

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1997

■ SYDNEY SPRING

Fresh notes for French master

DEBUSSY RECITAL
Eugénie Gossens Hall, August 29
By ROGER WOODWARD

OPENING the Sydney Spring Festival with a program of music by Debussy following a recital of piano works by the French master at the beginning of last year's festival, is almost becoming a tradition. And why not?

The closer this century comes to disappearing the more it becomes clear that Debussy managed to do no-else in the last 100 years to combine a radical sensibility with a strong and clearly perceptible feeling of continuity with the past.

Where Stravinsky drove a pickaxe into rhythmic atrophy and Schoenberg attempted to rewrite the rules of harmonic morality, Debussy found in instinct, ear and an intellectual sense of proportion an almost infallible guide to modernity without rupture.

The paths he followed are still being explored.

Woodward again played major sets of keyboard music this time the two books of studies (*Études*) that Debussy wrote in his final creative period: music in which principles of technique (repeated notes, arpeggios, chromatics, the use of octaves, sixths, thirds and so on) prompted his poetic fancy as surely as exotic ideas and images had done in his Preludes of a few years earlier.

This year Woodward's playing in the initial program of the series was mixed with other contributions. In the case of Nathan Waks's collaboration with the pianist in Debussy's cello sonata, the additional musician was a partner in the fullest sense of the word, never more so than in the wonderful final movement, where the quasi-theatrical gestures of the first two movements are resolved in a statement of joy and optimism as sudden, tumultuous and definitive as it

is brief. At this moment what had been a sensitive and skilful collaboration became flaring, irresistible impulse.

Karen Cummings, a young singer whose use of Woodward is championing a typical generosity, joined him in three important sets of Debussy songs: the *Chansons de Bilitis* from the years of the composer's first masterpieces, the early *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire* in which Debussy can be heard disengaging himself from his years of Wagnerian ardour, and the *Trois poèmes de Mallarmé*, settings that join the cello sonata and the piano Etudes among the finest, triple-distilled utterances of his last years.

The singer's commitment to the songs and her musically and verbally intelligent involvement with them were not in doubt, but the actual singing left what I can only regard as a fragmentary record of their essence.

Her phrases tended to come out in bright, bird-like spasms

The use of portamento (gliding from note to note), presumably a deliberate attempt to recover technique from the practice of singers contemporary with the composer, took on an obtrusive quality, altering (it seemed to me) the line of the songs rather than reinforcing it.

There was more to be said for spasmodic phrasing in the later songs: in the Debussy tends to elide material he might have spelled out in full in earlier works.

The earliest songs, the five settings of Baudelaire, with their relatively conventional musical syntax and their more explicit development of musical ideas, suffered the most from interruptions to line and, as a result, seemed on this occasion protracted and, occasionally, dull.

Woodward, playing the piano parts with a combination of attentive and co-ordinate co-operation and touches of striking individuality, struck some memorable sparks out of

the keyboard part in the second of the *Chansons de Bilitis*, where Pierre Louÿs's words and Debussy's setting of them epitomise the hair fetish that was one of the persistent artistic motifs of the last fin-de-siècle.

Much of Woodward's solo piano playing was at the revelatory level of his solo Debussy recital at the 1996 Sydney Spring festival: the notes sprang into freshly revealed life, becoming newly-minted musical behaviour rather than the reiteration of music already celebrated as among the greatest works for piano; but there were also one or two moments when certainties of impulse faltered briefly.

Woodward is astonishing in his ability in performance to rise above organisational worries, but the strain of directing an important festival whose continued existence is threatened must disturb, even his concert poise from time to time.