

CLASSICAL

Stephen Hough

The Queen's Hall

★★★★★

Pianist, composer, writer and thinker, Stephen Hough is one of today's true public polymaths – and his remarkable International Festival recital was perhaps a predictably serious-minded affair. But alongside his astonishingly fiery, piercingly clear and direct pianism, there was a sense of reaching beyond the music, to something far more spiritual.

In Hough's opener, Schubert's austere A minor Sonata, D784, that meant reveling in stark, uncompromising contrasts between the music's glowing lyricism and quite brutal tumult – a risky but highly effective strategy. In Franck's Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, Hough was similarly hard-edged, but he edged toward an incense-scented sense of rapture in an expertly sculpted closing fugue.

After the interval, questions of faith came more overtly to the surface in Hough's



↑ Stephen Hough's recital had both emotion and pyrotechnics

own Third Piano Sonata, named Trinitas, a quirky, deeply personal work full of arcane symbolism, with religious dogma represented by 12-note serialism, for example. It was vigorous and rigorous, but also thoroughly entertaining in its jazzy rhythms and peeling bells evoked by splashy flat-hand clusters on the keyboard.

And in his closing quartet

of Liszt showpieces – they're not called Transcendental Studies for nothing – Hough looked way beyond the works' pianistic pyrotechnics to a realm of emotion and intense spirituality.

It took his second encore – his own wildly inventive, uproarious reimagining of Waltzing Matilda – to bring us all back to earth.

DAVID KETTLE