

Wemberly Ponder to perform at the Emma Kelly  
By Angye Morrison, The Statesboro Herald

The ONE Series continues Sept. 24 with a performance by Statesboro native Wemberly Ponder.

Born to parents Sanford and Harriett Ponder, Ponder graduated from William James High School, as well as Georgia Southern University. He says that he was raised primarily by his mother, as his father was hospitalized throughout most of his childhood.

The family didn't have a television, but Ponder and his mom often watched at a neighbor's home. It was there that he was first exposed to classical music and piano — he watched a television show featuring two pianists when he was 5.

"I just loved the music," he said. "I said I want to play that music."

Ponder played by ear at first, utilizing the instruments of friends. He emulated everything he heard and saw others do on the piano, and by 11 he was playing as well as they did. People began to encourage his mother to get him piano lessons, and she spoke to a neighbor about teaching him. The neighbor pointed them toward Tharon Stevens, who was then the choral director at William James High School, and a distinguished piano teacher in Statesboro.

Ponder was soon taking lessons from Stevens, who pushed him and demanded the best from him. He recalls Stevens being very strict, and demanding an hour of practice every day.

"He was very detailed. If I didn't get it right, he would keep on me until I got it right," Ponder said, adding that the repetition ensured that he got the concepts down as well as the method.

Ponder went on to study when he was in the 11th grade with Dr. Sterling Adams, who was professor of Piano at Georgia Southern.

Ponder is the winner of the Fort Valley State College annual Music Teachers Clinic Awards in Piano and Sight Singing; the winner of the Pro-Mozart Society Scholarship that enabled him to attend the Mozarteum Academy of Music in Salzburg, Austria, where he studied with pianist and pedagogue, Kurt Neumuller.

He has participated in masterclasses under pianists Rosalyn Tureck, Lili Krauss and Maculzinski. He has been coached by pianists Andre Watts, Ruth Slenczynka and Eugene Haynes. Ponder studied conducting, musical composition, orchestration and music theory with the Rev. Don Northrip.

He has performed Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue for Piano and Orchestra" with Georgia Southern Symphony and Bach's "D Minor Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" with the Savannah Symphony.

He directed Brannen Chapel Male Chorus in a performance of his original composition entitled "O Statesboro, Where the Sun Smiles" during Statesboro's bicentennial celebration. He was musical director under Mical Whitaker in the poetry production about "The Life of Langston Hughes" by Bob Dick that was staged at the Averitt Center for the Arts. He has participated as an accompanist for Statesboro Youth Chorale and Statesboro Boys and Girls Choir under Dr. Tamara Harper.

Despite all his travels, Ponder says that his heart has always been in Statesboro.

"All my dreams, and all that I have wanted to do in my life came from my upbringing here in Statesboro," he said.

For his performance on Sept. 24, he plans to perform “Melody to the Stars,” an original composition dedicated to the city of Statesboro. He is also dedicating a song to the Averitt Center, called “A Prelude to the Averitt Center,” and another to Georgia Southern, entitled, “Melody to the Southern Pines.”

Ponder describes his music as soothing, and says that not all music these days is.

“Some of the contemporary music written now is very noisy. I take a lot of walks in nature and I spend a lot of time in nature,” he said, adding that he tries to spend time each day in silence to be still and catch up with his own thoughts.

“When I play music, it comes from that place of silence,” he said.

Nature inspires Ponder a lot, as does his faith, and he often takes walks at Georgia Southern, as he did when he was a student there. He often found solace in the Southern pines on campus.

“I would go there when I was worried about exams, and I would lie flat on my back and look up at the sky and just know that God was with me,” he said.

In addition to his original compositions, Ponder will play several works by Frédéric Chopin, his favorite composer, to include several of his etudes for piano, including “Fantaisie Impromptu, Op. 66.” He will also perform “Autumn Leaves” composed by Joseph Kosma, “Killing Me Softly” composed by Charles Fox, and “Misty” composed by Erroll Garner.

Ponder is currently teaching piano privately, and is an accompanist at Georgia Southern. He also plays for Greater Bethel AME and Historical First African Baptist Church.

The performance on Sept. 24 begins at 7:30 p.m. at the Emma Kelly Theater, and tickets are \$20.