

Woodward, Taylor/Adrian Boult Hall, Birmingham

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It was one of the Arts Council Contemporary Music Network's most inspired ideas to bring together the two pianists Roger Woodward (from Australia) and Cecil Taylor (from New York) as the two halves of a single touring recital. For the past two decades, Woodward has gained a deserved reputation as one of the most consistently exciting and convincing interpreters of virtuosic avant-garde piano music. Taylor, together with Coltrane and Coleman, is one of the originators of so-called "free jazz" - an all-embracing genre which encompasses almost any kind of music-making, as long as it is largely improvised.

I caught the Woodward-Taylor recital Birmingham on Tuesday night, before it proceeded to the East coast, and thence to Scot-

land - which happened also to be the night chosen for a BBC recording, to be broadcast on Radio 3 later this year. Although the theoretical working of the two musics could hardly be more different, there was a surprising affinity of gesture between Xenakis's fiery, virtuoso *Mists* (was there ever a more misleading title?), which Woodward played in his first half, and the immense 70-minute improvisation which Taylor delivered without pause after the interval.

Mists is short, pungent, to the point - almost a summary in miniature, shot with a few gentler reminiscences, of Xenakis's characteristic and explosive keyboard manner, combining the fury of *Herma* and the untamed wildness of *Eurythm*: a study in energy at white heat, lit by the

bright white light of a southern Mediterranean sun. Taylor's improvisation emerged at white heat also - but it was the heat of city life: a big, brilliant entanglement, paradoxically far more frenetic in its complexity, full of neon lights, towering shadows, the growl of automobiles.

It was long, and I loved every minute of it. I was surprised (although perhaps naively, considering the jazz context) to discover just how precise and carefully worked were the details of Taylor's harmonic scheme - in spite of a preponderance of block chords, and breathtakingly fast blocked cluster effects, he seemed to be using a 7-note motto theme (both harmonic and melodic) almost in the manner of a tone-row, inverting, canonising, fragmenting. His pair of

tiny encores was pure magic - the last presumably pure original invention, but a distillation nonetheless in 30 seconds of every song Cole Porter ever wrote.

Woodward also gave us two short pieces by Takemitsu - *For Away* and *Piano Distance*: beside *Mists* essentially delicate, nostalgic indulgences, fumed with an insistent oriental fragrance of Scriabin, but shaped with such intensity, and with such conviction, that for once they seemed a great deal taller, and more substantial, than the music suggests. Woodward worked marvels too on Morton Feldman's *Piano* - although not even his faultless touch and timing here could persuade us that truly inspired musical invention was unmistakably at work.

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