

April 24, 2010

CLASSICAL

Bach: Das Wohltemperirte Clavier

Roger Woodward

Celestial Harmonies

4-1/2 stars

ROGER Woodward sounds as if he has undergone a Lutheran musical conversion in his newest musical foray, a complete five-disc recording of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Not trying for anything interpretatively novel to make his mark with this touchstone of the keyboard repertoire, the 67-year-old pianist offers simple, unadorned readings that impress with their honesty and purity of vision. There is nothing at all of Woodward's former reputation as an abrasive modernist and champion of the avant-garde. Instead, he brings an unhurried grace, elegance and, above all, a distilled perfection to Bach's two books of preludes and fugues. There is not one controversial tempo, dynamically he rarely ventures outside a middling mezzo-piano zone, and everywhere he finds a sense of melodic line that knits all the elements together with uncanny ease. In this sense, less is more: one becomes more aware of the music than the pianist. Woodward has clearly boned up with scholarly zeal on historical performance practice, but not with the intent of trying to turn the piano into a harpsichord or clavichord: his articulation is beautifully crisp without being excessively pruned in denser contrapuntal textures, and his use of pedal is minimal. Occasionally though, he feels a little awkward in what to do with Bach's ornamentation, cutting trills prematurely.

Graham Strahle