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# Westminster Abbey Organist James O'Donnell Featured at Feb. 14 Recital

## Quick Facts

- Westminster Abbey Organist James O'Donnell looks forward to playing Winthrop's famed D.B. Johnson Memorial Organ for the Feb. 14 concert at Byrnes Auditorium.
- Tickets are \$10 for the general public and \$5 for those over 65 or students with a Winthrop ID.



*James O'Donnell*

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA - Sixteen years into his job as organist and master of the choristers at [Westminster Abbey](#), [James O'Donnell](#) knows how fortunate he is to have one of the most-coveted church music jobs in the United Kingdom.

For a change of pace from planning music at all of the Abbey's services and special occasions, O'Donnell loves traveling to give organ concerts for music lovers worldwide. He is the first artist to perform in Winthrop's new organ series in a **Feb. 14 concert** scheduled for 3 p.m. at [Byrnes Auditorium](#).

O'Donnell looks forward to playing Winthrop's famed **D.B. Johnson Memorial Organ**. "I have an idea of the instrument," he said after having viewed it on YouTube. He described it as a general purpose instrument that is ideal for a large hall such as Byrnes.

"All organs are different with different sounds and personalities," he said, adding that it is helpful that many of the U.S. organs are laid out nearly the same. Once he practices on the Winthrop instrument built by the **Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company**, he'll be able to adjust his performance to bring out its best. "It's a very symbiotic relationship," he said.

Internationally recognized as a conductor and organ recitalist, O'Donnell has traveled extensively all over the world. Rock Hill is one of three concerts, along with Chicago and Philadelphia, for O'Donnell during his latest trip to the United States.

His Feb. 14 program won't have any love songs or other topical themes. What he aims to achieve in his selection of seven pieces is to play music that anyone would enjoy. "The music I play will suit the organ well and hopefully will be enjoyed by whatever musical level the audience is on. It will be a concert that anyone could enjoy," O'Donnell said of the program which contains standard organ fare by English, German and French composers.

He advises young music students who love the organ and its culture to follow their dreams and work hard. "This has been a fantastically fulfilling life for me," he said.

O'Donnell has a very busy schedule at **Westminster Abbey** overseeing its music and conducting its world-famous choir. "I have a very busy schedule here and happily so," he said. Some of his most visible work has been to direct the music for a 2010 service in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI

and the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in 2011.

He makes time to travel to the United States at least once a year. "It is very important to step back and work in a different setting," he said, explaining that instead of conducting an ensemble, he also enjoys performing as a soloist.

"This is a good time for me to practice what I preach," O'Donnell said. "Variety is good when you are in the arts."

The Feb. 14 concert will be his first in South Carolina although he has performed in the Southeast in Georgia, Florida and Louisiana. "I find the people in the South to be very hospitable and friendly," O'Donnell said. "They have a particular style and are very polite and courteous."

Born in Scotland, O'Donnell moved to England during his childhood. He was a junior exhibitioner at the **Royal College of Music** and subsequently Organ Scholar of **Jesus College** in Cambridge. He then worked as first Assistant Master of Music and later as Master of Music at **Westminster Cathedral** before moving to Westminster Abbey.

Attracted to music at an early age, O'Donnell said he got the right breaks to end up in his current job. "There are very few jobs in Britain overseeing church music," he said. "I feel very privileged and fortunate to work where I do."

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