

Roger Woodward scales heights in Chopin renditions

It is entirely in keeping with the exuberance and tempo of Roger Woodward's career and life that three discs of his piano playing have been issued simultaneously from his first recording sessions for EMI.

This is handsome and deserved. True, the discs, all occupied by what can very loosely be termed Slavic music, do not give anything like the whole range of his repertoire.

They leave out all the very recent music with which he has put together some brilliantly exciting programs in the last couple of years, including the recital that won him untainted praise in London recently.

But there is nothing misleading in presenting Woodward in recordings redominantly made up of music in the grand roman-

tic tradition. This young Sydney pianist is, in the best sense, a romantic through and through.

He boils over with exactly the same kind of feelings that seem to have animated the leading musical (and other) creators of high romanticism.

A few years ago this admirable quality would have seemed in danger of swamping the full development of Woodward's technical control and artistic poise. That danger now seems a very long way behind.

Woodward today retains his personal impulsiveness and unpredictability —

Records by Roger Covell

long may he do so — but couples it with technical preparedness and artistic judgment of the highest order.

No pianist with less than his full share of these elements of performance would dare to commit himself to a disc of Chopin of which one side is occupied by the 12 Etudes of Opus 10 (HMV OASD 7560).

These require all the poetry the performer is capable of producing, but also, as their name implies, an extraordinary technique.

Woodward stands up to comparisons at the loftiest level on both counts. If you

want the "Revolutionary" study (No 12) played slightly faster and more clearly recorded, you can go to Horowitz (and in fact the veteran does have slightly more imperative a sound in the clanging right-hand octaves).

But as a reading of the whole set, Woodward's recording is better than performances by some of the most famous and efficient pianists of today or yesterday.

Woodward combines a winning right-hand lightness with forceful and masterfully independent left-hand; and his studies in

Poland seem to give him a decided edge over even the most famous pianists reared wholly in other traditions.

He makes the best-known studies (No 3 and No 5, for example) sound fresher and, on occasions, wilder than the average virtuoso does.

No 4 finds him superbly equipped in technical and expressive terms for its hurtling ferocity. (Compare the recording made by Tina Lerner, a pianist of the so-called "golden age," which goes just as fast, but entirely lacks the sense of relentless nightmare in Woodward's performance.)

The other side of this record contains a hauntingly realised account of the big Polonaise-Fantasia, Opus 61, in which the ardour of the dance is recalled fitfully as if through a haze of old memories.

But perhaps the most revelatory playing on the disc is in the D flat Nocturne, Opus 27, No 2. Woodward's basic tempo is exactly half that of Rubinstein in his standard recording. The music spreads out from the first bars like a still lake.

It is superlatively beautiful, wholly convincing and unforgettable.

This ability to vary radically the interpretation of a standard work in a way that is instantly acceptable is one of the rarer gifts of an interpretative artist.

It provides considerable further evidence for anticipating that Woodward may be the first Australian pianist to enter the very front rank of his profession (and I am not forgetting well-known Australian pianists of the past).

Almost as rewarding is a disc of Russian music (HMV OASD 7562) which allows Woodward, among other things, to contrast enormous physical excitement with brooding fatalism in Prokofiev's sev-

some welcome attention to one of Shostakovich's remarkably fine set of 24 preludes and fugues.

The side devoted to Scriabin is even more enlightening. Woodward is the only pianist who has made me want to hear more of this composer. He begins with the early C sharp minor etude (here the comparison with Horowitz is definitely in Woodward's favour), adds another etude and finishes with the tenth sonata in which the "little stridulations and abrupt whirring movements" of Scriabin's "transcendental insects" are, it becomes increasingly clear, very much in sympathy with Messiaen's birds.

A third disc (HMV OASD 7561) is occupied by 10 Rachmaninov preludes, including the top ones in C sharp minor and G minor.

Again we hear abundant evidence of Woodward's talent for artistic renovation (which is another way of saying that he takes nothing for granted) in attractive and sometimes powerful music. Note especially the fine Opus 32, No 10 prelude in B minor.

EMI have equipped the records with a striking cover, common to all of them. The sleeve notes by another Sydney pianist, Albert Landa, are intelligent and informed, but should have been much more carefully edited and proof-read. To give one instance of many, the Chopin Polonaise-Fantasia is misspelt at each of its four appearances on the cover.

Three Woodward records are a good start. Let us have some more, please, as soon as possible.

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