

TRACK

11

STEPHEN HOUGH

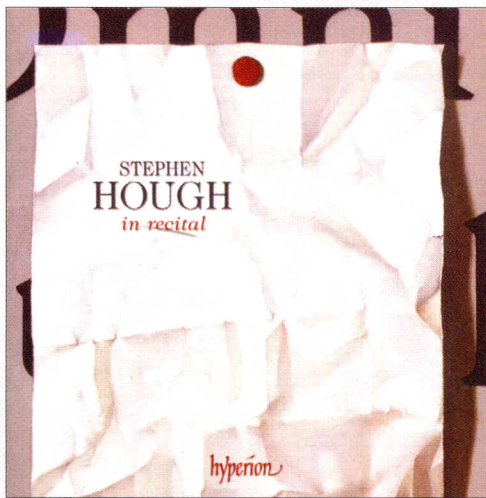
In Recital

Stephen Hough *pf*
Hyperion

This may sound eccentric, but pretty much all you need to know about this masterly, magnificent recital can be gleaned from listening to the three minutes of *Matilda's Waltz* that serves for an encore (of sorts). Hough himself has converted the traditional *Waltzing Matilda*, aptly, to a waltz. The famous melody sings but is so delicately poised, so supremely well balanced at both ends of the stave, nothing overdone, everything satisfying, that the word "perfection" does not seem hyperbolic.

So it is throughout the programme. Balance is the watchword, but taste is the driving force – not only so that everything is tastefully done, which it is, but that everything, as Jeremy Nicholas points

'This is Stephen Hough, master pianist, at his formidable best'



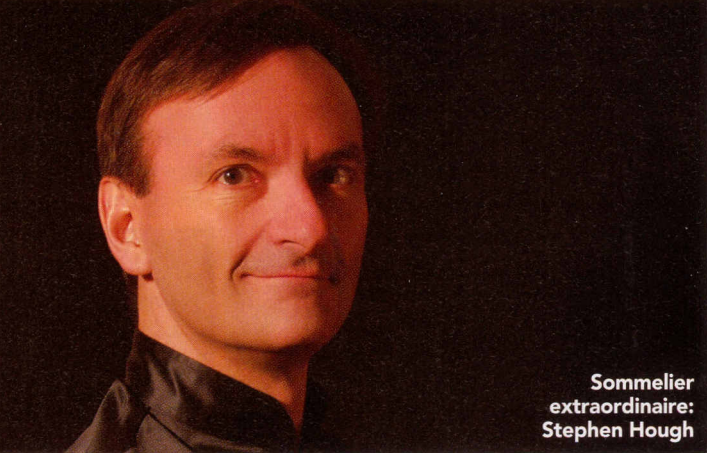
out, has its own unique and distinctive flavour. But always there is the guiding, rock-solid musical personality of Hough. Nothing screams out, there is no ostentatious flamboyance, but the listener is compelled to lend an ever-more attentive ear and is rewarded with endlessly changing, subtle hues and many layers of complexity.

This is Stephen Hough, master pianist (and, of course, *Gramophone* Gold Disc winner) at his formidable best. In a hotly contested month, it would take something special indeed to be CD of the month. This is it.

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CD of the month

DISC OF THE MONTH



**Sommelier
extraordinaire:
Stephen Hough**

GRANT HIROSHIMA



An exquisite gourmet experience – could it be piano recording of the year?

Stephen Hough

Beethoven Piano Sonata No 32, Op 111 **Chabrier** Feuillet d'album Leaf **Chopin** Waltzes – No 2, Op 34 No 1; No 7, Op 64 No 2 **Debussy** La plus que lente **Liszt** Mephisto Waltz No 1, 'Der Tanz in der Dorfschenke', S514. 4 Valse oubliées, S215 No 1 **Mendelssohn** Variations sérieuses, Op 54 **Saint-Saëns** Valse nonchalante, Op 110 **Traditional** Waltzing Matilda **Weber** Aufforderung zum Tanze, J260 Op 65
Stephen Hough *pf*
Hyperion © CDA67686 (79' • DDD)



Listening to this recital I felt as though I were a guest at a sumptuous banquet. The menu, with its tasty hors d'oeuvre, substantial classic dish as the main course followed by a variety of unexpected and nourishing desserts, is perfectly balanced – enough to fill you without being bloated, and nothing that is hard to chew or liable to give you indigestion. But it is the different wines accompanying each course that make this meal special, that is to say the discriminating *premier cru* tone, touch (what magically hushed *pianissimos*) and masterly pedalling to which the diners are treated, each element adjusted to each composer yet all unmistakably Stephen Hough – vintage Hough at that, for here is a pianist at the height of his powers.

This is the sort of programme and style of playing redolent of the so-called Golden Age of Rachmaninov, Hofmann, Godowsky, Cortot et al but which, in this earnest urtext era, is encountered all too infrequently. The Mendelssohn (with some seriously brisk tempi – try variations Nos 8 and 9) and a taut, crisply articulated account of Beethoven's Op 111 explore two aspects of variation form.

The "second half" is devoted to waltz time, beginning with Weber's pioneering *Invitation* (1819), the earliest work in this recital. For some unaccountable reason it is rarely heard in its original form these days. Hough's is the finest performance I have ever heard – and that includes Ignaz Friedmann – exuberant, seductive and scintillating by turns with the repeats (all are given) subtly varied second time round. After two delectably suave Chopin waltzes, Hough offers three contrasted Gallic takes on 3/4 time, imbuing each with the kind of affection and charm for which Cherkassky was famous. After this he cleverly takes us gently by the ear via Liszt's nostalgic *Valse oubliée* No 1 to the pianistic diablerie of his *Mephisto Waltz* No 1. Rounding off this masterclass is Hough's own witty transformation of *Waltzing Matilda* from its normal duple time to triple time. A great piano recording and front runner for instrumental disc of the year. **Jeremy Nicholas**