

THE JAMES NAUGHTIE INTERVIEW

# STEPHEN HOUGH



One of today's most outstanding virtuosos, the British pianist is also a brilliantly free-thinking communicator. But, he tells James Naughtie, performers do still need to maintain a certain distance and tradition

PHOTOGRAPHY ROB SCOTT

Stephen Hough is considering a change in his routine on the concert platform that would be radical. He doesn't intend to wear jeans, nor to engage his audience in faux-friendly banter before playing. But he may place his music on the piano, and read from the score. 'Memory has become too much of an Olympic challenge, a macho thing. I'm wondering whether it might be better to change that.'

The reason lies quite deeply inside him, and is far more than an irritation with the number of people who ask after a concert 'how do you remember it all?' when that has so little to do with the quality of a performance – 'an irrelevance'. It's a conviction that seriousness depends on constant refreshment, a revelation each time that a piece is played. 'It might be a way of teasing more out of a score, a different kind of constant discovery.'

Hough, who plays Saint-Saëns's *Egyptian* Piano Concerto at this year's Proms, is our most formidable and versatile pianist with an international reputation that has him firmly in the premier league, and is an artist who spends a great deal of time thinking about the nature of the music-making mystery. It's natural for him to put this in the context of literature and of religious faith, because he moves easily in conversation into that sphere.



ROYAL ALBERT HOUGH: the British pianist is a regular at the Proms

**'You pull a trick. It lasts a couple of months. Then what?'**

He makes the point that in the Judeo-Christian tradition a Rabbi or priest will read the liturgy from a book as a deliberate act of recreation, time and time again, although the words are embedded in his head. 'It is an important act. A discipline. You discover something every time.'

Sviatoslav Richter used a score towards the end of his life, partly, says Hough, to

allow him to extend his repertoire, but the Russian master also spoke about the benefits of the discipline of *not* relying on memory. A piece firmly bolted down in the mind, ready to be unlocked at the flick of a switch, may hold in it the danger of formulaic repetition. Hough wonders whether Liszt – who invented the form of the solo recital we know so well, with the piano at right angles to the audience and no music to be seen – put himself under so much pressure that it led to his decision to cut short his own performing career, so that by the time he was in his forties even that monumental figure was turning down invitations to play.

Hough will use a score when he gives the first performance of his own Sonata at Wigmore Hall in June... and maybe that will make the point. 'I wanted to separate myself the performer from myself the composer and I felt that, visually, to put my own score up and to play from it would be the best way of going about it.' We're back to the question of how a performance looks, and sounds, and the flow turns again to what he sometimes calls the 'theatrical liturgy of the recital'.

He's delighted by the breaking down of some of the social stuffiness that once surrounded the classical performance, but is wary of gimmickry. 'You pull a trick. It lasts a couple of months. Then what do you do? ▶



A LEARNED APPROACH: 'I spend a lot of time reading when I'm alone on the road'

Invent another one?' Indeed, he argues firmly for the other-worldliness of the performer to be established every time, and maintained. 'I think the theatre – the liturgy, really – of someone walking onto a darkened stage in a costume that's different from daily wear isn't dead yet. There should be some distance. That's not wrong, I think it's quite necessary.'

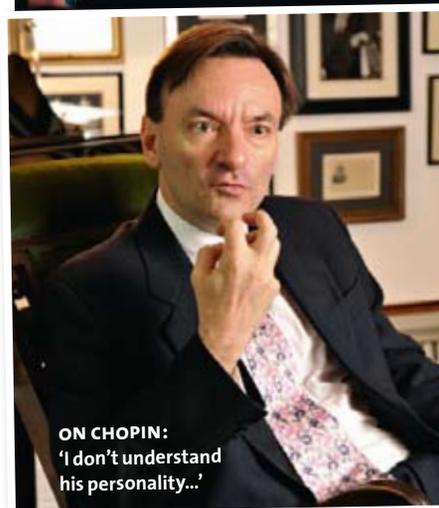
His excitement about performance and audiences isn't so much in the hope that such formalities will go but that the conventions that once dictated a fashion – 'narrow ties one year, wide lapels the next' – have gone. 'I think we're in a rather marvellous time. Everyone is free to do what they want. No one can stop them now. I hated the idea, for example, that in studying composition in the 1970s you could only write in one style. If you didn't, you couldn't get on the course. If you wrote outside the convention you'd be laughed off the stage. That's over. Finished.'

Hough of course has become a blogger, at the invitation of the *Daily Telegraph*, which asked him three years ago to have a shot at it. To his surprise – he thought he might make it to ten blogs and no more – he's still going strong and his commentaries are followed by many readers. His secret is that he always wanted to write, and was more interested in scribbling at school than in music. There's a sketchy novel somewhere in his head, and he is a voracious reader. The second secret is that he has discovered the electronic book.

We talk about his reading habits in the context of the solitary life of the travelling performer, and he reveals – perhaps surprisingly – that he enjoys being alone. Not for him the agonies of lonely hotel rooms. As long as he doesn't watch TV – he made it a rule after some grim American nights in the early days – he finds he can work, write, and read very happily. 'I'm an only child. I've always been used to being on my own. I like it.' He is no introspective loner, however – just someone who can handle himself without help when he has to. And the electronic book?

'I spend a lot of time reading when I'm eating alone in restaurants, on the road. I've spent years balancing books on plates, using forks and spoons, buying little gadgets to help me do to. Now that's gone. I love being able to read easily at the table.' He's just finished a Henry James, and we talk about his favourite books. He has a particular fondness for the American novelist Willa Cather (1873-1947), whose novels about life on the Great Plains in the first half of the 20th century have often been underrated. Indeed, she became so depressed by the critics who accused her of disappearing into an idealised past that she burned manuscripts and became reclusive. Hough feels a great warmth towards her,

**VERSATILE VIRTUOSO:**  
rehearsing 'awkward' Tchaikovsky  
with the BBC SO at the 2009 Proms



**ON CHOPIN:**  
'I don't understand  
his personality...'

and it leads us to talk about the nature of the artist: his admiration for her springs from what he believes to be her ability to express human compassion, and the ability to sense that in the artist is important to him.

Take Chopin. Hough's recording of the complete waltzes is coming out later this summer, and he plays the music with a consummate feeling for the emotion. Yet Chopin the man? A genius whom he might have found... not very interesting. Able to

produce magic on the page – one of the rare composers, he says, who never tried to write the same piece twice – but not someone with whom it would have been easy to engage. 'I don't understand his personality. Somehow his music is apart from him; it exists without him. Liszt is exactly the opposite. It's all him.'

Throughout our conversation, Hough emerges as an artist in search of that kind of completeness of identification between composer and musician. But he insists simultaneously on a measure of distance from the listener – the other-worldly presence on stage, again – which is just as important to him. When he speaks about Rachmaninov he expresses surprise that more students don't listen to the recordings of his playing – not because it would be a good idea to copy him, but because it's possible by listening to him to understand his 'noble' presence at the keyboard, and his ability to avoid even a hint of cloying sentimentality. For him, the rescue of Rachmaninov from the fate of unfashionability that clung to him 50 years ago was a generation overdue, and he speaks about the way he was able to write instinctively for the piano: of two of the ▶



**PROBLEM PASSENGER:**  
Hough tells Naughtie about the dangers of driving with Beethoven

best-known concertos in the repertoire, Rachmaninov's Second sits perfectly on the keyboard, Tchaikovsky's First does not. 'He probably couldn't play – certainly not in public – and it shows. No matter how often you play it, it's still awkward to manage.'

In conversation about the piano he exudes an enthusiasm for the instrument's possibilities that's as fresh as it was when he first became a notable boy performer and BBC Young Musician of the Year finalist in 1978, from which everything flowed. 'There are some chords that work perfectly on the keyboard. The whole instrument responds with overtones; when you play the chord the whole instrument is excited.' That's why, for example, he enjoys so much French music, because he believes that it acknowledges that power. And it is why he enjoys Schoenberg much more as a writer for strings than piano, because he can't quite find that excitement inside the instrument.

Is there a hint of mysticism here? Not quite. Although he converted to Catholicism as a young man and speaks quite easily about matters of belief and doubt, he insists that his attraction to the spiritual is to its earthiness, not its remoteness. His affection for ritual is not for what he calls the stategy, queeny, high camp sort, but for the sense of a story that began before we came along and will be there after we die ('the only certainty there is'). Just as music is a frame in which human

beings can find excitement and solace – and themselves – so religious practice offers the same opportunity.

As a gay Catholic he has his arguments with the institution, and clearly has no illusion about the difficulty of pursuing faith, but would be dissatisfied with an intellectual and emotional life that didn't offer him the chance to dig deeper, explore further. That is surely why he writes, and finds himself composing

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more music of his own. That will continue, part of a hectic life that you feel is probably sustained by that other side.

'I find it easier to work on the road than here at home in London, as a matter of fact. I can write, read, sit in a hotel room and concentrate. It works for me.' Back home it tends to be long hours of practice – the Dvořák Piano Concerto, which he thinks is underperformed, is a coming project – and even in the scary discipline of the concert tour he finds he can settle down to work.

Indeed, 'settled' seems a good description for him. Take his routine on a recital day.

He'll go to the hall for two or three hours to get to know the piano and acoustic, eat 'quite a big lunch', go for a walk or a gallery visit in the afternoon, go to bed – lights out, the works – at about four o'clock and sleep quite happily for up to a couple of hours. A strong cup of tea, a shower and off to the hall about 45 minutes before going on stage. It sounds simple, but it speaks of great control.

Such anxieties as he has, he conceals in a warm and easy flow of conversation. He speaks about imagining a car journey with Beethoven – 'He'd be poking at you all the way, you'd be very bruised' – about Schubert's need to get all that music out – 'otherwise he'd have been in a lunatic asylum' – about his own commitment to a freshness in performance that will recreate the thrill of the music every time. There's no hint of tiredness, no ennui about the demands of the circuit, only a relish for his instrument. And sometime soon you may see him on a platform with a page-turner alongside him. If he thinks it will take him on another stage of his journey, dropping the macho posture wouldn't bother him at all. 'I don't know if I'll do it,' he says, and laughs. I bet that he will. ■

**BBC PROM 23:**  
**Proms** Monday 1 August, 7.30pm  
*Stephen Hough plays Saint-Saëns's Piano Concerto No. 5 with the BBC Philharmonic, conducted by Gianandrea Noseda*