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The Muriel McBrien Kauffman Master Pianists Series

Alexander Melnikov, piano

Friday, March 4 | 8 pm | The Folly Theater

SCHUBERT
Fantasie in C Major, D. 760 (Op. 15) "Der Wanderer"

BRAHMS
7 Fantasien, Op. 116
- Capriccio in D Minor: Presto energico
- Intermezzo in A Minor: Andante
- Capriccio in G Minor: Allegro passionato
- Intermezzo in E Major: Adagio
- Intermezzo in E Minor: Andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento
- Intermezzo in E Major: Andantino teneramente
- Capriccio in D Minor: Allegro agitato

INTERMISSION

SHOSTAKOVICH
Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87
- No. 1 in C Major
- No. 2 in A Minor
- No. 3 in G Major
- No. 4 in E Minor
- No. 5 in D Major
- No. 6 in B Minor
- No. 7 in A Major
- No. 8 in F-sharp Minor
- No. 9 in E Major
- No. 10 in C-sharp Minor
- No. 11 in B Major
- No. 12 in G-sharp Minor

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Alexander Melnikov’s recital juxtaposes fantasies on the first half with preludes and fugues on the second half. In principle, this combination appears to cross from one side of the aisle to the other, so to speak: proceeding from one of the freest forms of composition (fantasy) to the most rigorous and strictly-ordered (fugue).

More hands stretch across the aisle – or the intermission – than one might initially think. Schubert’s Fantasy has strong links to sonata form, as well as perceptible thematic recurrences among its four connected movements. Brahms was a master of both counterpoint and form. Though the seven pieces that comprise his Op. 116 Fantasien are essentially tripartite miniatures, they are crafted with discipline and imagination.

As for Shostakovich, he may have been honing his contrapuntal skills in the fugues of Op. 87, but his Preludes are another matter. They provided him—as they did Bach and Chopin before him—with a blank canvas. He experimented with texture, form, atmosphere, and harmony, all the while using each Prelude to provide a convincing link to the fugue that ensues.

Two of the compositions on Mr. Melnikov’s recital resonate with this season’s theme of late works. Brahms’s seven Fantasien inaugurated the glorious efflorescence of keyboard music published as Op. 116 through Op. 119. These twenty pieces crowned his contribution to the piano literature, and were Brahms’s last solo pieces. Shostakovich’s “Preludes and Fugues” were also a swan song. Even though he wrote them more than twenty years before he died in 1975, they proved to be his final compositions for solo piano.

**7 Fantasien, Op. 116**  
**Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**

Brahms began his career writing giant, quasi-symphonic works for solo piano. Between 1852 and 1863 he composed three expansive piano sonatas and five substantial sets of variations. In his maturity, however, he favored miniatures, including over 200 songs, a form in which he was to excel. The miniatures were informed by Schubert’s well-known skills as one of music’s greatest song writers. The songs of both Schubert and Brahms, these compact miniatures, were elegant for their expressiveness and among the greatest of their works.
With the exception of the two Rhapsodies of Op. 79, all Brahms's subsequent piano pieces are collections of shorter movements. Most of the individual pieces adhere to some variant of ternary form. Despite that apparent structural simplicity, he was at the absolute height of his powers in this music. His mastery of the craft never lapsed, and he found astounding variety of mood and texture.

The Op. 116 collection marked a clear turn from the virtuosic toward the philosophical. Like Brahms's other late works, these are intensely personal statements that reveal a good deal about who he was as a human being as well as a pianist. The modest scale of each individual movement belies the heightened expressivity that characterizes each one.

Craftsmanship and musical integrity trump flashy technique in all seven of the Op. 116 pieces. While this music is by no means easy, it does not have the surface glitter of the works of Liszt or Chopin, nor the finger-busting technical demands of Brahms's own early sonatas or the ‘Handel' Variations.

What makes this repertoire difficult to perform is a combination of Brahms's unusual physical approach to the keyboard and the emotional content of each piece. Textures tend to be rich and full, often dense, lending an orchestral sonority to the music. It is not orchestral in the way that the Brahms's piano concerti are; rather more in the sense of suggesting different orchestral instruments: a horn solo, a duet for violas, cellos, which are embedded within the keyboard texture. (There are exceptions, of course, such as the Intermezzo in E Major Op. 116, No. 4, which is relatively spare and transparent.)

Throughout all these pieces, Brahms balances pulse with rhythmic complexity. He employs hemiola and other polyrhythms, and switches meter frequently. Syncopation and contrapuntal interweavings are common; sometimes two melodic lines unfold at once. Harmonies are often ambiguous, occasionally with a delayed resolution to a cadence. Collectively, Op. 116 demonstrates Brahms' romantic imagination at its best. Always, he is a master of form and counterpoint, paradoxically freeing himself from both to establish a unique sound world and expressivity within each piece.

Brahms vacillated about the title for Op. 116, eventually settling on Fantasien. In his character pieces, he only employed five titles: Ballade, Capriccio, Romanze, Rhapsodie, and Intermezzo. All seven of the Op. 116 Fantasien are Capriccios and Intermezzi. The Capriccios tend to have faster tempi and a more outgoing character, while the Intermezzi are more meditative, even private.

Though Op. 116 is rarely performed in its entirety, there are indications that Brahms conceived of the set as a suite (although obviously not one with every movement in the same key, as is usually the case in a suite). The tonal progression is carefully planned. Both the opening and closing Capriccios are forceful D minor essays, sturdy bookends to the set. The G Minor Capriccio, Op. 116, No. 3 combines the monumental Brahms of his youthful keyboard works with nobility and drama, inserting a chordal middle section between the nervous broken chords of the outer parts. All three Capriccios share a motivic reliance on descending chains of thirds.

Of the Intermezzi, No. 2 in A Minor unfolds almost like a sarabande, revealing the secrets of its delicate chromaticism only gradually. Nos. 4, 5, and 6 are a trilogy centered on the key of E major, almost as if they formed a giant slow movement in three parts.

The Op. 116, No. 5 Intermezzo begins in E minor and resolves in E major, but its distinction is the odd, inconclusive gesture across bar lines that forms its narrative. A quirky, stealth-like atmosphere dominates, providing the framework of a static rhythmic pattern that eludes harmonic resolution. Brahms presents a series of interrupted thoughts probing the edges of late romantic harmony.

The final cadence in E major provides a transition to the deeply expressive Intermezzo in E Major Op. 116, No. 6. In its opening phrase, it combines a chorale texture with rich chromaticism, The middle section heightens the harmonic ambiguity with a series of descending triads beneath a fluid upper melody; we hardly know toward what tonality Brahms is leading us. The reverent return to E major is at first tentative, but ultimately transcendent.
The set concludes with a whirling D minor *Capriccio* that reminds us what a fine pianist Brahms was. His central section unites contrary motion with cross-rhythms, inner voices, and volatile harmonic shifts that emphasize diminished seventh chords. Brahms' reprise of the opening section modifies his material as if it were a toccata. A virtuoso coda in 3/8 meter enables the pianist to conclude Op. 116 with a brilliant *fortissimo* flourish.

**Preludes & Fugues, Op. 87, Nos. 1-12**

*Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)*

The 48 Preludes and Fugues of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (*WTC*), Books I and II constitute a major pillar of the keyboard literature. Every pianist who achieves a moderately advanced level studies at least a couple of them. Bach's textural variety and imagination in the *Preludes* and his contrapuntal mastery in the *fugues* have inspired and challenged performers and composers for more than 250 years.

While many composers after Bach wrote *preludes* and *fugues*, Shostakovich was the first to embark on a complete cycle of 24, in each of the major and minor keys of the chromatic scale, matching Bach's pattern for his *WTC*. This large undertaking came to fruition during a turbulent period in his career.

**Cultural politics in the Soviet Union**

On February 10, 1948, Josef Stalin's chief lieutenant, Andrei Zhdanov, issued a resolution condemning Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, and other prominent Soviet composers. Their 'crime' was their failure to write music that complied sufficiently with the Soviet Union's definition of socialist realism. Shostakovich had already been the target of Stalin's formal censure in 1936, after a now infamous editorial in *Pravda* lambasted his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. After that early debacle, Shostakovich was ‘rehabilitated,’ and had lived more or less according to Soviet party doctrine for more than a decade, including the crucial years of the Second World War. Consequently, he was deeply wounded by the 1948 resolution. He reacted by withdrawal, declining to release new compositions for several years other than film scores and some Soviet choral music.

Notwithstanding his official disfavor in the wake of the Zhdanov decree, Shostakovich remained an important propaganda figure to the Soviet authorities because of his international celebrity. In 1950, he was asked to head a Soviet delegation to several music festivals in Communist East Germany, including the bicentennial celebrations observing the 200th anniversary of Bach’s death. One of his responsibilities was serving as a juror for the 1st *International Bach Competition in Leipzig*. 
There he heard the Russian pianist Tatiana Nikolaeva play many of Bach’s Preludes and Fugues. She had learned and memorized the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier* and played the works with formidable command and mastery. She won first prize in the competition.

Impressed by her performances, and inspired by Bach’s wondrous music still lingering in his mind’s ear, Shostakovich soon began writing his own *preludes* and *fugues*. He had ambivalent feelings about fugues, that most intellectually rigorous of musical forms. In the 1930s, he wrote them as an exercise to break through his writer’s block. As he told a Soviet journal in 1951, his focus on the fugue was a “technical exercise with the aim of perfecting his mastery in the polyphonic genre (along the lines of the polyphonic studies undertaken by Rimsky-Korsakov or Tchaikovsky in their time).”

The project consumed him. Normally he worked on several compositions simultaneously. Between October 10, 1950 and February 25, 1951, he focused almost exclusively on the Preludes and Fugues, sharing each new pair with Tatiana Nikolaeva on a continuous basis. He organized them not in ascending chromatic order, as Bach had done, but in a sequence of alternating major and minor keys following the circle of fifths, as Chopin had done in his Op. 28 Preludes. (Shostakovich’s 24 Preludes, Op. 34, written in 1932-33, also conformed to this tonal sequence.)

In Soviet Russia, all new compositions had to be submitted for peer review in order to secure permission for public performance and publication. Shostakovich played through the first half of the cycle – the same 12 Preludes and Fugues Mr. Melnikov performs – for the Union of Composers on March 31, 1951. By all accounts his performance was sub-standard, but even so, the reaction was unusually harsh. His colleagues objected that he was not conforming with recent ‘realistic’ works; he had not imbued the Russian contrapuntal style with energy and innovation appropriate to contemporary Communist trends. Nikolaeva and another Russian pianist, Maria Yudina, defended Shostakovich’s new pieces, to no avail.

Despite this dismal inaugural reception, Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues circulated underground in manuscript form. Emil Gilels programmed some of them on his recitals in Finland, Sweden, and Siberia—and ultimately in Moscow. It was Nikolaeva, however, who was finally able to persuade the Soviet authorities that this music was worthy of being performed. Publication of Op. 87 was approved in August 1952. Nikolaeva gave the first public performance of the complete cycle in Leningrad on December 23rd and 28th, 1952.

**About the music**

Shostakovich told his Union of Composers’ colleagues that his Op. 87 was not a cycle, and that pianists could choose any group from them to play independently. Nikolaeva always maintained that the work was a cycle, and continued to perform it as such until her death. Shostakovich did indicate that each Prelude and Fugue was an indissoluble unit, following each Prelude with the marking *attacca* (without pause).

A large architectural logic underlies each half (We are hearing just the first half of Op. 87 on tonight’s program). The Preludes are echoes and pre-echoes of Shostakovich’s instrumental writing in larger works: symphonic movements, string quartets, and concerti. Dance rhythms recur frequently; he opens with a Sarabande in C major and concludes with a sober Passacaglia in G-sharp minor. Along the way we hear a French overture (Prelude No. 6 in B Minor), a minuet in arpeggios (No. 5 in D Major), a gigue (No. 7 in A Major), and a gavotte (No. 11 in B major).

The Fugues have just as much variety. Shostakovich seems at pains to emphasize imagination rather than didactic intent. Among the dozen that we hear, all are three- or four-part fugues except No. 9 in E Major, which is in two voices; this limitation gives it the character of a Bach Invention rather than a fugue.
Different characteristics can be heard in each fugue of the subjects: a quasi-Russian folk song, fanfares of surprising delicacy, syncopations. Occasionally, as in the Prelude and Fugue No. 10 in C-sharp Minor, the subject of the fugue grows out of figuration from the Prelude, now dramatically slowed down. This sophisticated compositional technic, strongly unites the two movements.

Listeners who know Shostakovich’s chamber music and symphonies will recognize many hallmarks of his style, such as spare textures, occasional biting sarcasm, and quirky manipulation of tonality. This extraordinary collection is a vivid reminder that Shostakovich began his career as a performing pianist and retained a high level of virtuosity throughout his life. Yet he never sacrificed musical substance for the sake of bravura. These Preludes and Fugues always have a clearly-defined direction. As often as not, they take us deep into this elusive composer’s soul.

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2015

Found a word or phrase that you are unfamiliar with? Check out our extensive Glossary beginning on page 118 to discover the meaning.