The piano is not his only forte

The acclaimed musician artist and writer muses on life, art, faith and what to wear for performing, writes Peter Stanford

Rough Ideas: Reflections on Music and More
Stephen Hough
Ruber & Ruber: £12.99, pp164

To be a renowned concert pianist and composer would be more than enough for most of us. But Stephen Hough, who will mark the 200th anniversary of Queen Victoria’s birth at the Proms on Friday by playing a concerto by her favourite composer, Mendelssohn, on her own piano, is a polymath. He paints so well that prestigious galleries stage exhibitions of his work and he has recently published a well-received novel, The Final Retreat.

Perhaps, though, the two most impressive things about this Renaissance man, to judge by Rough Ideas, are his modesty – the elegant jacket features not the standard “celeb” portrait, but him with his back to us, disguised in anonymous black coat and bowler hat – and a down-to-earth tone that enables him to tackle complex questions about art, faith, morals and life in an unpretentious, everyday way. So, when describing the life of a concert pianist in the series of short, thought-provoking and often amusing “jottings” that make up the book, he doesn’t bother with glamour, big names or his own “gift”, but instead answers the questions that those who have never been to the Proms might ask him.

Why, for example, do classical music performers wear such old-fashioned, trouser-up clothes to perform in public? Is it down to psychology, or elitism, he explains, “I really think I play better when I change into something special.” Why are audiences disproportionately elderly? Not in Asia, he points out, where young adoring fans regard those who play Beethoven and Bach with the same near-hysteria as they do Justin Bieber.

As in all the best memoirs, he isn’t afraid to tackle uncomfortable or inane questions: how often does he play wrong notes (more than you would think) and does he spend his days practising at home on some fabulous grand piano? No, he has a digital Yamaha in his New York apartment, prioritising “floor space over a Steinway”.

Elsewhere, he recounts being asked, as a gay man, if an audience member can tell if a pianist is gay by his or her playing style: Hough might be excused for dismissing the inquiry as insulting, but instead first takes the chance to damn the suggestion once made by the celebrated American concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz that there were three types in the ranks of his colleagues and rivals: Jewish, gay and bad. “I’ve known some that were all three.” Hough notes.

Then he goes on to pick away at the underlying issues in the question. Perhaps, he concludes, “there is an intensity, a verging towards the edge”, certainly among an older generation of gay musicians, who lived in times of “the fear of policemen waiting at the dressing-room door”.

This is not, though, only a book for those wanting to go backstage in the classical music world. Hough offers thoughts on all sorts of things from architecture to picture restoration. Some of his most cross-cultural musings, however, come over religion. He is not, he says, adapting Graham Greene, “a Catholic pianist” but a pianist and a Catholic. “It has to do with the difference between God’s responsibility and ours in the creative process.” Where his own faith does, arguably, play a role in his work, he suggests, “is in the mental health that results from its vision of ultimate reality”.

Some of these jottings have appeared before, in newspapers and magazines around the globe, but others are simply “notes” taken to fill “dead time” while on the road. It is one to dip into, but the sum seems greater than the parts, which, if you get to the end of Rough Ideas, you might conclude is also true of the man who wrote them.

To order Rough Ideas for £16.71 go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0345 351 0000.