Spotlight Interview: Evan McGarrigle

Evan McGarrigle, piano, is an Apple Hill alumnus who lives in County Donegal, Republic of Ireland. About this interview, he says, “these questions have been such a joy to answer. I've been thinking about sight-reading Bach, about Lenny reading Tarot for the Turkish gang, about helicopters and lawnmowers, and asking people about their lives in areas of conflict and hearing the world views of people from other cultures. I think ALL alumni should sit down for a couple of hours and answer these questions! Make it a book!”

Tell us how you first became involved with Apple Hill.

My first instrument is piano but I actually played the clarinet a number of times at Apple Hill workshops in Derry city. I was never a very good clarinet player but I enjoyed the ensemble playing that I didn't really get to have with my piano at the time. Then, I remember being in first year University when some of the other Apple Hill alumni in Dublin convinced me I should play piano chamber music. They also coaxed me into applying (as pianist) for the workshop in Donegal (my home county). A few months later I received an email from Elise Kuder that I was being offered a Playing for Peace Ireland scholarship to attend two sessions in New Hampshire. I was so unbelievably excited. But I was a little scared. I'd never been that far away and I'd never gone further than England without my family! There were some really good friends from home going that year too so in truth, I was relieved about that. I don't think any of us really could have guessed the experience we would have at Apple hill.

What are you doing now? What is it like to do that work in a rural setting?

I teach a lot of piano but I also give vocal coaching and I conduct a few choirs (adult and child). As well as that, I teach general music and tin whistle in a couple of elementary schools. The rural setting gives a distinctive complexion and character to the work. There is a very strong sense of identity in Donegal. In rural Ireland, in fact, there are even localised parochial identities—peculiar to the smallest village areas. I think this most affects me in the way people (even kids) that I encounter have a strong sense of the music that they like to hear and want to perform. A migrant to the area and friend of mine recently observed that "everybody here can sing!"

Donegal is a stunningly remote and beautiful place—I really love it here—and for generations has attracted lots of introverted types such as artists, musicians, poets etc. I think the people are very open because of that: open to different kinds of music, different personalities and cultures. At least I like to believe that. There's not a huge amount of classical music here so you end up bumping into the same people at all of the events. That's nice: a community within the community. My people—this bog tribe—we can surprise you, you know! For example, a few years back, one of my adult piano pupils bought herself a harpsichord—for the sheer joy of it.
She brought this baroque instrument into her wee cottage, off a dirt road, off a bog road, off a country road. You wouldn't find it, even with a map. Now she makes all these friends: locals, foreign migrants, unlikely buddies who come from the hills and the lake-sides of Donegal and they're playing classical violins and viola da gambas and she's playing music to this incredibly high standard. I love how the people, like their children, like our changeable landscape, still manage to surprise and challenge me. I just love that.

**How has what you learned at Apple Hill helped you in what you do now?**

Well, I think I learned a lot about acceptance. The first of Apple Hill's three values is "Everyone is accepted" for who they are and where they happen to be on their journey. I learned a lot at Apple Hill about accepting myself, about who I am and about my worth; not just from the faculty but from everyone there. Without that self-esteem I don't think I could even be doing what I do now! I got a lot of that confidence from my friends at Apple Hill. You know lots of the lifelong participants at the summer workshops—I mean the ones that keep going to sessions in their 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond—a lot of them are involved in teaching music. I think we teachers appreciate the ethos at Apple Hill so much that we try to replicate it (at least in part) out in the world. Whether conducting a choir or teaching piano, I find I am so often tempted to "step in" to the space of the musician or group that I'm directing. Get the repertoire finished. Get the technique developed. Get the curriculum covered. Get the standard reached. The kid or the choir are not where they “need” to be. Get them to move off the road they're on and do better. "Step in" and intervene. But you know that is so wrong. On those days when I am doing my best work, I sit back a lot more. I observe how they want to be and I work with the energy they have and respect their space. And you know, they respect you a lot more if they know that you accept them for who and how and what they are as a person. And they will achieve way more, musically and personally, that way. I mean once you feel accepted as a person, then also as a musician, life becomes easier. Work becomes a reward not a chore. I think that I work harder as I get older, but I find work easier. I'm certainly a better practitioner, a better player, and a better teacher; I think even a little kinder. I'm a lot more open to other people and less about the “self.” On those good days, I know that Apple Hill is one of the spaces that I learned a lot from. I mean, I watched the coaches playing so amazingly and teaching me and I took masterclasses, sure, and I learned some of my skills there. But acceptance, that is the big lesson I get from Apple Hill.

**Can you tell us about one of your favorite Apple Hill memories?**

Wow, that is a really tough question. I'm glad to have been asked, because it makes me very nostalgic for so much (people, places, events) and very thankful for my privilege too. I recall my first summer in New Hampshire and the last night before leaving Apple Hill. That was a good night. A small crew of very special people from four different continents had gathered in the winter rehearsal room and we sang and played music, all types of music. We shared stories and had the best of 'craic' as we say in Ireland. Special people. I remember listening to music and thinking about all of the mind-opening people and experiences I had in such a short time. You know I was 18 years old and so, so green. Naive, in a good way and in a bad way—childish, really. Those days, I used to wear this religious icon around my neck: a tattered old piece of leather that unbuttoned to reveal faded Catholic images of devotion on the inside. I'm not particularly religious but I liked it because it had been my great-grandfather's. My mother asked
that I wear it on my first journey to America to keep me safe and I had no objection. I wore it most of the time anyway. On my first morning at Apple Hill I took it off and went to have a shower and came back out to find it gone, mysteriously lost, forever. Anyway, on that really special last night with the amazing gang, I became overwhelmed and really quite emotional. I had to leave the intercultural sing-song and get outside for a minute. Seriously, heavily overwhelmed. I went down to the middle of the lawn far behind the barn and threw myself on the ground. "Ouch!" I had sat right on top of the "lost" family icon. I, of course, love this story. I'm a stickler for spirituality, deep meaning and metaphor. I "lost my religion and found God" at Apple Hill; I got "out of myself and into the world." Sure, you know, you could flesh out the themes and motifs of the story to a novel! Maybe I will someday. Sure, God knows!