

Queen's Hall, Edinburgh: Piano recital

IT IS a lesson in musicality to hear Roger Woodward play Chopin's sonatas. Much of this music becomes a vehicle for empty virtuosity in the hands of many pianists, exaggerated, overprojected and rhetorical. On Sunday at the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh, even the finale of the B minor sonata seemed like a poetic vision.

This player is thoughtful, mature, deeply self-critical. He has, above all, an acute ear for texture; while he is not afraid to veil the sound in a fog of pedalled-over tone, he emerges from the gloom in great brilliant strides, and sometimes poises a glowing, gemlike melody above a haze of accompanying colour. He pushes the

soft dynamics to the verge of inaudibility — sometimes beyond it, so that some of the rapid passages in the scherzo of the B minor piece were no more than suggested.

His playing cannot be called directly communicative. It is pianist's pianism. So vague and mysterious was the finale of the B flat minor sonata that it lost all sense of speed and turned into a macabre evocation, senseless, frustrated, inward. Indeed, this whole sonata acquired a new life, the funeral march having a quiet sadness and whispered intimacy that rebuked the wretched habit of playing the piece at real funerals, the scherzo moving purposively on, never seduced

by the temptation to shallowly turn a phrase-end.

Mr Woodward proved an eloquent advocate of the early C minor sonata, though here one wondered whether the swash-buckling finale really possessed the profundities he suggested. Still, his habit of playing each rapid passage as a single gesture, and thus of hiding the music's sheer speed and difficulty, made new sense of the first movement; and the Schubertian minuet seemed perfectly achieved. Showmanship is no part of this pianist's scheme, as he proved by playing a pensive Stryabin piece as one of his encores.

Raymond Monelle