

## FEATURES

# The classical pianist who found a novel approach to down time

When Stephen Hough isn't being a fêted musician, he is writing poetry, painting, or working on his book. **Ken Walton** talks to the polymath ahead of his Usher Hall concert

To call Stephen Hough one of the greatest living British pianists is to sell short the startling array of artistic talents this 55-year-old Liverpoolian possesses. Sure, Edinburgh audiences will see him in his foremost role on 19 November as soloist in Mendelssohn's dazzling First Piano Concerto with the Basel Chamber Orchestra, as part of the Usher Hall's Sunday International Series. What they may not realise, however, is that he is also a prize-winning poet, a worthy painter of abstract art, a composer of significance, and now a novelist.

He is, without doubt, a contemporary Renaissance man, a rampant polymath, whose retiring countenance belies a mind that never sleeps, never ceases to create. It's a compulsion, says Hough. "The things I do outside of playing the piano are done out of an inner necessity, not just because I want to try my hand at different things. I would do a sort of violence to myself if I didn't express myself in the directly creative ways of writing, both words and music."

So why has he turned to novel writing? And just when did this incessant globetrotter find the time to write *The Final Retreat*, the tale of a priest who has lost his faith and is sent by his Bishop to a silent retreat, where he spills out his torment in a candid diary?

"I wrote it over the past two years or so, during all that wasted travel and hotel time that fills my life," he says. "The topic has interested me for a while: the priest as wounded healer; what is it when someone who is meant to bring comfort, assurance and certainty to people has lost faith and morals in his own life?"

Hough, an openly gay Roman Catholic, thought seriously of becoming a priest

himself, but there is nothing autobiographical about his book. "There's no music in there at all, except in passing, and the Irish childhood/mother scenario is the polar opposite to my experience."

"But some of the broader questions reflect my own questions and I was able to bring some of my past religious reading – hundreds of theological books – and experiences into the story. But I have NOT, unlike my main character, attended seedy bedsits in Greater Manchester for casual sex," he assures me.

Hough's debut novel, published by Sylph Editions, comes out next March and reflects a love of writing down words that has been with him as long as he's been able to hold a pen. "In school my favourite class was when we were given a subject for an essay on which we could freewheel," he recalls. "And poetry: I've always written it and loved the way words interact, in meaning and in sound."

But it was reading someone else's words, a biography of post-modernist writer William Burroughs, that spurred him on to write his own novel. "He [Burroughs] wrote *The Naked Lunch* as an assembly of material he'd been carrying around with him in a suitcase – scraps of letters, jottings, poems, essays. One day he and Allen Ginsburg decided to pull it all together into a novel."

"I thought this could be a way for me to write something as I travel on the road, so I assembled over the course of a year around a hundred small chapters on different topics, as if it were the notebook of the character in my novel. This was my suitcase. Then came the hard work of pulling it together. A lot was thrown away, and more was written, but it got me started."

In his suitcase next weekend will be Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No 1, for which he teams up with an orchestra



Stephen Hough, main, and in concert, above, is playing at the Usher Hall on 19 November



he admires from previous collaborations, though it's his first tour with them working under the baton of legendary conductor, composer and oboist Heinz Holliger.

"The Basel Chamber Orchestra is a wonderful ensemble, which plays the chamber repertoire with so much conviction and passion," he says. Aside from the concerto, their upcoming Edinburgh programme also includes Mendelssohn's Hebrides Overture, Schubert's "Great" Symphony No 9, and Holliger's own *Meta Arca*.

As for Hough's thoughts on Mendelssohn's short flamboyant sweep of a concerto, it's a belter, he reckons. "I think it is a masterpiece, three totally contrasting movements joined together in one brilliant whole. It's full of life and full of melody, most especially in the exquisite second movement which is one of the loveliest 'Song Without Words' he wrote."

Surrounding that movement is the music of a spirited genius, explosions of virtuosity that thrill and caress in equal measure. "I think the key for me to Mendelssohn's music is the instruction *con fuoco* [with fire] which appears all the time in the music. It's this inner fire which drives it and saves it from sounding like it belongs in the salon," Hough argues.

It requires energy, mental and physical, and that's something Hough has in spades. Besides his busy concerto schedule on both

sides of the Atlantic, his mind is currently heavily engaged on the complete Beethoven concertos, which he will record in Spring 2019. Before that, he has an all-Debussy album set for release at the end of this year in anticipation of the centenary of the composer's death in 2018.

Somehow, with all that going on, Hough still finds time to add significantly to his own compositional output, written in a style that reconciles the astringencies of modernism with softening touches of tonality. "I've been writing lots, including a Fourth Piano Sonata, a song cycle on poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins and Oscar Wilde, and an 'a cappella' piece for *The Sixteen* and its director Harry Christophers for the British Museum's new show of religious art," he informs me.

It's clear that Hough can turn his hand to just about any creative genre he fancies. We know how brilliantly he plays the piano. The odds are he'll turn out to be as interesting a novelist. For while he may be a Jack-of-all-trades, he's proved himself so far to be a master of them all.

● Stephen Hough performs with the Basel Chamber Orchestra at the Usher Hall on Sunday 19 November, 3pm, tickets from £12.50, [www.usherhall.co.uk](http://www.usherhall.co.uk); Hough's novel *The Final Retreat* is published by Sylph Editions in March 2018, [www.sylpheditions.com/the-final-retreat](http://www.sylpheditions.com/the-final-retreat)



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