

Great expectations

How long before
John Salmon becomes
a concert pianist?

by Carol Holowinski

At age six, he intently stared while his sister magically touched the white ivory keys of the piano. It was then that John Salmon decided he was talented—he had accomplished playing “Chopsticks.”

He began taking lessons from a rather exceptional teacher named Mrs. Q’Zella Oliver Jeffus, who is not only a pianist but also an avid admirer of Charles Dickens. In an atmosphere shrouded in music and Dickens, with violin-shaped ashtrays and Oliver Twist statues scattered about the room, he became fascinated and grew. Like most small children, he was intrigued.

It was in her small studio, crowded with assorted keyboard instruments, that the photographed faces of Jeffus’ students (dating from 1934) and Dickens’ char-

acters watched John play his first scales. He became so enthralled with his world that, now a senior, he aspires to be a concert pianist.

Romantically, John Salmon’s

music evolved similar to Pip’s manhood in Dickens’ **Great Expectations** John’s music grew from a superficial dream to that full of strength and depth—from pounding out a few notes to the genius of Bach and Beethoven.

John is different from most pianists. Although his talents may be partly inborn and partly cultivated, he possesses something special, Jeffus said. He has “absolute pitch”—he can hear notes and know exactly what they are. Even beyond that, John has cultivated his natural ability “to an extreme brilliance.”

Perhaps John was lucky that his interest has endured throughout the past 15 years. The world is full of stories of frustrated artists who wish they “could have stuck with it.” But in his early years, his fascination





John Salmon

gave him the strength to continue his dream.

"Being in an atmosphere like that (Jeffus' studio) kind of sent you into a time warp.... There was an innate love for music. But the fascination was just with this woman and her world," John said.

Later his fascination changed to a desire to be "a prophet figure" of music.

"I think that there is a genuine truth... in great music that people will be better off for having heard. And inasmuch as I can be an instrument of that truth, well then, I will," he said.

But John doesn't need a piano to survive. "I think if the Nazis were to rise and come to the U.S. and crush every piano just like they did all the books—instead of having a book burning they'd have a piano burning—I'd still find some way to make music. Music will always live, even without pianos," he explained.

It's difficult to imagine John's life without pianos, though they and the music they produce have grown so much a part of him. Their very substance seems to have become the fibers of his soul and mind.

At first he wanted to be a jazz pianist, but during his freshman year he changed his mind. He decided to be a concert pianist

because he felt the music was "more compelling."

Yet, at times, the very thing he loves most breeds fear in him—especially when he's about to perform. "The greater the music, the greater the responsibility, the greater the fear," he said. So before John plays Bach or Beethoven or Schumann before a music-hungry crowd, he prays, "because it's the only effective way of combatting fear."

His desire to be a concert pianist doesn't necessarily mean he spends all his time practicing. There seems to be some sort of a mystery or myth about being a concert pianist, John said. Automatically, people think you practice eight hours a day, when in reality it gets less, because as a student you really have more time, he explained.

Before a performance, John will usually practice four hours a day "really concentrating." John doesn't believe in the East Coast conservatory theory that one must practice eight hours a day to achieve excellence. Instead, he agrees with the German pianist Gieseking, who said that piano practicing is like bathing: You should only do it when you need to.

To John, it's the amount of concentration, not the number of

hours, that counts. "It's easy to practice seven to eight hours a day and say, 'OK, now I've done it,' just to feel like you've accomplished something. What's hard to say is, 'OK, I'm going to really concentrate.'"

"Many people use hours as an excuse for concentration," John said.

Currently John's instructor is Luiz Carlos de Monra Castro. Castro believes that one should practice constantly until the basic skills and techniques are learned. Once it "becomes a second nature to you" and is "integrated in your life," concentration is more important than amount.

As John progresses in his technique there will be a time when "he doesn't need a constant teacher," said Castro. When John reaches that point, he would be able to learn more by observing. However, even though he has been "taught" for 15 years, it will still be a while before John reaches that stage—Castro, for example, has been "learning" for 30 years.

You will "always need instruction" of some kind, Castro said. It is a "continued process of learning"; it is "so vast that there is always room for growth."

As his music pulls him in and surrounds him with its melodic beauty, he still manages to break from its embrace from time to time to stray into another love—philosophy. Buried somewhere within his philosophical nature and behind his bluish grey eyes, lies a modest soul.

John accepts his many musical awards and honors not as tokens of achievement but as the realization of a potential. He shies from talking about himself and his accomplishments. The conversation instead tends to drift to the inner person, the innate strength with which one must meet the world.

And John has created his own world, built with precision and love—laced with harmony. Unlike living in a world, John lives for a world.

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