dublin International Piano Competition.

I'd won." Beecher's hands rest on the keys for a moment, as he remembers.

Although the piano is taking centre stage now, this young man has always enjoyed diversity in his musical experience. "I played bass trombone with a jazz band throughout my time at CSM, and kept up with the trombone until last year, when the piano tended to take over. I kind of miss it.

"And I have always explored different kinds of music and instruments — flute, uilleann pipes, you name it! I think the more diverse you can be, the better musician you become, because you can understand it from all angles and viewpoints," Beecher says.

What about everyday life? "Oh, I live a very normal life. Always have." Yes, he does have a girlfriend, but she's not a musician. They met in Berlin, where Beecher is on an

Erasmus exchange at the University for Arts, as a student of Jacques Rouvier. "She's from Spain, and she's coming over here especially for the competition to support me, which is nice," he says.

For the first round of the Dublin competition, he plans to play 3 Debussy preludes and Liszt's 'Dante Sonata', and for the second round ("If I get through to that"), a Beethoven sonata, along with a Schumann fantasy.

And what does the future hold — composing, conducting, teaching, performing? "I want to try the performance route, first of all. It's a hard road and it takes a lot of dedication, but I'm not afraid of that," Beecher says.

■ The Dublin International Piano Competition is on May 15-26 at the RDS and NCH