

Good Reads for Bad Times: Stephen Hough's *Rough Ideas*

By [Clive Paget](#), *Musical America*

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What do you do when you find yourself sitting around in airports, on planes, or in hotel bedrooms? If you're international concert pianist Stephen Hough, you get out a notebook and jot down ideas. For years, many of his musings—or “rough ideas” as he calls them—found their way into the popular, but now defunct blog he used to write for the U.K.'s *Daily Telegraph* newspaper. Now, around 200 pieces have been corralled into book form, a smorgasbord of wit and wisdom that goes well beyond the purely musical (though music is its beating heart).

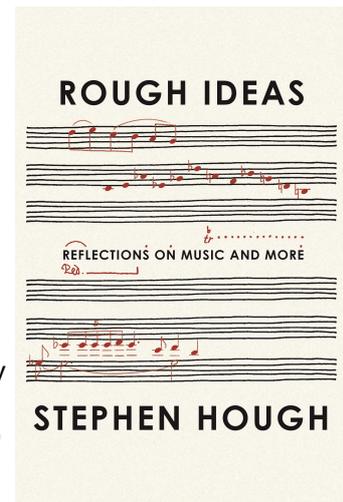
Hough has always been a polymath. As well as an omnivorous virtuoso with a talent for introducing his audiences to the highways and byways of 300 years of compositional thought, he's also an increasingly sought-after composer. But it doesn't stop there. He paints, he writes poetry—winning the Sixth International Poetry Competition in 2008—and has even written a book on perfume, one of his many “hobbies.” British by birth, he's Juilliard trained and, before and hopefully after the current world circumstances, remains a regular visitor to the U.S. despite becoming an Australian citizen in 2005. If ever someone deserved to be called a Renaissance Man, it is Hough.

The “jottings” here range from observations on art, music, and performance practice, as well as life, food, travel, sexuality—he's written extensively about his experience coming to terms with being a gay man— and religion. (Hough has seriously considered becoming a priest on at least two occasions.) Some essays are long, up to 1000 words, while some are as little as a few lines, but each has been carefully crafted to say just as much as needs to be said.

As a pianist, Hough is a consummate servant of the music, delivering deceptively bravura performances without appearing to break a sweat, and never making it all about him. Ditto as a writer. Each essay is attentive to the idea at hand, and despite many of them being first-person, the focus is rarely Hough (except when he talks personal keyboard practice). That's not to say it feels distant, far from it, for Hough is an engaging writer, offering a personal perspective and peppering his copy with a self-effacing wit and the sort of wry reserve that seems hardwired into a certain breed of English writers.

The book is conveniently subdivided, each section focusing broadly on a particular topic. “Stage,” for example, covers Hough's diverse thoughts on practice, performance, and concert-day routine. It also touches on zeitgeist subjects like clapping between movements (Hough is a fan) and ringtones going off during performances, and reveals some hilarious bloopers while philosophizing on why mistakes can sometimes be a good thing. “Studio,” on the other hand, is full of sharp tips for anyone thinking of making a recording, as well as useful advice on playing the piano. These range from observations on fingering to where to sit at the keyboard. His four essays on the use of the pedal are engrossing.

As a world traveler, Hough has important points to make on surviving a hectic schedule, but he's also an inveterate observer of different cultures and has things to say about his three most common ports of call: Britain, America, and Australia. These can range from observations on art and architecture—like his savvy reflections on the Sydney Opera House—



to the basic decency of Americans. An occasion at Kennedy Airport ahead of a flight for Seattle is one of my favorites. On learning Hough had mislaid his laptop at an earlier security point, a woman booked on a later flight offered to go back and collect it. They exchanged details, and the next morning there it was waiting for him at his hotel reception—the woman had dropped it off after midnight!



Of course, music is front and center here, and Hough has much to say about certain composers and particular works. His description of realizing all over again the brilliance of an over-exposed warhorse like Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto is memorable, as are his reflections on great pianists like Alfred Cortot, Shura Cherkassky, and Glenn Gould. Even more enjoyable are the odd anecdotes about fellow musicians. A

moment of uncontrollable hysteria shared with his friend the cellist Steven Isserlis is a gem.

As you might expect, "Religion" forms a substantial section, reflecting his views on God, the Catholic Church, Christmas, Judaism, and even venturing carefully thought-through opinions on abortion. As an out gay man and practicing Catholic, he treads carefully the shadowlands where sexuality rubs up against theology, but he can also laugh at it all too. "Gay pianists: can you tell?" is both smart AND funny.

With so much to enjoy, at 464 pages, *Rough Ideas* is the perfect antidote to COVID-19 shut-in boredom, or a big, fat holiday read in better times. And for those with musical friends and relatives, it literally screams "gift me."

Rough Ideas

Reflections on music and more

By Stephen Hough

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