

Two Lads from Chets

On February 23-25, 2012, North Carolina Symphony Music Director Grant Llewellyn welcomes someone who is more than just a talented guest artist to the orchestra's concerts in Wilmington and Raleigh. Pianist Stephen Hough is an old friend. Together as young boys they attended the prestigious Chetham's School of Music in Manchester, England. Unfortunately a planned face-to-face chat about those early days, to be conducted in London by Grant's daughter Imogen, coincided with last summer's riots in the city, and the meeting was cancelled. Instead, the two classmates responded separately to the same questions via email, offering unique insight on their shared time at what has become the U.K.'s largest music school.

Opus: *Tell us how you met at Chets. How old were you? What classes and activities did you share?*

STEPHEN HOUGH: I think I was ten and Grant was 11 when we met at Chetham's. We were in the same form, so we basically shared part of each day for five years, and several classes. History, English and French perhaps. I do remember Grant being extremely good at sports. I used to leave my sports kit at home so I wouldn't have to take part. I got a whack on the backside with a tennis shoe then I could go off and read or gossip.

GRANT LLEWELLYN: I think that Stephen joined Chets a year or two after me. We were in the same class, which comprised most of the specialist music students. The school had changed to specialize in music education in 1969, and the intake came increasingly from all over the U.K. Stephen was one of the "day boys," who came in from their homes in the Manchester area. We therefore didn't hang out together as much as I did with my fellow boarders, with whom I lived throughout the term.

I remember Stephen as a quietly smart, articulate lad who didn't need to be heard in class, but whom you knew was completely on top of every subject he chose. I was a bit of a jock, I suppose, and was as keen to kick and chase balls as I was to play my cello and piano. I had a wide acquaintance of mates, whereas I remember Stephen having a dedicated group of close friends. It was mainly in the musical arena that we spent time together.

Opus: *Were you a part of the infamous International Bollard Day? Any other shenanigans you remember getting up to?*

GL: The International Bollard Day was really the territory of the boarding boys, as we had to illegally hoard the [traffic cones] at night time so as not to be detected and arrested. The trick was to "borrow" a bollard or two from certain traffic or building sites around Manchester city center and stash them in a secure place in school until the eve of International Bollard Day. Then, overnight, we festooned the school with hundreds of mostly luminous orange bollards. As the school was housed in the original manor house at the epicenter of medieval Manchester, there were numerous spires, turrets and gargoyles to be decorated, plus the ultimate challenge, the top of the school flagpole. Of course this also left unmarked a number of gaping holes in the

roads of Manchester and so was not appreciated by the local police (with whom I may still have a record, somewhere).

SH: I remember assembling a pile of dirty bricks on the history teacher's desk for a sort of semi-joke, semi-artistic display. The teacher, Mr. Williams, was very good about this vandalism and every time I saw him in later years would mention it with a faint air of admiration. I hadn't the heart by that stage to tell him I'd done it to be naughty.

Opus: *You collaborated on a composition. Do you remember it?*

GL: A small group of us were selected to attend intensive music classes, one of which spawned a combination musical based on the tale of the Selfish Giant. I was very proud of a string quartet movement I wrote until the teacher declared it was "pure Shostakovich." I remember Wayne Marshall, Stephen Bott, Chris McCracken, Peter Wise and, of course, Stephen Hough all in the group. They were all better pianists than me, but I had a hand in the eventual quartet, plus I think I may have put it all together! Go figure.

SH: I remember Grant and I playing chamber music together, trio and cello sonatas, but not composition as such.

GL: Most importantly I remember performing with Stephen in recital. The Beethoven A-Major Cello Sonata was a favorite and was well-chosen, as it is more of a workout for the pianist than for the cellist. However, already Stephen was in a different league on the piano to my average cello skills, and I have memorable recollections of the first time I heard him as a concerto soloist with the Halle Orchestra whilst still at school. The finale of the Mendelssohn G-minor Concerto has never sounded more brilliant and sparkling



Grant Llewellyn



Stephen Hough

to me since that first live exposure in the hands of Stephen. That same effervescent quality was there in a performance of the Hummel Second Concerto we performed with the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the London Festival Hall when we were still in our 20s.

SH: I think the first [performance after Chetham's] we did was Rachmaninoff, the First Concerto with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. After that we played Hummel's A-minor Concerto with the BBC Symphony, and other occasions over the years. It's always wonderful to work with Grant.

GL: My first taste of the Rachmaninoff First Concerto was with Stephen and the CBSO, and it might still be my favorite. Then most recently, [we were on] a wonderful tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra playing Saint-Saëns and Weber.

Opus: What is it like to perform with a conductor or performer you know so well versus someone you are meeting for the first time?

SH: It's always an anxious moment for me when I start rehearsing with a new conductor. It's a bit like a date. You just don't know what will happen.

GL: Obviously you can relax with someone you know and feel comfortable with. You also can explore and challenge each other in ways that are impossible in the time allocated to the average concerto appearance. I increasingly try to work with people I know well and respect. Stephen is foremost amongst them.

Opus: Tell us particularly about your upcoming concert in North Carolina and the Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2.

SH: It's *the* great Romantic piano concerto really, a piece that is both full of glorious tunes but which is also skillfully constructed. It is passionate but also noble. Rachmaninoff was an aristocratic man whose face was completely expressionless when he played. Everything was in the notes.

GL: I think that Stephen and Rachmaninoff are a perfect match. Firstly for sheer pianism there is nobody around to touch Stephen, and the same went for Rachmaninoff in his day. But Stephen makes so much more of these concertos than the war horses they can become. He has a fantastic touch and delicacy, again reminding me of Rachmaninoff's own recordings, and a true understanding and appreciation of what the orchestra is contributing. He will challenge us, but it will always be in a collegial way. I can't wait.