

Stephen Hough

The life of an international musician is busy enough, says the leading pianist. Try turning composer as well

I'm writing this above the clouds somewhere between London and Budapest. "Your life is one long vacation, isn't it," said someone to me backstage once. Only my mouth was smiling. But now my recent recordings are over I feel less stressful and pressured, despite three concerts this coming weekend with the Budapest Festival Orchestra conducted by Mikhail Pletnev. When a great pianist is conducting there's always the fear that he will sweep the soloist off the stool and play himself.

Recording is the only way musicians can preserve the sounds over which they spend their lives agonising, yet there is no greater professional agony for me than this process. If only those pristine, shiny circles we insert into our machines could tell the stories of their creation! Sixty minutes, mined, cut and polished out of mountains which seem insurmountable at times. A week ago I was at Wyastone recording all the Chopin Waltzes; then over the past couple of days I've been at Potton Hall recording my own cycle *Other Love Songs* with the Prince Consort. I shouldn't make it all sound too negative though, because when the results come close to our ideals it can feel immensely, thrillingly fulfilling.

I've travelled to many places over the years but this is my first visit to Hungary. I'm particularly excited because it seems that there is a special musical gene in



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the Hungarian people. My first intimation of this came when I was at Chetham's School and went for my first Solfège class as a short-panted 10-year-old. Our teacher was an always vivacious, sometimes ferocious Hungarian lady called Cecelia Vajda who had us all tapping out the 7/8 rhythms from the *Gloria* of Britten's *Missa brevis* in our first lesson. I'm expecting no less from the receptionist at my hotel.

After our three concerts at the Palace of Arts I will be home – for about 30 hours before leaving on a six-week tour of North America. That should be enough time to unpack, repack, gather together my scores (and my flute sonata sketches, in case I have time to compose on the road) and

get a haircut. And to take one last drag of my feet through the moist carpet of London's autumn leaves, because when I return all will be bare and swept. I start in Vancouver and move from there to Seattle, Portland, Houston, Denver and Chicago, playing six different concertos with these cities' symphony orchestras. It was a busy but nicely planned tour, until Murray Perahia cancelled his Carnegie Hall recital and I was asked to replace him. So now, instead of a leisurely drive from Seattle to Portland along the glorious northern West Coast, I will be hurtling over to New York. The main stage of Carnegie Hall was actually the first public venue I played in New York, as a 21-year-old student in the finals of the Naumburg

Competition. The result that night changed my life; and, as grand as Carnegie is, there is always something strangely comforting in the memory of that unexpectedly sudden coming-of-age. I finish my US tour with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, beginning a cycle there of all four Tchaikovsky works for piano and orchestra. But as exciting as that may be, Chicago is home to one of the greatest shops in the world, Optimo Hats, out in the suburb of Beverly. I will be planning a trip there during my stay, even if I have to hijack a snow-plough to do so.

Looking forward, I will be playing with the Budapest Festival Orchestra again, but on that occasion conducted by their founder and music director, Iván Fischer, and in London, not Budapest. We're playing Liszt's First Concerto at the Royal Festival Hall as part of a small European tour as the celebrations for the bicentenary of the composer's birth begin. As this is the first concerto I played at the BBC Proms 25 years ago, it will be a small, private anniversary for me too. Whenever I play the music of Liszt I'm conscious of his formative influence on everything a pianist does. His hands shape our hands at the keyboard; for those of us who love him, they clasp us across the centuries in a warm embrace. ☺

Stephen Hough plays Liszt's Piano Concerto No 1 at the Royal Festival Hall on January 16