

The Well-Tempered Ear interview British Pianist Stephen Hough

By Jacob Stockinger

British pianist Stephen Hough is something of a renaissance man.

At 48, he performs around the globe and records on the piano in solo, chamber and concerto music. He composes music. He writes and blogs prolifically. He paints and writes poetry and has won awards for both. He champions rarely performed composers and works. He takes his own photos for his blog, and, as an openly gay man who converted to Catholicism when he was 19, he writes about theology and social issues.

A graduate of the Juilliard School in New York City, he won the Naumberg Competition in 1983 and in 2001 received a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant. He has dozens of recordings currently in print, including the complete piano concertos of Rachmaninoff and Saint-Saëns, and has won many awards for them.

Hough will be in Madison this weekend to give three performances of the Tchaikovsky’s popular and famous Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor* (the same one Van Cliburn was famous for) with the Madison Symphony Orchestra under returning guest conductor Anu Tali of Estonia.

Performances are in Overture Hall on Friday at 7:30 p.m., Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2:30 p.m. Also on the program are Sibelius’ *Symphony No. 1* and the Madison premiere of the work “Dawn” by Estonian composer Heino Eller (1887-1970).

Tickets are \$15-\$75. For information or reservations, visit madisonsymphony.org or call The Overture Center box office at (608) 258-4141.

Here are links to his website, his blog, his Wikipedia entry and tickets, program notes and other things for the MSO concerts:

<http://www.stephenhough.com/>

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/author/stephenhough/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Hough

<http://www.madisonsymphony.org/hough>

Hough recently agreed to an e-mail interview with the blog “The Well-Tempered Ear” by local classical music critic Jacob Stockinger, who wrote for *The Capital Times* newspaper and the *Rhythm* section for almost 30 years, until 2008.

That interview will appear on-line at welltempered.wordpress.com in two parts, on Feb. 22 and 23:

JS: Many critics and scholars dismiss the music of Tchaikovsky, and especially denigrate his *Piano Concerto No. 1* as little more than an overplayed warhorse. Yet the public loves the work and the so-called “unplayable” concerto helped launch the careers of such virtuosos as Van Cliburn, Vladimir Horowitz, Arthur Rubinstein and Sviatoslav Richter

among others. What is your own view of the First Concerto? How good is it as music and as a vehicle for the piano? What are its best points and its drawbacks? Why do you play it?

SH: I haven't the slightest doubt that Tchaikovsky's First Concerto is a masterpiece -- from every viewpoint.

It is chockfull of some of the best tunes ever written; it is exciting, tender, whimsical ... all you could want. And it "works" as a structure, even if the opening introduction might seem disconnected on paper.

The piano writing is certainly awkward (many pianists say that they find the Rachmaninov Third easier to play than this monster), but it always sounds good.

It's really the first piece in history fully to combine the virtuoso and symphonic styles in a concerto. Hummel, Chopin and Liszt gave us the former, and Beethoven and Brahms gave us the latter. But here we have both together.

JS: You have recently recorded all the Tchaikovsky works for piano and orchestra. What makes Tchaikovsky's music in general so appealing to the public and to you? What is it about his compositional style that reaches people?

SH: Perhaps the quality that is most appealing to the public is a kind of emotional honesty. Tchaikovsky is not afraid to wear his heart on his sleeve, and while we listen to his music we find the courage -- if only inside us -- to do the same. There is a sense of internal release involved.

Also, apart from the intensely expressive moments, he takes us into a magical world of fantasy. The world of the ballet is never far away, and the second movement especially of the First Concerto reminds me of this. I see a young girl at Christmas ... full of wonder, innocence, dreams, games. This can be spoiled, I feel, by too slow a tempo (it's *Andantino Semplice* ... flowing and simple).

JS: Which Tchaikovsky piano concerto is your favorite? Which one is the most underappreciated and underperformed?

SH: I like the First and Second equally, but also have a soft spot for the Concert Fantasia. It certainly should be heard more often.

JS: You yourself are an out and self-identified gay man while Tchaikovsky was a closeted and oppressed gay man. Do you see any ties between his sexual identity and his music? Do you feel a special affinity with him and his music, or see a reason to champion his music because of his sexual identity?

SH: It actually appears from his letters -- particularly the ones which were censored and suppressed during the Soviet years -- that Tchaikovsky was much better adjusted about

being gay than we thought. Of course, this doesn't suit those who would see homosexuality as an automatic recipe for depression and self-hatred.

It was not possible to live a normal, family life with another man in Tchaikovsky's lifetime, but it was widely known that he was gay -- particularly amongst the upper classes of Russian society, and it doesn't seem to have bothered anyone very much.

The real emotional crisis of his life (and the only time he considered suicide) was when he married in mid-life to try to fit into conventional society. This catastrophe lasted only a few weeks.

He was certainly a man with a highly volatile emotional life -- his father too was often reduced to tears out of sheer emotional stress when both happy and sad -- and so I feel a warm sympathy with a composer who could let his inner soul be seen by those of us who play or listen to his music. But I don't think his homosexuality makes me connect more intimately to him as such.

JS: Do you have any comments about our neighbors, the Minnesota Symphony and its conductor Osmo Vänskä, with whom you have recorded all the Tchaikovsky concertos? When is the Tchaikovsky set slated for release?

SH: The release date is April 1st this year. We had the most intense time recording these works in four weeks of concerts. The music is highly-charged for a start, and if you add to that that the recording is "live," you have adrenaline flowing in copious amounts. But the Minnesota Orchestra and Osmo are one of the great musical teams in the world, and it was a fantastic experience to be able to do this project.

JS: Despite your hectic touring and recording schedule, you are a prolific blogger who posts about every other day. Why do you blog? What do you most enjoy or find rewarding about blogging? How many hits do you get in a day? How does blogging affect your performing career and vice-versa?

SH: I began blogging because I was asked to! I don't think I would have started off my own bat, but having the opportunity to write a regular column for one of the great British newspapers was very tempting.

Although when I started I thought I'd not get beyond a dozen articles, I've since seen it as a wonderful way to put down thoughts that before I used to scribble on bits of paper and throw in a drawer.

Not only can I write (which I've always loved to do) but I can interact closely with my audience, but without losing my privacy. My blog gets between 8,000 and 16,000 hits a week, and I've done close to 200 posts over the past year. My only stipulations when I started were that I would not be a critic and comment on living artists, and that I would write about things other than music.

JS: 2010 is a Chopin and Schumann Year. How will you be marking it in concert and in recordings? What is on your Chopin recital CD and when is it due for release? Is a Schumann CD in the works?

SH: I have a Chopin CD coming out, also in April this year. It's called "Late Masterpieces" and has on it the B minor Sonata, Barcarolle, Berceuse, Polonaise Fantaisie, the two op. 62 Nocturnes and some mazurkas.

There is no Schumann planned at the moment, although I adore his music too.

JS: You recently wrote in your blog that you don't really like the music of J.S. Bach as much as you should or others might expect. Why not? What has been the reaction from readers and other musicians to your admission?

SH: Ah, but that's the confusion. I actually said I don't LOVE Bach, and used it as a springboard to discuss why we feel close to some composers and not to others.

I like Bach, and I admire him more than any other composer. But I just don't feel a deep connection with him in the very root of my being.

Some people have been surprised by this; some have been shocked (as if I announced in 16th century Rome that I no longer believed in God); and others have agreed with me.

JS: How do you think classical music can reach newer and younger audiences?

SH: Perhaps by not being too worried by it! Young people will never want to do what their parents do socially, so all we can do is to make sure we have confidence in the quality of great music, perform and program it at the highest level, keep our own love for it fresh, make it available ... and then trust.

JS: You compose a lot and transcribe music for the piano. How does that activity fit into your career as a performer?

SH: Actually, I write very little for the piano. I'm much happier writing for choir, or cello, or piccolo, or other instruments in a way.

I'm making an exception now as I've been commissioned to write a piano work for the 2010-11 season. It will be a set of small, intense, desolate pieces with a winter theme -- some of them less than a minute long.

The last piece I wrote with piano was my trio for piccolo, contrabassoon and piano, and was commissioned by members of the Berlin Philharmonic last year ("Was mit den Traenen geschieht"). There are plans to record this for BIS next year.