

Just good Franz
Pianist Stephen
Hough; Inset:
Franz Liszt



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Lisztomaniac

Pianist Stephen Hough tells **Jonathan Lennie** why, in his 200th anniversary year, Franz Liszt remains as crucial to the piano repertoire as ever

A large suitcase stands in the kitchen of Stephen Hough's bijou home, symbolically attesting to the peripatetic lifestyle of the professional pianist. Having just returned from Chicago after the final concert of a tour, he courteously stifles jetlag to endure an hour of interrogation on all things Liszt.

One might assume that living in such a well-heeled part of town, tucked away at the end of a row of mews in St John's Wood, was literally right up the street of this 49-year-old, Cheshire-born pianist, composer, intellectual, artist, theologian and writer (who even manages a blog for *The Daily Telegraph*). However, his bohemian nature revolts: 'It's full of rich bankers' wives,' he sighs. 'I wish sometimes that the cafés were full of people who were a bit more grungy – with piercings and tattoos.'

Bereft of such adornments himself, Hough is snazzily turned out in a bright green shirt, blue tweed jacket, jeans and, er, pink plastic slippers. He sits in the middle of the upstairs living room, with a piano dominating the space (an electronic one in black lacquer – not his real one which is kept at another nearby location). Behind him the wall is covered in photographs of piano legends such as Paderewski

and Horowitz, and above them all sits an engraving of Franz Liszt. And it is this Hungarian composer-pianist we are here to discuss, as on Sunday Hough performs his Piano Concerto No 1 with the Budapest Festival under Iván Fischer as part of Shell Classic International series at the Royal Festival Hall.

Liszt was born in 1811 and so is enjoying a 200th anniversary this year. Living to the grand old age of 75, he was a virtuosic pianist who pushed technique, and a composer who pushed the boundaries of form, influencing his own and generations to come. Having toured Europe ceaselessly like a pop star for ten years, he settled in Weimar with his mistress, conducting other people's



works and teaching for free. Never marrying, he had three children: his daughter Cosima marrying Richard Wagner. Later, he took minor religious orders becoming an abbé, all the while composing prolifically.

Who is Franz Liszt to you?

'I think Liszt is almost too many things to put in one sentence because he embraced everything of that part of the nineteenth century. He was the first person to play a full concert by himself as a pianist and the first to sit in profile to the audience [usually pianists directed from the keyboard with their backs to the audience]. So he created this idea of the recital – indeed, the term is his own... the first one-man show.'

And then?

'And then you have this amazing point in his mid-thirties when he stops playing concerts altogether and retires to Weimar where he starts writing music in a serious way and teaching and conducting. And in those three areas he is also a pioneer – as a teacher he is really the first one to do what we call masterclasses. As a conductor he was one of the first to routinely conduct other people's music, sometimes at enormous personal expense. Then, as a composer, he began so many things that other composers took up – he explored certain aspects of harmony, which

Wagner embraced, and he started experimenting with impressionistic effects, and it is directly from that we get the music of Ravel and Debussy. He also started writing pieces with open fifths, such as in his "Czardas Macabre", which Bartók took and made into his own primitive style. So, Liszt is the fountainhead of just about everything that makes music what it is in the twentieth century.'

Is he the first modern pianist?

'I think in some ways he is – he is the first pianist who has any kind of a life playing other people's music; the encouragement he gave to other composers was extraordinary. We get caught up on the early part of his career – being the showman, the pop star, the ladies' man – by the age of 35 that was all out of the window – he wasn't taking money for concerts any more; he lived a very simple life.'

It is said that he is the greatest pianist there has ever been...

'Who can say? People who do things for the first time always have the first place. For us to come and do what he did is much less difficult than it was for him. It certainly is not true that he just had a better technique; he obviously had a sort of personality that compelled people to listen and that is something intangible.'

What is your relationship with Liszt – is he your progenitor?

'Not really. I see him as a sort of musical friend. I enjoy spending time in his company at the keyboard, but I wouldn't dream of thinking of myself in any direct line. He is an inspiration. Like him, I have also had doubts in my life as to whether I should carry on playing the piano. At one point I was thinking of becoming a priest as well, so that side of him I empathise with.'

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Like Liszt you compose and play – are they equally important to you?

'The writing is becoming increasingly important to me. I was discouraged early on, but unlike Liszt I didn't put that to one side and just carry on. Over the last six years or so I have written a lot more music and it is becoming much more

what I feel passionate about leaving behind. I don't listen to my recordings very much, but I sort of hope if I have written good pieces then those are more likely to survive because they are more unique than my recording of a Rachmaninov concerto, which is one among hundreds, and maybe, by that time, thousands.'

Stephen Hough is soloist with the Budapest Festival Orchestra in Liszt's Piano Concerto No 1, part of Shell Classic International series at Royal Festival Hall on **Sun Jan 16**.

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