



**Shostakovich in Black and White**  
**Professor Marina Frolova-Walker & Peter Donohue CBE**

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The Prodigy

Shostakovich began to play the piano relatively late, at the age of 9, even though his mother had studied at the Conservatoire and earned money by giving piano lessons. Once started, his progress was astonishingly fast, and he entered the Petrograd (former St Petersburg) Conservatoire aged 13 to study piano and composition. His piano professor was Leonid Nikolaev, and his classmates were Maria Yudina and Vladimir Sofronitsky, who were both to become legendary pianists. Shostakovich also, at this time, considered the career of a pianist.

The Chopin Competition

On impulse, Shostakovich applied to compete in the first ever Chopin Competition in Warsaw, 1927, principally so that he could go abroad and make new professional contacts. He had less than a month to prepare his programme for the two rounds, but he succeeded, since he found memorising easy, and his impressive technique was equal to the task. He had already won a reputation among his fellow students for finger dexterity and rapid delivery: when they held informal contests to see who could perform a particular Chopin etude fastest, Shostakovich always won. Another strength was his ability to convey large-scale musical structures with lucidity. He was not perfect, though, and contemporaries found that his range of tone colour was narrow, and the “romantic” spirit seemed to elude him.

*“An acquaintance told me that Szpinalski (who played before me) took 51 seconds over the [B-flat minor] prelude. I played it in 47.”*

Shostakovich in a letter to Yavorsky

In his letters home, Shostakovich said that he had acquitted himself honourably and earned a warm reception of the audience. Accounts of the competition in the Polish press back this up. But the other members of the Soviet team enjoyed still greater success, and Shostakovich’s friend Lev Oborin above all. The Soviet competitors all found it difficult to match the etiquette of the grand occasion:

*“... The Russian pianists appeared on stage looking like “proletarians”, with uncombed hair, ill-fitting collars, clumsy footwear and rumpled shirts. Even so, their performances of Chopin came across remarkably well...”*

(Warsaw newspaper)

The result was a blow for Shostakovich: he failed to win a prize (awarded to the top four competitors) and departed with a mere diploma. He put a brave face on it, but privately was distraught. He believed that the jury must have been biased by Polish nationalist sentiments, which is hard to believe, since the Russian Oborin was awarded the first prize (and a Russian received one of the other prizes). He was sure that he had outperformed everyone, with the sole exception of Oborin. To make matters worse, he suffered an attack of appendicitis while he was still in Warsaw, and he had to rely on Soviet consular officials to secure the urgent treatment he needed. He declared the whole experience a “fiasco”.

*“I am deeply shaken by the death of Pyotr Voikov. I had become very attached to him while I was in Warsaw, and besides a general anger about the murder, I also feel a deep personal sadness. After my appendicitis in Warsaw, Voikov insisted that I should have dinner at his place every day so that I wouldn’t run the risk of receiving poor-quality food in some restaurant. I also practised on the piano at his place, and after my fiasco, he treated me so well once again, and with such warmth – I will never forget that.”*

Shostakovich in a letter to Yavorsky

Shostakovich’s bitterness led him practise with renewed vigour after his return, wanting to prove himself better than all the pianists who had been ranked above him in the competition. Over the next few months, he performed Tchaikovsky’s and Prokofiev’s First Piano Concertos. After that, his career as a concert pianist was subordinate to his compositions, which he premiered over the next three decades until he had to stop in the 1960s, due to a debilitating condition that affected his right hand.

### Sonata No. 1

The first large-scale piano piece (if we disregard juvenilia) coincided with Shostakovich’s immersion in the most avant-garde music of his day: Hindemith, Krenek, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and others. But the main model was Prokofiev, who was still Shostakovich’s idol at that stage. The Sonata reveals its closeness to Prokofiev’s piano textures and occasionally to Prokofiev’s musical materials as well but takes dissonance and various kinds of “misbehaviour” to a new level. The Sonata was completed in 1926, and by a stroke of luck, Shostakovich was able to play it to Prokofiev himself the following year, during the latter’s first return to Russia since his emigration in 1918. As Shostakovich himself reported:

*“Prokofiev listened to the Sonata and asked me to play the beginning a little slower, because he didn’t understand anything.”*

Shostakovich’s letter to Yavorsky

Prokofiev also found the event memorable enough to record at length in his Diary:

*“Second up was Shostakovich, quite a young man, not only a composer but also a pianist. He played by heart and with panache, having passed me the score to peruse as I sat on the sofa. His Sonata opened with vigorous Bach-like two-voice counterpoint, and the second movement, which followed without a break, is written with supple harmonies surrounding an interior melody. It was pleasant, but diffuse and rather too long. The Andante leads into a quick-tempo finale, disproportionately short in relation to its predecessors. But it was altogether so much more lively and interesting than Schillinger’s piece that I launched with joy into a paeon of praise for Shostakovich. That amused Asafyev, who commented that the reason I had liked the first movement of the Sonata was because it showed my influence.”*

Prokofiev, Diary entry for 20 February 1927

Prokofiev must have been sincerely impressed, since he played the piece to Diaghilev in Paris. Diaghilev, however, was more interested in Shostakovich’s Leningrad rival, Gavriil Popov. No commissions came to either composer and Diaghilev met an early death two years later.

Shostakovich managed to fit his Sonata into his post-competition recital in Warsaw, and also played it on many occasions in his home city. Interestingly, the piece soon began to appear in concert listings as the “October Sonata” (evoking the October Revolution of 1917). Shostakovich had expressly written an “October” Symphony (No. 2) for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Revolution, and he

probably wanted to extend this success to the Sonata. Shostakovich improbably became known as a pioneering composer of revolutionary music, and he certainly outstripped his rivals in talent.

Not everyone, however, was enamoured with the Sonata.

*“The composer ignores the piano’s range of timbral possibilities, and for this reason, it is difficult to listen to this Sonata.”*

The *Leningrad Pravda*, 1926

*“...as dry and tiresome as Czerny’s études”*

*Artistic Life*, 1926

Shostakovich’s composition professor, Maximilian Steinberg, washed his hands of his student:

*“There is nothing I have to say about such ‘music’.”*

### Cinema Pianist

Before Shostakovich’s career took off, he and his family suffered a period of dire hardship. Shostakovich had to find a way to earn some money during his studies at the Conservatoire, and the opportunity came along: he became a silent-movie pianist. Improvising over long hours required considerable stamina, but fortunately Shostakovich was a brilliant improviser and adept at matching the changing moods and situations of each film. It is tempting to see this work as the source of Shostakovich’s eclecticism, but before this, he was already influenced by Western modernism, which drew from an array of historic and popular styles, all treated with wit and irony. Immediately after his return from Warsaw, Shostakovich came wrote a cycle of very short pieces, and called the set *Aphorisms*. There is an atonal serenade with irregularly placed guitar-like chords, a so-called nocturne that seems to owe nothing to the genre, but compensates with extravagant instructions, such as *appassionato* and *ffff*. There is also a rather jolly funeral march, a parodic “dance of death”, a pointillist canon, etc.

*“The Nocturne, despite only having one bar of music, is the longest of all. The shortest is the Recitative, 33 seconds.”*

Shostakovich to Yavorsky

Among these mainly irreverent pieces there is a Lullaby that takes Bach as its subject for pastiche, but the result is actually rather touching, and looks ahead to the many neo-Baroque meditations found in Shostakovich’s mature work, and particularly in the Preludes and Fugues.

The *Aphorisms* and the First Sonata constitute the peak of Shostakovich’s avant-gardism, but it was not long before he began to cultivate a more sober and moderate modernism. The 24 Preludes of his op. 34 (not to be confused with the 24 Preludes and Fugues op.87) also play with various genres and idioms, but they are decidedly more tonal than the *Aphorisms*, and the material is skilfully developed to engage listeners rather than startle them. The more famous First Piano Concerto also hails from the early 1930s, and shares much common ground with the Preludes, although the larger scale allows him to accommodate a little “misbehaviour” along the way. It is scored lucidly for a chamber orchestra, and the trumpet part is so virtuosic and prominent that it becomes a rival soloist. The famous piano cadenza in the finale is not just the traditional virtuosic showcase, but runs through a series of popular idioms, such as an Odessa street song, a Brahms Hungarian Dance, and a jazzy stride style before it recovers a more classical demeanour. The cadenza serves as a dazzling farewell to Shostakovich’s work as a cinema pianist – the first Soviet “talkie” film had already appeared in 1930.

## Sonata No. 2

Shostakovich, the world-famous fireman and symphonist of besieged Leningrad, was successfully evacuated from the city, and was placed out of harm's way in Kuibyshev (now Samara), not far from the border with Kazakhstan. There, he completed the Leningrad Symphony and also wrote his Second Piano Sonata. He was suffering from typhoid and worked over the material for the Sonata mentally during his confinement, then wrote it up in February 1943 when he was discharged and dedicated the Sonata to the memory of his piano professor, Leonid Nikolayev, who had died the previous autumn. The composer of the First Sonata can scarcely be recognised: where the earlier sonata was raucous and exuberant, the new sonata is sombre and austere. The news of the spectacular success of Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata in January might have reached Shostakovich, but it is unlikely that that he had a chance to see the score or hear the piece.

Although distant in character from Prokofiev's Seventh, Shostakovich's Second is a challenging modernist work, especially in the harmonically complex slow movement and in some of the variations of the finale. The piano writing is spare, even ascetic, sometimes thinned down to a single voice, or two parts at opposite ends of the piano, as if deliberately rejecting any piano idiom that could be called "rich" or "beautiful". As a result, the Sonata did not become particularly popular, although the leading Soviet pianists Yudina, Richter, and Gilels all performed it. In 1948, after the Party Resolution against "formalism", the Sonata was one of the works named on the blacklist of works that were not to be performed.

Interestingly, Shostakovich had a chance to play the Second Sonata to Prokofiev, just as he did with the First Sonata fifteen years earlier. Then, Shostakovich was a promising but as yet unknown student, but now he was an international musical celebrity who even eclipsed Prokofiev, thanks to the global wartime success of the Leningrad Symphony. Prokofiev only found the first movement to his liking and admired the ease with which Shostakovich moved from key to key. Their relationship was now respectful but distant.

## 24 Preludes and Fugues, op. 87

Shostakovich first thought of writing a set of preludes and fugues in 1935. In a depression over some personal problems, he thought that the discipline of writing a fugue a day would be therapeutic. He only persevered for four days, but the seed was planted, and in 1950, he returned to the project. Shostakovich was unhappy again, but for more public reasons this time. He faced official censure in early 1948, and for a year or more, his music was not performed. To regain official favour, he made several compromises in 1949, including the composition of *Song of the Forests*, a cantata for Stalin's birthday. More serious works from this period were consigned to the deskdrawer in the hope of better times.

*"I've decided to start working, so as not to lose my skills. I will be writing a prelude and fugue a day, just like J.S. Bach."*

Yuri Levitin's memoir

But there was also a direct source of inspiration: in 1950, Shostakovich was invited to the first Bach Competition in Leipzig, East Germany, in order to serve as a member of the jury. The top three prizes went to Russian pianists, and Shostakovich heard many performances from Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues.

He composed rapidly, and on many days, he actually managed to produce a complete prelude and fugue. Tatyana Nikolayeva, winner of the first prize in Leipzig, was the first person to see the manuscripts. Shostakovich played the completed set to an audience of composers, musicologists and performers, and a heated discussion ensued. Nikolayeva said later that Shostakovich was very

nervous on the occasion and was unable to give the pieces a fair rendering. Opinion was divided: under the restrictions of the time, even this music could qualify as “formalist”, simply because they were focused on a particular musical form rather than any “socialist content”. But the pianists, including Nikolayeva and Yudina, voiced their support for the set, vouching for its playability and its potential classic status. Nikolayeva later learnt the whole of the set and became its great champion.

In 1952, the Preludes and Fugues were nominated for a Stalin Prize. The committee was divided: the head of the Composers’ Union, Tikhon Khrennikov, stated that he had found several worthy prelude-and-fugue pairs in the set, but many others, he thought, were best regarded as mere compositional exercises with no real artistic substance. And so, the complete work was not passed, but a selection was to be awarded a prize (the C major, A major, E major, C minor, and D minor pairs). In the event, Stalin’s death, in March 1953, led to the cancelling or postponement of all other events, and the prizes from that year’s round were never actually awarded. Nevertheless, the disappearance of Stalin from the scene led to a limited relaxation in Soviet life, from the release of political prisoners to a broadening of artistic possibilities. Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues now had a more propitious environment.

Contrary to expectations, Shostakovich does not indulge in complex contrapuntal devices, and most of the fugues are quite conventional as far as compositional technique is concerned. Rather, the interest lies in the tension between past and present musical idioms. Shostakovich deliberately models the first few preludes and fugues closely on Bach’s (e.g. the C major and A minor pairs), so that we are immediately on the alert when he begins to deviate from that idiom. He often evokes Baroque genres in the preludes, such as the sarabande or passacaglia. But as we progress through the set, we encounter a widening range of styles and genres: the fugues often adopt elements of Russian folk and popular songs, mostly in a meditative mode, but occasionally with flashes of humour. Some of the fugues (e.g. the Db major) are extremely chromatic. The A-major fugue is highly diatonic, by contrast; it is one of the most popular in the set, with a triadic theme that seems to lack all contrapuntal potential, but in Shostakovich’s hands, it becomes a fugue like no other, with music-box writing in the high register that is especially magical. The Prelude and Fugue in F# minor contain Jewish melodic elements, and the recitation/cantillation of the Fugue has a particularly haunting effect. The final Fugue, in D minor, is the grandest of all. It is a double fugue (i.e. there are two themes), and the dramatic development of the material provides a monumental and moving finale to the set.

The formal and textural restrictions of this Bachian genre suited Shostakovich very well. If the Second Sonata seems to deny itself the beauty of the piano, the ascetic approach seems quite natural in the Preludes and Fugues and receives its vindication. Combined with the ruminative nature of most of the fugues, a sense of poignant intimacy emerges. The work is compelling to those who are prepared to meet it on its own terms, and it is rightly regarded as the crowning achievement in his compositions for piano.

*“Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues are his intimate diary, which he kept for himself. And it has brought joy to us all.”*

Kurt Sanderling

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Sources and further reading:

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