

# Marathon enhances stature of Woodward

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## Music

Roger Woodward  
Chopin program  
Town Hall, Sydney

MARTIN LONG

AN emotional standing ovation, a platform strewn with flowers and streamers, and Roger Woodward's 25-month, 17-concert journey through the entire works of Chopin was over.

Somehow, it did not seem excessive or inappropriate. From the start there has been a larger-than-life quality about the venture, and an element of show business alongside the artistic purpose.

The show business side, the fascination of a public endurance test, has possibly helped in the making of a noteworthy popular success. At a time when the solo recital seems to be generally in decline, Woodward has been able throughout the series to attract large audiences to the capacious Town Hall.

Sometimes the determination to play every extant page of Chopin's work seemed to get in the way of the essential artistic purpose, but it did not diminish it. In the end it is the artistic achievement that endures.

Woodward is an outstanding Chopin interpreter by any test. Nothing that the composer wrote seems to trouble his confident virtuosity; he has a scholar's determination to produce an authentic reading, as far as that is possible, of the composer's intentions; and he shows above all natural sympathy with all the Chopin moods from the playful to the thundersome.

Moreover, to my ears, he is growing in stature. The Woodward of this final recital seemed perceptively more assured, restrained and consistent than the sometimes wayward recitalist of two years ago.

He no longer seems tempted to over-exploit his power, to indulge in curious rhythmic irregularities or to astonish with breakneck tempos. (True, in this recital the Opus 43 *Tarantella* was taken as fast as human fingers can play it, but it is that sort of a piece).

Two years ago I might have nominated the type of Chopin music that Woodward played best — the lyrical, contemplative vein represented by the nocturnes. Now I find no fluctuations in quality or sympathy.

The 24 Preludes, which appropriately ended the recital and the series, gave him a perfect opportunity to reveal this ready and versatile response. This masterly set of billiard cues encapsulates, sometimes in no more than a minute or so of music, virtually all the characteristics of the mature Chopin style.

Earlier, the recital brought forward the usual curiosity: the seldom-played *Sonata No 1*, written when Chopin was a student.

During the series we have heard a number of works from Chopin's teenage (and pre-teen) years, but none that showed future promise so strikingly. The main theme of the first movement has a sombre power and sticks in the mind; the two middle movements are charming and inventive; only the last movement wears with noisy bravura. Chopin had yet to develop his unique ability to give melodic interest to virtuosic decoration.

The plotting of this development has been one of the many pleasures of this memorable series.