

Poetry perpetually in motion

IF you subscribe to the *Through the Keyhole* style of profiling, the little St John's Wood mews house is revealing. In the hall is a still-packed suitcase; in the immaculate kitchen, the fridge is empty, but for chocolate; in the living room is a wall of paintings ranging from hyper-realist to Surrealist, and neat stacks of *catalogues raisonnés* of artists as diverse as Zurbarán and Rothko. Bookshelves groan beneath biographies, poetry, diaries and CDs; another wall is chequered with autographed photographs of keyboard greats—Liszt, Horowitz and Cherkassky gaze down on an electronic Yamaha. One can hear Loyd Grossman: 'This is the home of someone who travels, a person with an interest in the humanities—a pianist, perhaps.'

'Catholicism is about reality. We aren't meant to live like angels'

Stephen Hough, however, defies categorisation. Pianist, indeed—widely considered the finest British exponent since Clifford Curzon—but also composer, author and prize-winning poet. In 2001, he was the first classical musician to win the MacArthur Fellowship, and, in 2009, *The Economist's Intelligent Life* named him one of 20 world polymaths.

Mr Hough, 49, shifts uneasily in his rocking chair. 'I'm not very comfortable being called an intellectual,' he says. 'I see so many people from whom I have things to learn.' He is unfailingly courteous, modest, engaging and down-to-earth, but there is also a reassuringly sybaritic side to him—he has an exquisite collection of bowlers, homburgs and fedoras. 'I don't dare say what they



Catholic tastes: Stephen Hough's interests range from bowler hats to blogs, *Columbo* to Cherkassy

cost.' Any other guilty pleasures? 'Well, I love watching *Columbo*.'

He makes light work of his musical achievements. He entered the 1983 Naumburg Competition in America on a whim, 'forgot' he had to perform Brahms' mighty 2nd Concerto, and sailed to a victory that established his career. He composes on the hoof: on aeroplanes, in lonely hotels, in dressing rooms, to 'relax'. He writes a cultural blog for *The Daily Telegraph*, and even responds, with lack of hauteur, to the comments. 'I got some rather violent responses to a piece about gun law, but, on the whole, classical music doesn't attract crackpots. Although there was one guy who travelled round the world to hear me play and kept posting unpleasant comments. You just try and turn the other cheek.'

The last phrase is key, a clue to a man who, at the age of 18, converted to Catholicism in the teeth of family opposition. Without a hint of sanctimony, he shares his beliefs: 'The story of the Crucifixion represents suffering, disgrace and death—the three things we most fear—but also

their transcendence. Overcome the fear, and you stop worrying about what people think of you,' he explains.

Why Catholicism? 'Initially, I was attracted by the music—*Dream of Gerontius* (the text is by Cardinal Newman) and a Mass I heard at Buckfast Abbey. The liturgy provides ritual, which we need. But Catholicism also makes intellectual sense to me. It's about reality. Its symbols—water, salt, oil—are tangible. We aren't meant to live like angels. I find it quite a flexible, accepting religion.'

Mr Hough, who twice considered entering the priesthood, has written of the difficulties he had reconciling being gay with the Church's stance on homosexuality. 'God's creation is good. And we now know that homosexuality does exist in nature, it's not just man misbehaving. I believe that, as with slavery, the Church will eventually revise its position.'

This brings us to the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt, who presumably had his own issues squaring his Catholic convictions with his womanising. Mr Hough, famous for his catholic (with

On the record

Stephen Hough plays Liszt's Piano Concerto No 1 in the Shell Classic International series at the Royal Festival Hall, London SE1, on January 16

Where is your favourite place in Britain?
The Isle of Wight

What is your favourite building?
The Sydney Opera House

Who is your hero?
The Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather

a small 'c') repertoire—'I love switching styles, like Olivier slipping into different roles'—has an affinity with this 'much misunderstood' artist that goes beyond the formidable technique or common faith they share to the lyrical heart of the music. And, as Mr Hough launches Liszt's bicentenary year, we will be grateful that he renounced thoughts of the priesthood. *Teresa Levonian-Cole*

Next week Oliver Rackham