

Stephen Hough



Stephen Hough is widely regarded as one of the most important pianists of his generation. Since winning first prize in the Naumburg International Piano Competition in 1983, he has appeared with most of the major American and European orchestras and performs regularly in the major halls and concert series around the world.

He was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2001 for his unique contributions to contemporary life. In December 2007, the Northwestern University School of Music selected Hough as the second recipient of the Jean Gimbel Lane Prize in Piano Performance.

This interview was conducted prior to Stephen Hough's performances of the Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No. 4 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in December 2007. Portions of the original interview were published by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
—Paula Tsurutani

In a *Fanfare* interview, you described the Rachmaninov Fourth Piano Concerto, vividly, as “such a private kind of piece, a disturbing vision of the man backstage.” What can the listener, not well-acquainted with this work, expect to hear? I think it's one of the saddest pieces in the repertoire—but not a ‘staged’ tragedy. It's a glimpse of the composer's soul as a representative of the men or women of a disturbing age.

The Fourth Concerto, amazingly, has not been performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1974. Why is this concerto performed less frequently than his others? To me, the Fourth is one of the great 20th century scores—deeply reflective of that era in a unique way. Other works (*The Rite of Spring*, *Pierrot Lunaire*) were filled with the new ideas forging ahead, but this piece uniquely evokes the sense of alienation of the interwar years; the feelings of those who would like to have moved ahead with the new fashions and ideas but felt unable to. As such, and as we look back at the 20th century now as something past, the Fourth Concerto is one of the most important expressions of one of the most prevalent moods of the epoch.

One other main reason it is not played very often is it's very difficult to play as an ensemble piece. Nothing quite happens where expected, rhythmically, melodically, or harmonically. Also, it is not what people expect when they see the name Rachmaninov attached to a piece.

You recorded all four of the Rachmaninov concertos, live, with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra several years ago, and in three different ways (with different woodwind parts). Which version will you play in Chicago? I hope to do the extra woodwind parts. It's only for about ten bars but without them it does sound to me like something's missing. They are clearly heard on the composer's own recording.

You also are an active composer, and had several world premieres this year. How does your work as composer inform your work as pianist, and vice versa? It's difficult to quantify, but I hope that it makes me look at the score with respect and empathy—and, in this case, deep admiration for Rachmaninov's skill.

You also conducted the premiere of your cello concerto this year. Do you enjoy conducting, and do you expect to do more in the near future? My experience with that concert was rather frantic with barely any rehearsal time. I do have some other dates in my diary to conduct so we'll see how it feels under better circumstances!

Other projects on the drawing board now? I have a contract ready to sign on my desk for a book exploring aspects of gay theology. I just have to have the courage, and time, to take the plunge and start gathering together the hundreds of pages of notes and ideas. And compositionally, I'm beginning work on an idea for a ballet. I also want to orchestrate and expand a mass I finished earlier this year.