

PIANO PROGRAM IS 'KEY' TO MUSIC STUDIES AT ST. OLAF

By Elizabeth Child

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As an instrument, the piano is a must for any music program. It can be the diva performer, a complement to music ensembles and vocalists, or the workhorse of rehearsing choirs.

At St. Olaf the multifaceted piano is matched with a talented piano faculty of nine teacher-performers who have won national and international competitions, performed in the world's great music halls and released their own signature CDs.

Later this month three of the piano faculty will be presenters and judges at the largest convention for piano teachers in the Western hemisphere: the Canadian Federation of Music Teachers' Association (CFMTA) and the United States' Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), which will gather in Toronto for the 2007 Collaborative Conference March 23 to 27.

The Royal Conservatory of Music also is collaborating on the joint conference, which is expected to draw instrumental and voice teachers, graduate students and industry representatives from across Canada and the United States.

Two Canadians teaching at St. Olaf, Associate Professors of Music Kent McWilliams and Andrew Hisey, will help bridge the divide. Hisey will moderate three panels -- one on piano pedagogy in the United States, another on piano pedagogy in Canada and a third to discuss what the countries can learn from one another's distinct systems of teaching and testing. He will also co-lead a session on developing creativity in piano students and will be present for the release of a new eight-volume educational series of popular piano music by British composer Christopher Norton. Hisey edited the music and co-authored the student guidebooks that accompany the volumes.

McWilliams will help judge the MTNA's Young Artists, Senior Performance and Junior Performance competitions. He'll also lead a session called "A Peek into the Exam Room" and offer a lecture-recital on the music of Robert Muczynski.

In addition, Associate Professor of Music Kathryn Ananda-Owens will give a presentation called "Dogs, Horses and Hands: What Pianists Can Learn about Biomechanics and Cognition from Canine Agility and Equestrian Steeplechase," in which she'll describe how pianists can maximize their keyboard agility by being both handlers and performers.

"We'll be raising the profile of St. Olaf's piano program," says Hisey, who came to St. Olaf from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music 18 months ago. "Regionally the program is well respected. St. Olaf is recognized as a great place for music. But nationally the piano program gets hidden behind the choral and ensemble programs." That said, he adds, the choral and ensemble programs help showcase piano students who may be touring with the St. Olaf Band, Choir or Orchestra. For instance, piano performance major Paul Melcher '07, a member of the St. Olaf Choir, was a featured pianist on the televised broadcast and DVD of *A St. Olaf Christmas in Norway*, which has aired on PBS for the past two years.

HARMONIOUS FACULTY

The St. Olaf Music Department is known for its "mutual respect and appreciation," Hisey says. The year-old Thursday Piano Forum, in which faculty critique performance students taught by other faculty members, would be unheard of elsewhere, he explains.

The friendly partnerships impressed piano performance major Aileen Han '10, a state and national piano competition winner. "Music is very competitive, and St. Olaf has a healthy attitude toward competition," she says. The strong liberal arts environment at St. Olaf means that Han hasn't had to compromise her love of piano in order to pursue her dream of a dentistry career and her interest in the Chinese language. "I didn't expect to be a full-fledged piano performance major, but I was admitted into the program and now I realize I would be pretty lost without music," she says.

When Ananda-Owens was a student, her parents worried about how she'd pay for health insurance as a pianist, so she majored in both economics and music at Oberlin College. Today she enjoys teaching music at St. Olaf because the liberal arts environment appeals to students "who think deeply" while offering music training "equivalent to that offered at a high-quality conservatory," she says.

Faculty members augment their teaching with performance. This year's piano students took a master class from concert pianist Kevin Kenner and in April will work with David Breitman, director of the historical performance program at Oberlin. In recent years St. Olaf has hosted Hanni Schmid-Wyss, Tori Stodle, Leon Fleisher and Harvard Gimse as well.

The college's proximity to the Twin Cities allows piano students to compete with their peers at other colleges. St. Olaf students recently swept the Schubert Club Collegiate Awards in Minnesota.

Piano students at St. Olaf may study classical or jazz piano or major in piano performance with the chance to specialize in playing with bands, orchestras or vocalists.

Members of the piano faculty aim to broaden the reputation of the St. Olaf piano program. But many musicians and educators nationwide already are familiar with St. Olaf as a place where serious students get personal attention from highly trained professionals who put teaching first.

