



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

On DSCH. Shostakovich: *Preludes & Fugues*; Stevenson: *Passacaglia on DSCH*. Igor Levit, piano. Sony.

Shostakovich was on the outs with the government in 1948 after Andrei Zhdanov, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, condemned him and other composers for “formalism,” roughly art for art’s sake. Their music didn’t serve socialist goals well enough, and full official approval didn’t come again until 1958. Still, Shostakovich was permitted to go to Leipzig in 1950 to help judge the first International Johann Sebastian Bach competition. The gold medal winner, Tatiana Nikolayeva, impressed him by being ready to play any of the 48 preludes and fugues from Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* at a moment’s notice, and he was inspired to write his own cycle of preludes and fugues. The Baroque forms put limits on Shostakovich’s penchant for anguish, and he turned to gentility and congeniality more often than in many of his pieces. (On the other hand, a sizable minority of the pieces are too similarly sober; about five are—hate to say it—dead weight.)

Nikolayeva’s two Melodiya recordings are hampered by inferior sound; her 1990 Hyperion set drags. Vladimir Ashkenazy’s Decca sonics are far too vague, and the reverberation washes forward from each chord like a small wave. Keith Jarrett speeds and smooths everything out too much. I have only sampled Peter Donohoe, but his tempos seem too cautious. Alexander Melnikov’s set has been my fa-

vorite since I reviewed it in Issue 211. He imposes more personality onto the pieces; some find it over the top but I enjoyed it (the D-Flat Prelude’s drunken waltz is a good example). The sound is pretty good but the piano can get clanky.

Levit has the best piano sound (minus a few pedal thumps) and a more moderate approach than Melnikov, tending to a Jarrett-like smoothness. The E-Flat Minor Prelude, with its slow, spare folk-like melody over tremolos, never catches fire, and the dead-weight fugues stay soporific. The A Minor Fugue is where Shostakovich’s acerbic wit comes out, and Levit is crisp and precise until the last few bars where he pulls off an unexpected acceleration that made me chuckle several times. The strums of the D Major Prelude sound more like a balalaika in his hands than in anyone else’s. In the D-Flat Fugue, a coruscating whirlwind of chromaticism and unstable rhythms, he keeps the lines separate better than anyone; it usually becomes a white-out blizzard of dissonant chords. Levit’s slow-burn approach pays off in the massive final fugue as the hammer blows grow more and more powerful until the final overwhelming octaves.

Scottish composer Ronald Stevenson wrote his *Passacaglia on DSCH* in 1963. It is an 85-minute tribute based on the four-note figure (D, E-flat, C, and B) Shostakovich used to represent his name musically. The wild ride starts with a sonata movement and passes through a waltz, a Baroque suite, Arabesque variations, a symphonic march, a section of drumming palm clusters called “To emergent Africa” on its way to a final set of variations. The penultimate stop, a triple fugue, also uses Bach’s musical signature and, perhaps predictably, the *Dies Irae*. It’s about time the piece gets the sonic richness it deserves, and Levit plays it to the hilt. **Stephen Estep**

Further Listening: Zaderatsky: *24 Preludes & Fugues* (Jascha Nemtsov/Profil); Nikolayeva: *24 Concert Etudes* (Yi-Hsuan Chang/ on YouTube)



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Saint-Saëns: String Quartets. Quatuor Tchalik. Alkonost.

Saint-Saëns’ two published quartets came late in life, the first in his 60s and the second in his 80s, though the second reused material from a quartet he attempted in his late teens. They don’t grab you by the lapels like Beethoven’s quartets, which Saint-Saëns fairly idolized and even made piano transcriptions of; rather, they take a seat on the couch, light a pipe, and have modest, intelligent, and friendly conversations with you. Saint-Saëns always looked to earlier composers for wisdom, and his neo-classicism was the result. The First Quartet harks back to the French *quatuor brillant* style from a century before, where the first violin has clear prominence. His knack for polyphony and textural variety balances that out, though, especially in the development in the sweet, melancholy first movement. The Second opens with a cheerful, Haydnesque movement that has some inventive and fetching little modulations. The counterpoint that returns in a joyous *fugato* in the third movement has some tasty pizzicato punctuation that makes a slapstick reappearance just before the final three chords. The musicians are unashamed of their good ol’ romantic vibrato and play with appealing freshness. The sound is comfortably close and unfussy. **SE**

Further Listening: Hahn: *String Quartets*, *Piano Quintet*, etc. (Quatuor Tchalik/Alkonost)