STEPHEN HOUGH
The polymath pianist records the five Beethoven concertos

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Stephen Hough had decided to record the complete Beethoven piano concertos live across two concerts, but plans soon changed... He tells Jeremy Nicholas about these five extraordinary works and gives an eye-opening insight into his life.

We didn’t use a single thing from the live concert recordings. Not a thing. We changed pianos and started all over again.”

Stephen Hough is dapper in a light grey suit, striped shirt and a tie in a provocative shade of green. It is one he grabbed from the wardrobe that morning, he tells me. He rarely wears a tie. This one, he confesses somewhat sheepishly, is one of more than 400 Jermyn Street ties belonging not to him but to his long-term partner.

“But...” I splutter. “You mean...? Nothing of what I heard?” “Nothing at all,” confirms Hough. I had travelled to Helsinki in May 2019 to hear him, the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and their conductor Hannu Lintu play Beethoven’s five numbered piano concertos live in concert on two successive evenings, performances to be recorded for Hyperion, broadcast live on radio and filmed for later presentation on television. Located at the core of the Musikkitalo is the quietly spectacular Concert Hall, a vineyard-style auditorium in the round with superb acoustics. And as long as you have a PhD in seat locating, it is quite easy to find which of the 1704 seats is yours without looking like an idiot.

The first concert featured Piano Concertos Nos 2, 3 and 4, the second had the C major concerto, followed after the interval by the Emperor, 1 - and I suspect most of those in the two sold-out houses who listened and marvelled with such rapt attention - assumed it was job done. A few passages to tidy up in the patch sessions. Discs ready for issue. But no.

It took Hough two years to prepare for this project. The original idea was to rehearse and record all five concertos in the studio over five days in Helsinki. Then the idea of playing them all in two concerts was mooted. “Then”, says Hough, “the TV people heard about it and said they’d like cameras there - so the whole thing snowballed into something that was a little bit pressured.

The mentalities for a recording, for a concert and for television are three very different things.”

What happened to make the decision to scrap the live recordings? “I wasn’t tremendously happy with the sound of the piano on the recording. That was the main issue. I chose a piano which projected enough in the hall for the live concerts, but in the recording I was less happy with the mix. So I spoke to Hannu. We had five days of patches. I said, “Why don’t we just start again? We’ve played them. We’ve gone through that process. I think it could be better.” And I think it is. I’m really happy we did that - and Hannu is too.”

‘No 4 is different from anything else. Beethoven is a composer of strong ideas and firm convictions – but this is his “What if?” concerto’

Hough ended up using the hall’s new Bosendorfer, which he’d rejected for the two live concerts. When he returned for these second sessions, he arrived at the hall at nine o’clock the night before to try the instrument. I knew within five seconds that I wanted to use it. It has an action to die for, of clarity and speed and brilliance. And the team would also get the chance to tweak the mix and get a slightly better sound. We put some baffles up at the sides to bring the orchestra more into focus. So the whole thing was not as planned, it just turned out like that.”

When it comes to concertos recordings, Hough has an impressive track record (no pun intended). His early romp through the A minor and B minor concertos of Hummel is unquestionably one of the all-time great concerto recordings and won the Gramophone Concerto Award in 1987. Another winner in that category, in 1996, and winner of Gramophone Record of the Year for Hyperion, was the coupling of Schumann’s Fourth and...
Sauer’s First – a project that would never have got past the commissionaire in the days when EMI ruled the roost. His set of Saint-Saëns’s complete works for piano and orchestra was winner of the Gramophone Concerto Award as well as Recording of the Year in 2002 (and in 2008, somewhat to Hough’s bemusement, it was awarded a special Gramophone Gold Disc Award as ‘the finest classical recording of the past 30 years’). Among his other concerto recordings, there are some questionable musical decisions – the opening of Rachmaninov’s Second, for instance, in his complete Rachmaninov concerto cycle, and the final pages of Tchaikovsky’s Second in his set of all the works for piano and orchestra; but always with Hough there is a clear-eyed logic backed up by scholarship and impeccable taste that inform such decisions.

‘I play the short, sweet, stylish cadenza for the First Concerto. It has a perfection which I love, although the big fat one is thrilling’

With this in mind, I ask him about some unexpected details I had noticed in Helsinki, such as the arpeggiated first chord of the G major concerto. ‘Well, we know from Czerny, who heard Beethoven in the Fourth Concerto, that he arpeggiated the first chord. Of course, you don’t have to arpeggiate the chord for that reason but there are other reasons why I think it makes sense. The whole first movement will work round that G major chord, go away from it and come back to it. But it’s more than that. I think the piano is in a slightly different world from the orchestra – not just in key but in spirit. And indeed dynamics. We see in the first 30 seconds of this piece that it is not going to be anything that is usual. It is, indeed, different – different from anything else that Beethoven wrote, different from anything else that anyone else wrote. The pianist, when he or she comes in, is saying, “Yes, that’s true, but what about this?” And that is unusual for Beethoven, because he is a composer of strong ideas and firm convictions. He’s very different from Schubert, who is always musing about “What if?” The G major is Beethoven’s “What if?” concerto. Then you get the slow movement, which again is extraordinary stuff. There is nothing from another composer that has these two completely different worlds.’

We move on to the other concertos. Why did he feel it necessary to provide his own cadenza for No 2 in B flat? ‘As you know Beethoven wrote one towards the end of his life. I don’t mind that it’s not in the style of the concerto. That’s quite fun in a way. I just don’t like it very much. It’s not great Beethoven. There’s a sort of fugue that doesn’t quite work, textures that don’t quite work, an ending that doesn’t quite work. And then the final orchestral tutti is totally out of balance: we only have a few bars and then the movement is over. And I get the feeling he didn’t like this music very much. He apologised for it, didn’t feel it was his best music. I’ve had the chance to write something that is more in the style, more in proportion and so on.’

As to the Emperor Concerto, this recording might be the first one on which a modern piano plays the first chord of the concerto. The score had never been published like this before Jonathan Del Mar’s Bärenreiter edition of 2015. ‘In the manuscript it is written as a figured bass,’ Hough explains. ‘The first chord in the score is E flat with a figure 5 above it, which just means you play a root chord in E flat. The 5 – the fifth, the B flat – is missing in the whole of the rest of the orchestra. Only the pianist has it. And no pianists play it. So if you don’t play it, you are missing a note that Beethoven expected to be heard. And also, psychologically you need it. Having played it like that, I now cannot imagine not doing it. Beethoven didn’t need to put the chord in because no pianist of his time would have dreamt of not playing it.’

Are there any particular points to look out for in Nos 1 and 3? ‘I play the short, sweet, stylish cadenza for the First Concerto. It has a certain perfection which I love, although the big fat one is thrilling and gives you a sense of Beethoven being in the room! I think you hear le vrai Beethoven in everything he wrote – still, there’s so much Mozart and Haydn there too.’ And No 3, the first great piano concerto of the 19th century? ‘Absolutely – the first Romantic piano concerto, with heavy qualifications on the use of that term, always with Beethoven! The sheer scope of it, the drama between soloist and orchestra, the very idea of soloist centre stage seems to me to transcend everything that went before. It’s an absolute marvel, and the trajectory from tragic to triumphant is so utterly Beethovenian.’

Hough has long been hailed as the foremost British pianist of his generation (though in fact he has dual nationality, having become an Australian citizen in 2005, partly in tribute to his
father, who was born there). The number of awards, doctorates, visiting professorships and honorary fellowships he has accumulated mounts annually. In 2014 he was made a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) for services to music. But he has an equally enriching and fulfilling life away from the piano, as might be expected from someone named in 2009 by The Economist and Intelligent Life magazines as 'one of 20 living polymaths'. His published literary works include The Bible as Prayer (2007). A committed Catholic, Hough has twice considered becoming a priest, a calling that earlier in his life led to some 15 years of celibacy. Many of his own compositions are inspired by religious themes and texts. Several of his many published scores have reproductions of his paintings gracing their covers. 'I find painting an incredibly physical thing to do,' he admits. 'Sensational. My heart beats faster when I'm painting. I wouldn't say it's a sexual act but it is certainly very sensual. You have these colours and tubes of paint. Squeezing a tube of paint. It's one of the most voluptuous things I know.' There have been several exhibitions. Oil paintings go for more than £5000; his smaller works (acrylic ink and gloss paint on grease paper) sell for £700.

Taste and smell crop up frequently in conversation. Nosing Around (2014) is another book, reflecting his fascination with fragrances and perfumes. Hats interest him too (he has a small but highly prized handmade collection). Still another book was his first novel, The Final Retreat (2018), a disturbing and forthright study of a gay priest coming to terms with his sexual addiction and shattered faith. 'If you don’t flinch reading certain bits,' says Hough, 'then it’s not worked.' A second novel is already half-finished. 'It’s very weird. I don’t know if I’ve got the courage to do with it what I need to.' His latest published book, Rough Ideas: Reflections on Music and Move (2019), is a collection of more than 200 blogs and essays he wrote for the Daily Telegraph and other publications over a number of years. The Financial Times chose it as one of the best books of 2019. Given all this, I am intrigued by something he says to me in Helsinki. 'Sometimes I feel I want to move back and live in the small house in Cheshire where I grew up.' I wonder what prompts that? 'It's a crazy life,' he replies. 'There I was in the Whitley County Primary School and playing in the garden at the back of the house, and I end up in the wings of the Hollywood Bowl, thousands of miles away, thinking, 'How did all of this happen? What on earth am I doing here?' There are times when I think I would like to run a sweet shop.' This is the cue for a riff on his childhood (he was an only child) and another smell. 'Of course, the thing I wanted most was to be a tobascoist when I was a child. I was always fascinated by tobacco, the smell of it, the colours of the box. In fact, on my 17th birthday my father took me to a tobacconist in Manchester to buy my first pipe, and to choose my first tobacco. I smoked a pipe for years. I had about 40 of them. I learnt Rachmaninov’s Third with a pipe in my mouth. I used to practise with my pipe lit, blowing smoke and showering ash on to my corduroys – corduroys with holes in them from the ash burning through to my legs. I learnt Hummel with a pipe. That’s why I sit so still at the piano. You couldn’t move with a pipe full of Latkia! I still mois it, I still have the pipes, but I don’t smoke anymore. I had a cigar in Singapore a couple of years ago when I was staying with a friend called Wolffes Wu, a plastic surgeon who’s written a wonderful autobiography called Life in Plastic. At which point your interviewer collapses in a heap and accuses Hough of making it all up. 'We were sitting not on the pavement but in the road at one o’clock in the morning smoking Havana cigars. The point is that all this repertoire was learnt with a pipe. I used to smoke it in the Juilliard cafeteria with my tweed jacket. I was 19 but looked 40.' This is typical Hough. He may not improvise on the piano (in public, at least), but he loves to improvise with words and images – that new Bösendorfer in Helsinki, for instance, was ‘like a mango that is hard when you buy it, but after a day you feel the resistance is going, the skin’s giving way and you peel it open and you’re just in ecstasy with the flavour and the juice is dribbling down your chin’. He speaks in measured sentences, with no superfluous ums, ers or ‘you knows’ – the sign of a well-ordered, disciplined mind.

He is, you will have gathered by now, a great conversationalist with, it seems, a ready-formed opinion on anything you throw at him. And the solitary life of the international pianist is something that is no discomfort for him. He always travels with his own pillow and kettle. ‘A kettle is essential,’ he insists. ‘You leave Britain and you can’t get decent tea. And it’s not every hotel that has a kettle in the room. Certainly not in America. I have a little German one and it’s in my luggage usually stuffed with socks. I bring teabags. It saves bringing a tea strainer. I used to take real tea, but it was complicated twice. I took the most wonderful first flush Assam with me on a tour, and when I arrived in Kuala Lumpur it had gone. I take extra chewing gum, extra socks, melatonin, plugs for every country in the world, bugs for air sickness and earplugs. On flights I read
and write but rarely watch movies unless it's a huge long-haul flight to Australia.
I think a lot – letting my mind unravel, thinking programmes through, thinking about things.'

He will be 60 in 2021. Now at the top of his game with every waking moment taken up by playing the piano (practising, recording, giving concerts), teaching, travelling, painting, writing, composing, talking, eating and sleeping (presumably at some point), what about diet and keeping fit? 'I don't do any exercise at home but I go to the gym in whatever hotel I'm staying at. I change into my shorts, I switch on Kindle on my mobile phone ... I once read Andrew Roberts's Napoleon: A Life on the treadmill.
A thousand pages. You see? That's a book I would never have read otherwise. I can't travel with books that are heavy – it would kill my arms. It was riveting. Fantastic. Napoleon was on the edge of the Alps and I was on my treadmill! In the old days, I smoked my pipe on the treadmill. As for diet – well, you spend a lot of time on your own. You're in Omaha alone in your hotel with nothing to do, so what do you do? You have a wonderful meal with a glass or two of a wonderful wine. But you have to be careful. It could so easily turn into self-indulgence.'

Self-discipline: yes. But it's much more. Behind his affability and ineffably courteous manner is a core of steel. Hough knows his own worth and will never allow the main purpose of his life to be compromised. Requests for his services which he feels to be inappropriate or of not a sufficiently high standard are rejected. When it comes to the piano, there is no place for frivolity. 'You need to be tough as old boots off stage and then as delicate as a ballerina's shoe on stage.
It's a schizophrenic life. If you are a creative artist like Beethoven then you can be neurotic the whole time and do what you have to do. But I have to be at the airport at a certain time. So there can't be any airy-fairyness about it. Yes, I do have absolutely no fault of their own. There are phenomenal artists I have met over the years who haven't had careers and you think, “Why?” Often, it's because one number on that bingo card has not been in the right place even though all the other numbers were. And luck – no one has a career without luck.‘

'When I talk to young people about having a career, I say of course playing the piano well is one thing, but there is so much more involved. I often wonder how actors in a long run of a long play can keep fresh. How can you walk out to play the Beethoven Emperor and still get a thrill when you play that first major chord? That's what it takes to have a career that lasts over decades. Look at those elderly artists, the Arraus and the Brendels who have had long careers: there's a freshness, the ability to find life constantly fascinating. Apart from playing the piano well, you need to find living a thrill.’

Well, there's a lesson – not just for young people and the next generation of pianists for whom Hough is something of a role model. It's one for all of us. Living life to the full and finding it all thrilling. Amen to that.  

Stephen Hough's Beethoven recording will be reviewed next issue