

Shiva meets Bach

Roger Woodward's Recording of the Complete Well-Tempered Clavier

A remembrance: Roger Woodward sitting at the keyboard, in a boldly concentrated posture. Only the hands are invisible; you can't follow them, because they are racing across the keys faster than the camera possibly could capture them, creating the impression that Shiva herself was playing the piano. Then the Australian pianist – born in 1942 – briefly speaks, saying hardly more than : “When I play Xenakis I feel like I could pull out trees”. And Shiva's hands become again visible, as they work their way through Xenakis's *Eonta*, ripping the notes out of the score and hurling them through the space as if they were tree trunks.

But Woodward can also display the opposite of berserk. He can hold his breath, and he has the spiritual freedom to play Morton Feldman's piano concerto. For Woodward one thing seems to be the determining factor: that the music he plays has to be radical and completely subjective. Although he had become the icon of the avant-garde – even the acknowledged successor of Cage pianist David Tudor – Woodward continued to let himself get lost deeply in the tradition. For Celestial Harmonies, a record company devoted to the extraordinary and to outsiders, Woodward has recorded Chopin, Debussy and Bach – and right now both volumes of the Well-Tempered Clavier have been released, with the publication adding the original autographs in miniature format.

These recordings resulted in four-and-a-half stellar hours of the Bach discography. Because Woodward approaches the two cycles fluently and briskly as one unified work, because, as a graduate of the avant-garde he doesn't need to shy away from any technical challenge, because he knows how to courageously take full advantage of the possibilities of the modern grand piano, because he relies less on interpretation than on fiercely incendiary presentation, 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 looking back, no nostalgia, no more educational high-browism, no more old Europe. Never before did Johann Sebastian have such a future ahead of him.

REINHARD J. BREMBECK

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