

'There are a lot of aspects of pianists' lives that I almost envy'



David Kettle

I think I always knew I was destined for music – it was easily the biggest thing in my life." Cellist Philip Higham is pondering his musical beginnings as a child. And that intense focus on all things musical has continued into his adult life. He's an accomplished soloist and chamber musician, an in-demand teacher and, since 2016, principal cellist of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. It's as soloist and SCO player that he embarks on a four-stop tour across Scotland later this month, performing Tchaikovsky's *Variations on a Roco Theme* with the orchestra in Stirling, Findhorn, Turriff and Forfar.

Born in Edinburgh, Higham studied at the city's St Mary's Music School, where his first choice of instrument was violin. Before that, he was a pianist. "As I've hopefully become a better and deeper musician, there are a lot of aspects of pianists' lives that I almost envy," he says.

"Their connection with the whole of the music they play is really unique – string players need to draw on that a lot."

It's an observation that encapsulates Higham's perceptive, deeply thoughtful view on his music and his profession. He moved to the cello permanently aged 16, when he suddenly felt he could access more of the instrument's expressive range. "It becomes kind of addictive after that," he chuckles.

Following studies at Manchester's Royal Northern College of Music, he has forged a very successful career as a soloist and chamber player. He already has two highly regarded solo discs to his name – of the cello suites by Bach and Britten – and another in the pipeline, featuring the first recording of John Caskin's *Stolen Airs* with regular recital partner, pianist Alasdair Beatson "...who's been a remarkable influence on my own musical thinking," Higham adds modestly.

After living in Manchester, London and briefly Berlin, Higham's return to Edinburgh in 2016 was for family reasons. "My partner and I decided



Philip Higham went from playing the piano, to the violin, and finally cello

that having a family was going to be the next step, and we came to the conclusion that Edinburgh was the best place – family and friends were obviously the main factors in that."

His move, however, coincided with a vacancy in the SCO's principal cello chair. "I knew the SCO already, of course," Higham explains, "and having done primarily solo and chamber work for five or six years, it made sense to pursue something

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else. When the offer came, it was everything I wanted at that moment."

His new orchestral position was, he admits, a little different from much of his earlier experience. "The first opportunity it offered was to become immersed in a lot of music that I didn't really know. That's still the case now, even three years into the position – there's a lot of repertoire I'm playing for the first time. Here I am playing all the Beethoven or Brahms symphonies, having really only done the cello sonatas or piano trios previously. But I see that as a huge opportunity: if you're a curious musician, you want to understand the

whole picture." He's keen to continue his other activities alongside the SCO, however. When we speak, he's just returned from a week of performing at the Penarth Chamber Music Festival, and he's played at London's Wigmore Hall and in both of pianist Susan Tomes's Winterplay weekend festivals at the Queen's Hall.

"When it's all working well," he explains, "everything feeds off everything else. You exercise different parts of yourself as a musician."

Higham played as a soloist with the SCO for the first time in 2018, in a typically sparkling but thoughtful performance of CPE Bach's *A minor Cello Concerto*. He describes Tchaikovsky's lyrical *Roco Variations* as "well loved, and very lovable".

What's the piece like to play? "It isn't pastiche, but in it Tchaikovsky is looking at the world of Mozart and Haydn as he sees it. I think a lot of it is ballet music – it has very balletic gestures and rhythms. As a cellist, you have to find the line between a sort of delicacy and grace, and a full-blooded late-Romantic Russian spirit." ■

Philip Higham plays Tchaikovsky's *Variations on a Roco Theme* with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra at Stirling Castle (18 July), Findhorn (19 July), Turriff (20 July) and Forfar (21 July).