



Hough, Stephen (b. 1961)

by Slawomir P. Dobrzanski

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A portrait of Stephen Hough by Christian Steiner.
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The British concert pianist Stephen Hough is among the most talented and most highly acclaimed classical musicians of his generation. Within the traditionally closeted environment of classical music, he may also be, at least among his equally successful peers, the most openly gay classical musician working today.

Born on November 22, 1961 in Heswall on the Wirral Peninsula, Hough began piano lessons at the age of five. He studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, and then at the Juilliard School in New York City.

In his late teens, influenced by the sound of the singing Buckhurst Abbey monks, Hough abandoned the Methodist denomination in which he was raised in favor of the Roman Catholic Church. At that time in his life, he briefly considered entering the priesthood.

Having won the 1978 BBC Young Musician of the Year Piano Award, the 1982 Terence Judd Award, and the Naumburg International Piano Competition in 1983, Hough embarked on an international performing career in the 1980s.

He now regularly performs with most of the major orchestras around the globe, including the London Symphony, the Chicago Symphony, the Toronto Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. He frequently appears as a soloist in Europe, Asia, the United States, and Australia.

Hough has recorded dozens of award-winning compact discs under the label Hyperion. He is the only soloist who has twice won *Gramophone Magazine's* Record of the Year Award. Among his most notable recordings is a set of the four Rachmaninoff Piano Concertos and the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, recorded during live performances with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

In addition to performing the standard piano repertoire, Hough also performs works by little known and unjustly neglected composers such as Federico Mompou, Xaver Scharvenka, Leopold Godowsky, and Johann Nepomuk Hummel. He also actively promotes contemporary music, having recorded works by Goerge Tsontakis and Lowell Lieberman.

In addition to his accomplishments as an acclaimed pianist, Hough is also well known as a composer, chamber musician, conductor, and writer.

Hough's book, *The Bible as Prayer*, was released in the United States in 2007. It is a devotional publication consisting of daily meditations on selected verses from the Bible.

As a writer, Hough frequently contributes articles on various topics to the British Roman Catholic journal *The Tablet*. He tirelessly advocates changes in Roman Catholic attitudes in favor of acceptance of same-sex

love, arguing that God does not intend for human beings to be alone. He forcefully challenges the Church's anti-gay interpretations as ahistorical and uncharitable.

In an article included in the gay anthology *The Way We Are Now*, edited by Ben Summerskill, in 2006, Hough writes of the difficulties he experienced growing up as a Christian in an environment traditionally hostile to homosexuality. He also postulates a mysterious link between his musical talent and his sexual identity.

Hough's other writings include articles about piano interpretation, pianists (among them two gay pianists: Shura Cherkassky and Joseph Villa), travel journals, and several very well written texts for CD booklets.

As a composer, Hough has contributed two masses ("Mass of Innocence and Experience," commissioned for the Anglican Westminster Abbey, and "Missa Mirabilis," commissioned for the Roman Catholic Westminster Cathedral), a cello concerto, "The Loneliest Wilderness," as well as smaller works published by Josef Weinberger, Ltd.

Hough made newspaper headlines in 2007 when his scheduled performances in Hanoi were abruptly cancelled by the communist regime. Sponsors and government officials alleged that his sexual orientation might become a safety issue for him while visiting Vietnam.

In 2001, Hough received the renowned MacArthur Fellowship Award. In 2008, he received the Jean Gimbel Lane Prize in Piano Performance from Northwestern University, an award given to "pianists who have achieved the highest levels of national and international recognition."

In 2005, Hough applied for Australian citizenship "by descent," since his father was born in Australia. Thus, he holds dual citizenship. He has explained his decision to become an Australian as stemming from the love he has for the country and for the link it provides with his family's past there, particularly with his father and grandfather.

Currently, he is professor at the Royal College of Music in London and International Chair of Piano Studies at his alma mater in Manchester. He lives with his partner, a music publicist, in London.

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About the Author

Slawomir P. Dobrzanski is Assistant Professor of Music at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. As a pianist, he has performed in Europe and in North and South America. He is author of a biographical study of the nineteenth-century pianist Maria Szymanowska, published in 2006.