



## A fine vintage

### ROGER WOODWARD

#### Debussy: Piano Works

(ABC Classics)

The one-time urban terrorist of the avant-garde hits many right notes.

This is vintage Woodward performing vintage Debussy: a clear, luxurious recorded sound, a distinctive yet discreet musical personality and an imaginative, immaculate control of piano sonority are informed by reverence for the composer's text. It is playing distilled from a lifetime's experience with this music, with each performance commanding individual attention and respect.

More to the point, each provokes delight, such as the inscrutably controlled serenity of *Pagodes* (from *Estampes*) and the subtle, soft gradations in *Study No. 10, For Opposing Sonorities*. And there is also pleasure in unexpected places: who would have thought that Woodward, the one-time urban terrorist of the avant-garde, would bring such limpid, nodding charm to the *Serenade for the Doll*.

Combining Woodward's 1995 *Images* recording and his release of the *Studies* (1997), this set contains all of Debussy's major piano works except the *Preludes*, and the suite, *Pour le Piano*. There are the three *Estampes*, the *Images* (including *Image Oubliée*), the virtuoso piece *L'isle joyeuse*, the two books of

studies, and smaller works. As recorded here, *L'isle joyeuse* is an energised journey towards delight, full of flashes of restless colour (which also fleetingly illuminate Woodward's *Goldfish*).

The performances of the *Estampes* and *Images* are outstanding: serene and pellucid in *Reflets dans l'eau* (*Image I*) and possessed of playful exuberance in *Jardins sous la pluie*. In the strangely titled *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* (*Image II*), Woodward evokes a mysterious antique oriental world of quietly tolling gongs punctuated by intensely expressive moments (such as the simple, haunting melody that makes a telling return at the close). In *Clair de Lune*, Debussy's most hackneyed yet justly celebrated masterpiece, Woodward is delicately colourful without meretricious sentiment. Most pianistically demanding are the studies, which encapsulate and condense all that Debussy ever tried to achieve at the piano: satire (in the *Study for Five Fingers*), subtle and fluid manipulation of texture (in the studies for thirds and sixths), delicate filigree (as in the *Study for Ornaments*) and exotic orientalism infused with flashes of vibrancy (in the study for fourths).

Woodward's playing has clarity of expressive purpose, well-controlled texture and above all, love. It is a set to return to again and again.

**Peter McCallum**