

roger woodward

LIKE all true musical individualists Roger Woodward makes no compromises. He takes no easy options. He'll go for spirit over accuracy every time. He'll take big risks. And if, occasionally, the sheer volatility and theatricality of his temperament come between him and the composer, if occasionally the imagination simply outratches the know-how (and goodness knows that's formidable enough), at least he is certain to have something challenging to say.

Take last week's account of the Grieg Piano Concerto — his return to the London concert platform after far too long an absence. The familiar opening declamation rang out, as one might have expected, with all due rhetoric and more, but it was his full-blooded assault on the ensuing low A that really started the adrenalin flowing. With that one note Woodward had positively demanded that we listen afresh. And we did. If there were problems here, they arose from his insistence upon searching for more than this piece can actually yield.

Edward Seckerson welcomes Roger Woodward back to the concert platform at the Barbican and Wigmore Hall

Thunder of renewal

The opening bars of the first movement cadenza were so mysteriously characterised as to emerge from shadows like late Beethoven. They somehow didn't belong. Then there were the traces of neuroticism in the phrasing — little nervous ties in the rubato that struck me as out of keeping with the psyche of both piece and composer. How delicately, for instance, Woodward touched in those crystalline arabesques at the start of the slow movement, only to nudge them aside — too brutally, to my mind — in the following stringendo.

Elsewhere, though, there could be no doubting the excitement of his impetuosity, his highly strung musical personality. Tuttle arrived in frenzied assaults of octaves, the cli-

matic moment in the cadenza, where restatement of the principal subject is answered by thunderous flourishes in the lowest octave of the instrument, was as thrilling as I've ever heard it. This wasn't just another Grieg, but a wholehearted attempt to completely revitalise. It was also a welcome infusion of musical energy in an otherwise predictable and dreary evening. The RPO was conducted by Per Dreier.

The profound and highly personalised vision of Chopin gave altogether greater rein to the Woodward intellect and imagination at the Wigmore, some days later. Theoretically laid out with two intervals to separate them, there was a rare opportunity to hear in-tandem all three Sonatas: to hear why Sonata No. 1 in C minor has remained very much an "also ran" beside its masterly companions.

No, the rewards began to flow later in a positively galvanic account of the scherzo and a Funeral March remarkable for the hypnotic, evenly-voiced placing of the middle section. By the time we arrived at, in my view, the greatest of the three sonatas, the B minor, Woodward was arguing more cogently and his fingers were doing all that was required of them in the veiled shifting harmonies of the slow movement and the accumulative energy of that bounding finale. Four encores — Debussy and Prokofiev — found him in full cry at last. Prokofiev's Suggestion Diabolique — a good deal more than suggestion in this instance — was wild and wonderful.

The Guardian Friday, 26th July, 1985

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