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John Terauds

There are people who keep insisting that those who can't do, teach. John O'Connor came to prove otherwise to a Music Toronto audience at the Jane Mallett Theatre on Tuesday night.

The director of the Royal Irish Academy of Music, who turned 63 last week, sat down at the piano in a varied program of pieces from the 18th and 19th centuries in order to show off a rare combination of sensitivity and verve.

Dressed in a rumpled tweed jacket – because the airline lost his luggage during a much-delayed stopover in New York – O'Connor presented a clearly articulated, dramatically varied *Sonata No. 47* in B-minor by Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and three well-known *Nocturnes* by fellow Irishman John Field (1782-1837), whose melodies he threaded together with a butterfly-like lyricism.

These were a prelude to the evening's climax, the Op. 110 *Sonata No. 31* by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) in a performance that kept me on the edge of my seat. This was not a pretty interpretation. It was even awkward in spots. But it was dramatically riveting as O'Connor sliced each of Beethoven's thoughts into distinct pieces, linking them together with a "you won't believe what's going to happen next" buildup of suspense.

This was nothing short of a masterstroke of musical theatre, performed by two hands on a keyboard.

A left-hand-only *Prelude* and *Nocturne* by Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) sounded as if there were five more fingers on the keyboard. And the four Op. 90 *Impromptus* by Franz Schubert (1798-1828) were cleanly and clearly laid out, but, even so, they felt like an anticlimax after the Beethoven.

If this is what piano teachers are all about, mothers, send forth your children immediately.