

The wonder of Woodward



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EDWARD Lockspeiser, one of Debussy's biographers, described him as "a composer who re-introduced taste as an aesthetic value".

During his lifetime, France fought two fierce wars with Germany. An aesthetic battle was waged at the same time against Teutonic domination of European music and for the restoration of "French cultural values".

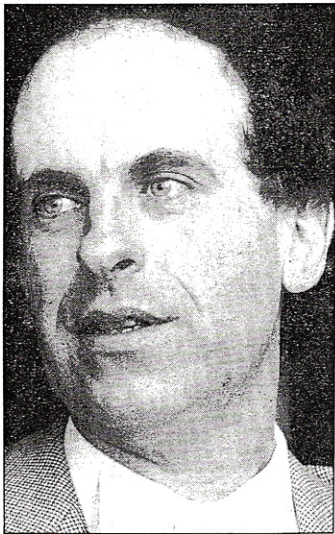
However, while it could certainly not be seriously contended that — after Mendelssohn — "taste" was a significant characteristic of that German music, it is unarguable that Debussy restored far more than mere "taste" to French music: he also brought a highly-developed literary sensibility and a concern for psychological subtlety.

Despite the analogy with painting that the often-used term "impressionist" implies, the composer Paul Dukas asserted that: "The strongest influence on Debussy was from writers".

In any case, he had a certain ambivalence to Germany, what psychologists call an "approach-avoidance conflict".

He visited Bayreuth a number of times but, when writing his own minuscule opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, was at pains to shake off Wagner's influence: in an allusion to both Wagner and the sorcerer in *Parsifal*, he referred to his need "to exercise the ghost of old Klingsor".

The fascinating Opera House concert of his music, which the Alliance Française recently sponsored to commemorate its cente-



MIRACULOUS: Pianist Roger Woodward.

the Sydney pianist Roger Woodward and the French soprano Véronique Dietschy, it also reminded us that, in his public debut as a composer (in 1882, when he was nineteen) Debussy accompanied a soprano in two of his songs.

Whether concerned with taste or timbre, no composer could have hoped for more from any interpreter than the miraculously beautiful and insightful performances which we heard from

superb command of the contrasts of Debussy's writing — of dynamics, of tempo, of mood, of texture. The soft and contemplative opening of *Hommage à Rameau*, for instance, was almost prayerful and the way in which he sustained the rapt lucidity of this supremely beautiful piece was true inspiration.

In quite different mood, he handled the dance and decorative elements of *La soirée dans Grenade* with the utmost adroitness; throughout the evening, his

ter heard than in the three *Im-* of 1907 (the second set), especially in the enigmas of *Ei la descend sur le temple qui fu't* the scintillations of *Poissons d'*

It was a matter of profound regret to me, then, that Veronique Dietschy never remotely approached this level of musicality. I found her a remarkably boring singer who, though generally secure in her pitch, was virtually without regard for carefully annotated dynamic colouration of her music. Debussy once wrote of his songs, "I would like the music to appear as if coming out of the shadows a moment from time to time returning to the while always remaining a distant presence".

There were no shadows of Madame Dietschy's singing — rarely any animation — it was at an even *mezzo-forte*. She sometimes broke phrases in inappropriate places and some of her upper notes were thin; it was only in the three songs of the first set, *Fêtes galantes* that she seriously engaged me. Elsewhere, she was as exciting as a Hansard reporter's account of the love of Romaine and Juliet.

A REMARKABLE Festival of Organ and Chamber Music has been going on at Newington College: it began on Wednesday evening with a concert by distinguished English organist Thomas Trotter and it ends tomorrow.

I could manage only Trotter's accomplished opening performance on the excellent instrument in the school chapel (it was built in 1985 by Knud Smeby who has worked in Australia since 1979). This tracker-action neo-baroque organ has a tonal palette and is capable of bright sounds though the performer tend to lack power: generally Trotter's program was music in which the instrument seemed ideal though he produced a surprise at the end with a cheery and jazzy *Prélude et Danse fugue* by the blind organist-composer Gaston Litaize (1909-1991).