Michael Kieran Harvey Collection

Shostakovich / Messiaen

preludes sonata

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Youthful works from two of the 20th century's most distinctive compositional voices are juxtaposed on this CD. The eight *Preludes* of Messiaen, and Shostakovich's *24 Preludes* are worlds apart, yet overflowing in imagination and ideas. The latter's rarely heard first *Sonata*, a powerhouse of futurist pianism, still has tremendous impact 80 years after its premiere. An exhilarating snapshot of these iconoclastic young composers at the beginning of their careers.

1 – 24
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
24 Preludes, Op 32 (1932-1933)
28'42"

25 – 32
Oliver Messiaen (1908-1992)
Preludes (1928-1929) 29'50"

33
Dmitri Shostakovich
Piano Sonata No. 1 in C, Op 12 (1926)
11'16"

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The trouble with Dmitri Shostakovich is that his music seems fated to be heard only in the context of his biography. Even during the composer's lifetime it was hard to listen to his work without remembering the circumstances in which it was created. But Shostakovich was an artist first and a Soviet citizen second, so it should be possible to separate the two.

What if we view Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District primarily as a passionate opera about a passionate woman, instead of the piece that got Shostakovich into trouble?

What if we regard the *Fourth Symphony* as a monumental slab of orchestral brilliance rather than the piece he was forced to withdraw in fear of his life?

What if the *Fifth Symphony* were simply the next piece in the canon, as opposed to a work of ironic defiance in the guise of a grovelling apology? Is it possible to listen to the *Eighth String Quartet* and not hear it as an elaborate suicide note?

In other words, can we learn to hear Shostakovich's music only as music, instead of as a series of coded messages? And if finally we succeed in stripping away these biographical details from his work, does Shostakovich emerge as a greater or a lesser composer?

Andrew Ford, 2006

Early music

The music on this CD is very much young person's music – specifically the product of philosophically opposed yet unusually gifted and free-thinking young men. It requires on the one hand the tearaway riskiness and on the other the dreamy ideological curiosity of the young in its interpretation. This apologia is from a middle-aged man who wants to justify his approach to these challenging scores, but who also sees in them many of the ideological issues of the present-day. The struggles of these emerging talents against the twin juggernauts of war and repression remain inspirational. It is humbling to be associated with such a profound, amorphous yet resilient artform.

How far Shostakovich would have upstaged the mid-twentieth century avant-garde had the portent of his *First Sonata* been fulfilled is a matter of complete speculation. Instead, as is evident from his later *Preludes*, his style was forced into a coded diatonicism by the totalitarian communist regime he was forced to work under. Messiaen was no less unfortunate in being encarcerated by a similar totalitarian state – the Nazis – but was able to continue developing the nascent language of his early *Preludes*. It is interesting to note that both Shostakovich's *First Sonata* and Messiaen's *Preludes* were written when the composers were 20.

Michael Kieran Harvey, 2006

32 preludes

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) and **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906-1975) were two of the greatest composers of the twentieth century. Both were remarkable in that they discovered their own unique and distinctive creative voice when they were in their teens and each was inspired by one of the two great 'religions' of the twentieth century, Catholicism and Communism respectively. Messiaen was a devout Catholic and his spirituality is a fundamental element of almost his entire creative output. Shostakovich, three times a recipient of the Order of Lenin, was regarded as a champion of Communism in both the Soviet Union and in the West until his death in 1975. In reality, he only felt safe to criticise the regime from the grave, bitterly repudiating the Soviet system in his posthumously published memoirs Testimony.

Messiaen and Shostakovich each composed their set of preludes for piano towards the beginning of their compositional careers and within just a few years of each other; Messiaen in 1929 and Shostakovich in 1932-33, When placed together they are a study in contrast and a symbol of the extraordinary diversity found in Western Music between the First and Second World Wars. As a guide (and for inspiration), each could look to sets of preludes by composers as diverse as Chopin, Debussy, Busoni, Scriabin and Rachmaninov, not to mention the preludes

from the Well Tempered Clavier by Bach.

Shostakovich once said that his musical aesthetic included 'Bach and Offenbach' and his music speaks often of the extreme polarities of the profound and the comic – of tragedy and satire. He found the piano an ideal instrument with which to explore these extremes; the bass can produce sustained and powerful resonance to give tragic expression and the treble can generate brittle and dry sonorities to evoke the comic and the bizarre.

Shostakovich consistently sought to balance the contrasting elements of lyrical melody and strict counterpoint, a feature of his orchestral music as well as his works for piano, Shostakovich's *Preludes* follow Chopin's tonality plan of basing the series on the coupling of relative major and minor keys, which explore the cycle of fifths from C major to D minor. Each prelude is a concentrated miniature and is influenced by or based on a different form, style or technique; three-part fugue (No 4), moto perpetuo (No 5), polka (No 8), march (No 13) and symphonic adagio (No 14), for example.

Messiaen's set of eight *Preludes* (1929), by contrast, are in general more substantial, and are meditations or evocations of a deeply spiritual nature. In style, the *Preludes* are reminiscent of Debussy, exploring the resonant decay of sound and the vast range of harmonies and dynamic levels available on the modem piano. Shostakovich, conversely, exploits the attack of the piano's timbre and seems to have been influenced more by the dry, percussive piano-style of Bartok, who gave a number of recitals in Russia in 1926.

At the time of writing the *Preludes*, Messiaen's personal style did not yet incorporate the elements of birdsong that were to become such a feature of his later works, nor did he employ the Hindu rhythms that were soon to give his melodies their characteristic freedom. The *Preludes* do however make considerable use of another recognizable element of his personal style, the 'modes of limited transposition' – scales, such as the whole-tone scale, whose inner symmetry means that they can be transposed only a limited number of times before they replicate themselves.

David Gething, 2002

A whimsical, and unapologetically programmatic view of Shostakovitch's **24 preludes op 34**:

1 *Moderato* 1'18" – In C major, this benign-sounding lullaby soon traverses wildly distant harmonies of B and F sharp minor, before a long evaporation over the tonic (masquerading as a dominant pedal point).
2 *Allegretto* 0'49" – A quite loony and grotesque waltz in A minor. It begins conventionally enough but soon explodes into alcoholic rage before being overcome by maudlin embarrassment.
3 *Andante* 2'00" – A bucolic scene in G major, which just prior to lapsing into soporific bliss, is rudely interrupted by military manoeuvres.
4 *Moderato* 1'56" – This three-part E minor fugue wends its way comprehensively through dorian terrain, unable to make up its mind whether it is a slow waltz or a two-step, as it is in five-four. Frustration mounts until, unaccountably, all voices climax in a virtuosic cadence in A flat major, followed by a ruminative coda over the tonic.
5 *Allegro vivace* 0'33" – Scales and the odd arpeggio – a demented right-hand rodent in D major.
6 *Allegretto* 1'04" – An F sharp minor Führer march with fingers very definitely held in a reverse V.
7 *Andante* 1'18" – Dismal vistas of

sodden phrygian puszta, as time ticks relentlessly on in A major.

8 *Allegretto* 0'50" – Stravinsky would have been proud of this F sharp minor polka, which manages to get itself heroically blasting away in C major before ending with a glance at the East, and wry Debussyisms.

9 *Presto* 0'37" – Tarentino directs this Tarantella, pulping fictitious dogs without reserve, as AK47s blast away in a harmony zone suspected of association with E major.

10 *Moderato non troppo* 1'45" – Farmers resignedly survey the C sharp minor barrenness, shrug and start again. Birds trill, scavenging for seeds. Or worms. Anything really.

11 *Allegretto* 0'49" – Another couple of drunks, hiccoughing, wend their way around B major before, naturally, confiding how much they love each other.

12 *Allegro non troppo* 1'05" – Chopin's ghost makes a brief appearance, checking to see notes are in tune, playing bits of melody, beating a hasty retreat – what the hell am I doing in this atheist cycle?

13 *Moderato* 1'06" – Trudging in 2, occasionally forgetting why, in F sharp major … or is that …

14 *Adagio* 2'23" – E FLAT MINOR, waiting in queues, troop movements, denouncements, screams from the gulag, another normal day in the USSR, where the only response is to go...

15 *Allegretto* 0'49" – … gathering nuts in May, then retire after being "burnt by the sun". D flat major.

16 *Andantino* 1'00" – Now starting to weary of these military parodies, we'll start parodying the stars and stripes, while getting as far from B flat minor as possible.

17 *Largo* 1'40" – Perhaps Marlene should go a little easy on the A flat major absinthe, and readjust her very sheer blouse...or simply pass out.

18 *Allegretto* 0'47" – F minor lends itself so well to morning-after stretti, and hideously disgusting libretti.

19 *Andantino* 1'18" – An E flat cantilena in a leaking gondola, why does my pole get stuck, I need to loosen, loosen, LOOSEN it, ah, too soon.

20 *Allegretto furioso* 0'37" – You'd be furious too if you had to play in C minor.

21 *Allegretto poco moderato* 0'34" – A waltz with a B flat major speech impediment. In five-four.

22 *Adagio* 2'05" – At last a duet...but no, another waltz? Some sinister chords completely destroy such nonsense along with what remains of G minor. Pass the Prozac.

23 *Moderato* 1'04" – Idly flying geese survey F major, get caught in some uncomfortable thermals, but eventually swoop down, gracefully fertilizing someone's bald spot.

24 *Allegretto* 1'13" – Some D minor tongue-poking and anti-virtuosic boogie-woogie unsentimentally see us outta here!

Michael Kieran Harvey, 2006

Oliver Messiaen
Preludes

25 *La colombe* 1'35"
26 *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* 5'40"
27 *Le nombre léger* 1'39"
28 *Instants défunts* 3'39"
29 *Les sons impalpables du rêve* 3'31"
30 *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu* 6'10"
31 *Plainte calme* 2'44"
32 *Un reflet dans le vent* 4'58"

Messiaen's eight *Preludes* for piano were completed in his penultimate year of study at the Paris Conservatoire in 1929. The work remains one of his most intriguing early compositions, Messiaen had enrolled there in 1919 and studied with a distinguished array of Conservatoire Professors: Marcel Dupre for organ, and Paul Dukas for composition. His extraordinary distinction as a student was marked by an impressive succession of prizes, including one for composition, the year the *Preludes* were completed.

Perhaps such a prize was in recognition of Messiaen's growing musical personality, and part of the fascination of the *Preludes* lies in their strange combining of early influences with premonitions of his later style. Some of the 'influences' are clear enough: any French composer writing a set of piano preludes inevitably evoked the spirit of Debussy, but Messiaen does so with real homage. His choice of poetic

titles, his refined piano textures, and his evocative, non- functional harmony, are all redolent of Debussy.

And yet, there are other influences: Plainte calme, for example, draws both on Wagner's *Tristan* in its yearning opening, and also Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (Coronation Scene) for its highly coloured juxtaposing of seventh chords, while much of the *Preludes'* more complex harmony – where a simple tonal chord is enriched with crushed dissonances – suggests the equally strong influence of Ravel, particularly in the dense verticals of the *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu.*

If the influences of Wagner, Musorgsky, Debussy and Ravel help us to understand where Messiaen 'was' as a composer in 1929, they do not account for the remarkable, new elements in his early style that make his set of *Preludes* far less a summing up of early musical loves, and far more an anticipation of his fully formed personality.

So many moments have the authority of the mature Messiaen: the iridescent ripples that evoke the beating of wings in *La colombe* (The dove) or refined, sensation in *Les sons impalpables du rêve;* the chant-like melodies at the opening of the *Chant d'extase* or over undulating arpeggios in *Un reflet dans le vent,* and his use of new rhythmic patterns, derived from Greek and Indian sources, as in the tolling bell that opens the *Cloches d'angoisse.*

As a result of his handling of extra-musical association, Messiaen's *Preludes* move away from Debussy's precise, pictorial images, towards more surreal ideas, that evoke a complex, spiritual response. *La Colombe* (The dove), *Chants d'extase dans un paysage triste* (Ecstatic song in a sad landscape) and *Un reflet dans le vent* (Reflection in the wind) are closest to Debussy in intention and sentiment, the remainder are more elusive. *Les sons impalpables du rêve* evokes the 'impalpable sounds' of a dream, Instants défunts the decaying of time, *Plainte calme* a moment of still contemplation, while *Les cloches d'angoisse* (Bells of anxiety and tears of farewell) uses complex carillon patterns to paint a sound-picture of sensuous melancholy. The cryptic title of *Le nombre léger* heads a prelude of delicate arabesque textures, its clarity strongly contrasting with the hectic richness of *Le sons or Les cloches.* Clearly, at the age of 21, Messiaen was determined to explore the full range and possibility of piano sonority.

Julian Philips, 1997

33 Shostakovitch
Piano Sonata No. 1 in C, op 12 11'16"

To those who know Shostakovich through his *Fifth Symphony, First Cello Concerto* or *Second Piano Concerto,* this piece might come as something of a shock. The work is in a markedly 'futurist' style – characterised by a relentless energy deriving its inspiration from sources more industrial than pastoral. (An apt example of this re-examination of music's traditional values is also supplied by one of Shostakovich's op.13 *Aphorisms:* a Nocturne which for nearly half its length is marked *ffff*.)

The *First Sonata* at one stage bore the subtitle 'October', but there is no obvious programmatic content. It is a singularly unrelenting piece, dominated by uncompromising dissonance (including some genuine clusters, with the keyboard's lowest six notes played *fff* simultaneously); there is no real tonal centre, and the harmonic language is dominated by chords more typical of Schoenberg and Webern than of the traditional tonal vocabulary. There are two main points of reference for the listener: the two longer notes played at the very beginning, and a rapid downward scale which first appears as the opening tumult comes to a sudden halt. Both appear in the sonata's few Adagio moments as well as its Allegro sections; the listener might be best advised, however, simply to submit to the sonata's own stream-of-consciousness.

Carl Rosman, 2002

When I heard the wonderful pianist Ayako Uehara perform the breathtakingly difficult Shostakovich *Sonata* during the 2000 Sydney International Piano Competition, I realised why I hadn't heard it live before, and also that I had to perform it. (It also stung me that as so often happens in competitions Ms Uehara's obvious imagination, creativity and daring went unrewarded, and as official ABC Classic FM commentator I said as much at the time).

The important point to remember about this type of work is that the music only makes sense when one is playing in extremis, and makes a nonsense of the careful roboticism trotted out for so much classical music performance. Shostakovitch's message is urgent and raw, overflowing with intelligence and outrage. He himself played the work, which speaks volumes of his own pianistic prowess and recklessness, and it is very hard to imagine him pulling any punches in performance. Indeed, criticism of his playing concerns his "excitability", hardly something one can hold against him given the passionate material being dispatched. The enthusiasm of discovery, of finding a 12-tone system (all notes of the row are used in the first bar, just as in the Boulez 2nd sonata [1948]) to free his imagination stands as contrast with the obvious tonal gloom and irony of his later works. Hints of this ironic gloom and code – a result of charges of "formalism" directed at him and others by the detestable Union of Composers – are just discernibly emerging I think in the preludes.

Michael Kieran Harvey, 2006