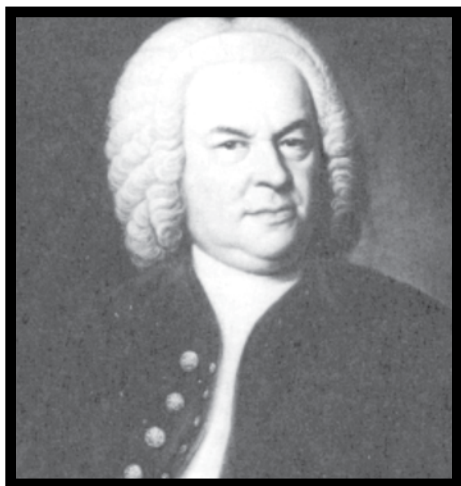


Preludes and Fugues: Bach and Shostakovich

During the course of my lessons with a certain beloved Mrs. Vogel, I was assigned – like so many students of the piano – to learn the C major prelude of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier. After endless and tedious finger-strengthening exercises involving repetitive, clattering scales in octaves, I remember the excitement I felt when I encountered this ethereal, lyrical little poem in arpeggios, so simple and yet so profound. For me, as for thousands (millions?) of other piano students, mastering the Prelude No. 1 of the formidable “48” pairs of Preludes and Fugues of Papa Bach marked a rite of passage into a more mature and creative relationship with the keyboard. I was playing a piece by Bach! And many years later, long after abandoning serious study of the piano, I still sit down to commune with this work of pure harmonic architecture, which still feels so natural and right even under my out-of-practice fingers. Inevitably my spirits soar as I listen. If I were agitated, I would be soothed and reassured by the clarity and solidity of its steady rise and fall, underpinned by the absolute certainty of the C major scale, by that primal and satisfying final C in the bass that seems to resound along the very axis of the universe.

And that is only the beginning. As I came to understand music better, my

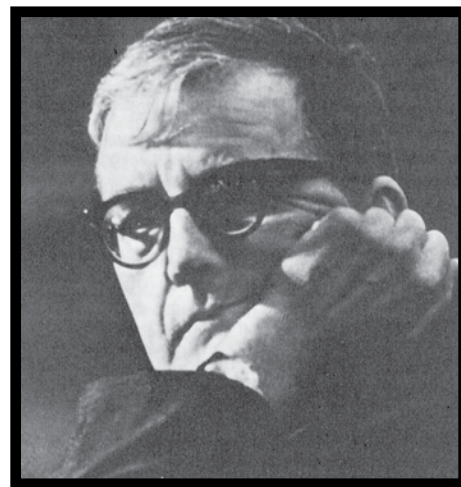


J.S. Bach

admiration for Bach’s work as a teacher grew. In this cycle of preludes and fugues, composed in two installments of 24 pairs in 1722 (Vol. I) and 24 pairs in 1744 (Vol. II), Bach leads the player through a rigorous course in harmony, counterpoint and compositional forms, but he makes the material so varied, so tuneful, so attractive, so pleasing, so playfully rhythmic, that the student-player never has the feeling of being lectured to by a condescending know-it-all. The lessons are taught through an appeal to the heart – not just the head. From the start, the student is hooked on an emotional and intellectual level, and therefore moved to pursue the quest as the degree of difficulty rises along with the number of flats and sharps in the key signature. As any good teacher knows, successful learning depends on pacing, motivation and strategically distributed rewards. Bach knows all those tricks, and some more besides.

The title-page of Part I bears this message from the composer: “For the use and profit of the musical youth desirous of learning and for the pastime of those already skilled in this study.” Bach’s admirer Robert Schumann later advised students, “Let the Well-Tempered Clavier be your daily bread. Then you will certainly attain to good musicianship.”

So firmly established in the repertoire of players of various keyboard instruments (harpsichord, clavichord, organ, piano) are the pieces of the Well-Tempered Clavier (Das Wohltemperirte Clavier) today that it still comes as a shock to remember that the two volumes remained very little known for more than half a century after Bach’s death. The first complete and accurate editions were published only in 1801-02, although Mozart was introduced to the cycle in 1782 by the musical patron Baron van Swieten. For 19th- and 20th-century composers, the preludes and fugues became a manual for increasingly adventurous harmonic



Dmitri Shostakovich

and melodic explorations, both a point of departure and a safe haven for return. One of those most profoundly influenced both musically and spiritually by the example of the Well-Tempered Clavier was the Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75), who in 1950-51, more than two centuries after Bach completed his “48,” produced his own set of 24 Preludes and Fugues as both homage to and commentary on the work of the German baroque master.

In the Well-Tempered Clavier, most historians agree, Bach was seeking to demonstrate the harmonic possibilities of what was at the time a relatively new system of tuning, or “temperament.” Bach’s contemporaries took this to mean “equal temperament,” the division of the octave on the keyboard into 12 equal semitones, C through B. Under this system, the naturally occurring impurities in the sound-wave frequencies of the intervals of minor thirds and major

thirds are spread evenly over the octave. In practical terms, this means (among other things) that on the keyboard the same key is used to sound G-sharp and A-flat, although within the respective harmonic structures built around each of these notes there is a slight but detectable audible difference between them. (Stringed instruments like violins do not have this problem.) The Well-Tempered Clavier provided a model of what became the modern harmonic system based on 12 major and 12 minor keys (rather than just a few mathematically pure keys) and laid the foundation for “classical” music since Bach’s time.

As Christoph Wolff writes in *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, “Bach’s primary purpose in writing *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, then, was to demonstrate in practice the musical manageability of all 24 chromatic keys, a system that earlier had been considered only theoretically.”

Both Volume One and Volume Two each contain 12 pairs – one pair in each of the 24 keys – of prelude followed by fugue, preceding upward by half-steps from C major through b minor. In Volume One, the pieces generally become more difficult and complex as they progress. The preludes use an impressive variety of styles, including simple arpeggios (Prelude No. 1 in C-major), plaintive arias (such as Prelude No. 4 in c-sharp minor), witty exercises for the right hand (Prelude No. 5 in D Major), heavily ornamented counterpoint (Prelude No. 10 in e Minor), excursions into unusual meters (Prelude No. 15 in G Major, in long-breathing measures of 24/16), majestic chorales (the massive concluding *andante* Prelude No. 24 in b minor, with its two repeated sections), *toccatas* and dance forms.

The fugues include examples with two, three, four and even five voices, and techniques such as *stretto* (overlapping of statements of the melodic subject to increase tension, such as we see towards the end of the Fugue No. 1 in C Major), inversion (reversing the original sequential relationship between falling and rising notes) and augmentation (lengthening

the note values of the original subject statement in subsequent repetitions). “National” influences also appear, such as the *stile francese* of the Fugue No. 5 in D Major, with its heavy dotted rhythms and processional, formal, unmistakably Gallic personality.

It was the celebration in 1950 of the bicentennial of Bach’s death in 1750 that inspired Dmitri Shostakovich to talk back to Bach – to undertake a cycle of preludes and fugues conceived in the same basic formal design as the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In summer of 1950, Shostakovich headed a Soviet delegation that traveled to East Germany (then part of the Soviet Communist bloc) to attend various commemorative Bach events. In Berlin, Shostakovich was a soloist in a performance of Bach’s *Concerto for Three Harpsichords* (pianos). In Leipzig, where Bach lived from 1723 until his death, Shostakovich attended the International Bach Competition, where he heard Russian pianist Tatiana Nikolaeva (1924-93) perform. She played the f-sharp minor set from Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, won first prize and made an enormous impression upon Shostakovich, with whom she was already acquainted from her student days at Moscow Conservatory.

Soon after returning to Moscow, Shostakovich began composing his set of 24 Preludes and Fugues Op. 87, completed in a burst of intensive work between October 1950 and February 1951. At first, Shostakovich said later, he wanted “to write some sort of technical exercises in a polyphonic style, but then I decided to expand the project and write a big cycle of artistic pieces in polyphonic form, using material containing strong imagery, something like Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*.” In a letter to his close friend Issak Glikman on April 5, 1951, Shostakovich reported: “On February 25 I finished my 24 preludes and fugues. In general I am satisfied with this opus. Most of all I am satisfied that I had the strength to bring it to completion.”

Shostakovich’s decision to pay tribute to Bach’s musical and historical legacy came at a difficult and even

dangerous moment in his life. Throughout his career, and especially since the official denunciation of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin in 1936 as obscene and “formalist,” Shostakovich had been living with the fear that his privileged official and creative position could change for the worse at any time. After enjoying a somewhat more free artistic atmosphere during World War II, he and other leading Soviet composers were again viciously attacked in 1948 at a widely publicized conference for their alleged deviations from the norms of Socialist Realism in music. In fact, the years between 1948 and the death of Stalin in 1953 were among the darkest and most oppressive in the history of Soviet music. In order to protect himself and provide for his family, Shostakovich in 1949 completed such demeaning propaganda projects as the score for the notorious pro-Stalinist film *Fall of Berlin* and the bland oratorio *Song of the Forests*.

At the same time that Shostakovich was turning out big necessary “public” scores like these, however, he was also producing for himself music of a much more private, complex, cerebral kind, such as the *String Quartets* No. 4 (1949) and No. 5 (1952). Fearful of the official reception, Shostakovich withheld both of these chamber works from performance until after Stalin’s death. The Preludes and Fugues Op. 87 also fall into this same category of “private” music, but it is significant that Shostakovich chose not to hide them away in the drawer. For one thing, he knew that their connection to the name and legacy of J.S. Bach could serve as an ideological shield. Despite Bach’s close connection to the Lutheran church, he was generally regarded by Marxists and Communists as



a progressive and deeply national artist with roots in the “people.” According to the lengthy article on Bach published in 1973 in the Soviet Musical Encyclopedia, “The national and democratic tendencies of Bach’s creativity find their source in the protestant chorale. It was Friedrich Engels who described one of the most famous examples, Ein’ feste Burg is unser Gott (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God) as ‘the Marseillaise of the 16th century.’”

In the somewhat wooden official statements he made around the time he was working on the Preludes and Fugues, Shostakovich also pointed out Bach’s kinship with socialist ideals.

“In what way is Bach close to us, Soviet composers and musicians? What draws us to the music of the great German composer? First of all, the fact that he drew his inspiration from the inexhaustible spring of the art of the people: you always feel a strong connection in his instrumental and vocal works with German folk song. J.S. Bach is a great master of polyphony, his works are distinguished by melodic richness and a mastery of polyphonic technique....I love in Bach’s works the depth of his thoughts, the deep humanity and the incisiveness of his many-faceted art. All of Bach’s works are very close and dear to me, as they are to all Soviet composers and musicians.”

But beyond the perfunctory ideological justifications, it seems that Shostakovich also saw in Bach a powerful kindred spirit, one who could help him retain his moral integrity at a time when he felt guilty and compromised for his position as an official Soviet composer. (And a time when many of his former friends and colleagues had already been liquidated for their ideological errors.) In the “pure” musical world of preludes and fugues, without any programmatic titles to illustrate or political agendas to fulfill, Shostakovich could find refuge and renewal from the relentless demands of his patrons. Was he not also in a way following the example of Bach, who in such works as the Well-Tempered Clavier moved beyond his role as an ordinary Lutheran kapellmeister writing to order for Sunday services into the realm of

more imaginative abstract art?

In his Preludes and Fugues, Shostakovich never loses sight of the Bach model that inspired him, but still employs all the harmonic and other possibilities available to a mid-20th-century composer. His neo-classicism is much more free and less mannered, for example, than many of Stravinsky’s self-conscious attempts to write like Bach “with wrong notes.” Many of the pieces in the cycle possess an improvisatory, unfettered character; they are aware of tradition without being paralyzed by it. Shostakovich does not make obvious direct references to the Bach cycle, and the cycle does not move stepwise like the Well-Tempered Clavier. Instead, it progresses through the circle of fifths, which may actually be seen as a more “natural” way of moving from piece to piece, exploiting organic harmonic relationships rather than the artificial configuration of the keyboard. Also, the preludes and fugues in each pair are more closely linked thematically and harmonically than is the case in Bach, and there is no pause between them in performance.

Some of the pieces have an unmistakably “Russian” character, notably the Prelude No. 3 in G Major, which sounds like a liturgical chant, especially in the unison opening, while others are wildly “modern” and devilish, like the accompanying Fugue No. 3. We also find ample evidence of Shostakovich’s familiar sardonic humor, as in the Fugue No. 5 in D Major, with its amusing telegraph-key staccato subject on tonic and dominant, or the miniature Prelude and Fugue No. 2 in A minor, a crazy toccata followed by a cockeyed piece of Baroque elegance gone playfully sour. Quite a few of the preludes (Nos. 1, 4, 5) transport us to a serene and ethereal realm, much more dreamy, leisurely and impressionistic than anything encountered in Bach. Shostakovich makes no secret of his mastery of traditional counterpoint, however, as in the masterful Fugue No. 14 in E minor, which turns midway into an exhilarating double fugue and concludes with a majestic Picardy third (the prevailing minor interval becoming major in the last

chord), a favorite device of Bach. Prelude No. 10 in c sharp minor unfolds in the manner of a fantasia, the accompanying four-voice fugue in a contrasting lament with the flavor of a folk song.

Shostakovich was himself a brilliant pianist, which helps to explain why the cycle lies so well beneath the performer’s hands and communicates so well with an audience. But the first audience to hear the Preludes and Fugues was not so friendly. As was the case with all new works by Soviet composers, it had to be presented at the Union of Composers before public performance and publication could be approved. On May 16, 1951, an “extremely nervous” Shostakovich himself played the cycle, with Tatiana Nikolaeva turning the pages in what she later remembered was “an unbearably hot and stuffy” hall. As usual on such occasions, the performance was followed by a discussion dominated by the Union’s bureaucrats. They were sharply critical of the cycle, and used the opportunity, according to Nikolaeva, “to give vent to their black envy” of Shostakovich’s much greater talent. Their negative and insulting remarks were profoundly painful for the composer.

Only in 1952, after Nikolaeva performed the cycle at a second official hearing, were the Preludes and Fugues authorized for publication. To Nikolaeva also fell the honor of performing the world premiere of the cycle, in Leningrad in two concerts held on December 23 and 28, 1952.

Harlow Robinson

