

## PROGRAM NOTES



### **Preludes and Fugues, Opus 87**

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

*b. September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg*

*d. August 9, 1975, Moscow*

### **Performance Time**

2 hours and 30 minutes

### **Premiere**

December 23, 1952 in Leningrad

The 1722 Bach wrote a set of pieces for keyboard that he called *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Bach's own description of this music suggests his intention: "Preludes and Fugues through all the tones and semitones . . . for the use and profit of young musicians anxious to learn as well as for the amusement of those already skilled in this art." *The Well-Tempered Clavier* — full of wonderful, ingenious, and expressive music — has moved and haunted composers ever since. One of those haunted was Bach himself: twenty years later he wrote a second set of twenty-four preludes and fugues. The "48," as the two books of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* are sometimes called, have been a part of every pianist's repertory since then, from the humblest amateur to the greatest virtuoso, and pianist-composers of very different character have felt the pull of Bach's achievement. Chopin composed a cycle of twenty-four preludes in each of the keys during a stay in stormy Mallorca in 1838-9, keeping his copy of Bach close at hand the whole while. Nearly a century later, Rachmaninoff also composed a set of preludes in each of the keys, laboring on the project for a decade, and in 1942 Hindemith composed his *Ludus Tonalis*, a collection of preludial and contrapuntal music in different keys (and it should be noted that when Debussy wrote his Preludes, he composed exactly twenty-four).

But the pianist-composer most haunted by Bach's achievement in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* seems at first an unlikely one. In 1950, on the two-hundredth anniversary of Bach's death, Dmitri Shostakovich was one of the judges at the First International Bach Competition in Leipzig, where he was astonished by a performance of the "48" by a young Soviet pianist, Tatiana Nikolayeva. Shostakovich had known the Bach since he was a child, but under the spell of Nikolayeva's performance he resolved to compose his own set of preludes and fugues in each of the twenty-four keys, and he worked very quickly: his *24 Preludes and Fugues, Opus 87* were composed entirely between October 1950 and March 1951. Nikolayeva was soloist at the premiere in St. Petersburg on December 23 and 28, 1952.

This was the period of the most intense artistic repression in Soviet history. In the aftermath of Zhdanov's denunciation of leading composers in February 1948, Shostakovich had gone underground artistically. For public consumption, he composed "safe" music — filmscores and patriotic cantatas — that kept him protected from government intrusion. Privately, he wrote the music he wanted but kept it hidden in his desk, waiting for more liberal times. One might think that a composition modeled on Bach's elemental work would be "safe," even in the grim final years of the Stalin regime, but exactly the opposite was true. In his biography of Shostakovich, Eric Roseberry quotes the attack by Yuri Keldysh on Soviet composers who turned to the West for their models: "the neo-classical tendencies we find in some of our composers are derived from the West, and are a form of escapism. We cannot express Soviet reality and the feelings of Soviet Man in terms of Bach-like stylisations . . ." In his recent study of the *Preludes and Fugues*, Mark Mazullo quotes from the official government reaction to this music, published in *Sovietskaya Muzika*, which denounced Shostakovich's music because its "images of tragic detachment or nervous exaltation, which dominate many of the pieces, in no way can be accepted as typical of the inner world of the Soviet citizen." Writing these preludes and fugues was for Shostakovich not simply an exploration of a demanding and pure form, but an act of courage as well.

In the *24 Preludes and Fugue*, Shostakovich proceeds through all the keys, just as Bach and others had done before him. He begins with the "simplest" of keys — C major — which has no sharps or flats and gradually works his way through the circle of fifths, arriving at the mid-point with *No. 13 in F-sharp Major* (six sharps), then works his way back to *No. 24 in D Minor* (one flat). The progress of the cycle is thus from the "innocence" of the opening prelude to the massive, heroic conclusion of the final fugue. Some listeners have been ready to hear a narrative in that trajectory and to attempt to understand the cycle as a unified whole. Nevertheless, a complete performance of the *Preludes and Fugues* takes well over two hours, and these preludes and fugues are almost always performed individually or in small groups. Shostakovich himself performed them that way (and recorded several of them), and pianists usually play just a few of them, choosing several for maximum contrast or effect and sometimes presenting them in a non-numerical order. On this recital Mr. Melnikov offers the virtually unique opportunity to hear a performance of the complete cycle of *24 Preludes and Fugues*. He will pause for a brief intermission after *No. 12* and after *No. 16*.

**No. 1 in C Major** begins with a chordal prelude that Shostakovich marks *dolce*. C major is a "white" key, and the slow fugue that follows is truly "white" music: there is not a single accidental in this long fugue in four voices. Despite Shostakovich's marking *Moderato*, it seems to proceed at a very slow pace, and the opening almost gives the impression of motionlessness; gradually the contrapuntal lines begin to weave together, and the music moves along an almost solemn pulse of steady quarter-notes.

**No. 2 in A Minor** By contrast, this prelude races along a perpetual-motion rush of steady sixteenth-notes. It is also brief, whipping past in barely a minute. The fugue, in three voices, is marked *Allegretto*, a favorite Shostakovich tempo indication. The fugue subject represents one of Shostakovich's many self-quotations in Opus 87: it is derived from the third movement of the composer's *Fourth Symphony*, written in 1936, and not yet performed — Shostakovich had withdrawn the symphony after its initial rehearsal, and it would not be not premiered until 1961.

The prelude of **No. 3 in G Major** gets off to a fierce and full-throated start with its opening idea hammered out in octaves that Shostakovich marks *pesante*. This is quickly answered by a flowing countertheme, marked *marcato* and based on a steady progression of eighth-notes. The prelude reaches a climax in which Shostakovich combines these two themes and drives directly into the fugue. This fugue in three voices, marked *Allegro molto*, dances brightly along its 6/8 meter, builds to a great climax, and then falls away to a surprisingly understated close on a solitary D.

**No. 4 in E Minor** The key of E minor is a dark one, and it has called forth some very serious music, including one of Beethoven's most enigmatic quartets (Opus 59, No. 2), Dvorak's "*Dumky*" Trio, Brahms' final symphony, and Shostakovich's own monumental *Tenth Symphony*. Shostakovich's *Prelude and Fugue in E Minor* maintain this serious character. The moderately-paced prelude (Shostakovich's marking is both *Andante* and *espressivo*) has the principal melody emerging from within a progression of steady eighth-notes that will be heard throughout the prelude. The fugue in four voices, marked *Adagio*, has a quiet and noble simplicity. The lengthy fugue subject sustains the atmosphere of the prelude, but suddenly the tempo eases ahead, the fugue becomes a double fugue, and the music grows complex. At the climax, Shostakovich ingeniously combines the subjects of his two fugues, and the music powers its way to a grand conclusion.

After the intensity of the previous piece, **No. 5 in D Major** brings poised relief at this point in the cycle. The prelude is in ternary form: the opening left-hand theme is followed by a melody of soaring innocence in the right hand; Shostakovich accompanies both with arpeggiated chords, and the cheerfully-ringing sound of those chords continues throughout. The fugue, marked *Allegretto*, is in three voices, and its precise subject is played staccato throughout. The fugue maintains its atmosphere of classical balance, right through a conclusion made all the more effective for its understatement.

A measure of complexity returns in **No. 6 in B Minor**: both the prelude and the fugue are large-scale in construction, expression, and sonority. The powerful prelude is built on double-dotted rhythms, and it takes the pianist across the range of the keyboard, particularly into its deep lower register. The fugue in four voices opens with a simple four-bar phrase in octaves marked *Moderato*, but this is instantly answered by a twisting faster figure, and the simultaneous presentation of these two ideas will give

this music a complicated texture, one in which the music seems to be proceeding at different tempos at the same time. This fugue brings a somber sound: its opening and closing pages have both hands playing in bass clef, and the music trails off into silence on a softly-repeating F-sharp.

The prelude to **No. 7 in A Major** inevitably invites comparison to the keyboard music of Bach, particularly his two-part inventions. The active line leaps between the two hands here, its progress enlivened by some very chromatic writing along the way. The prelude reaches a moment of repose on high, silvery chords, then Shostakovich combines them with the busy main theme to bring the prelude to its close. The three-part fugue is built on a subject that sounds like a distant, delicate bugle-call: this theme is built entirely on the notes of an A-major triad. Textures grow complex as the fugue proceeds, but this music retains its sparkling, spirited energy right through its *pianissimo* conclusion on a very widely-spaced A-major chord.

**No. 8 in F-sharp Minor** brings some of the most powerful music in the entire set. It gets off to a deceiving start, though. The prelude, marked *Allegretto*, trots along a steady left-hand accompaniment, and there is a sense of humor — both saucy and sardonic — in this music, which whips past in barely a minute. The fugue seems at first to bear some resemblance to the prelude — both themes begin with a two-sixteenth pickup to the downbeat — but that may be their only similarity. The fugue's long, slow subject (the marking is *Andante*) becomes the basis for one of Shostakovich's darkest meditations. The pace here may be steady and inexorable, but emotionally this music is static in its bleakness, its entire span a lengthy plunge into icy gloom.

The prelude of **No. 9 in E Major** is written on three staves, and this music seems to inhabit two distinct worlds: resonant statements from the piano's deepest register (each played two octaves apart) are answered by the shining delicacy of responses from the other extreme of the keyboard (also played two octaves apart). The brisk, brief fugue that follows seems to take us back to Bach once again, but this cheerful music brings a number of subtleties along with its high spirits: it is the only fugue in two voices in the entire set, the fugue subject is a subtle variation of the main theme of the prelude, and at the end Shostakovich thins out all the contrapuntal complexities and lets this music rush to its conclusion in utterly clear octaves.

The prelude of **No. 10 in C-sharp Minor** is constructed of chains of sixteenth-notes rapidly exchanged between the pianist's hands; these alternate with sequences of chords built on shifting meters. After the skittering energy of the prelude, the fugue in four voices is long, noble, and calm. It has been noted that the opening of the fugue subject replicates the shape of the four-note gesture that concludes the energetic prelude, but — rather than maintaining that frantic energy — this lengthy fugue becomes an island of stability, almost of reassurance, in the many-faceted sequence of pieces that make up Opus 87.

The prelude and fugue of **No. 11 in B Major** share some similarities: both are marked *Allegro*, both are played staccato throughout, and both are high-spirited and fun. Observers frequently note the “childlike innocence” of the prelude, though that innocence disguises a number of very sophisticated harmonic changes in the course of this brief piece. The fugue in three voices, marked *marcatissimo*, has some of that same spirit, now wed to a jaunty energy that drives the piece almost breathlessly to its sudden close.

The prelude of **No. 12 in G-sharp Major** is a passacaglia, here anchored on a twelve-bar ground bass in deep octaves in the left hand. As it repeats, Shostakovich spins out an increasingly expressive melody in the right hand. At the seventh repetition the ground bass is modified, moving briefly into the right hand before it returns to the left and the prelude eases to a quiet close. Out of that calm conclusion, the fugue bursts to fiery life. Set in 5/4 and taking some of the shape of the passacaglia’s ground bass, the fugue subject is angular, almost spasmodic. From this wild shape, Shostakovich builds a fugue that rips along a spiky, breathless energy. In the closing measures, that energy evaporates and the fugue glides to its conclusion on a G-sharp major chord marked triple *piano*.

Both the prelude and fugue of **No. 13 in F-sharp Major** are exceptionally beautiful. The prelude proceeds along a series of gentle arabesques that swirl upward and relax; something of the nature of this prelude can be understood from the fact that over its two-minute span Shostakovich reminds the performer *fourteen* times to play *pianissimo*. The fugue that follows, in five voices, is based on a four-bar subject marked *Adagio*, and it proceeds with equal measures of calm and dignity, despite complexities that require much of it to be written over three staves.

By contrast, the prelude of **No. 14 in E-flat Minor** erupts on the sound of a deep tremolando, and that sound — moving between the two hands — is almost constant throughout this dark and bleak music. The turbulence of that tremolando disappears only twice, and at the end the prelude closes quietly. The tense mood of the prelude then vanishes, for the three-voice fugue — marked *Allegro non troppo* — rocks lightly along a 3/4 meter and almost skips to its relaxed close.

The prelude of **No. 15 in D-flat Major**, marked *Allegretto*, proceeds with a mechanistic energy along a 3/4 meter that seems always on the verge of turning into a waltz (but never quite does); its central episode has a sort of tinkly, music-box quality. The return of the opening material leads to what can only be described as a comic ending. The fugue, marked both *Allegro molto* and *fortissimo marcatissimo sempre al Fine*, is wild music. It is in four voices, but the intensely chromatic writing and constantly shifting meters make it impossible to keep them straight in the breathless rush of this music, which whips past in less than 90 seconds. This fugue, which Wilfred Mellers has described as “as scarily crazy as Bedlam,” rushes to a precipitous ending that features the utterly unexpected intrusion of some of the

closing music from the prelude. What are we to make of this half-comic, half-wild music? Early Soviet critics knew what to make of it — they denounced it as “ugly” and a “caricature” of what Soviet music should be. Sixty-five years later, we are likely to value it precisely for the qualities that produced those reactions.

The most striking feature of both the prelude and fugue of **No. 16 in B-flat Minor** is how quiet they are. The prelude is marked *piano*, and while Shostakovich indicates several crescendos, the dynamic never rises above *piano*; the fugue is marked *pianissimo*, and there is no dynamic change indicated at any point over its generous span. Not surprisingly, both pieces are quite subdued. Shostakovich disguises the meter (it is in fact 3/4) across the opening measures of the chorale-like prelude. This movement has been compared to a passacaglia: the chorale melody repeats and is embellished with ever-faster accompaniment as it proceeds; the simple chorale resumes at the end. The fugue subject, marked *Adagio*, expands with a baroque luxuriance, and the composer notes that it should be played *legatissimo sempre al fine*. An unusual feature of this fugue is its constantly-shifting meters, which alternate between 4/4, 5/4, and 3/4. The voicing becomes complex as the fugue proceeds, but nothing ever happens to ruffle the surface of this music, which remains calm, inward, and restrained throughout.

After the subdued expression of the previous music, both the prelude and fugue of **No. 17 in A-flat Major** burst with sunlit energy — commentators universally feel the need to describe both as “childlike” in their simplicity. Both are also marked *Allegretto*, and both move along with a happy energy. The prelude is built on two simple tunes, and both of these have the simplicity and even phrases of folk music; Shostakovich combines them in the prelude’s closing measures. The fugue is in 5/4, and its subject picks up some of the shape of the prelude’s opening theme. There is a pleasing insouciance to this music, even as it moves through unexpected modulations — complexity is banished, and one felicity is followed by another.

The prelude to **No. 18 in F Minor** — Shostakovich specifies that it should be *espressivo* — moves with a dark intensity of its own, and so it comes as a surprise to find at its center a fleeting passage marked *Adagio* that is even *more* expressive. This passes almost instantly, and the prelude returns to its opening material. The four-voice fugue that follows is marked by a certain emotional reserve. The writing is absolutely clear, the individual voices are cleanly defined within the textures of the contrapuntal writing, and the writing is very accomplished, even as the content of the music remains elusive.

The prelude and fugue of **No. 19 in E-flat Major** are enigmatic pieces: both begin powerfully, both lose their force and direction as they proceed, and both vanish into uncertain silence. The noble stride of the prelude’s opening chordal declaration is quickly penetrated by one of those nervous, skittering figures so typical of Shostakovich. These two themes alternate across the span of the prelude, and it is

almost as if the nervous response has undercut the confidence of the opening—this music steadily loses force until it slips into silence. The fugue, on a twisting and active subject in 5/4, also begins powerfully, and at first it proceeds purposefully. But once again this opening energy dissipates, and the fugue slides to its quiet (and ambiguous) cadence.

There are some striking similarities between the prelude and fugue of **No. 20 in C Minor**. Both are built on the same theme-shape, and both are at a fairly quiet dynamic. The key of C minor is a dark one — it was Beethoven’s “serious” key — and that darkness colors both prelude and fugue here. The prelude opens with a solemn progression of chords, and each time it appears, this solemnity is met with a response high in the pianist’s right hand. These responses are rhythmically and harmonically free, and the tension in this quiet music comes from the collision of such different kinds of expression. The long fugue that follows is also slow (the marking is *Moderato*), and its subject is very similar to the prelude theme—in fact, the first four notes are the same. This fugue in four voices is just as solemn as the opening of the prelude, and its lengthy development proceeds along an almost non-stop progression of slow quarter-notes.

The prelude of **No. 21 in B-flat Major** has been described as a toccata, but it is more accurately a perpetual-motion for the pianist’s right hand. Shostakovich’s tempo marking is only *Allegro*, but it is clear that he wanted this piece played very fast: his metronome marking is half-note=104. He also specifies that the dynamic should remain quiet throughout and that the playing should be legato. The fugue, marked *Allegro non troppo*, is built on a dancing eight-bar subject of formal balance (the first and eighth measures are the same). This is spirited music, and it eventually drives to a full-throated chordal climax and a rousing close.

Both the prelude and fugue of **No. 22 in G Minor** are restrained. Shostakovich marks the prelude both *piano* and *tranquillo*, and this music has some of the atmosphere of a Chopin nocturne — it is quiet, dark, and inward. The prelude is built on a constant pulse of eighth-notes phrased in groups of two, and this continuous sound moves back and forth between the pianist’s hands. The fugue in four voices is similarly restrained: the marking is *pianissimo*, and for only a brief moment does Shostakovich allow the dynamic to rise to *forte* as the music makes its way to a most subdued conclusion.

The prelude of **No. 23 in F Major** is exceptionally beautiful music. Its wistful opening theme is presented in a sort of sonata-form structure, with exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda. The four-voice fugue preserves some of the understated quality of the prelude. Some have argued that Shostakovich deliberately restrained this penultimate pair as a way of setting the stage for the extended drama of his massive final pair. Perhaps. But this music, gentle throughout, has pleasures of its own.

The cycle comes to its monumental conclusion in **No. 24 in D Minor**. The prelude, marked *Andante*, opens with a spare and declamatory statement — from the first instant of this music Shostakovich is aiming for a grand sonority. The music gradually turns quiet, and then comes what will turn out to be a surprise: very quietly Shostakovich introduces what will be the subject of the fugue. The prelude's opening material returns and is combined with the fugue subject, and the music proceeds to an almost evanescent close. The fugue begins quietly with the now-familiar subject and develops with a dark nobility, but this is actually a double fugue, and its second subject arrives as a chain of quietly-pulsing eighth-notes. This is developed at some length, and as he nears the climax Shostakovich combines both fugue subjects and projects that combination with an almost symphonic sonority: the marking is triple *forte*, and the music is hammered out in full chords by both hands. The music reaches an overpowering climax marked *Maestoso*, and in the closing measures Shostakovich almost wrenches the music into a heroic conclusion in D Major.

– Program notes by Eric Bromberger