

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 4 April 2022 7.00pm

Igor Levit piano

*Igor Levit appears by arrangement with Classic Concerts Management GmbH*

Supported by Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a donor advised fund at the London Community Foundation



**Dmitry Shostakovich** (1906-1975) **24 Preludes and Fugues Op. 87** (1950-1)

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|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in C</i>       | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in A minor</i>       |
| <i>Prelude And Fugue in G</i>       | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in E minor</i>       |
| <i>Prelude And Fugue in D</i>       | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in B minor</i>       |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in A</i>       | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in F sharp minor</i> |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in E</i>       | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor</i> |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in B</i>       | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in G sharp minor</i> |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in F sharp</i> | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in E flat minor</i>  |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in D flat</i>  | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in B flat minor</i>  |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in A flat</i>  | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in F minor</i>       |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in E flat</i>  | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in C minor</i>       |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in B flat</i>  | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in G minor</i>       |
| <i>Prelude and Fugue in F</i>       | • <i>Prelude and Fugue in D minor</i>       |

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A complete performance of **Shostakovich's** 24 Preludes and Fugues Op. 87 affords a stimulating opportunity to reflect on the power of musical fashion. At their birth in the early 50s, nobody liked these Preludes and Fugues, except their dismayed composer. (Schubert's friends hated *Winterreise* when he first sang it to them, so nothing to worry about, really.) The interesting thing was that people disliked them for two different reasons, both ideological. In 1948, the Soviet Composers' Union, in the search for ever more 'realism', had mounted a campaign against 'formalism'. Shostakovich's response was to write fugues! His Op. 87 was found, therefore, to lack a proper Soviet social message. Meanwhile, in the West, composers were busy tearing up the past. 'Schoenberg est mort', was the arrogantly dismissive comment of Pierre Boulez in 1951, and while many traditionalists might have echoed the comment, they would have done so with a quite different idea in their minds: Boulez was welcoming the opportunity to clear the slate, and get beyond the master of 12-tone technique. This was the attitude to be adopted at the BBC in the 60s by William Glock and Hans Keller, who came to be known in certain quarters as 'Block & Killer' for their wiping from the airwaves of a good deal of music that most people enjoyed. In this atmosphere, Shostakovich's Op. 87 was dismissed as antiquarian pastiche.

Shostakovich had written preludes before: 24 of them, in 1933. Such sets of preludes shorn of fugues are usually homages to Chopin, whose 24 preludes, published in 1839, are arranged in the cycle-of-fifths – so we start with C major and its relative minor, A minor, and then move up a fifth to G major and its relative (same key signature), E minor. And so on, until all 24 keys have been explored. Chopin's cycle was conceived as a homage to Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* (the first book of the '48'). Very sensibly, he did not attempt to match the fugues – although he could write some wonderful passing counterpoints, the thoroughness of fugal form did not play to his strengths.

Interesting to speculate as to whether Chopin thought that adopting a different order (Bach's two books are arranged by semitone – C major, C minor, C sharp major, C sharp minor, and so on) would disarm any criticism of the absence of fugues. One of the oddest arrangements of key occurs in Sterndale Bennett's agreeable Preludes & Lessons, which travel *up* the cycle of fifths from C to C sharp, and then *down* from F to D flat, resulting in a set of 30!

The stimulus for Shostakovich to move on from preludes to preludes and fugues was a visit to Leipzig in December 1950, where he acted as a judge in a competition marking the 200th anniversary of Bach's death. He was impressed with the playing

of his fellow Russian, Tatyana Nikolayeva, and set about writing Op. 87 with her in mind. He loved Bach, and was himself a great contrapuntist. Echoes of Bach can be heard in his music when he approaches neo-classicism, almost in the manner of Stravinsky, whom he admired. But Op. 87 is not neo-classical; rather an attempt to return to the fount of Western music, at a time that official doubt was being cast on his own style. He seems to have worked on the pieces in a rather piecemeal way that winter, and although he did play them all himself, he never gave a complete performance, preferring to make selections, according to the mood he was in, or perhaps the mood he wanted the audience to be in. He arranged the set by fifths, like Chopin, rather than by semitones, like Bach.

This brings us to consider a musical fashion of our own time: the passion for completeness. I don't suppose Beethoven ever dreamed that anyone would play all his piano sonatas, one after the other, let alone listen to them. The typical concert programme of Beethoven's day suggests that he would have thought it a crazy enterprise. It was the great Hans von Bülow who started the taste for the endeavour, and the idea of the Complete Beethoven Sonatas is now so ingrained that a student of mine once wrote 'fortunately, Beethoven did not die until he had completed his 32 piano sonatas'.

Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*, likewise, was probably not performed as a complete whole for well over a century. But there could be a compelling logic behind a complete performance, for Bach's purpose in writing pieces in every key was to demonstrate that he had invented a system of tuning keyboards (where the same note on the keyboard has to do duty as both G sharp and A flat, for example) that made it possible to play in every key. A complete performance of the '48' in the temperament which, some maintain, Bach encoded in the flourish he engraved on the title page would be the only logical way to demonstrate his invention. A complete performance in equal temperament (which we now use to tune pianos) would have no such justification. Shostakovich composed in equal temperament as a matter of course.

But the lure of completion – because it's there! – maintains its hold on our imaginations and reminds us that there's more to performance than simply presenting things to enjoy musically. Performance is a spectacle of human endeavour and excellence, and a complete run of Op. 87 makes its effect at every level of musical appreciation.

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