

presents...

# STEPHEN HOUGH | Piano

Tuesday, November 14, 2023 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

## MOMPOU

### Cants Mágics

*Energic*  
*Obscur*  
*Profond: Lent*  
*Misteriós*  
*Calma*

## DEBUSSY

### Estampes

*Pagodes*  
*La soirée dans Grenade*  
*Jardins sous la pluie*

## SCRIABIN

### Piano Sonata No. 5 in F-sharp Major, Opus 53

INTERMISSION

## HOUGH

### Partita

*Overture*  
*Capriccio*  
*Cançion y Danza I*  
*Cançion y Danza II*  
*Toccatà*

## LISZT

### from *Années de Pèlerinage, Deuxième Année "Italie"*

*Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*  
*Sonetto 104 del Petrarca*  
*Sonetto 123 del Petrarca*  
*Après une lecture du Dante, fantasia quasi sonata*

**This program is made possible in part by the generous support of Robert and Ruth Dell.**

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## ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents Stephen Hough for the seventh time. He made his first appearance in February 1991.



Named by *The Economist* as one of Twenty Living Polymaths, **Sir Stephen Hough** combines a distinguished career and a longstanding international following as a pianist with those of composer and writer. The first classical pianist to be awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, he was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year Honors 2014 and was awarded a Knighthood for Services to Music in the Queen's Birthday honors 2022.

In the 2022–23 season Hough performed over 90 concerts across five continents. Recent orchestral highlights include the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, Orchestre National de France, Vienna Symphony, London Philharmonic, and the Finnish Radio as well as with the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center, the St. Louis, Cincinnati, Detroit and Houston symphonies and the New York Philharmonic.

Mr. Hough is a regular guest at festivals such as Salzburg, Mostly Mozart, Edinburgh, La Roque-d'Anthéron, Aldeburgh and the BBC Proms, where he has made 29 appearances. In June 2020, he returned to London's Wigmore Hall to give the UK's first live classical music concert in a major venue since the nationwide lockdown earlier that year.

Mr. Hough's extensive discography of over 60 CDs on the Hyperion label has garnered the Diapason d'Or de l'Année, sever-

al Grammy nominations, and eight Gramophone Awards. Recent releases include the complete piano concertos of Beethoven with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra; *Brahms: The Final Piano Pieces*; and Schubert Sonatas. His recording of Mompou's *Musica callada* was released in 2023.

A prolific composer, recent commissions include composing a new work for the 2022 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, which was performed by all 30 competitors, and his String Quartet No. 1 *Les Six Rencontres* commissioned by the Takács Quartet (recorded by Hyperion, released in January 2023). Mr. Hough has also been commissioned by the Musée de Louvre, London's National Gallery, Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, the Genesis Foundation, Gilmore International Keyboard Festival, among others.

Mr. Hough's memoir *Enough: Scenes from Childhood*, was published by Faber & Faber in Spring 2023. It follows his collection of essays *Rough Ideas: Reflections on Music and More*, published by Faber and Faber in London and Farrar, Straus and Giroux in New York, which was named one of the *Financial Times*' Books of the Year 2019. His first novel, *The Final Retreat*, was published by Sylph Editions in 2018. For seven years he wrote more than 600 articles for his blog in *The Telegraph*, which became one of the most popular and influential forums for cultural discussion.

Stephen Hough resides in London and is an Honorary Member of the Royal Philharmonic Society, a Visiting Professor at the Royal Academy of Music and at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University, holds the International Chair of Piano Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music, and is on the faculty of The Juilliard School in New York.

Follow Stephen on X @houghhough.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### Cants Mágics

**FEDERICO MOMPOU**  
(1893–1987)

Catalonian composer Federico Mompou learned to play the piano as a boy, then went to Paris to study piano and composition. Intensely shy and retiring (he did not marry until he was 64), Mompou early gave up any thought of a career as a concert performer and instead devoted himself to composition. Mompou's retiring personal manner

finds a direct reflection his music: he aimed for an elusive, almost self-consciously simple style, a style that he referred to as *primitivista* or *recomençament*. His music often does without key signatures, barlines, meters, or development and sets out to produce an elusive, haunting impact on its listeners—Mompou said: "I wish that [music] should seem to come out of the shadows so to return to the shadows once again."

Mompou composed his *Cants Mágics* in 1917–19, when he was in his mid-twenties. All five movements are very brief, all are in a general ABA form, some phrases are marked with quite subjective descriptions, and all five movements end with an enigmatic fade into silence. Mompou came from a family of bell-makers, and many listeners sense the sound of tolling bells in this music.

The opening *Energic* proceeds steadily and slowly along huge chords, fading into silence on a broadly arpeggiated chord. *Obscur* does have barlines: though the meter is unmarked, the piece is effectively in a slow 2/4, and Mompou repeats a number of brief phrases. Some of this movement is written on three staves, and ironically in a movement titled "Obscure," performers are instructed to make their performance clear: "clear." *Profond-Lent* begins slowly and grows even slower in its central episode; at one point Mompou asks that the playing be "under the weight of a dream." *Misteriós* is the most brilliant of the movements—after a slow introduction, the music rushes ahead on sparkling sixteenth-note passagework, marked *sens ordre*: "without order." The *Cants Mágics* concludes with *Calma*, built like the opening movement on a steady progression of chords; its brief middle section is marked *Inquiet*.

### Estampes

**CLAUDE DEBUSSY**  
(1862–1918)

In 1903, Debussy published a set of three brief piano pieces that he called *Estampes*. That title translates as "engravings" or "prints," and the notion of creating a visual impression through sound is central to these quite different movements: each offers a different subject, and Debussy presents each in a quite different musical style.

*Pagodes* ("Pagodas") appears to have had its inspiration in the music of the Javanese gamelan ensembles Debussy heard in Paris during the International Exposition in 1889. The clang of string and percussion

instruments in those ensembles made itself felt in his own music, and in *Pagodes* he creates an air of exotic orientalism. His recurring use of the interval of the fifth and the pentatonic scale (the opening theme is played entirely on the black keys) instantly evokes that atmosphere, but even more effective are Debussy's bell sounds: the swirling high arpeggios of the ending with the sound of tiny temple bells brushed lightly by the wind.

Debussy apparently spent only one day in Spain, a brief trip across the border to San Sebastian, but he seems to have had an instinctual feel for the Spanish idiom. *La soirée dans Grenade* has been praised for having caught the sultry feel of a warm Spanish night. Musically, it takes the form of a *habanera*, a popular Spanish dance of Cuban origin (the title comes from the name Havana) based heavily on dotted rhythms. Debussy's *Soirée* falls into a number of short sections: the languorous, lilting opening gives way to faster sections, some of them sharply syncopated. The shifts reflect the different sounds and faces of the night, and Debussy brings the piece to a close in the same quiet atmosphere with which it began.

*Jardins sous la pluie* ("Gardens in the Rain") has proven one of Debussy's most popular piano pieces, and this evocative music has called forth a wealth of fanciful interpretations: some listeners have actually invented a program for this short piece that has the sun breaking through the clouds at its close. Debussy asks that the performance be "Clean and fast." The steady patter of sixteenths depicts the rain, and in the course of the movement Debussy introduces two wistful children's songs—"Do-do, l'enfant do" and "Nous n'irons plus au bois"—as counter-melodies.

## Piano Sonata No. 5 in F-sharp Major, Opus 53

ALEXANDER Scriabin  
(1872–1915)

In the early years of the twentieth century, Alexander Scriabin's life and art underwent a profound transformation. Falling first under the influence of Nietzsche and then Madame Blavatsky and theosophism, Scriabin conceived a vision in which all life strained toward mystical unity and ecstasy, and this vision transformed his own music. He had begun as a "traditional" composer, one much influenced by Chopin, but now he began to evolve a new musical

language, characterized by harmonic and formal freedom and a strong interest in instrumental color. As part of his consuming philosophy, Scriabin wrote what he called a "poem of ecstasy." This inspired one of his finest orchestral works, a tone poem that he called *Poem of Ecstasy*, written between 1905 and 1908. During its composition, Scriabin took time off to compose his *Piano Sonata No. 5*, which springs from the same inspiration.

Scriabin wrote this sonata very quickly, in the space of only six days in December 1907. It is in the one-movement form that he came to prefer in his later years, and it lasts a compact ten minutes. In the printed score, Scriabin quotes four lines from his "poem of ecstasy":

*I call you to life, O mysterious forces  
Submerged in depths, obscure!  
O thou creative spirit, timid of life,  
To you I bring courage!*

Listeners should not look for a literal depiction of any of this in the music but should rather take these lines as an indication of the spiritual longing that animated Scriabin's creativity over the final decade of his brief life.

The sonata gets off to a striking beginning with a very brief—and violent—introduction. A sequence of low trills is broken by salvos of attacks that spiral upward and break off in silence. Out of nowhere comes a quiet transition Scriabin marks *Languido*. The main body of the sonata rushes ahead firmly at the *Presto con allegrezza* ("Very fast, with cheerfulness"), and soon this settles into a rather voluptuous melody marked *accarezzevole* ("caressingly"). This in turn is interrupted by rhythmic outbursts marked *Allegro fantastico*. Scriabin's treatment of this material is very free: he recalls all his themes, varying and alternating them as they reappear, and continually moving them higher in the piano's register. This music—of great rhythmic freedom and often scintillating color—is extraordinarily difficult for the performer. At the end, a coda marked *Presto* drives this sonata to a conclusion that is almost breathtaking in its suddenness.

### Partita

STEPHEN HOUGH  
(B. 1961)

The composer has supplied a program note for this piece.

Having written four sonatas for piano of a serious, intense character, when I was commissioned by the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation to write a piece for its competition winner, Albert Cano Smit, I wanted to write something different—something brighter, something more celebratory, more nostalgic. Indeed, a piece deliberately, unashamedly drawing on some early-20th century influences and tonal gestures.

This Partita is in five movements. Its outer, more substantial bookends suggest the world of a grand cathedral organ. The first of these alternates between ceremonial pomp and sentimental circumstance, whereas the final movement, taking thematic material from the first, is a virtuosic toccata—a sortie out of the gothic gloom into brilliant Sunday sunshine.

At the center of the work are three shorter movements each utilizing the interval of a fifth: a restless, jagged Capriccio of constantly shifting time signatures, and two *Cançon y Danzas*, inspired by the Catalan composer Federico Mompou.

—Stephen Hough

## from *Années de pèlerinage* (Deuxième année: Italie), S.161

FRANZ LISZT  
(1811–1886)

Liszt and his mistress Marie d'Agoult made an extended visit to Italy in 1838–39, and they fell in love with the country, its people, its art. While in Italy, Liszt began to sketch a second collection of piano pieces in the manner of the first book of *Années de pèlerinage* ("Years of Pilgrimage"). Where the first collection had been devoted to physical locations in Switzerland, now Liszt changed his focus: the seven pieces of *Italie* were inspired by varied works of Italian art. While in Italy, Liszt and Marie d'Agoult read through the sonnets of Petrarch together, and Liszt was so struck by these poems that the following year he wrote three songs that set Petrarch's sonnets 104, 47, and 123. Liszt immediately transcribed the three songs as piano pieces, and these transcriptions were published as a set in 1846. Several years later, Liszt returned to these piano pieces and revised them for inclusion in the second book of *Années de pèlerinage*.

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While the impulse behind these three pieces is lyric, Liszt turned the piano versions into virtuoso keyboard works: moments of melting lyricism will give way almost instantly to bravura writing that demands an absolutely first-class pianist simply to get the notes. *Sonetto 47* opens with a brief but impetuous introduction before settling into the main melody of the song, which Liszt marks both *con intimo sentimento* and *sempre dolce* and which sings gracefully on syncopated rhythms. The song-theme is elaborated—and the introductory material returns in various forms—before the music closes with a quiet reminiscence of the central theme.

By contrast, *Sonetto 104* opens powerfully (*Agitato assai*), as befits the troubled topic of this sonnet, but this abrupt beginning quickly gives way to the melody of the song, which is then extended at length. The writing for piano is particularly impressive here, with difficult chordal passages, powerful writing in octaves, great cadenza-like flourishes, and chains of thirds.

The subject of *Sonetto 123* is more peace-

ful, and Liszt marks this setting *Lento placido* and specifies that the performance should be *dolcissimo* and *espressivo*. Despite an occasional outburst, this music remains generally restrained, and in the closing moments there is some lovely use of the piano's ringing high register.

The final work of this set is a sort of companion-piece to the three Petrarch settings, and it was published as the seventh (and final) piece of the Italian book of *Années de pèlerinage*. Liszt borrowed the elaborate name *Après une lecture du Dante* from a poem by Victor Hugo and appended his own description *fantasia quasi sonata*; the work is sometimes known as the *Dante Sonata*. Written in 1839, it was apparently very difficult for Liszt: Marie d'Agoult wrote to a friend to say that its composition "was sending him to the very devil."

The *Dante Sonata* opens with powerful descending octaves meant to depict the entry into hell and doubtless inspired by the line "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." Soon we are plunged into the torment of the damned on music that Liszt marks *lamentoso*. Liszt biographer Alan Walker notes that one of Liszt's students—

on information provided by the composer—copied the following lines from *The Inferno* into his own score at this point:

*Here sighs, with lamentations and loud moans,  
Resounded through the air pierced by no star,  
That e'en I wept at entering. Strange tongues,  
Horrible cries, words of pain,  
Tones of anger, voices deep and hoarse,  
With hands together smote that swelled the sounds,  
Made up a tumult, that for ever whirls  
Round through that air with solid darkness stained,  
Like to the sand that in the whirlwind flies.*

Consolation comes with the singing and serene second subject (perhaps a vision of heaven from out of the pit of hell), and though there are moments of radiant calm along the way, Liszt drives the *Dante Sonata* to a close that is both dramatic and sonorous.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger