



David Syme in Ireland

By Vera Marie Badertscher



The *craic* fills the kitchen of the house by Bantry Bay in southwest Ireland. “Craic,” pronounced “crack,” means lively conversation, fun, and friendship – qualities that abound in Ireland. People generally go looking for craic in a pub like the well-known McCarthy’s (Pub and Grocery Store) down the road in Castletownbere. But on this Sunday afternoon, people gather in Suzanne and David Syme’s spacious kitchen awaiting his fortnightly piano concert. They come for *ceoil agus craic* (music and fun).

The Beara Peninsula, off the beaten track of the tourist trails in Southwest Cork, reaches out into the Atlantic. “Next

stop, Boston,” the residents like to say. Locals will tell you to skip the over-touristed Ring of Kerry and drive the scenic Ring of Beara. In this wild land of gray limestone outcroppings, sudden cliffs, and a thousand rocky inlets, there is music in the sea pounding the shore, in the voices that speak in the lilting sounds of Gaelic speech, and in the very air when the wind hurls up a storm.

Music lovers in the small fishing village of Castletownbere have little classical music in their own backyard. Bantry House, the home of West Cork Chamber Music Festival, stands an hour away from this fishing village of about 1,000

Photos by Patrick Henaghan



people and it takes about three hours to drive to Cork City, which has an orchestra and renowned music school. Consequently, when Syme, a Steinway Artist from America who lives half the year in Ireland, started living room recitals, he found an eager audience.

When Suzanne returned to her second home in Ireland after being widowed, "I was embraced by the community," she says. These people thought her brave to be living there without a husband, and when she met Syme several years later, there was a collective sigh of relief.

"The first summer that David came, everyone was so happy for me, and they knew all about him," she says. "He couldn't figure it out. He would walk into town and they knew him."

Syme says, "I had been here maybe five days and the word had gotten around about who I was and what I did and I was asked to do a concert to help raise money for a school in Africa and I agreed. The encore was 'Danny Boy,' which they sang along in Irish. It was very moving."

He came to see that reaction as characteristic. "They are very emotional, very passionate, wear their hearts on their sleeves ... people respond emotionally rather than cerebrally."

"Wherever I am, I'm looking for somewhere to play," he says. "If I'm not performing, I shrivel up. I need to be playing. It's like oxygen to me."

"We decided to do it at our home," Syme says, speaking of the living room recitals. "We already had a very large living area that seats 50 to 60 people. We have plenty of parking space. We have a piano there. We have me there."

While most pianists depend on a publicist to put out the word about concerts through mailings, newspaper advertisements, and radio announcements, David and Suzanne took a more personal approach in Ireland. "We have a sign out on the road – a chalkboard with the times of concerts," Syme says. They also distribute flyers at various businesses. On the Sunday of a concert, David drives into town to leave "Concert Today" flyers at the SuperValu supermarket, where everyone shops after Mass.

When people get the word, he says, "We'll be sitting in our kitchen ... and people come to the door to ask if there are seats available for the concert."

From late July through August 2007, he performed five concerts. The audience heard



Opposite: Guests gather for music and fun while Steinway Artist David Syme performs one of his quaint living room recitals. Above: The Symes live part-time in their Bantry Bay home in southwest Ireland.



Syme's solo recital times are listed on this roadside chalkboard.

four Beethoven sonatas, the Schumann *Carnivale*, Bach, and many works of Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt. He added December concerts, and repeated the summer schedule in 2008.

He says, "I don't get any less pleasure than out of a concert in a large hall. It is like they are coming into my workshop."

Although southwest Ireland draws increasing numbers of travelers from the United States and other countries with its scenic splendor and ancient sites, Syme did not come to Ireland as a tourist. He has not traveled widely in Ireland outside of the Beara Peninsula. As he says, "I love where we live in Houston [where he plays on his 1904 Steinway Model B] and I love it here, so when I have time when I'm not working, I like to stay where I live. It feels like a vacation to just not travel."

Two hours before the concert in his home, Syme has still not settled on the program for the day. "I have a huge library of music in my memory," he says, savoring the freedom of the home recitals. He says that the experience makes him want to do more. "Like learning the Rach 3 [Rachmaninoff's 3rd Piano Concerto in D Minor] three years ago. ... I was in my 50s. Most people say you should learn it in your 20s because you have to play it a hundred times to get it right." He first performed it in Tucson, Arizona, and will be repeating it in May 2009 with the Birmingham-Bloomfield Michigan Symphony.

Starting at the age of 3, Syme could play almost anything he heard, which baffled his parents when they tried to find a piano teacher.

Each time they met with one and asked what they would teach the little boy, Syme would listen to the teacher play, and mimic the music back. When he was 13 years old, he says, "Somebody finally got it through my head that if I was going to be a concert pianist, I needed to take lessons."

At that point, he decided he needed to work very hard to catch up, and he set himself a practice schedule of 10 hours a day in the summer time, leaving a couple of hours for baseball. Steven Larsen, director of the Champaign-Urbana and the Rockford (Illinois) symphonies says, "He is the only pianist I know who has developed a career after that kind of beginning."

Despite this unorthodox start, Larsen praises Syme's ability to "make a performance of the whole" rather than "expecting to be accompanied." Larsen goes on, "He gives a very exciting, organic performance."

From child prodigy to youthful forays into rock and jazz, to cocktail lounge, radio, and TV shows, to his main job, performing in classical concerts, Syme has played many variations on his pianos. His present schedule varies from major concert halls in the United States and Europe to Steinway galleries and living room recitals.

Even during his detours into popular music, Syme stayed fixed on his main goal – becoming a classical concert pianist. Syme studied with Jorge Bolet at Indiana University, Ozan Marsh at the University of Arizona, and Sascha Gorodnitzki at Juilliard. He later studied with Lewis Kentner in London.

At Indiana University, he played with rock and jazz bands and struck up a lifelong friendship with rock drummer Kenny Aronoff. The drummer has played with the Rolling Stones, John Mellencamp, and many other major stars. Although they went in different musical directions long ago, Aronoff says, "When I hear his CDs, I can hear his passion – he lets himself come out through his fingers."

Aronoff believes, as Syme does, that his youthful excursions into playing rock music have made him a better classical performer. As Aronoff puts it, "In rock and roll venues, people can integrate with the performer and the performer with the audience. It is not proper for the audience [at a classical performance] to yell, 'Hey, good job. Fantastic. I love your pizzicato.' In rock and roll, people can do that, and I can say, 'I like you man,' and throw a drumstick to them. David did that [played for that kind of audience] ... once you have had that experience, you can bring that with you to an orchestra setting."

After three years of intense study, Syme went to the Frederick Chopin International Piano Competition in 1975 and made the cut from 120 to 40 people. Because of the quality of his performance, judges invited him to play a concert at Chopin's birthplace. He calls it "one of the highlights of my life."

He continued to study, and three years later won a slot in the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. "When I lost that, I headed straight to Hazard, Kentucky," he says, in one of his self-mocking moments. There he hosted a popular TV show.

The varied background has contributed to a wide variety of interests. At home in Ireland, when he is not practicing, which many times takes place in the middle of the night, Syme switches between reading *Vanity Fair* magazine and various newspapers, watching TV, and listening to CDs. He likes artists from his youth like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones or The Band or Delaney and Bonnie. He delights in deconstructing the lyrics of popular music or finding traces of classical music hidden in tunes.



David and Suzanne Syme in their spacious living room beside the Steinway.

“When I listen to classical piano music, first is the late Jorge Bolet, whom I met when I was 16. He was considered to be a definitive Liszt player. Three pianists of the past whose recordings have influenced me are Arthur Rubinstein, Sviatoslav Richter, and Ignaz Friedman ... I am greatly inspired by the work of my longtime friend Stephen Hough, who is pursuing a career of such breadth and magnitude that he will be remembered in the same light as the all-time greats such as Rachmaninoff and Hoffman.”

Half an hour before starting time, Syme is running through pieces on the Steinway in the middle of his living room, still dressed in his shorts and casual open-collar shirt. Women in stylish white summer dresses arrive and gather in the kitchen, where Suzanne is putting out plates of spice cake and chocolate cookies.

He disappears into the master bedroom and re-emerges in a black suit with a red kerchief in pocket. People gather in the living room and chatter. Many have been here before. One of the men present designed the house. The doors onto the patio let in the warm summer air. The cows in the field below occasionally play a tuba note. The aroma of the fresh-baked desserts floats in from the kitchen.

About five minutes after three o'clock, Syme sits at the Steinway. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are about ready to get started.” Before he starts on

the first movement of a Beethoven sonata, Syme has a sartorial question. “Do you mind that I’m not wearing any socks?” It is a typical, humorous, and unexpected diversion from the more serious business at hand. They do not mind, as they sink into soft white chairs and sofas that ring the Steinway.

First comes Beethoven’s *Pathétique* Sonata. Next, he plays his favorite composer, Chopin. Two *Études* from Opus 25. He goes on announcing the titles, telling stories, and apologizing for the run of sad music. “The next piece is one of the saddest things ever written by Chopin,” he says, “but it makes me happy to play it. The *Nocturne in E Minor*.”

After a break, Syme returns to play “*Romanza*,” originally written for guitar, and then three pieces by Liszt. “The next two,” he announces, “are fairly energetic. Not sad. The *Transcendental Étude in F* by Liszt, called ‘transcendental’ because Liszt was the only one who could play it.”

Audience applause indicates that Liszt was not the only one who could play it.

After the recital, people mill around, buy CDs, drink another cup of coffee, and chat. As locals and tourists drive out the country lane lined with drooping red flowers of foxglove, Syme is already thinking about how his performance went today as he prepares for some summer trips abroad and the next living room concert.



Steinway Sightings

THE CORK SCHOOL OF MUSIC

The Cork School of Music, which is a School of Cork Institute of Technology, offers musical training from first grade through post-graduate. A new building that opened in 2007 in Cork City provides state-of-the-art facilities. When the new school opened, the school purchased a total of 57 new Steinway pianos, of which 54 are Model B grands, two are Model Vs (uprights), and one is a Model D concert grand.

Gabriella Mayer, head of Keyboard Instruction, adds, "Steinway was the only company willing to guarantee that its pianos would last at least 25 years, provided that they were maintained by a qualified Steinway technician." So the school hired a full-time Steinway piano technician.

The school sponsors public concerts, bringing in internationally known artists as well as recitals by their own advanced students. www.cit.ie

WEST CORK CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL

Founder Francis Humphries calls West Cork Chamber Music Festival "a major international chamber music festival – the most important and celebrated in Ireland." (He carefully makes a distinction between his festival and the Wexford Opera Festival.) Humphries and his staff of three manage 35 concerts, 26 master classes, instrument makers exhibition, more than 80 musicians, and more during a nine-day festival in the latter part of June each year, as well as other year-round activities.

Humphries faced many challenges when he gave up his dairy farm to become a concert manager. One involved proper pianos. Humphries says, "When I came to do the first festival, I said [to an Irish piano rental agency] I need a Steinway D, and he said 'There isn't a Steinway D for hire in all of the country, but give me a few months.' In a few months, he rang up and said, 'I have a Steinway D for you, and you will have it for the festival.'

"We have about 15 pianos total brought down here for a week, with 70 musicians, [including] 10 pianists." www.westcorkmusic.ie

BANTRY HOUSE

The 18th-century, Queen Anne-style Bantry House, the major home of the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, is what is known as a "big house." The eighth-generation owner of the house still lives on the top floor. Egerton Shelswell-White plays the trombone and used to do concerts with some friends. He and his wife, Brigitte, wanted to bring music to the area about the time that Humphries decided to start the festival, and they found a good match.



The stately Bantry House bed-and-breakfast is home of the West Cork Chamber Music Festival.

The historic family manor stands amidst formal gardens and statuary on the water of Bantry Bay just outside the town of the same name. Visitors may take self-guided tours of the property year-round, stay in a few rooms that Shelswell-White converted to a bed-and-breakfast, or eat casual but tasty snacks and meals in the West Wing Café.

In addition to the West Cork Chamber Music Festival in June and a traditional music festival in August, Bantry House hosts concerts monthly. www.bantryhouse.com

Coming Attraction:

CAPELLA DUNBOY CASTLE HOTEL

With present accommodations in Castletownbere limited to small hotels and bed-and-breakfasts, visitors look forward to the opening of a new five-star hotel.

Dunboy Castle was a stronghold of one of the last chieftains of Ireland. The new hotel near Castletownbere took the name from the ruins on the property, but the Capella™ Hotels and Resorts chain actually restored the 19th-century manse of a copper mining family named Puxley. If its castle-like towers and soaring stone arches in the grand entry hall do not impress you, try the thoroughly luxurious rooms and spa when the property opens in early 2009. www.capelladunboycastle.com