

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-75)

24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87

In the 25 years since his death, Dmitry Shostakovich's reputation as the musical chronicler of the Soviet era has reached unprecedented levels of controversy, with almost every work scrutinized for deeper or hidden meanings. If the *24 Preludes and Fugues* are an exception, they are so deliberately; written at a time when abstract composition in the then Soviet Union was not just an undesirable, but also a dangerous venture.

The notorious - and subsequently discredited - 'Zhdanov Decree' of 1948 had the result of making Shostakovich's concert and recital music unperformable. Over the following four years, the composer's major works - the First Violin Concerto, Fourth and Fifth String Quartets and song-cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* - were essentially written 'for the desk drawer'; film music being his only dependable source of income. Ironically, the effective ban on his music coincided with a period of extensive travel, including Leipzig in July 1950 for the Bach bicentennial celebrations. Participating at short notice in a performance of Bach's Concerto for Three Pianos in D minor, Shostakovich was impressed by the artistry of the young Tatyana Nikolayeva; the catalyst for his cycle of *Preludes and Fugues* Op. 87, composed between October 10th 1950 and February 25th 1951.

Seventeen years earlier, Shostakovich had signified a renewed interest in abstract composition with his *24 Prelude*, brief but varied pieces which form a cycle almost in spite of themselves. The *Preludes and Fugues* are much more the outcome of a pre-ordained groundplan: interestingly, given their inspiration, one that progresses not by semi-tones, as with Bach's '48', but through the circle of fifths followed by Chopin in his *24 Preludes*. Whether or not this intimates a musical line of descent, the cycle allowed Shostakovich the priceless opportunity to celebrate his own creativity, unfettered by the social and political considerations then prevailing.

Although the composer submitted and actually played through his cycle to the Composers' Union in Moscow in May 1951, the response was unfavourable. Yet over the following eighteen months, he performed selections in public, often to unresponsive 'invited' audiences of local functionaries and representatives of the armed forces. In the summer of 1952, Nikolayeva argued successfully for the work's official approval and publication giving the public première of the complete cycle on December 23rd and 28th. Despite her belief that the work could only be judged as an integral design, selections were the norm for the following three decades. Sviatoslav Richter's 1963 recording of excerpts is but the most famous: the composer himself left recordings of sixteen of the cycle. Since the mid-1980s, however, many pianists have followed Nikolayeva in presenting the work complete, usually over two evenings, when the breadth and cumulative power of Shostakovich's conception can truly be savoured.

The *24 Preludes and Fugues* are paired together in key sequence.

No. 1 C major: The prelude is a ruminative chorale in sarabande rhythm, followed by a fugue which stays within its key with Bach-like certainty.

No. 2 A minor: A prelude in fast-flowing semiquavers precedes a lightly ironic, freely-modulating fugue.

No. 3 G major: A stem prelude, with a chant-like theme in octaves, contrasts with the gambolling humour of the fugue.

No. 4 E minor: The limpid prelude exudes a Tchaikovsky-like melancholy, while the fugue builds methodically to a powerful climax.

No. 5 D major: Light, arpeggiated chords add a deft touch to the prelude, and the engaging fugue features repeated note sequences.

No. 6 B minor: The crisp rhetoric of the prelude acts as a foil to the studied calm of the fugue.

No. 7 A major: An elegantly classical prelude is complemented by a diaphanous fugue, located firmly in the piano's upper register.

No. 8 F sharp minor: The skittish, offbeat gestures of the prelude contrast with the fugue's probing contrapuntal writing and serious nature.

No. 9 E major: The prelude's teasing call and response between bass and treble is followed by a vibrant, almost classical fugue.

No. 10 C sharp minor: The prelude is again a dialogue, this time classically elegant, between left and right hands; the fugue is thoughtful and restrained.

No. 11 B major: A delightfully jaunty prelude leads, almost without pause, to a propulsive fugue.

No. 12 G sharp minor: Clearly intended to mark the halfway stage in the cycle, the prelude's stern, austere passacaglia is followed by a fugue of impressive emotional breadth and cumulative energy.

No. 13 F sharp major: A gently undulating prelude precedes a measured, contemplative fugue - the only one in the cycle in five parts.

No. 14 E flat minor: The charged atmosphere and volatility of the prelude, and subdued recollection of the fugue have the effect of a dramatic scena and postlude.

No. 15 D flat major: A bitingly ironic prelude prepares admirably for the frenetic course of the fugue, making the most of this unstable tonality.

No. 16 B flat minor: Complete, contrast - with the prelude a tranquil, tonally-static set of variations, and a lengthy, texturally ornate and rhythmically supple fugue.

No. 17 A flat major: The fresh, winsome prelude leads naturally into the perky, imitative fugue.

No. 18 F minor: A shy-sounding, bittersweet prelude, succeeded by a lilting, equally reticent fugue.

No. 19 E flat major: Among the shortest of the cycle, the prelude contrasts chorale with caprice, while the fugue works through chromatic inflections to a purposeful calm.

No. 20 C minor: An austere, Mussorgskian prelude, rich in modal chording, provides the thematic basis for a fugue which gradually opens out harmonically and emotionally.

No. 21 B flat major: The prelude is a rhythmic *moto perpetuo*, while the fugue entertains with its engagingly syncopated dance measures.

No. 22 G minor: The prelude combines a circular melodic pattern over a walking accompaniment; folk elements permeate the thematic substance of the fugue.

No. 23 F major: A Bachian calmness of spirit pervades the prelude, consolidated by the fugue's varied and thoughtful progress toward an affirmative conclusion.

No. 24 D minor: In what is a fitting summation to the cycle, the prelude, alternately stern and intimate, prepares thematically and emotionally for the fugue; as wide-ranging in temperament as it is varied in form, and climaxing in a triumph all the more real for being so hard won.

Richard Whitehouse

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