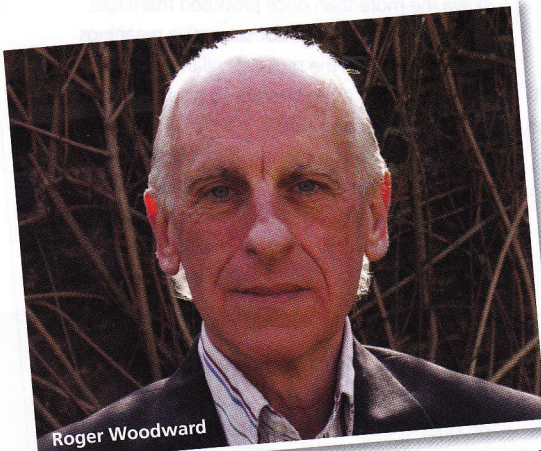


## A modernist for all periods

Roger Woodward has been at the cutting edge of music for decades, but an enduring love of Bach and the romantics has set him up for a scorching year in the studio



Roger Woodward

**A** pianist who in the space of 12 months can attract enthusiastic reviews for recordings of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Chopin's nocturnes, Debussy's preludes and works by contemporary German composers Hans Otte and Peter Michael Hamel defies pigeon-holing.

Australian-born, San Francisco-based Roger Woodward, who has achieved this with American label Celestial Harmonies, also resists the title of avant-gardeist, even though in a career spanning 40 years he has worked with Messiaen, Cage, Boulez, Pärt and many others.

'Perhaps all music that was more experimental than derivative, that retains a sense of contemporaneity and that defies time and predictable notions of style, could be called "avant-garde", and in that sense, I played or directed, all my life, alert, forward-looking repertoire from across the centuries with which I fell in love, and

wanted to live with,' he says.

'Some remarkable works I returned to constantly in the search for qualities that attracted me to them, just as we all do, in one form or another, as we reach out towards an understanding of the meaning of our existence.'

Among those constant influences has been Bach, and an indication of Woodward's reverence for the composer is his insistence that the booklet for *The Well-Tempered Clavier* recording contain a facsimile of the score.

'Despite all the categorisation that goes on, one of the most modern composers of our times remains, at least for me, Johann

Sebastian Bach. I do not see his music as belonging to the past, since his adaptation of forms, transcribed patterns, textures, dissonances, resolutions, and lofty spirit retain just as much relevance for me today as they did 60 years ago and continue to hold just as much relevance for others who were inspired by that spirit for centuries.'

That modernity extends to Woodward's decision to use a piano when recording Bach. Although I grew up playing the organ works of Bach and was already familiar with the harpsichord by the age of 14, I became fascinated with the legato cantabile aspects that could be so ideally realised on the pianos of our own times, although I continued to play harpsichord as well because of the more articulate qualities and colours of which the piano is incapable [of producing]. Having said that, *Das wohltemperierte Clavier* was played from the mid 18th century right through to the end of the 19th on organ before the great debate began as to whether it should have been performed

on clavichord or harpsichord.'

Several of his recordings are live, and if he is to go into the studio he will perform the repertoire in concert beforehand. 'When the transmission of a live concert performance to disc or as a visual image is successful, it is a rewarding experience. But sometimes the studio brings out feelings that large concert hall venues or the live audience situation are incapable of inspiring.

'For CPO Records I recorded the first performance of Feldman's *Piano and orchestra* live at the Metz Festival on the occasion of the composer's 50th birthday. Adrenalin was flowing because Hans Zender was directing; the recording sound certainly retained the special feeling that we experienced on stage as well as the enthusiastic interaction during the performance with the large audience.'

One of his favourite venues is the Sendesaal Bremen. However, when the Debussy preludes were recorded there during one of his recitals, persistent audience coughing necessitated patching sessions. But, 'without people and clothing, the temperature drops, the wood of the piano contracts and resonance increases.' The entire project had to be scrapped.

His love of the hall is undiminished. 'There was a frightening period when some local developers wanted to tear the place down but fortunately reason prevailed and this unique musical shrine was saved.'

Woodward does detect a change in audience attitude to the music which in earlier years he had to fight to get on a concert programme. 'I watched all my professional life as the works of Bartók, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich that I had played on a regular basis as a teenager became "mainstream" repertoire. As a teenager, I had been warned that this "modern stuff" was "cacophony", so much "piano bashing", and to avoid it. Managers hated it. Fortunately, we all have moved on since then and music lovers are better informed than they used to be about the life and work of early- and mid-20th-century music. It has now become customary to hear such works in concert programmes all over the world and the public accepts them as some kind of extension of 19th-century romanticism without necessarily feeling threatened.'

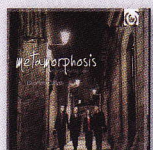


### Hurlstone, Schreck, Eylar: Bassoon sonatas

Frank Forst, bassoon, Yukiko Sano, piano  
Animato ACD6116

Hurlstone's excursions from romanticism into a plethora of rustic tunes and Schreck's stricter adherence to sonata structure allow Forst to display dexterity, Lachner and Spohr evoke a rich legato but it is Leo Ayler's work that spans a wide range of moods and true dialogue, engagingly conveyed here.

★★★★★



### Metamorphosis

Cuarteto Casals  
Harmonia Mundi HMC 902062

The works presented offer a thoughtful thesis: how three Hungarian composers in the first half of the 20th century struggled against sonata form: Bartók in his fourth quartet with a stream of folk-inspired melodies, Ligeti with gritty, stabbing textures in his Quartet No 1, Kurtág with brooding, truncated phrases in *12 Microludes*. The ensemble meets the formidable demands superbly.

★★★★★



### Miaskovsky: Quartets 1 and 13

Renoir Quartet  
Ar Re-Se 2010-1

Miaskovsky's final quartet opens with an eight-note theme that plunges one back to Tchaikovsky's Russia and weaves an opulent ten-minute tapestry in the first movement. The entire work radiates yearning retrospect. The quartet from 20 years earlier is forward-looking, Gallic in its flirtation with dissonance. Both are works that demand return to the concert repertory.

★★★★★