

The Gramophone, December 1975

SHOSTAKOVICH, 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op.87

Roger Woodward (piano) RCA LR125100 (two records)

RCA deserve special congratulations both on their enterprise in recording the complete work and the success which has attended the venture. Roger Woodward is a pianist of great brilliance and flair. Throughout these pieces one is struck by the fine musicianship and marvellous sense of rhythm and proportion that distinguish his playing. His tempi are generally on the fast side, but his readings are free from the rhythmic mannerisms that affect Richter's and he is, of course, a far more accomplished pianist than Shostakovich himself whose Parlophone disc, welcome though it was, left much to be desired. Woodward brings much greater tonal colour to the C major Prelude though a slightly slower tempo would, I think, have given a greater sense of repose. Shostakovich himself adopts a much slower tempo here. Woodward articulates the fugal part-writing with great skill and clarity (the fugue of No.2 in A minor is marvellously clean) and even where one would welcome a slower tempo or greater dynamic range, his playing never fails to grip the listener by means of its intelligence and personality. In no.4, Richter is considerably slower (he takes well over eight minutes as opposed to Woodward's five) and his rhythm is more flexible, and, some would say, mannered. However, he secures a greater range of dynamics.

Throughout the whole set Roger Woodward's playing is never less than compelling. He brings a marvellous inner life to the Prelude of No.7, while in the Fugue the texture seems almost to glow under his fingers and there is a radiance that the composer himself might envy. Shostakovich's account of the Fugue is (for once) faster, less expertly played and altogether more earthbound. In the Fugue of No.8, there is an impressive sense of forward movement in Woodward's account which Shostakovich's slower tempo fails to communicate. There is not space to list the felicities of each of these pieces, the breadth Woodward achieves in No.13, or the poetry of No.16, in B flat minor or the imposing final D minor Prelude and Fugue (No.24) that the composer himself has also recorded. Suffice it to say, that firmness of rhythmic grip and clarity of texture is a general feature of these readings and that no-one acquiring this set is likely to regret having done so. These are rewarding pieces full of fascination and beauty.... This is an important set and deserves a strong recommendation.

(Robert Leighton)