

Bach's bold recording angels

Have musicians misunderstood Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* all these centuries? Roger Woodward's new recording offers a bold new approach, reports **Barney Zwartz**.

PIANIST ROGER Woodward is already an Australian Living Treasure, but that 1997 accolade may be about to extend its borders after his latest project — a Bach recording and essay involving a seismic shift in historical performance practice.

Woodward, 67, has just recorded for the first time Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, also known as "the 48", which he calls "a work of inestimable importance".

Few works have so often been reinterpreted as the 48 — two sets of 24 preludes and fugues, in every possible key in turn, written two decades apart that together form what pianists call their Old Testament. (Beethoven's 32 sonatas constitute the New.)

The "tempered" in the title means equal tones and semitones of the octave. Begun as a pedagogical exercise for one of Bach's sons, it became a work of towering genius, encapsulating music of all the main schools that had gone before, from Renaissance to regional Baroque, and looking forward across the centuries.

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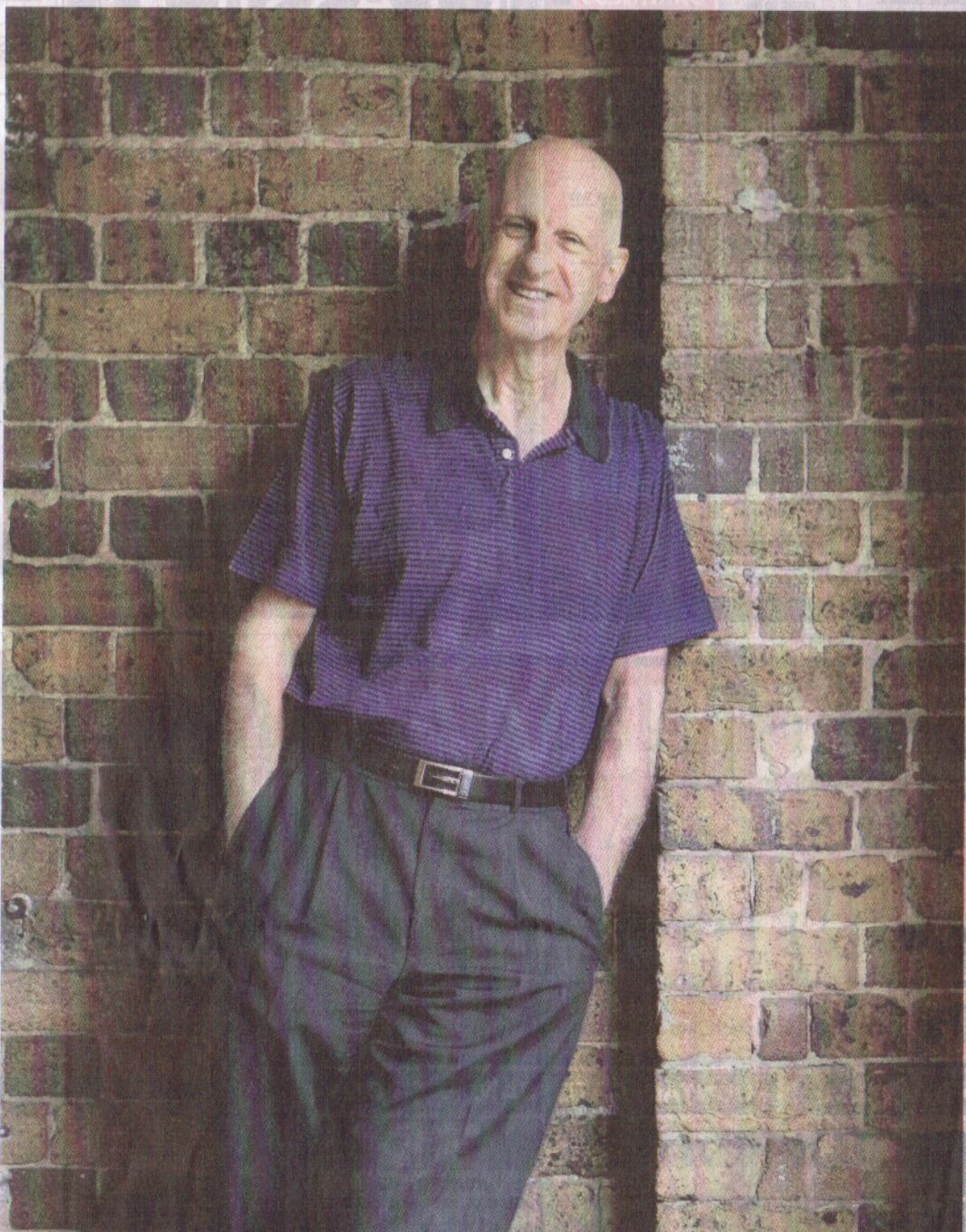
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Woodward argues that clavier with a 'C', as Bach titled the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, denotes any keyboard instrument, whether from the organ family, involving the circulation of air through pipes, the harpsichord family in which strings are plucked (spinet, virginal), or the piano family (clavichord, fortepiano) in which they are struck by small hammers. The great advance of the piano family was the use of weighted touch, allowing notes to be played softer or louder.

Modern interpreters, Woodward suggests, risk falling into one of two opposite dangers: trying to replicate the dry, percussive sound of the harpsichord (a la Glenn Gould), or making it ultra-pianistic and virtuosic, as Liszt and his students did in the 19th century, or Daniel Barenboim more recently.

In this recording, Woodward plays what is regarded as the piano ultimate, a Steinway D. Eckart Rahn — owner of the Celestial Harmonies label that has produced these deluxe CDs, complete with facsimiles of Bach's autograph scores — says the recording engineer sold his garden to buy the Steinway D with ivory keys (last made in 1983) which give better traction when the pianist's fingers get hot.

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Woodward argues, against contemporary orthodoxy, that Bach intended this music to be played on any keyboard instrument, not just the harpsichord, and that the sound he wanted was a pianistic singing style called *legato-cantabile*.

Composers such as Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin were deeply influenced by this music, Woodward says. Until the end of the 19th century it was played mostly on the organ. The "original instruments movement" began in the early 20th century through such performers as Polish-French harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, taken up by such advocates as Ralph Kirkpatrick, Gustav Leonhardt and Nikolaus Harnoncourt in the 1960s.

"The purist movement took it for granted that it should only be played on original instruments, and they are right; but they forget that the piano was an original instrument in Bach's time," Woodward said yesterday from his San Francisco home.

Bach endorsed Silberman's fortepianos from the 1730s, and played a later model in 1747 at the palace of Frederick the Great, one of the great figures of the Enlightenment.

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"Bach is always open. The music is never closed, which is why jazz musicians pick up on Bach. The most intelligent thing a musician has ever said to me is, 'You can't play this just by practising it, you must reflect over it because it is philosophy.'"

Woodward has certainly reflected deeply and believes he has recaptured the core of Bach's musical vision, the *legato-cantabile* sound — a striking development in Bach's day.

"It's getting back to the idea of letting the voices sing," Woodward says. "It's getting back to the ideas Bach enshrined in his teaching. Things should sing, and they should flow, and they should be smooth and even. I've done no more than follow what Bach advocated to his students."

There is little instruction in the score, even of the speed of the music, let alone detailed phrasing.

But "the infinite beauty of Bach's simple dances and preparation of their tempi inevitably leads to an examination of the laws of musical move-



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PICTURE: QUENTIN JONES

ment, inner pulse, details of phrasing, *legato* and *cantabile*."

Woodward has been delighted but surprised at the reception of his recordings and essay. The authoritative *Gramophone* magazine made it the editor's choice this month, while German critics have been ecstatic, calling it a new departure.

One reviewer wrote: "Woodward's interpretation incorporates the organic structure of counterpoint, the exploitation of bold well-tempered harmonics, and a contemplative concentration on sound along with flashing virtuosity and a clarity of musical lines and orchestral effects."

The pianist himself, who has worked a great deal with modern composers, says his approach is the same as always.

"I've tried to do what I've done all my life — consult the composer."

Roger Woodward returns to Melbourne in May for a recital celebrating the 200th birthday of Chopin.