



He worked to draw attention to an oppressive Polish regime, and now Woodward is helping young Aussie artists

Chopin's significance as a national icon spurred Woodward to explore his oeuvre more deeply. "The sense of history that Chopin imparts through the mazurkas and polonaises not only intrigued me but was something I found incredibly moving at a human level. As a foreign student in Poland it fascinated me that a composer could be so widely accepted as the ultimate symbol of a nation's independence."

Oddly enough for a patriotic hero, Chopin spent only half his life in Poland. He became stranded in Western Europe while on tour in 1831, the year a national uprising against Russian forces was put down with unusual ferocity. It was during this first year of exile in Vienna, before settling in Paris, that his work became imbued with an acute yearning and nostalgia for Poland, born of what Woodward calls a "profound cultural dislocation". In Vienna, Chopin composed his first nine mazurkas, instilling the folk form with an outward-looking European grace, before it took its place among the pinnacles of Romantic music. He also revolutionised the polonaise, transforming it from a courtly processional into a heroic expression of his homeland's indomitable spirit. Accounts of the composer playing the Grande Polonaise in A-flat Major Op 53 in Paris tell of fellow exiles in the audience, moved to tears, rising in unison to sing the anthem, "Poland has not perished yet, as long as her sons are alive."

Chopin's experiences at a turbulent time in his country's

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history were not far from Roger Woodward's thoughts as the political repression of the Polish Solidarity Movement began to affect friends and colleagues in Poland. Having spent years studying and playing in Poland, he felt compelled to lend his voice to the cause. "I made my debut with the Warsaw National Philharmonic... I had come to know Lutoslawski, Penderecki, Serocki and often played throughout Poland. How could I possibly ignore the problems that good friends were experiencing after such kindness?"

"I had to make a decision whether to sit on the fence or stand by my mates. I knew that I could help the Solidarity Movement by playing concerts to raise public perception about what was going on, as well as much needed funds,

Woodward's profound connection with Chopin's music resonates through his performances



and ended up playing concerts for the Movement for many years. It was not something that necessarily concerned Australians or any other particular nationality; it had more to do with human rights and therefore concerned all of us."

Chopin's music had always been a rallying point whenever Poles felt their homeland was under threat. During the Nazi occupation, the German High Command so feared the effect of Chopin's works that decrees were passed to outlaw it. Anyone caught playing Chopin's music was punished by death. Throughout the 1980s, Woodward continued to perform Chopin concerts under the banner of Solidarnosc, in 1982-3 performing the composer's complete works for the first time in a tour-de-force of 16 recitals for the Sydney Festival. In 1993, a few years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, he was awarded the Polish Order of Merit.

These days, his humanitarian efforts are focused on supporting his fellow Australian musicians, playing concerts to raise funds for young artists through organisations such as the Tait Memorial Trust. Australian composers also form a key part of Woodward's active repertoire. "I keep revising works for performance by Anne Boyd, Richard Meale, Larry Sitsky and Ross Edwards whose music I have always admired." Woodward is a composer-pianist who is currently engaged in writing of a different kind: "an autobiography for the ABC about collaborations with various musical

celebrities, including composers with whom I worked closely or who wrote works for me, such as Iannis Xenakis, Toru Takemitsu, Morton Feldman and others".

As a studio artist, too, Woodward has not stopped making news. His recent recording of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier for Celestial Harmonies has wowed critics in England and Europe. *Gramophone* called his Bach release "a new standard", while the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich declared: "These recordings present four and a half hours of stellar moments in the Bach discography – because Woodward approaches the two cycles as one unit, fluently and flawlessly... Woodward removes anything historical, elitist or alienating from this music. He understands Bach as a contemporary of innovators, such as Xenakis, Cage, Feldman, and Ligeti. No more looking back, melancholy or cultural snobbery, no more old Europe. Never before did Bach have such a future ahead of him."

The future also looks rosy for Woodward, who is currently on a tour of Australia to mark the 200-year anniversary of Chopin's birth this month. He eschews any talk of retirement, and maintains a frantically busy recording and touring schedule. "I have worked all my life, keep fit, look after myself and my students and am grateful to be able to raise funds to help young artists or provide meaningful mentorship." **L**

TOUR DATES

23 June, 8pm
Goulburn Regional Conservatorium,
Chopin Recital

25 June, 4pm
Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre, Penrith,
Master Class

26 June, 8pm
Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre, Penrith,
Chopin Recital

27 June, 2pm & 5pm
Utzon Room, Sydney Opera House,
Chopin Recital

3 July, 8pm
Elisabeth Murdoch Hall, Melbourne Recital Centre,
Chopin Recital

ROGER'S RECITALS

Woodward is back in Australia, with a series of concerts this month

