

March 6, 2016 at 2:00pm
Richardson Auditorium in Alexander Hall

Alexander Melnikov, Piano

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
(1906–1975)

Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87

- No. 1 in C Major
- No. 2 in A Minor
- No. 3 in G Major
- No. 4 in E Minor
- No. 5 in D Major
- No. 6 in B Minor
- No. 7 in A Major
- No. 8 in F-sharp Minor
- No. 9 in E Major
- No. 10 in C-sharp Minor
- No. 11 in B Major
- No. 12 in G-sharp Minor

— 20 MINUTE INTERMISSION —

- No. 13 in F-sharp Major
- No. 14 in E-flat Minor
- No. 15 in D-flat Major
- No. 16 in B-flat Minor

— 20 MINUTE INTERMISSION —

- No. 17 in A-flat Major
- No. 18 in F Minor
- No. 19 in E-flat Major
- No. 20 in C Minor
- No. 21 in B-flat Major
- No. 22 in G Minor
- No. 23 in F Major
- No. 24 in D Minor

Please join us for Russian refreshments served downstairs in the Richardson Lounge during both of the extended intermissions.

Following the concert, Princeton Professor Simon Morrison will talk on stage with Mr. Melnikov about the cycle, and take questions from the audience.

About Alexander Melnikov



Alexander Melnikov graduated from the Moscow Conservatory under Lev Naumov. His most formative musical moments in Moscow include his early encounter with Sviatoslav Richter, who thereafter regularly invited him to festivals in Russia and France. He was awarded important prizes at the International Robert Schumann Competition in Zwickau, Germany (1989) and the Concours Musical Reine Elisabeth in Brussels (1991).

Known for his often unusual musical and programmatic decisions, Alexander Melnikov discovered a career-long interest in historically-informed performance practice at an early age. His major influences in this field include Andreas Staier and Alexei Lubimov. Melnikov performs regularly with distinguished period ensembles such as the Freiburger Barockorchester, Concerto Köln, Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin and Orchestre des Champs-Élysées.

As a soloist, Alexander Melnikov has performed with orchestras including the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Philadelphia Orchestra, NDR Sinfonieorchester, HR-Sinfonieorchester, Russian National Orchestra, Munich

Philharmonic, Rotterdam Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic and the NHK Symphony, under conductors such as Mikhail Pletnev, Teodor Currentzis, Charles Dutoit, Paavo Järvi, Philippe Herreweghe and Valery Gergiev.

Together with Andreas Staier, Alexander Melnikov developed a program that sets excerpts from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* in musical dialogue with Shostakovich's 24 Preludes and Fugues. Additionally, the artists recently recorded a unique all-Schubert program of four-hand pieces. Intensive chamber music collaborations with partners including cellists Alexander Rudin and Jean-Guihen Queyras, as well as the baritone Georg Nigl, also form an essential part of Melnikov's work.

Alexander Melnikov's association with the recording label Harmonia Mundi arose through his regular recital partner, violinist Isabelle Faust, who was on our series this Fall. In 2010 their complete recording of the Beethoven sonatas won both a Gramophone Award and Germany's ECHO Klassik Prize. This CD, which has become a touchstone recording for these works, was also nominated for a Grammy. Their most recent release features the Brahms Sonatas for Violin and Piano.

Melnikov's recording of the Preludes and Fugues by Shostakovich was awarded the *BBC Music Magazine* Award, Choc de classica and the Jahrespreis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik. In 2011, it was also named by the *BBC Music Magazine* as one of the "50 Greatest Recordings of All Time." Additionally, his discography features works by Brahms, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich and Scriabin.

Alexander Melnikov kicks off the current season with "The Man with the Many Pianos," a program in which he performs a solo recital on three different instruments reflecting the periods in which the works were written, as well as a three-concert Shostakovich program with the Cuarteto Casals. He continues his collaboration with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Freiburger Barockorchester and Tapiola Sinfonietta as its Artistic Partner. Further highlights include concerts with the Camerata Salzburg and Louis Langrée at the Mozartwoche in Salzburg, Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, as well as engagements in London's Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam's Muziekgebouw aan't IJ, Antwerp's De Singel, Dijon's Opéra and Barcelona's Palau de la Música Catalana.

This concert marks Alexander Melnikov's Princeton debut.

An Introduction

by Professor Simon A. Morrison, Professor of Music, Princeton University, ©2016

“Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues is a tribute to J. S. Bach, on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, an affirmation of the power of music without words, without politics. The music is cosmic, magical, sublime, and . . . choose your adjective: they contain everything that matters.”

— Professor Simon Morrison

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75) came from inside Soviet culture and had an artistic and political support network that ensured his embittered survival of, and triumph over, the politics of several Soviet leaders. He cut his teeth as a composer during the Revolution and Civil War and embodied the aesthetics of the 1920s. As he completed his conservatoire education, he became a fellow traveler of proletarian arts organizations, which increased in prominence through the 1920s, thriving in the cultural badlands before the “Great Gardener” (one of Joseph Stalin’s many sobriquets) weeded them out of existence. Shostakovich dabbled in the burlesque and the sleazier sides of American popular culture; he worshipped Gustav Mahler and Alban Berg; he composed for cinema, opera, ballet, and music theater.

In short, Shostakovich liked being all over the map, privileging nothing and everything, pinching from the classics and smashing the purloined goods into the songs and dances of the Communist League Movement. Up to a point, his music sounded like he looked: it stammered, pontificated, protested, lacked sentiment and seriousness, but also twinkled with

erudition. Those who did not enjoy the fun, including the Soviet cultural bureaucrats who would bring him low in the mid-1930s, failed to understand that the revolution, for all the suffering it induced, was a free-for-all for creative experiment. He would be forced to repent as a composer for the playfulness of his ballets and luridness of his operas. He turned sadder but wiser in his middle years to intimate genres. His Preludes and Fugues (1950) is a tribute to J. S. Bach, on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, an affirmation of the power of music without words, without politics. The music is cosmic, magical, sublime, and . . . choose your adjective: they contain everything that matters.

About the Program

*A Personal Statement by Alexander Melnikov,
with contributions by Professor Mark Mazullo and Eric Bromberger*

Before writing the sleeve notes for my recording of the Shostakovich Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87, I found myself in something of a quandry. Certainly it seems that Op. 87's immediate biographical context is very clear and defining: Shostakovich's 1950 visit to Leipzig to attend the Bicentennial Bach Competition, where he heard and was impressed by pianist Tatyana Nikolayeva playing Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, served as an impetus to write his own set of Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues, loosely modeled on Bach's. This he accomplished with remarkable, almost unbelievable speed upon his return home (it took him a mere three-and-a-half months). Nikolayeva, blessed as she was with a phenomenal musical memory, performed Op. 87 for the rest of her life, and her name became practically synonymous with the work. All of this is absolutely indisputable...yet today the cycle seems to have fallen between two stools...and is regarded with a degree of mistrust both by many Shostakovich devotees ("boring?" "controversial?" "inaccessible?") and by numerous musicians of what we may call a "Western Intellectual" way of thinking ("too dogmatic?" "primitive?"). It seems that, in order cogently to appreciate Op. 87, one has to take into account many different aspects: instrumental, polyphonic, tonal, modal, harmonic, structural, aesthetic, and biographical.

One of the greatest interpreters of the Preludes and Fugues is Tatyana Nikolayeva, the work's dedicatee. In 1962 she became the first to record the cycle in its entirety, a decade after she had give its public premiere in Leningrad. She recorded it twice more, when she was much older, and even won a British Gramophone Award for her 1991 account.

— Professor Mark Mazullo

Let's have a brief look at some of those aspects.

The forty-odd years which have passed since Shostakovich's death have demonstrated clearly that his life and music (not unlike Richard Wagner's) remains a topic of heated dispute to which no end seems in sight. Too complex and multifaceted was his personality; too crazy the world he lived in; too desperate his stance and his struggle in that world. While a great deal has been written and said both in Russia and abroad concerning his "social" position, and some serious, albeit often controversial attempts have been made to analyze his operas, symphonies, and quartets, relatively little attention has been paid to Shostakovich's piano music. With good reason: for, despite being a brilliant pianist - his wonderful performance of Schumann's *Humoreske* at the graduation examination at the St. Petersburg Conservatory still resonates in that city a century later, and his failure to win the 1927 International Chopin Competition was a bitter personal disappointment - Shostakovich's music for piano solo occupies a somewhat modest position in his creative output. It is safe to say that both of his piano sonatas are much

The 2nd Fugue in A Minor, whipping past in barely a minute, 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 premiered until 1961. — Eric Bromberger

less well-known than the sonatas written for cello, violin, and viola, and that the two piano concertos are less significant works than their counterparts written for string instruments. Perhaps the Twenty-Four Preludes Op. 34 have fared better, as have some other early pieces, but for today's average concertgoer, Shostakovich's piano writing is experienced primarily through the piano parts in the duo sonatas, the accompaniments to the vocal cycles, and the piano parts in the Quintet and the Piano Trio No. 2. We can only speculate as to what lay behind the composer's surprising neglect of his own instrument, and reasons of biographical, psychological and medical origin are often cited. The only fact we know for sure is that for much of his turbulent formative years, writing for solo piano was not at the top of the Shostakovich's agenda. Therefore perhaps it does not come as a surprise that, by the time the mature composer finally embarked on writing a major piano

work, he opted for the prelude and fugue genre, which is the least instrumentally oriented and most intellectually laden.

Practically speaking, the fugues could be sung or played on many instruments, and many of the preludes are clearly written with the sound of orchestral or chamber music in mind. There are, of course, some notable exceptions: **Prelude No. 2 in A Minor** has pure harpsichord textures, and **Prelude No. 21 in B-flat Major** makes fun of the technical piano etude. So, if there is little pianistic gloss in the cycle, how can it be expected to work in the context of a solo piano recital?

For it *is* a cycle, and despite the composer's own declaration at the shameful (*see note below) 1951 presentation of the work at the Union of Soviet Composers that each prelude and fugue can be performed on its own and they are not intended to sound as a cycle, he left just too many indisputable signs to the contrary. Even setting aside the tonal structure which one could argue is there for purely organizational reasons (the circle of fifths with a prelude and fugue in the relative minor following each major-key piece), a first look at individual fugues already reveals their part in a larger structure.

Fugue No. 1 in C Major, for example, employs not a single black key, and by repeating the theme once in each of the modes of a diatonic scale, the composer masterfully sets the mood of an introduction to something truly big and significant. Here, interestingly,

** In April, at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Composers in Moscow, the ideological lines were drawn, as delegates from across the country were given the opportunity to speak in favor of the resolution and, if necessary, to repent their formalist ways. Shostakovich addressed the delegates on the second day of the Congress, obviously under duress, and promised publicly to compose hereafter in a melodic style aimed at the people, and in programmatic (that is, overtly narrative) forms dedicated to contemporary themes. We know now, as surely almost everyone did then, that Shostakovich was merely paying the required lip service to the state machine. While he did momentarily increase his production of scores for propagandistic films and settings of patriotic texts, he also continued to work - albeit sometimes behind closed doors - on such "private" works as the song cycle 'From Jewish Folk Poetry,' the First Violin Concerto, and even a blatantly (and perhaps dangerously) satiric dramatic piece entitled 'Anti-Formalist Rayok'(or 'peep show'). Such works were left unperformed, or performed only privately, until the period of the thaw after Stalin's death. -Mark Mazullo*

The D-flat Major Fugue, No. 15, is one of the cycle's high points and one of the individual pieces accused of conveying a distorted and false image of Soviet reality at the composer's audition of the cycle for the Union of Composers.

— Professor Mark Mazullo

Shostakovich does not yet explore his own “home-made” modes (**see note below).

There is certainly a dynamic within the first volume, culminating in the wonderful **Prelude and Fugue No. 12 in G-sharp Minor**. The prelude is a *passacaglia*, a genre which never failed Shostakovich whenever he needed to compose something serious, tragic and solemn; he just knew how to write them. It is followed by the most harmonically complex fugue of the cycle so far, played at a breakneck pace, reaching an impossible degree of emotional strain and desperation. Thus the stage is set for the culmination of the first volume, a “breakdown”

moment: the monumental-soundings emit one upward move of the lower voice, clearly the result of the cumulative effort of all the previous fugues, followed by a tumbling fall which always makes me think of a broken spine. The next prelude and fugue (**No. 13, the first of the second volume**) has an unmistakable reconciliatory aura of “a new beginning.”

Perhaps the most disputable but also very interesting argument for the cycle being a cycle is the place and the role of **Preludes and Fugues Nos. 15 and 16, (D-flat Major and**

***Some brief remarks on aspects of the tonal and modal system of the 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87. As noted already in 1960 by Alexander Dolzhansky, Shostakovich uses three groups of modes throughout his cycle, and indeed in his other works.*

The first one is ‘normal’ major and minor. It is used mainly as the backbone of the cycle’s outer structure, but appears rarely in the music itself.

The second group is used much more widely and consists of the seven modes of the diatonic scale (Lydian, Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian, Phrygian, and Locrian).

Finally, the third group consists of the modes invented by Shostakovich himself. It is largely these modes which make the composer’s musical language so instantly recognizable. and of course there are not any universally accepted names for them.

All these modes are of course combined, which leads to most unexpected yet naturally-sounding harmonic solutions.

B-flat Minor). As noted by author Levon Akopian, they appear at the “sectio aurea” point of the twenty-four. Arguably, they make the biggest statements and form the biggest contrast of the entire work. **No. 15** employs two purely twentieth-century musical languages: the prelude is full of mockery and relies on the street music of (largely criminal) post-revolutionary Russia (one thinks yet again of Shostakovich’s early years earning money playing the piano in cinemas). The near-dodecaphonic fugue is unusual in that the vertical harmonic relationships pretend (only pretend!) to be less important than in all the other fugues, and here the contrapuntal technique reminds us of the Second Viennese School. On the contrary, **No. 16** has its roots planted firmly in Baroque or even Medieval soil. The solemn prelude (yes, another *passacaglia*!) is followed by the most extraordinary fugue in which the theme alone is in effect one long, seventeen-beat bar: hearing it, an early music connoisseur would not believe that this is music written by Shostakovich! Finally, the last fugue, **No. 24 in D Minor**, risks appearing too extended, too monotonous if played on its own, and only seeing it as the conclusion of an epic cycle justifies the ratio between its size and its relative scarcity of musical material.

The Prelude to No. 7 in A Major inevitably invites comparison to the keyboard music of Bach, particularly his two-part inventions. The three-part fugue is built on a subject that sounds like a distant, delicate bugle-call. Textures grow complex as the fugue proceeds, but this music retains its sparkling, spirited energy right through its pianissimo conclusion.

— Eric Bromberger

Having merely touched on this handful of fugues, we can already see how much they differ from each other; and this is a good moment to address the “dogmatism” issue, and Shostakovich’s approach to The Fugue in general. It is true that, with practically no exception, all the fugues follow one rigid model which could be described as a “school fugue.” The straightforward exposition is followed by several theme pairs played in different new melodic modes (often simply substituting major for minor or vice versa), then the music wanders into remote keys, before coming back to a dominant pedal point, to be followed by a stretto section blending into a coda. The counterpoints are always retained, and there are no melodic inversions; each of these two rules suffer a single exception, the fugues of **No. 22 in G Minor** and **No. 9 in E Major** respectively, but I

choose to believe that Shostakovich made those exceptions so that nobody could accuse him of not being able to!

In all this there seem to be enough reasons for labeling the fugues as primitive and academic, “Soviet-made,” especially when compared to the endless variety and inventiveness of the fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. However, with time one starts to see a very different picture.

It seems that there might be two key reasons for Shostakovich’s spartan approach to the fugue, one objective, and the other personal. To understand the former, it is necessary to look at the background of polyphonic music in twentieth-century Russia. At the end of the nineteenth century, both the Moscow and St. Petersburg conservatories (with the towering figures of Taneyev and Rimsky-Korsakov respectively, among other outstanding professors who were themselves mostly important composers) had reached remarkably high levels in the study of counterpoint, as well as harmony, orchestration and other disciplines of musical theory. It is astonishing to realize that composers as diverse as Scriabin, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff are all deeply indebted to these two institutions, and their voice-leading remained impeccable throughout their lives despite the most radical differences in musical language. In fact it has taken seventy years of Bolshevik rule, Stalinist terror, and two world wars nearly to nullify those educational achievements.

Shostakovich doubtlessly took full advantage of this culture while he was a student, and went on further to enrich the tradition as a teacher himself; anecdotal evidence exists of him exclaiming angrily decades later: “In this country nobody knows how to write a fugue

It was while on tour with the Preludes and Fugues in November 1993 that (Tatyana Nikolayeva) suffered a cerebral hemorrhage onstage at the Herbst Theater in San Francisco, lapsing into a coma and dying a few days later. She had been playing the great Fugue in B-flat Minor, one of the cycle’s longest and most spellbinding, with a melismatic fugue subject that Nikolayeva herself once likened to a shepherd’s pipe tune. — Professor Mark Mazullo

any more!" He had a clear vision of many features of his own fugues before beginning to compose Op. 87: many of the well-thought-out formal, tonal and harmonic techniques were used by the composer with full confidence in his three earlier fugues: the Prelude for Piano Op. 34, No. 4 (1933), the second movement of the Piano Quintet Op. 57 (1940), and the fugue from *The Song of the Forests* Op. 81 (1949). While he maintained that he started writing the Op. 87 fugues merely as an exercise for his polyphonic skills, only seeing later that something more significant was being born out of the project, we can be sure that he did not really need too much training. He was already fully accomplished in fugal writing and this might partly explain his reluctance to depart from the model, which he already mastered so well. We may ask ourselves, then, why did he need to compose twenty-four more fugues when he was not even radically changing anything?

For me the answer lies in the second, personal aspect of Shostakovich's vision of the fugue. It was an inherently important challenge for him consciously to limit himself to the "school fugue" model and then, using any available methods within those constraints, to create music as diversified and rich as possible. Looking at the cycle from this point of view we are immediately filled with the greatest admiration and appreciation. Once those constraints are known and understood, the sheer amount of virtuosity and genius required becomes immediately apparent, not least in Shostakovich's approach to tonality and modality. The music always remains and sounds strictly tonal, but as soon as we look a little closer we notice that many cornerstones of tonality look very unusual. The C natural is an integrated part of the B Major tonic. The modulation from C Minor to B Major is achieved with the greatest ease because the two keys sound very much as one and the same. The places traditionally occupied by keys of dominant function suddenly become the comfortable realms for the subdominant ones - these are just a few examples. All these extraordinary things became possible because Shostakovich had developed his own original and complex tonal and modal system. This is problematic to describe on paper because some of the terms are either not invented or not widely accepted. And all of this can only be appreciated in the context of traditional tonal music, a context that might not have occurred to important composers on the other side of the Iron Curtain in the 1950s.

This brings me to the last and perhaps the most important topic.

In 1936 Shostakovich was forced dramatically to change his musical language after his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was ruthlessly condemned in a famous

Pravda article “Chaos instead of Music.” We all know that his career, even his life was on the verge of extinction, and the theory exists that Stalin himself was behind the article. As a matter of fact somebody was killed then - the avant-garde Shostakovich, the author of such wonderfully futurist works as the Second Symphony and the First Piano Sonata. But the hero had the last laugh. Whereas almost any other creative individuality would simply cease to exist under such impossible circumstances, Shostakovich’s enormous talent and honesty could overcome even such a murderous-seeming hurdle. The very demands of Socialist Realism, as ridiculous and perverse as they were, led to the birth of the musical idiom of the Fifth Symphony and beyond. It proved an idiom ideally suited for the

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— Alexander Melnikov

music, which remains perhaps the greatest monument of the last century’s unspeakable atrocities, no matter where they were committed. And it is out of this idiom that the morbid style of the late Shostakovich was born, and it is this very idiom which fuels all the heated disputes mentioned above. Finally it is this idiom that made Shostakovich the last great representative of the post-Beethovenian symphonic tradition as described by musicologist Richard Taruskin in his article ‘Shostakovich and Us.’

The Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues inhabit this idiom as well. It is tempting to avoid entirely the eternal haunted question of the “message” of Shostakovich’s music: it was overexploited by so many people for such a long time, and this inevitably led to a cheap simplification of the music. Not to pose those questions, however, would be equally mistaken. There are of course no answers outside of the music itself; and whatever answers there may be will be different for each listener. One thing will remain unchanged, though: throughout Op. 87 we hear the voice of a tormented man, finding again and again the superhuman force to face life as it is - in all its variety, ugliness, and sometimes beauty.

The comments by Professor Mark Mazullo are excerpted with permission from his essay for the ‘Yale Review’ entitled “The Ethics of Expression, Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues in Performance.”

Mark Mazullo is Professor of Music at Macalester College.

Eric Bromberger is the Program Annotator for San Francisco Performances.