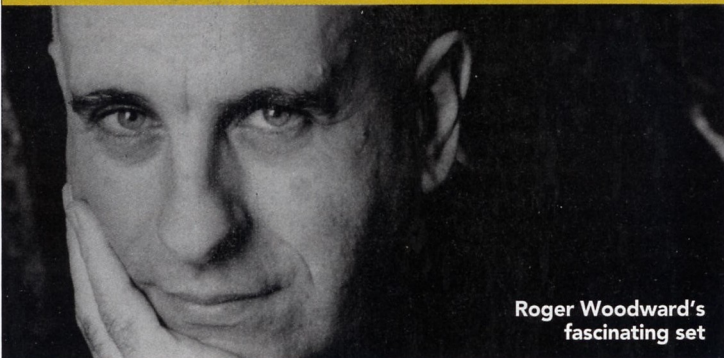
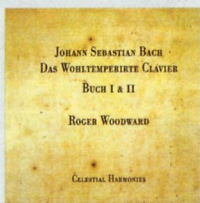


EDITOR'S CHOICE



Roger Woodward's
fascinating set



Imaginative performances by Woodward that rank alongside the very best

Bach

Das Wohltemperirte Clavier, BWV846-893

Roger Woodward *pf*

Celestial Harmonies Ⓢ 19922-2 (4h 37' • DDD)



A five-disc *Well-Tempered Clavier* usually signifies

measured tempi and all repeats observed, and that's mostly true of Roger Woodward's recording. Yet nothing drags, because the pianist's superb contrapuntal acumen, imaginative ornamentation and quietly strong sense of inner rhythm keep the music alive and moving forward. Woodward's ripe and ample sonority certainly lends itself to such an approach, abetted by the recording's arguably-too-plush ambience. Occasionally Woodward's expressive niceties add up to the point where the basic tempo slows down as the piece progresses, such as in the Book 1 F sharp minor Fugue and B flat minor Prelude (followed by an unusually loud, declamatory performance of the fugue in the same key), or in how the G major Prelude starts out light and supple, only to grow heavier in texture over time.

On the other hand, the Book 2 C major Fugue's gradual winding down in the final bars seems deliberate and purposeful, while Woodward varies his articulation of Book 1's C sharp minor Prelude's arpeggiated chords to hypnotic effect. Its Book 2 counterpart proves no less multicoloured. Every note of the Book 1 D major Prelude's rapid right-hand passagework falls into a seamless, centred long line, while Book 1's B minor Prelude benefits from Woodward's *alla breve* conception that refreshingly contrasts with slower, more solemn renditions. Gentle mobility characterises Book 2's A major Fugue, where the soft, pearly lines move in a manner akin to a kitten working its way out of a handbag.

While many pianists relish the Book 2 G major Prelude's toccata-like writing as a virtuoso vehicle, Woodward by contrast delineates the phrases as they fall over the bar-lines, and clarifies foreground and background textural strands as if he was conducting a chamber orchestra. Listeners accustomed to a big-boned, grandiose "French Overture" interpretation of Book 2's G minor Prelude will surely be surprised (and hopefully convinced!) by Woodward's atypically quiet, contemplative stance. The mood spills over into the Fugue, where Woodward connects the subject's repeated notes with vocally informed *legato*, rather than pounding them out.

Woodward's extensive and probing booklet-notes discuss the music and its performing traditions in depth, and prove just as articulate and provocative as his musicianship and pianism. A fascinating antipode to Hewitt (Hyperion, 10/98, 9/99), Koroliov (Tacet, 6/00) and Ashkenazy (Decca, 3/06), among standout recent piano versions of the "48". **Jed Distler**