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A populist approach to music

CONCERT pianist David Syme describes his arrival in Ireland as "the beginning of the rest of his life". With a pedigree that involves Juilliard College in New York and recordings and concerts with many of the great orchestras across the world, what sets him apart is his attitude to music-making and the scope of music he enjoys and plays. He spends six months of the year in Houston, Texas, from where he tours widely. The other half of the year Syme lives on the Beara Peninsula in West Cork.

A dedicated following from near and far descends on his weekly recitals at his Irish home, Ahabeg Vista, between Castletownbere and Adrigole. He counts Maureen O'Hara among his regular attendees. It seems that Syme has a knack of delighting a broad audience wherever he plays; he was for some years known as the 'human-jukebox' to millions of radio fans at stations across the United States and further afield, playing popular requests of almost any kind of music using instant recall and flair.

Playing by ear is a talent he discovered aged three. He refused to take lessons until he was almost 13, when he cultivated an intense practise regime. He played Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No 1* with his high school band soon after. At 18, he played Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No 2* with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and entered Juilliard the same year.

"By the time I was in Juilliard I was pretty much in that frame of mind, I was practising 10 hours a day in summer, six during the year, I was really able to stand alongside my contemporaries. We were all looking for a common goal, to achieve excellence and serve the composer.

Juilliard-trained concert pianist David Syme would like to perform in every town and village in his adopted country, writes **Nicki French Davis**

"After a year though, I felt goals grander and broader than what I'd seen there. I found a teacher who didn't choose to be part of the New York music scene, Ozan Marsh, and went out to Arizona to learn from him. At the same time I joined a rock band. We thought we were divinely inspired. I felt myself deepening as an artist, shaking off the chains that had restrained me." He did return later to Juilliard for "unfinished business".

Syme appears to have an in-



David Syme spends half of the year touring from Texas, and the other half in his Co Cork home.

grained facility to follow his heart beyond convention, but is philosophical about the musician's challenge. "There's so much hard work and discipline required to play the right note the right way, freedom and spontaneity is always a challenge but I believe it's truer to the composer. Striking a balance is probably the most daunting part of being an artist."

A huge fan of Chopin and Liszt, Syme is considered one of the world's leading interpreters of the piano music of George Gershwin.

He regularly performs Gershwin's piano concerto with orchestras across the world and is hopeful and determined to find an Irish orchestra to take the work on.

Syme was selected by piano manufacturer Steinway as one of their 1,600 Steinway Artists. "They guarantee there'll be a Steinway always available to me, but they don't say they'll pay for it," he laughs. "They select artists to endorse the piano. I had to handwrite a testimony. I accepted partly because I wanted to sign

their book. I was after Rachmaninov and Rubenstein and before Tchaikovsky."

The only context Syme doesn't enjoy playing is where people are talking. "I get many requests for corporate events but I won't do it. I've worked too hard to get people to listen to me. In the 1990s General Motors hired me. They were trying to change their image — less country music, more concert hall. It was the easiest money I've made but the least fulfilling. They hired me a 9ft Steinway grand and I did about 180 auto shows for really big money but it was the most meaningless work I've ever done."

For now, after several years of playing either in huge concert halls thousands of miles away or literally in his own front room, Syme has opened up to the audience in Ireland beyond his doorstep.

He recently performed in Kenmare, Clonakilty and Tralee, and he will play at Fota House on Friday, February 17, with further bookings in Waterford, Clonakilty and at Bantry House. The response from the public has been enthusiastic and has inspired a new goal.

"My love is exactly what I'm doing in Ireland, playing in my home between Hungry Hill and Bantry Bay to a rapt audience, it's magical. My goal now is to play in every big and little town in the whole country.

"Whenever possible I'd love to play a really good piano, but I've purchased a high end digital piano which I can take anywhere and I'll play anywhere people want to hear me."

■ David Syme performs at Fota House on Friday, February 17.