

RICK JONES

LARGER THAN LIFE

As the pianist Stephen Hough prepares to perform the works of Liszt, whose bicentenary celebrations take place this year, he acknowledges certain parallels between himself and his hero

Franz Liszt's bicentenary is marked this year, and initiating the celebrations at the Royal Festival Hall on Sunday 16 January is British pianist Stephen Hough who has much in common with the Romantic Hungarian. I put this to Hough when we meet, but he seems surprised and even embarrassed by the comparison, though he concedes certain points of similarity.

Both were first famous abroad – Liszt in France, Hough in America. Paris acclaimed the young Hungarian's genius after his family moved there in the 1820s. He fell in with the artistic circle around Chopin and Georges Sand and, aged 26, won a celebrated piano competition, albeit with just two competitors. Hough, born in Cheshire in 1961, studied at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester, and the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) before accepting a Julius Isserlis scholarship to the Juilliard School, New York, where, aged 23, he won the Naumburg Piano Competition. As a result, his career took off in the United States and he still gives half his annual round of concerts there.

Liszt was – and Hough is – a teacher, both in a masterclass context. Hough has a residency at Northwestern University, Chicago. "I give lessons to an audience," he says, "mostly comprising members of the public. What's strange nowadays is that students don't turn up unless they have to. They seem unwilling to listen to anything outside the curriculum. It wasn't like that in our day. I heard pianists like Bolet and Perlemuter at the RNCM. We were interested."

I suggest that Hough is being a little hard on present-day students and remind him that he has confessed elsewhere to spending too much time as a student watching *Crossroads*, talking late into the night and smoking cigarettes. Liszt too, we agree, was notoriously louche as a young man. He eloped with a married countess and had three children with her. Hough is un-Lisztian in this respect although he does have an unconventional lifestyle with his music publicist partner and has written about squaring his homosexuality with his Catholic morality. "God didn't intend

anyone to live alone," he has reasoned.

He compares his own teaching experience to Liszt's. "Students came from all over the world to study with Liszt," he says admiringly. "He played by candlelight and they sat round listening, smoking cigars. It was very general teaching, not scales or technique. He commented broadly on his music in soirées that lasted late into the evening. I don't think he taught composition, though his most famous students – Carl Tausig, Emil von Sauer, Moriz Rosenthal – were composers too. In fact, it was unthinkable then to be just a pianist."

Hough, too, is a composer, which marks him out among his contemporaries. Like Liszt, he has written works both for his own instrument, the piano, and for the Church including Masses for both Westminster Abbey and Cathedral, and a song cycle to poems by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Like Liszt, who took minor orders, Hough once considered a career in the Church. He grew up a Protestant, but became a Catholic at 19. He was a member of Opus Dei for two years.

Of Liszt, Hough says, "he was always searching for a deeper spiritual life. In his *Grand Mass*, he emphatically underlines the words *One Holy Catholic Church*. He was friendly with Pope Pius IX and in later life dressed somewhat theatrically as a priest. Some considered him a hypocrite, because he couldn't live up to his ideals, but, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, weakness isn't necessarily sin. You can say it's wrong to commit adultery, but still do so out of weakness. Liszt's problem was a lack of discipline. He drank a lot in later life. He was someone with amazing ideas, who sketched a lot, but finished little. With Liszt, if you don't like the man, you don't like the music. Some composers you can separate – Chopin, Wagner for instance – but not, I think, Liszt."

Hough belongs to the Liszt lovers. "Despite his flaws he was enormously generous. He helped others by conducting their music. He, more than any, put Berlioz and Wagner on the map. He interpreted Schumann – the Byron setting "Manfred" and the opera *Genoveva*. He could have claimed prestige,



Stephen Hough on Liszt: 'He really had a Franciscan soul – you know, the poetic quality in Catholicism'

but he travelled third class and taught in modest rooms. He really had a Franciscan soul – you know, the poetic quality in Catholicism, the love of well-baked bread and wine, which appeals to artists. Indeed, he wrote a piece for piano about St Francis – the sermon to the birds."

"Liszt was a towering figure," Hough continues, "a pioneer who pushed piano sonority to its limits. Piano construction changed because of him. The iron frame came in to cope with the violent extremes of technique he introduced. As a composer, he experimented. He developed Wagnerian harmony and even Pappano now accepts that Liszt created the Tristan chord. He abandoned sonata form in favour of theme-transformation. He invented the tone poem. There was the impressionist Liszt, who wrote whole tone scales, and the primitivist Liszt, using open fifths in the csardas. No one could claim to be a successor to him. He was larger than life."

There, perhaps, the comparison ends, although Hough's compositions tend towards a stark Lisztian simplicity and his writings on music and religion are as searching as the Hungarian's. At the January concert, which also marks the start of Hungary's first presidency of the EU, Hough plays Liszt's First Piano Concerto with the Budapest Festival Orchestra under Iván Fischer. "The First Concerto is the work of someone with a big personality. It's a one-movement work, superficial in the best sense, lean, bereft of padding and focused on physical excitement," summarises Hough, donning a white fedora and heading for the door. He has a dinner party to attend with friends. "There is a vision in Liszt, a Byronic figure. He fills a big space." And so, increasingly, does Hough.