SOFIA SACCO **THE PRELUDES & FUGUES** SHOSTAKOVICH

ORC100385

ORCHID CLASSICS

24 PRELUDES & FUGUES, OP. 87

Disc 1: Preludes & Fugues Nos. 1-13
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

1	Prelude No. 1 in C Major	2.57
2	Fugue No. 1 in C Major	3.21
3	Prelude No. 2 in A Minor	0.53
4	Fugue No. 2 in A Minor	1.23
5	Prelude No. 3 in G Major	1.53
6	Fugue No. 3 in G Major	1.50
7	Prelude No. 4 in E Minor	2.55
8	Fugue No. 4 in E Minor	4.54
9	Prelude No. 5 in D Major	1.58
10	Fugue No. 5 in D Major	1.42
11	Prelude No. 6 in B Minor	1.43
12	Fugue No. 6 in B Minor	4.00
13	Prelude No. 7 in A Major	1.22
14	Fugue No. 7 in A Major	2.29
15	Prelude No. 8 in F Sharp Minor	1.16
16	Fugue No. 8 in F Sharp Minor	7.00
17	Prelude No. 9 in E Major	3.00
18	Fugue No. 9 in E Major	1.32
19	Prelude No. 10 in C Sharp Minor	2.08
20	Fugue No. 10 in C Sharp Minor	5.08
21	Prelude No. 11 in B Major	1.24
22	Fugue No. 11 in B Major	2.07
23	Prelude No. 12 in G Sharp Minor	3.47
24	Fugue No. 12 in G Sharp Minor	4.00
25	Prelude No. 13 in F Sharp Major	2.36
26	Fugue No. 13 in F Sharp Major	4.20
	Total time	**71.25**

Disc 2: Preludes & Fugues Nos. 14-24
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

1	Prelude No. 14 in E Flat Minor	4.35
2	Fugue No. 14 in E Flat Minor	2.27
3	Prelude No. 15 in D Flat Major	3.07
4	Fugue No. 15 in D Flat Major	1.48
5	Prelude No. 16 in B Flat Minor	2.41
6	Fugue No. 16 in B Flat Minor	7.16
7	Prelude No. 17 in A Flat Major	1.55
8	Fugue No. 17 in A Flat Major	3.42
9	Prelude No. 18 in F Minor	2.16
10	Fugue No. 18 in F Minor	3.20
11	Prelude No. 19 in E Flat Major	2.03
12	Fugue No. 19 in E Flat Major	2.31
13	Prelude No. 20 in C Minor	3.46
14	Fugue No. 20 in C Minor	4.53
15	Prelude No. 21 in B Flat Major	1.20
16	Fugue No. 21 in B Flat Major	2.58
17	Prelude No. 22 in G Minor	2.02
18	Fugue No. 22 in G Minor	3.46
19	Prelude No. 23 in F Major	2.51
20	Fugue No. 23 in F Major	3.12
21	Prelude No. 24 in D Minor	3.38
22	Fugue No. 24 in D Minor	7.16
	Total time	**73.22**

Sofia Sacco, *piano*

In 1950, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975), at the age of 44, was invited to Leipzig to serve as a juror at a festival marking the bicentenary of J. S. Bach's death. It was here that Shostakovich met the young Russian pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva, who won the competition. Inspired by her insightful interpretation of Bach, he began to compose a series of 24 preludes and fugues for piano in all the major and minor keys, just as Bach had done with the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Despite taking inspiration from Bach's work, the tonal organisation of the cycle is not the one that Bach uses. Bach's progression moves by semitones (from C to C#) whereas Shostakovich, following Chopin's *24 Preludes Op. 28*, chooses a progression by ascending fifths (C followed by G, G followed by D, and so on). The resulting tonal colour is substantially different. With Bach we have a series of abrupt shifts between one prelude and fugue and the next, whereas Shostakovich creates a more nuanced chain of modulations. In reality, Bach only intends to 'demonstrate' the possibility of practising all major and minor tonalities on the tempered keyboard, while Shostakovich's choice indicates the intention of creating a cycle, with a path that returns to its origin at the end, making it whole. The cycle not only demonstrated Shostakovich's brilliant skills in counterpoint but also became a statement of his geniality and his resilience at a time when he was under immense pressure.

The political context surrounding the composition of the Preludes and Fugues is crucial to understanding the depth of the work. The Soviet Union, under Stalin's rule, was an oppressive regime for the Russian *intelligentsia*. Especially the period from 1946 to 1953 (the year of Stalin's death) was an era of terror and censorship among artists. The Soviet government demanded that all artistic works adhere to Socialist Realism, a state-imposed doctrine that required music to be accessible, uplifting, and ideologically sound. In 1948, Shostakovich was one of the prominent composers condemned by the Soviet government's decree of "antipopular formalism". He lost his teaching position and several of his works were banned. It wasn't the first time when he had drawn the ire of the authorities—shortly after the publication of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934) and his *Fourth Symphony* (1936), Shostakovich had been forced to withdraw them and was labeled an "enemy of the people".

It was under this oppressive atmosphere that Shostakovich composed his *Preludes and Fugues*, knowing before even starting that they would very likely be denied the light of day. The first performance of the *Preludes and Fugues* was given by the composer himself in 1951 in front of the Union of Composers. Nikolayeva, who was present, recalled that the work faced strong and widespread opposition. It was described as "ugly" and "distorted" and Shostakovich was found guilty of showing "tendencies of those sins committed in the past years". It was Tatiana Nikolayeva herself who advocated for this work, recognising the brilliance of the cycle. She performed the *Preludes and Fugues* in its entirety in public in 1952, eventually securing its publication and championing it in her recitals.

We have to bear in mind that Shostakovich, despite being an accomplished pianist, barely composed for piano. He was celebrated by the Soviet government for his symphonies, where his artistic desires had to bend to the regime's demands and expectations. Besides the technical desire to sharpen his polyphonic technique on the piano, Shostakovich may have had another deeply personal reason for embarking on the cycle. Lawrence Cosentino notes that the cycle emerged as a "highly improbable, extraordinarily bold, and shockingly profound act of self-healing."[1] Amidst a climate of fear and paranoia, Shostakovich's music became for him a form of self-expression, where he could unleash his artistic genius without the constraints of official ideology. In writing the *Preludes and Fugues*, Shostakovich had no-one to please or to celebrate, but was instead seeking an outlet for his own emotional and psychological survival. It feels, in fact, disarmingly sincere. Combining the highest Baroque form

1 Liner notes of Tatyana Nikolayeva's 1987 recording of Shostakovich's *Preludes and Fugues.*

with the colours of Russian folk songs, Shostakovich achieves an unprecedented variety of images and characters, giving life to one of the most spectacular compositions of the 20th century.

Prelude and Fugue No.1 in C major: The cycle opens with a melancholic pianissimo prelude in C major. Ethereal and pure, it is a contemplative beginning before embarking on a long journey. The fugue, with its heartfelt subject, could be described as a "white fugue", where the composer intentionally avoids the use of black keys.

Prelude and Fugue No.2 in A minor: The reference to Bach's famous prelude and fugue in C minor is obvious. The prelude unfolds in a single, uninterrupted breath of fast notes, winding smoothly like a breeze. The fugue is lively and angular, almost resembling a scherzo in its playful character.

Prelude and Fugue No.3 in G major: Here we encounter a prelude that is almost entirely forte and fortissimo, a striking contrast to the previous two. The resulting image is epic, with a strong, severe bass line set against an almost persistently insistent top voice. The fugue is eccentric and highly virtuosic, demanding technical prowess and flair.

Prelude and Fugue No.4 in E minor: The fourth prelude and fugue marks the first significant milestone in the first half of the work. The prelude is deep and lyrical, its themes intricately interwoven with the fugue. The calm pace of the fugue gradually builds, evolving steadily until it reaches its dramatic climax in the final section.

Prelude and Fugue No.5 in D major: The prelude's pure, delicate, and almost impressionistic sound sets the tone for this short piece. The fugue maintains a similarly lighthearted spirit, incorporating a comic and almost caricatured element with the repetition of four notes.

Prelude and Fugue No.6 in B minor: The prelude's dotted rhythm evokes the style of a Baroque French overture. With its declamatory melodies and romantic character, the prelude concludes in an unexpected pianissimo, paving the way for a sorrowful fugue.

Prelude and Fugue No.7 in A major: This prelude conjures an enchanting, pastoral scene, filled with the serenity of a quiet countryside. The mood is preserved in the fugue, whose luminous subject is a contrapuntal marvel, with the theme consisting solely of the notes of the tonic triad.

Prelude and Fugue No.8 in F sharp minor: The prelude, with its march-like rhythm, is a delicate combination of inner melancholy and subtle irony. It is very short compared to the fugue that follows, probably the most mournful of them all. The subject of the fugue sounds like a painful lament, unresolved until the very last chord. Only then is there a glimmer of hope.

Prelude and Fugue No.9 in E major: After the dark sonorities of No.8, the prelude of No.9 sounds like a peaceful moment of meditation. It unfolds as a dialogue between a deep, resonant bass voice and shimmering bells in the upper register. The fugue, in contrast, takes on an entirely different character—fast and vigorous. It is also the only fugue in the set for two voices.

Prelude and Fugue No.10 in C sharp minor: The prelude has a distinctly improvisational character, with its fast, unpredictable melodic line that twists and turns at every corner. In stark contrast, the fugue presents a solemn theme that evolves into a rich, impressive polyphonic structure.

Prelude and Fugue No.11 in B major: Light and whimsical, the prelude has a playful character that makes it sounds like a short piece for children, and could easily belong to his collection *Dances of the Dolls*. The fugue by contrast is very virtuosic and fast, the theme exuberant and explosive.

Prelude and Fugue No.12 in G sharp minor: Shostakovich composed this dramatic prelude as a *Passacaglia*, a Spanish form where the melody, first introduced alone, is repeated continuously throughout, sometimes serving as a bass line and at other times as a melodic element. The fugue, in contrast, is rhythmically fierce, with a vigorous theme that becomes almost irritating in its relentless persistence.

Prelude and Fugue No.13 in F sharp major: Prelude No.13 marks the start of the second half of the cycle. After the turmoil of the first twelve pieces, a sense of calm is restored. The serene delicacy of the prelude is complemented by the gentle, peaceful mood of the five-voiced fugue that follows.

Prelude and Fugue No.14 in E flat minor: The sense of calm in No.13 is short-lived, quickly swept away by the abrupt, forceful beginning of the E flat minor prelude. The tremolo effects that persist throughout the prelude have a sense of restlessness and inevitability. The solitary voice that rises above the tremolo conveys the feeling of an inescapable fate, ultimately fading into darkness. The following fugue is intimate and beautiful, written in 3/4 time. It has a strong sense of circular motion and detachment, reminiscent of the sound of an old, lonely forgotten music box.

Prelude and Fugue No.15 in D flat major: Arguably one of Shostakovich's most iconic works for piano, prelude No.15 is a vigorous and exuberant masterpiece in the form of a waltz, where a motley array of characters participates in a wild, unpredictable dance. There's something both parodic and devilishly playful about it, giving the piece a captivating charm. The fugue that follows was harshly criticised upon its release, being accused of formalism. The theme is marked by a *marcatissimo* and *fortissimo*, intentionally grating and intrusive. It feels like a crowd of angry peasants shouting at one another—only a genius like Shostakovich could craft something so hideous and irresistible at the same time.

Prelude and Fugue No.16 in B flat minor: The theme of the prelude is solemn and poignant, almost resembling an elegy. It is introduced in its barest form at the start, then varied three times using the Baroque technique of embellishing the melody with increasingly faster notes—first quavers, then triplets, and finally sixteenth notes. The fugue, too, pays homage to the Baroque tradition. Its melodic line is richly ornamented and carries an improvisatory feel, with the theme shifting and unwinding in a timeless, fluid dimension.

Prelude and Fugue No.17 in A flat major: This is the only prelude and fugue in the second half that evokes the same lightness and freshness found in the major pieces from the first half of the cycle. The first two bars of the prelude establish the rhythm for the entire piece, supporting a soft and unassuming melody that first appears in the bass, then moves to the higher register. The fugue maintains the same modest and cheerful character as the prelude, with the subject feeling as though it could almost be whistled.

Prelude and Fugue No.18 in F minor: The delicate and unpretentious melody of the prelude evokes a sense of melancholy and yearning, while the fugue maintains the same simplicity and humility in its theme. Although this prelude and fugue are in a minor key, they don't quite feel that way. There's an absence of darkness or drama; the music unfolds in long, flowing lines that rarely build to any emotional peak. Shostakovich's writing creates a subtle atmosphere that leaves the listener feeling slightly disoriented and lonely.

Prelude and Fugue No.19 in E flat major: Much like the opening of a dramatic play, this prelude stirs a sense of both mystery and apprehension. It introduces two contrasting themes: the bold and commanding first theme, which unfolds with powerful chords in dotted half notes, and the more hesitant, mysterious second theme, which flows with light quarter notes. The fugue sounds like the logical development of these two characters, which this time get blended in

one. The theme is quite decisive, but at the same time gloomy and frightening. It seems to be a premonition of something diabolical that is about to happen.

Prelude and Fugue No.20 in C minor: Prelude No.20 can be seen as the darker, more anguished counterpart to prelude No.9, constructed in a similar way—a conversation between the lower register and the higher line. Like prelude No.9, the bass remains bare but full of emotional depth. The upper line, in contrast, is glacial and suspended, creating a sense that something dreadful yet inexpressible has just occurred. The theme of the fugue echoes the prelude both in mood and melody, with the first four notes being exactly the same.

Prelude and Fugue No.21 in B flat major: The light melody develops in long, sweeping lines with an exciting sense of momentum and propulsion. The left hand provides a steady pulse, while the right hand flies through the higher register with cheeky bursts of energy. The fugue is totally in Shostakovich's style: playful yet vigorous, with quirky accents and a lively energy that builds to an exhilarating climax right at the conclusion.

Prelude and Fugue No.22 in G minor: The prelude's melody is defined by slurred pairs of eighth notes, with the subtle tensions created by these intervals fostering an ongoing sense of unresolvedness. The fugue's theme is calm and lyrical, almost Bach-like in its simplicity. What sets this fugue apart is the placement of its climax, which occurs just before the halfway point, leaving the second half with an underlying sense of suspended tension.

Prelude and Fugue No.23 in F major: The beautiful prelude begins with an enchanting melody that feels almost like the beginning of a fairy-tale. Its pure and extremely long melodic line is characteristic of Shostakovich, unfolding without ever truly resolving, indulging in intriguing harmonies while remaining somewhat indifferent to resolution. The fugue theme feels light and innocent, divided into four distinct, smaller phrases, each marked by gentle pauses that give it an effortless, lyrical quality.

Prelude and Fugue No.24 in D minor: This famous prelude and fugue is the rightful, dramatic conclusion to the cycle, releasing all the tensions that have been building for the previous two and a half hours. The prelude begins with a powerful statement, then shifts to an intimate, aching melody that will become the fugue's main theme. The fugue itself mirrors the structure of fugue No.4, with the theme emerging quietly, pianissimo, in a slow, tortured intertwining of voices. It then accelerates into the second section, where the theme gradually intensifies in a slow and steady crescendo, ultimately culminating in a majestic maestoso climax that unleashes the full force of its inexorable power.

When listening to the entire cycle, it's evident that there's a sense of evolution between the pieces, with both a gradual shift in color and, especially, an emotional development. Unlike *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, which is divided into two books, this cycle feels unified, though it's clear that prelude and fugue No.12 marks a turning point. The first twelve preludes and fugues share a lighter, more carefree spirit. The fugues are shorter, the musical ideas more direct, and the structure of each prelude and fugue is well-defined, often with clear and satisfying climaxes. Something starts shifting with fugue No.10. The subject here is more heartfelt and intimate – qualities shared with the second half of the cycle. It finally feels like a glimpse into a more personal and tortured side of Shostakovich's soul. Prelude and fugue No.12 builds on this with a touching *Passacaglia* that evolves into a "formalist" fugue. After its unsettling conclusion, prelude No.13, psychologically, marks a new beginning. From here, the line between major and minor keys becomes more subtle, and the preludes and fugues feel more cohesive. The major preludes and fugues take on a more melancholic, heartfelt quality, while the minor ones lose their previous dramatic force, instead embracing more moving and anguished themes. It is as though we are finally being granted access to his most intimate side, revealing an emotional depth that had always been there but never fully exposed until now. Prelude and fugue No.24 serves as the ultimate culmination of the cycle. It's a synthesis of the two halves, carrying

the profound anguish and sincerity of the second half, but with a renewed sense of purpose, drive and structural strength that had been lacking earlier. It brings the cycle to a powerful, definitive conclusion, leaving a lasting impression, a rightful ending to this extraordinary work.

Sofia Sacco

Sofia Sacco

Italian pianist Sofia Sacco played extensively throughout Europe and Asia. She appeared as soloist in more than 100 recitals in Italy, Germany, Spain, Belgium, and China with latest appearances at prestigious venues including Teatro la Fenice in Venice, Gohliser Schlösschen in Leipzig, Pushkin House in London, Villa Reale in Monza, Centro Cultural Retiro in Madrid among others. She recently toured China giving recitals in Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Changsha, Changchun, Hangzhou, Shenzhen. She appeared with the Pollini Symphony Orchestra, the Audentia Ensemble, Orchestra delle Tre Venezie and the Timía Chamber Orchestra. Sofia is the recipient of the Francis Simms Prize and first prize winner of the Bach International Music Competition and A. Baldi IPC.

Sofia began playing the piano at the age of 6 in Padua with M. Lazzarin, A. Silva and M. Ferrati, and moved to the UK in 2019 to study at the Royal Academy of Music as a scholarship student with R. Hayroudinoff. After completing her Master of Arts and Professional Diploma, Sofia was appointed Hodgson Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music for two consecutive years, and was awarded the Aud Jebsen Fellowship for 2024/2025. She is generously supported by City Music Foundation and was recently nominated CMF Artist 2024-26. Shostakovich's music is a profound passion and influence for her, and she is committed to play and record all his works for piano - as an Artist in Residence for the Società del Quartetto di Bergamo she will perform his opera omnia in the coming years.

Inquisitive and widely curious, she also graduated in Physics at the University of Padua. Alongside her performing career, Sofia is an enthusiastic teacher, and she currently holds a teaching position at Trinity Music School and Queen's College, London and at the Royal Academy of Music as part of her fellowship.

Recorded at the Menuhin Hall on 14-16 February 2025
Producers: Alexandra de Freitas e Silva, Mark Rogers, Sofia Sacco
Engineer: Mark Rogers
Editor: Sofia Sacco
Photography: Nale Michela

A special thanks to City Music Foundation for their continued support and helping make this project possible.

For more information on Orchid Classics please visit
www.orchidclassics.com
You can also find us on Facebook,
Instagram and our YouTube channel