

Variety is the key



SIM CANETTY-CLARKE

A long-overdue series of concerts is putting the spotlight on Stephen Hough, a virtuoso who enjoys an 'outrageous juxtaposition' or two. By Hugh Canning

More than 25 years have passed since a then 26-year-old Stephen Hough leapt to international prominence with his award-winning recording for Chandos of two rarely played concertos by Johann Nepomuk Hummel, a pupil of Haydn and a younger contemporary of Beethoven. Six subsequent discs — for the British “boutique” label Hyperion — have been similarly garlanded at Gramophone magazine’s annual prize-giving ceremonies, including a set of Rachmaninov’s four piano concertos and Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, which have been favourably compared to the composer’s own celebrated recordings.

The rise of the British-born pianist — who additionally took Australian nationality in 2005 in honour of his father — is not a story of overnight stardom. Indeed, it has been a painstaking progress, exploring not only the staple masterpieces of most concert virtuosos, but a vast repertoire of lesser-known works, his own arrangements and original compositions. His discography encompasses the classic works of Mozart, Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Grieg, Tchaikovsky and Liszt, and those of lesser mortals such as Xaver Scharwenka, Emil von Sauer and Federico Mompou. He has championed the rarely recorded piano works of Benjamin Britten and byways of the repertoire in “national” programmes entitled Stephen Hough’s English, Spanish and French

Albums, and contemporary composers in a disc devoted to new piano works.

This season, his work is spotlighted in a sequence of Artist in Focus concerts at the Barbican in London. Last October, he inaugurated the series with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in one of his trademark Hummel concertos, while later this year with the same orchestra he will tackle both of Brahms’s majestic works for piano and orchestra. Meanwhile, on January 19, he will give a solo recital incorporating two Chopin nocturnes, Schumann’s Carnival, Brahms’s Sonata in F minor and his own Second Sonata, entitled *Notturmo luminoso*. This Hough-fest is a long-overdue recognition in the British capital of the country’s most brilliant virtuoso.

When I met him recently, he reflected on the early lessons he learnt about building a long-term career and the virtues of patience and continuous study. “I sometimes do masterclasses,” he says, “and I tell all the students that making a career is not just about getting a date or winning a competition — those are the first steps. It is how you keep things going year after year, how you go back for the 10th time to an orchestra, and why would they want to have you? As an instrumentalist, all I think you can do is always try to be better than you were before.”

He refers to the need for “a kind of internal energy” that actors possess when they repeat performances night after night, often for months on end. “I sometimes

sense that students, even before they’ve left college, are already a bit bored with a Chopin ballade or a Beethoven sonata, as if to say, ‘I’ve done that. What’s next?’”

Famous for his voracious musical appetite and wide-ranging repertoire, Hough has surely never had time to get bored? “Well, yes, I’m curious, I suppose. Of course the standard repertoire forms the basis of what I do, but the byways of the repertoire, the influences on the great composers, have always interested me. But even pieces like the Brahms concertos, which I’ve played a lot — I can’t imagine not being thrilled when the C minor opening of the First strikes up in the orchestra, or the opening of the Second, which is like the sun coming out of the clouds. I think making a career is about maintaining an enthusiasm for pieces like this, and the ones who last are usually the ones who have something new to say about the standard repertoire.”

Of course, there have always been astonishingly gifted prodigies who can achieve X Factor-style fame through televised competitions, but as often as not, they burn out before they acquire artistic maturity. I ask him whether the fact that he has been recorded by niche-market labels rather than one of the big multinational companies has contributed to the slow-burn nature of his career.

“Well, I suppose so, but I don’t think it’s necessarily what I would have chosen if one of the big companies had come to me in my twenties: it would have been hard to resist. But in retrospect, it has been a good thing. I’ve not had the unrealistic pressures put on some young players, and I’ve had time to explore a wider repertoire, and to allow my interpretations to develop. So I am grateful to

Hyperion for being able to take a longer view, to record my specialities, but also a lot of the mainstream repertoire that I’ve wanted to. One of the great dangers of peaking too early is that you don’t get the space to make mistakes out of the limelight, and you start to narrow your horizons to play in a way that’s acceptable for competitions or big record labels.”

Hough’s range of interests is unusually wide for a pianist — often regarded as a solitary and obsessive profession. He writes a blog for a national newspaper on a wide range of subjects, he is a committed Roman Catholic, a keen opera-goer and a balletomane. When we met, he was looking forward to the Royal Opera’s production of *Robert le Diable* by Giacomo Meyerbeer, a composer he knows mainly through the ears of other composers, such as piano transcriptions and variations by Liszt. “Chopin loved Meyerbeer,” he says. And his recent French album includes his own arrangement of a Massenet number from the score to Kenneth MacMillan’s *Manon*, dedicated to the Royal Ballet’s former principal guest ballerina Sylvie Guillem, who is a good friend.

“I like to play around with boundaries. I like outrageous juxtapositions. One season, I did the Copland Variations followed by Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, which is a dramatic contrast between this icy-cold New York skyline of the early Copland and the passionate warmth of the Schumann. I don’t like programmes that are strictly chronological. I like to mix things up in, I hope, interesting ways.”

Stephen Hough’s recital is on January 19 at the Barbican, London EC2. He plays Brahms’s concertos there on April 12 and May 17