



Pianist's big questions

Stephen Hough is inspired by links he finds between music and spirituality,
writes Ashleigh Wilson

STEPHEN Hough remembers it as his religious honeymoon period, the time in his late teens when he converted to Catholicism. Flush with euphoria for his new faith, he was considering whether his true vocation was to become a priest. Three decades on, he's happy to admit he was attracted by "external" issues as much as anything.

"It was the idea of having a long robe and a rosary dangling around my neck, the sunlight filtering through the stained glass windows, the incense," he says. "I probably would have been sent to an inner-city parish, a prefab church with guitars, and would have gone mad within two months."

The prospect would also have been "spiritually immature", he adds. Lucky, then, that he chose music instead.

One of the most esteemed pianists in contemporary classical music, Hough, 47, is an engaging personality on and off the stage. The British-born musician has recorded extensively, won numerous awards and appeared as a soloist with some of the world's best orchestras. In 2001, he became the first classical musician to win a \$US500,000 MacArthur Fellowship, an honour sometimes known as the genius grant.

He is also an intellectual, writer, blogger and published author with a deep interest in theology. It's a unique combination of interests that has him regularly asking big questions about spirituality and music, both in isolation and in relation to each other. Religion clearly plays a central role in his life, despite his criticism of the church's approach to homosexuality.

When it comes to artistic inspiration, though, he is clear about who should, and should not, get the credit. He has no time for artists who claim to have God on their side, saying: "It's not that if we get on our knees then suddenly the music is going to be better.

"I've always been slightly anti-religious in the way that I'm so often put off by people's confidence in their own faith and getting it right," he says, adding that he finds American televangelists particularly abhorrent.

"It's also the sense — and I've come across this with certain musicians and composers — the feeling that, because they're good or because they're a Christian, therefore their music is going to be inspired. I think that kind of religious business is an obstacle to real

artistic [achievement].

"I'm more more impressed by someone like Beethoven, who was a man of great faith but not someone who had got it all straight in his mind. His music has a greater sense of searching, of looking for something more."

In Sydney tonight, as part of an Australian tour that includes solo and concerto performances, Hough will deliver the Stuart Chalmender Lecture, discussing the elusive intersection of spirituality and art. It is a topic close to his heart, but still he finds it hard to describe how the two thought lines relate to his experience.

"It's hard for me to analyse it, really," he says. "I live a spiritual life in the way that I best can, which is pretty pathetic most of the time. It's an important part of me adjusting to how I live life on this planet, accepting success and failure, good health and bad health, and somehow trying to see it in a bigger picture. I think that influences everything that I do. I don't know if that makes things better or worse. It's even just how I drink this cup of coffee."

He pauses and takes a sip. He says he's tired after several interviews and a long flight, but he's showing no sign of fatigue. In conversation, he is engaging on a range of subjects: the presence of ego and humility in music, the demands of performance, the changing role of priests in contemporary society and so on.

His interest in religious issues found form in his 2007 book, *The Bible as Prayer: A Handbook for Lectio Divina*. He also writes a regular blog called Cadenza for London's *The Daily Telegraph*, in which he holds forth on everything from spirituality to audience behaviour, Stanley Kubrick, Liszt and even hats, a favourite piece of apparel for the pianist. He has become an enthusiastic blogger: "It's like a notebook, really," he says.

In one entry, in which he discusses blindfold tests in the context of the Joyce Hatto hoax — the British pianist who died in 2006 and who gained fame when recordings of other pianists were released under her name — he tells how he once visited a radio station and asked who was playing the music airing at the time. He was told it was him, although Hough had recognised neither his own playing nor the piece. (It was Benjamin Britten's *Sonatina Romantica*.)

"I was just trying to say that when we listen to things, we don't always listen from a totally objective, even playing field," he says. "It's the same with visual arts, isn't it? There's a Rembrandt painting in the most exquisite room in the museum until someone comes along and says it's actually by a student of Rembrandt and it comes off the wall and ends up in the basement . . . I think there is this element in all of the arts that we have to be a little bit careful of. We have to be a little



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bit honest.”

Hough is especially wary of complacency in art. He says great musicians, like great actors, must find the excitement in each performance, regardless of how many times a particular work has been done. In Australia, he will be performing two compositions by Tchaikovsky with the Sydney Symphony and the Queensland Orchestra.

“With the Tchaikovsky second concerto, it opens with this wonderful flourish in G major, and if your heart isn’t just leaping at the thought of that opening phrase, then really it’s the next Qantas flight home,” he says. “Because there’s no point. You have to have that.”

For Hough, there’s something about the morning light in Sydney that has enchanted him since he first visited Australia two decades ago. Through the years he has developed great affection for the country in which his father was born. But apart from the environment and the possibility of extended visits in the future, there was another reason he decided, in 2005, to formalise his relationship with Australia and become a citizen.

Soon after Hough’s father was born in Australia, he was taken to England by his mother. While details remain vague, it is clear there was a split between Hough’s grandparents; his grandmother told her son his father had died.

“But in fact his father had been writing him letters for years,” he says. “Finally, some letters got through, towards the end of my grandfather’s life. One of the last ones he wrote was to say that he’d heard that my father was about to have his first child, which

was me.”

The recent discovery of these letters led Hough to successfully apply for citizenship, keeping alive the family’s Australian bond. Hough’s father died about 20 years ago.

“I’m the only one left with this connection to this rather sad, strange broken family with lies and the scandal of the separation that couldn’t be spoken about,” he says.

“It’s a kind of posthumous way of making [sense of] this messy family situation, where a lot of people seemed to have suffered and to have been afraid to tell the truth and examine the situation. When I come back here and have such fun here, I imagine that my father would have loved to have been here, too. So, by doing this, it’s a way of keeping that Australian link going for at least while I’m alive.”

It helps that Australia has what he says is an energetic cultural life. He is also fascinated by the potential of music in the broader region.

“I see a real possibility in the future of classical music here,” he says. “With Asia also being an important player in the future of classical music, I think the combination is a very powerful one. I think we might see the European-American centre of gravity changing over the next 50 years to Asia and Australia.”

Stephen Hough presents the Stuart Challender Lecture in Sydney tonight. He performs with the Sydney Symphony tomorrow, Saturday and Sunday; with the Queensland Orchestra in Brisbane on June 27; and in a solo recital at the Queensland Conservatorium Theatre on June 28.



Australian ties:
 Stephen Hough
 Picture: Sam Mooy