

H JONES

IN CONCERT

ROGER WOODWARD
50TH BIRTHDAY GALARoger Woodward, piano
Sydney Opera House

LAURIE STRACHAN

IT'S nice to go along to someone's birthday party and be given a present yourself. On Wednesday night at the Sydney Opera House, Roger Woodward gave the paying guests at his 50th the best of all possible presents - a recital to treasure.

Stop me if you've heard this before but a Woodward recital is always an Event. So, when it is billed as a Gala Event, what more can you expect? Answer: a gala performance.

This all-Chopin recital could easily have been treated as an excuse to feed an adoring public a menu of bonbons and popular firecrackers, especially when you have a CD of Chopin on the market. Woodward, though, took it as an occasion to share with the public his love and reverence for this great composer.

The program notes made mention of the fact that some people still don't think Chopin is really up there with the greats of music - Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler and so on. How anyone could still hold to this view after hearing Woodward play Chopin - and particularly after hearing Woodward play Chopin on Wednesday night - is beyond imagining.

Woodward laid out for us the full panoply of a great musical mind in its wide-ranging power. From the opening piece, the *Nocturne in D flat*, it was immediately apparent that this was going to be a night of revelations. It was as if Woodward were opening a door and taking us, like Virgil leading Dante, out into an ever-expanding world of wonders.

It is a measure of a great interpreter that the music and the musician become one and the same thing, and it is a hallmark of great music that it can sound completely surprising and completely inevitable at the same time. On both counts this was a recital that consistently attained greatness.

Two sets of mazurkas, pieces that ought by all rights to be simple country dances, were revealed as miniature dramas, concise comments on life and hope; two counter-balancing sets of waltzes showed again how much can be done with so little.

The *Polonaise in A flat* was Chopin in his most fiery, extrovert mood, while the *Barcarolle in F sharp major* moved from quiet contemplation to nervous turbulence and back with absolute assurance.

Best of all, though, was the final piece on the program, the *Ballade No 4 in F minor*. This was, in a sense, a summing up of all that had gone before, the poetry, the passion, above all the wonderful sense of two great musical minds meeting as one.