

## Australian master a wonder to behold

### REVIEW

Roger Woodward, piano  
City Hall Concert Hall  
April 7

By HARRY ROLNICK

ROGER Woodward is not only Australia's finest pianist; he is one of the most astonishing middle-generation pianists on the international stage. His mastery of Chopin came from study in Poland, his Bartok performances are legendary, and composers like Stockhausen and Xenakis have composed works especially for him.

Thus the choices of his Hongkong recital seemed strangely "piecemeal": a sextet of Chopin waltzes, a quartet of Debussy preludes, a lone Satie *Gymnopédie*. . . yes, there was a complete Bach partita and a Prokofiev sonata, but one might have hastily thought the program rather formless.

Formless until Woodward began to play. For almost without exception, he combined the most dazzling technique with an architectural structure that left one overwhelmed.

This was not academic playing at all. When Woodward took the Bach *Sixth Partita* it turned from a simple work for clavichord to a monumental work that could have been composed for church organ. The opening toccata (with the long figure) and the sarabande were offered with resounding sounds. Even the final gigue led into more complex structure; it was an ecclesiastical performance of Bach which left one quite breathless.

One could be forgiven for mistaking the following Chopin waltzes as fairly lightweight, because the trip from church to salon was so great. But Woodward is hardly a lightweight. He simply has more *fun* with the Chopin. Such digital mastery makes the waltzes airy, sometimes breathless. These were not always faultless performances, but as he whipped through their paces, he exuded the right enthusiasm.

If this second half showed the polarities of Woodward's style, the first half was sonically fascinating. After the quiet mysticism of Satie's *First Gymnopédie* he played four of Debussy's most enigmatic preludes. The bells of *The Engulfed Cathedral*, those strange sustaining surges of *Ondine* and the sounds of *Sounds And Perfumes* each had an abstract quality, a sense of weight and poetry.

The Prokofiev *Seventh Sonata* was harsh, metallic, with a jumpy rhythmic quality that made it all the more disturbing.

Neither the Debussy nor the Prokofiev were the most accessible works, but Woodward was hardly looking for an acquiescent audience. He demanded attention, and with his brilliance and his search for meaning, he received it. It was simply an amazing recital.

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## Woodward reaches into soul of music

Roger Woodward is a pianist with a desire to turn music into sculpture.

At the same time there is absolutely no lack of tenderness and subtlety in his playing. This makes for highly interesting, and at times highly moving and exciting performances.

Woodward's playing of Satie's *Gymnopédie No 1*, although seemingly simplicity itself, reached into the depths of the music.

Four of the *Preludes* of Debussy allowed a further enjoyment of Woodward's amazing control over the soft and subtle aspects of piano colour.

The statuesque was heavily emphasised in Prokofiev's *Sonata No 7 in B flat major, Op 83*.

In Bach's *Partita No 6 in E minor* the necessarily heavy hand of the stonemason was at work, but as the work continued it became more evi-

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dent that the pianist was building a special sound-scape, and one in which the central meaning of Bach's message came across in forceful terms. Perhaps the aria was a shade too fast for the syncopations to be effective, and perhaps the opening fugue and the closing gigue were a shade plonking in effect, but the overall result was that of musical thinking on a very high level.

Six Waltzes of Chopin brought the concert to a close in true style.

Mr Woodward expounds the works he plays where other pianists might be content with the surface effect. In this way his playing reaches parts of the music which other pianists cannot.

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