Returning to Australia to make his mark on the Chopin bicentenary with a series of recitals, Roger Woodward tells how years spent in Warsaw shaped his connection with Poland's beloved composer

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lassical musicians don't come more courageous than pianist Roger Woodward. Apart from recording more than one hundred discs of some of the most complex repertoire ever written for the piano, he has trod an unwavering path as a defender of human rights - often at the expense of his career. Because of his association with the anti-Soviet Polish Solidarnosc movement, he was forced to decline an invitation by legendary pianist Sviatoslav Richter to play at his festival in Moscow. He also became persona non grata in Communist Poland, where he had spent formative years as a student at the Warsaw Academy of Music. Now based in San Francisco, Woodward still stands up for the causes of music and freedom, and still brings an enthralling power to both concert hall and studio. Some critics describe his Chopin performances and recordings as his calling card: few can rival the special bond Woodward has developed with the Polish great's works over the last four decades. But this relationship was not love at first sight.

"As a teenager in Australia the prevailing opinion of Chopin was that of a lightweight and one of enormous ignorance, even snobbery, when in all reality few knew the true worth of his creative output", recalls Woodward of the mid-1960s."And to be perfectly honest, in many ways I was more interested in the music of Lutosławski, Górecki, Penderecki and other Polish composers at the time."

Woodward's awareness of the importance of Chopin's music deepened only after he was exposed to its cultural source. In 1965 he received a Polish Government scholarship to study at the National State Academy of Music in Warsaw, with Zbigniew Drzewiecki, a former student of Ignacy Jan Paderewski and a renowned Chopin specialist."In the first few years of my studies in Warsaw, I became fascinated by the deep sense of history that was clearly the motivation for Chopin's epic polonaises and at a later stage, with the intimacy of miniature forms, in particular the mazurkas. I began to wonder why cultural values were sufficiently important to a society to lead it to place Chopin's image everywhere. The outpouring of love expressed for this composer seemed to be personal, and his music was an almost palpable part of Polish culture. It was impossible to ignore such a phenomenon."