

The piano man

Nancy Previs talks to John O'Connor about his upcoming recital in the National Concert Hall, his life here and in the States, and how he likes to hang out with his wife of 43 years

I climb the steps to the front door of the three-storey Victorian redbrick and pause, enthralled at the rich sound of Beethoven being played with such clear brilliance on piano. When I ring the doorbell the music stops: a moment later pianist John O'Connor is welcoming me into his Dublin home.

His grand piano commands a corner of the large dining room at the back of the house. When John and his wife Mary (a relationship counsellor and psychosexual therapist) moved here in 1990 with their teenage sons Keith and Hugh, two steel beams had to be installed under the floor to take the weight of this magnificent instrument.

John is busy preparing for his recital of works by Schubert and Beethoven in the National Concert Hall; and it looks a daunting programme: Schubert's Sonata in B Flat Major, D.960 and *Diabelli Variations*, Op. 120 by Beethoven. John agrees: "It is so difficult that I've carved out five hours a day for it – Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* is a 55 minute piece and at the 47-minute point you get to this finger twisting fugue, so you have to pace yourself. It's rather like somebody running a marathon and still having the ability to sprint at the finish".

We are sitting on a large sofa in the front room. Two low tables beside the window twinkle with an intriguing array of miniature ornamental pianos made of glass, china, wood and metal. "When a student gave me one about 30 years ago I thought 'what a kitchy present', but then the following year when

somebody else gave me another one I found myself thinking, 'that's kinda neat'. At this stage I have about 60 of them, none of them expensive – except that tiny silver one, which Mary gave me".

Besides performing, John also continues to teach and give masterclasses around the world. He is professor and chair of Piano at Shenandoah Conservatory in Virginia; is a faculty member at Glenn Gould School of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto and visiting professor at Showa University in Japan – and the Royal Irish Academy of Music. "I love teaching and once they start playing, it's like I get an adrenaline shot."

John was granted a USA green card about three years ago. Lately he and Mary spend much of their time in America, where they have a condo in Florida. While he loves working in the States, Ireland will always be home. "I miss seeing my Irish friends. I had a dinner party for 10 friends when I was home at Christmas and I did the cooking – and", he adds, "they were all astonished. But I love cooking and have various quick recipes that I do, like a wonderful beef dish made with things like port and those pencil thin carrot sticks".

His wife is an avid golfer but John's strict practice regime wouldn't allow him take up the sport. "I did take lessons, but then I had no time to practice and if you don't practice between lessons it's all a waste. I'll drive Mary to the golf course and every so often I'll have a whack at a ball myself – but it never goes far, and usually ends up in the water".

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The couple, married for 43 years, met as teacher and pupil in the then college of music. "Mary was a production assistant in the RTE newsroom and she could only take lessons in the mornings. The college told her that the only teacher available mornings is Mr O'Connor and she replied 'Well, then, I'll have Mr O'Connor' – and she did!" he says, laughing heartily.

It took him six months to ask her out and once they had married she travelled with him to Vienna and worked there as a secretary – so he could practice. "It was a partnership from early on", he says, gently.

"When we're together we hang out – we'll watch movies, go out to eat, read books. It's just wonderful companionship. She'll be travelling with me around the world this summer from July".

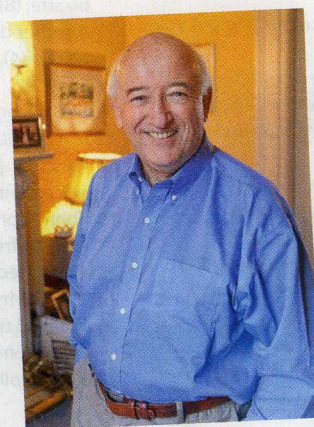
Their son Hugh – the actor, director and photographer – continues to live in the family's Dublin home, while Keith lives in Montreal with his wife Elaine and baby girl, John and Mary's first grandchild.

Leaving the grandeur of the reception rooms, John leads me downstairs, along original flagstones in the hallway and tells me about some of the family photographs lining the walls. There's one of John taken in 1973 in Vienna, on the day which launched his international career, when he won 1st Prize at the International Beethoven Piano Competition. A little further on, 12 year-old Hugh is pictured on the set of *My Left Foot* with Daniel Day-Lewis. "And that's Liam Neeson in *Lamb*, with Hugh when he was nine".

Crossing the threshold we enter the family room, with its comfortable chairs and a library of DVDs and videos. This is where the pianist comes to relax. "There are books all over the place down here too. I'm an eclectic reader – I've read everything of Charles Dickens, all the Shakespeare plays but also everything Agatha Christie wrote. I love the idea of reading because you use your imagination".

Now approaching 70, he's as hardworking as ever: this summer he'll be playing in London, Italy, the US, Canada and Puerto Rico. Will he ever slow down? "I love performing. Every so often I think 'will I stop?' but then I think, 'ah, not yet' – I enjoy it too much!"

John O'Connor performs works by Beethoven and Schubert in the National Concert Hall, 27 April.



The Dublin International Piano Competition returns on May 15th- 26th May when 68 pianists, all under the age of 30, from 18 countries, will compete. For further information visit www.dipc.ie.