

Master plays true homage

MUSIC

ROGER COVELL

ROGER WOODWARD (piano)

Chopin
Opera House Trust recital. Opera House, September 23

PAYING homage to Roger Woodward (while he paid homage to Chopin) at his 50th birthday recital in the Opera House was a popular pastime. The hall was crowded and the mood expectant and responsive.

As Woodward is one of the finest artists to have come from this part of the world, this mood of celebration was fully justified and its expectations were comprehensively rewarded. It was a magnificent recital.

The very first piece, the D flat Nocturne, Opus 27 No 2, made melody a voyage of exploration in which nothing could be taken for granted, not even by a listener familiar with the music. Its singing line was as fresh and luminous as if it were being invented from moment to moment.

The *Polonaise Fantaisie* in A flat, Opus 61, was the big pianistic tone poem of the first half of the recital, as the F minor Ballade, Opus 52, was of the second half.

Woodward rolled out the teasingly incomplete arpeggiations of the opening of the *Polonaise Fantaisie* with impeccable care and a delicately sumptuous judgment of sonority; and the many and varied incidents of the score followed in rich succession. I have rarely been so aware of this piece as a comprehensive testament of Chopin's art at its most profound.

Waltzes and mazurkas were the

episodes of greatest contrasts in both halves of the recital. The A flat waltz, Opus 42, achieved a dazzling lightness in its passages of treble velocity, a quite remarkable achievement. The mazurkas were of almost infinite variety: the one in G sharp minor, Opus 33 No 1, like a delicate autumn poem, the C major Opus 56 No 2 full of the sense of bustling movement of a true dance. Woodward's delivery of the A minor mazurka, Opus 17 No 4, had lost none of the magically apt phrasing and wistful fatalism remembered from an earlier recital.

It was appropriate for Woodward to end the first half of the evening with a rousing and familiar work, the A flat *Polonaise*, Opus 53, although the truth is that this is not one of the pieces in which he is happiest. He might well surprise us all with it next time; but at the moment I have a strong impression that he does not fully identify with its heroic tone; and the result in such a candid player is that his command of phrasing and judgment of dynamics become, for him, relatively perfunctory.

The sense of paradisaical bliss in the lilting rhythm of the great F sharp major Barcarolle, Opus 60, was fully evident, in contrast; and there was nothing in the least forced in the winding lyrical paragraphs of the F minor Ballade, briefly animated by a totally convincing and thrilling explosion of energy.

It has not been fully recognised yet that Woodward is one of the handful of Australian musical soloists whose gifts surpass even the altitudes of outstanding talent.

This recital is likely to have played a useful role in spreading awareness of his unique status among our pianists.