

STEPHEN HOUGH



Stephen Hough's electrifying recording of the Tchaikovsky piano concertos has been called "awe-inspiring" and "guaranteed to set the pulses racing." In a series of concerts in December and January, the brilliant British polymath, who was a MacArthur "genius" award winner, performs all three Tchaikovsky piano concertos and the Concert Fantasia.

Most people are familiar with Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto, but not familiar at all with the other works you'll be playing. Was the First always a part of your repertoire?

No. I never wanted to play the Tchaikovsky First when I was a student and I turned down performances of it in the early part of my career. I just didn't feel I knew what I wanted to do with it, and it was always being played. It was when I was teaching a masterclass a few years ago, and working through some ideas with a student, that suddenly I fell in love with the piece and saw exactly what I wanted to do with it.

This roughly coincided with my recording of the complete Rachmaninov concertos and my record company, Hyperion, asked if I'd like to follow on with the complete Tchaikovsky. I didn't need much persuading at that point!

According to the performance archives, the CSO last performed the Second Piano Concerto more than 20 years ago, and has never performed the Third or the Concert Fantasia. Talk about some of their most notable aspects. What surprises did you encounter when learning these works?

Well, the Second Concerto is a masterpiece, the equal of the First. Notable is the

enormous scope of the first movement with its three cadenzas, the third one continuing for pages of blizzard-like notes. Then the magical second movement where it becomes a triple concerto with principal violin and cello having most of the melodic material. We are playing the original version in Chicago, but for 50 years after the composer's death the version heard virtually all the time was the truncated Siloti version. Tchaikovsky hated it and it's not surprising; Siloti removed nearly half of this wonderful second movement. I'm sure this is one of the reasons the piece did not settle into the repertoire of pianists in the same way as the First.

The Third Concerto (only one complete movement survives) is the last piece he wrote before his death. There are some interesting developments from his earlier style – even a hint of Shostakovich perhaps in places.

The Concert Fantasia was the biggest surprise because it's the least played of all the works and I fell completely in love with it. It's a little lighter in mood in some ways (perhaps like a ballet score), but full of great music and a tremendously exciting finish.

Portions of this e-mail interview originally appeared in *Backstage at Symphony Center* (December 2010), published by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.



How do you think Tchaikovsky's writing influenced – or altered – the development of the piano concerto form – or piano writing in general?

Although it *sounds* wonderful, I'd have to say that Tchaikovsky's piano writing is not really idiomatic in the sense of lying well under the hands. Almost everything he wrote is awkward – chords do not lie where they should, passagework turns corners in strangely tricky ways, melodies have to sing with one finger above thick textures. In that sense, he was not particularly influential on future composers for the piano. But he was arguably the first to combine symphonic scope with virtuoso technique – the true father of the Romantic piano concerto. Also, it's hard to hear the big cadenza of the Second Concerto without hearing so many other similar examples of the huge gestures of 19th century virtuosity – Rachmaninov of course, but onwards to Busoni and Prokofiev.

What are the challenges for you in presenting a whole body of work like this?

They are long and physically tiring to start with...and that's before thinking of the emotional challenges. Tchaikovsky is a composer on the edge, and unless the

performer is standing there with him, on a precipice of musical intensity which sometimes approaches hysteria, the works will never take wing. But, as with any large structures, you need to keep the climaxes in proportion and balance the architecture from beginning to end. So a balance of heart, head and hands in every bar.

You've performed in Chicago often. What is special for you about working with the CSO?

The CSO was the first major U.S. orchestra I played with – at Ravinia in 1984. From the first notes of the rehearsal for that concert until the present day I have loved how this orchestra sounds. It's like sitting in front of a great instrument which can do anything – and Chicago is one of my favourite cities in the world!

Feel free to talk about any future projects on your plate now – books, conducting, recordings, compositions....

There are lots of new projects of all kinds on my desk! I've just finished writing a song cycle to go with the Brahms Lieberslieder sets for SATB and piano duet. They're called "Other Love Songs" because they deal with love of all kinds, except romantic male/female. There are gay, Divine, filial, friendship-related poems, including texts by the African Americans, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes. I'm writing a flute sonata at the moment at the request of Michael Hasel of the Berlin Philharmonic, who commissioned my piccolo, contrabassoon and piano trio. All of these and other works will be recorded this season. And I keep writing words, publicly on my *Telegraph* blog and privately in poetry and other things. On the piano desk, lots of Liszt – both concertos to be recorded along with the Grieg; the Liszt sonata in recitals through the year and the premiere of my Sonata for Piano (broken branches) which was commissioned by the Wigmore Hall.