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finally, would be stitched together. So he did it in all the various lonely “dead” times that punctuate any international pianist’s life.

It’s the diary of a priest on a week-long retreat who is being blackmailed by a prostitute and has lost his faith. I’ll stop there, even though he tells me the whole plot.

The poetry won him first prize in the International Poetry Competition in 2008. He got £500 for *Early Rose*, a rhapsodic, very musical piece that, I can see, echoes some of his own music. But the point is, it’s serious and well worked. Somehow, he must always fill the dead times.

The painting is more explicitly therapeutic, but also even more revealing than the poetry of the novel. “It’s just something I do when no one is looking, to release tension in myself. I just splash bright colours over big canvases.

“I think of abstract art as, in the end, decorative, really. I love it, I love going to exhibitions. Of course, the best of it transcends that, but I think of it as a form of high decoration, in a way. I think nature is very abstract. If you have a piece of

wood, it’s an abstract design and there’s a certain randomness – marble is the same. What I’m doing is trying to be the God behind the marble.”

Seeing patterns in randomness is known by psychologists as pareidolia. It is, scientifically, a simple mistake, a perceptual glitch; non-scientifically, it is precisely what artists do or, religiously, what God has put there. Now we are closing in on Hough’s own music.

He was born in Cheshire in 1961, into modest circumstances and a “loosely Anglican” family. By the age of five, his prodigious gift had emerged – he learnt to pick out 100 nursery rhymes on a relative’s piano and, after a failed experiment with a toy piano, his parents spent £5 on an old stand-up and his course in life appeared to be fixed. At six, he was a finalist in a competition. “I got my first, and probably only, headline in the *Daily Mail* – ‘Could This Be the New Mozart?’”

So all was going smoothly until he went off to Chetham’s School of Music, in Manchester. At 12, he had a nervous breakdown. “I lost interest in everything. I don’t really know what happened. I didn’t want to leave the house. I didn’t want to go into Manchester, I was scared of being attacked. I watched six hours of television a day and I did very badly at school.”

He missed out his whole second year, but also all the rest of his time at Chetham’s – these were the years of Led Zep and loon pants – and didn’t recover until he went, at 16, to the Royal Northern College of Music. Then “everything changed”. Somehow, he had done enough work on his piano-playing through the crisis for it to re-emerge at the RNCM gloriously intact. He won awards and, in 1983, became a full-time professional pianist.

Even this phase wasn’t quite as ordered as it now seems, however. Hough was wrestling with two big issues – his homosexuality and his conversion to Catholicism. Gayness led, as it so often does, to concealment, which may have had something to do with his breakdown. “I was afraid of my parents rejecting me, of people making fun of me. You learn to hide things, then they find an outlet in outrageous behaviour.”

Two notable events led to his Catholicism: attending a Mass at Buckfast Abbey and studying Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius*. He saw something larger than he had ever known. “It seemed such a big world. I had lived in a very English and very Victorian and very limited world.” This is an obvious echo of his love of the sheer scale of the new world to which he aspires to belong.

Gayness and Catholicism are, of course, an uneasy mix. It drove him to 15 years of celibacy. “I lived the life of a travelling monk,” he has said. He now lives with his civil partner. Meanwhile, he made two attempts to become a

MY CULTURAL FIRSTS FELICITY KENDAL

The actress tells *Rob McGibbon* about her Indian childhood on stage and discovering television

First stage play I saw

My family’s production of **A Midsummer Night’s Dream** – but I was nine months old, so does that count? I was the Changeling Boy to my mother’s Titania and my view was from a basket. My childhood was spent watching Shakespeare plays from the wings or performing in them all over India.

First film I saw at the cinema

This will date me. The original Walt Disney **Peter Pan** from 1953 when I was about seven. My aunt Mary took me to see it in Bangalore. I loved Captain Hook and his wicked smile and Tiger Lily, but I thought Tinker Bell was a pain in the arse. One of my very few regrets in life is that I turned down the Peter role in a great production at the Coliseum in 1976 because I was having problems in my love life. Damn. Whoever that boyfriend was, he wasn’t worth it.

First actor I admired

Paul Scofield playing Timon in *Timon of Athens* at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1965 when I was 19. I went on my own and sat up in the gods. Paul was mesmerising. He was physically beautiful and I remember him striding the stage like a panther, his voice filling the theatre. He had such charisma that he commanded concentration from the audience. I went again the following week, even though I had so little money.

First TV show I never missed

I was never that interested in television when I was young because I saw it as second class compared to theatre or films. Plus, there weren’t many televisions on tour in India. Back in England, I first lived with my mother’s family in Solihull and they watched TV every evening after supper. It was me and my three cousins, my aunt and uncle, all crammed into a tiny front room.

The Avengers and **The Man from U.N.C.L.E.** were firm favourites – but if there was anything remotely sexual my uncle felt so uncomfortable that he’d get up and go to his study.

First sitcom that made me laugh

Dad’s Army was unmissable. All the cast were fantastic, the scripts were to die for, and the comic timing was blissful. They made it all look so effortless. My favourite was John Le Mesurier as Wilson. I called him

Eeyore because he was always the gloomy one.

First book I loved

A thrilling biography about Mary Queen of Scots, simply called **The Queen of Scots** by Stefan Zweig. I remember reading it in my early teens on a voyage from Bombay to Singapore. Our theatre company always travelled in the cheapest cabins and I could not wait to crawl on to my top bunk, open the book and disappear to the 1500s.

First album I bought

We only had a very basic portable gramophone in India and we had very little money, but when I was about 14 my sister Jennifer gave me an LP of **Albinoni’s Adagio for Strings in G minor**. I listened to it endlessly and I still love it. It is haunting and beautiful and it takes me straight back to those years. Jennifer died of cancer in 1984 when she was only 50, which was awful. She was the star of our family and that piece of music always reminds me of her, so it is particularly moving.

First famous person I met

Nehru [the Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru] when I was about six. He came to our production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Delhi. He always invited my dad to lunch whenever we were in Delhi. I also met the Maharani of Jaipur – Gayatri Devi – when I was 12. She invited our company to tea. She wafted into the room on a cloud of glorious jasmine perfume. To this day, she is still the most beautiful person I have ever seen. I didn’t know at the time that she was famous, but I was stage struck.

*Felicity Kendal is in the 40th anniversary production of **Noises Off**, opening at Theatre Royal Bath on Sep 22, then touring until Oct 29*



MARK THOMAS/SHUTTERSTOCK