

Understanding Shostakovich's *preludes and fugues*, Op. 87: A Pedagogical Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines Dmitri Shostakovich's *Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues*, Op. 87, from a pedagogical perspective. Although the cycle is closely connected with Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, it also reflects Shostakovich's own historical position, national identity, and personal expression. The article first places Op. 87 within the cultural and political context of Soviet music, especially the tension between public expectation and individual voice. It then discusses Russian and Jewish musical elements in the cycle and considers how these elements shape musical character. Finally, the article examines the relationship between tradition and innovation, showing how Shostakovich combines Baroque contrapuntal models with twentieth-century harmonic, rhythmic, and structural ideas. By connecting historical understanding with practical interpretation, this study argues that Op. 87 can help students develop both analytical awareness and expressive performance skills.

Keywords

Shostakovich; *Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues*; Op. 87; piano pedagogy; Soviet music; national style; Jewish musical elements; counterpoint; Bach; performance interpretation.

1. Introduction

Dmitri Shostakovich was one of the most important Russian composers and pianists of the 20th century. Known for his symphonies and film music, his *Preludes and Fugues*, Op. 87, is considered one of his most significant piano works. This set of 24 paired preludes and fugues in all major and minor keys reflects both the historical context and a personal and stylistic evolution in Shostakovich's personal expression and musical style. This article explores how Op. 87 reflects the tension between public expectations and personal voice, how it blends traditional techniques with modern innovations, and how the set functions as a valuable pedagogical tool. Although Op. 87 has often been discussed in relation to Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Shostakovich's late style, its pedagogical value also deserves attention. For students, the cycle is challenging not only because of its contrapuntal writing, but also because its musical character depends on historical background, national style, and personal expression. This article therefore approaches Op. 87 as both a musical work and a teaching resource. In this way, it helps students and teachers better understand and interpret this cycle.

2. Historical Context

Understanding 20th-century Russia requires a close look at the cultural and political dominance of Joseph Stalin. Stalin's control extended beyond politics into every aspect of Soviet life, including the arts and music. Grigorii Uratadze described Stalin as "a man without a biography," showing the secrecy and mystery around him [1]. Roy and Zhores Medvedev added that "large parts of Stalin's personal library and archives are also missing, either stolen or destroyed after his death in 1953"[2], which makes his place in history even more complex.

During Stalin's rule, several key events transformed the structure of the Soviet government and deeply affected cultural development. By the 1920s, symphonic music played a vital role in Soviet culture. As noted by Khalatova, "The genre of symphony was an important feature of the 1920s. Nicolai Myaskovsky was the most remarkable figure in this period." [3] Also, "the active engagement of musicians themselves in building Soviet musical life" laid the foundation for a state-guided artistic movement [4]. The term Socialist Realism first introduced in a 1932 speech by Gronsky, president of the Writers' Union's Organizational Committee. In 1935, for the first time, "Social Realism" was used by Stalin himself to describe a musical work, marking a significant shift in official cultural policy [5].

This ideological shift had a huge impact on Shostakovich. His early opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, was condemned as "formalist," which hurt his career and damaged his public reputation. "He was removed from his teaching positions, and a number of his works were banned." [6] The situation became more difficult in 1948 when Stalin introduced the "antiformalism" resolution. Composers were expected to write accessible music with patriotic or folk themes, even if it meant sacrificing personal expression. However, after Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet society and the arts finally began to breathe more freely, allowing composers to pursue more individual and expressive work. [7] This new freedom allowed composers like Shostakovich to have their works performed for the public, including the 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87.

3. Overview of Shostakovich

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in 1906 into a family of intellectuals. His mother was a trained pianist who had studied at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. He entered Ignaty Glyasser's private music school in 1915 and later transferred to the Conservatory his mother had attended, where he studied with notable professors such as Maximilian Steinberg and Nikolay Sokolov. His studies gave him a strong background in both traditional and modern composition. In the 1920s, Shostakovich followed the general musical direction in the Soviet Union and composed his First Symphony, which made his name known. However, his work was not limited in symphonic work. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, he began focusing more on piano compositions and participated in piano competitions. During the 1930s and 1940s, his interest gradually shifted toward music that felt more personal and emotionally direct. He composed the Second Piano Sonata in 1943 and the Piano Trio No. 2 in 1944, both both reflecting this shift in focus. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he began working on the 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87. [8]

4. 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87

In 1950, Shostakovich visited Leipzig for the 200th anniversary of J.S. Bach's death. During this journey, Shostakovich "experienced deep artistic inspiration that would soon manifest itself directly in the Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues." [9] Shostakovich also talked about his compositional intention in 1951, saying that "At first I wanted to write a kind of technical exercises [sic] in polyphony. Subsequently, however, I broadened my task and decided to compose on the model of Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier*, a big cycle of pieces in polyphonic forms, with a definite imagery and artistic intent." [10] In this cycle, strong Russian musical styles were present. At the same time, the content was self-conscious and rebellious, which was unusual and risky at that time. Secondly, the whole cycle followed the structure of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, pairing each prelude with a fugue. The preludes could stand alone as complete pieces, while the fugues incorporated sonata form within their polyphonic texture. Shostakovich combined traditional polyphony with new compositional ideas.

From a pedagogical perspective, this work provides rich pedagogical value. Teachers can guide students technical challenges of counterpoint, compare Russian and Baroque styles, and discuss how history influenced the music. The 24 Preludes and Fugues can serve not only as an important part of the modern piano repertoire but also as a important pedagogy tool to develop students musical understanding.

4.1. National Style and Personal Expression

Students often meet challenges when trying to recognize and express stylistic traits that reflect national identity. This difficulty often comes from a limited understanding of how a composer's cultural background influences musical language and expression. Without this broader perspective, students may treat each prelude and fugue as an isolated study rather than understanding Op. 87 as a unified whole.

In Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87, two clear examples of national style can be found: Russian musical traits and Jewish folk elements.

4.1.1. National style

First, the Russian musical style. Several Russian musical characteristics can be found in Tchaikovsky's Folk Song Collections. As Terence R. Kroetsch noted in his thesis, A Baroque Model in the Twentieth Century: The Preludes and Fugues. Opus 87 of Dmitri Shostakovich, these include "quintuple meter, predominantly stepwise motion(melodic perfect fourths when there are leaps), modal scale structures and small melody ranges." [11] Mark Mazullo, in his paper Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues: Fashioning Identities, Representing Relationships, also referred to the "inconspicuous shifts from the major to the relative minor... made possible by a lack of strong cadences, an emphasis on less active scale degrees, and ambiguous melodic contours," a technique characteristic of Russian music. [12] From these papers, we can conclude that Russian musical elements in Op. 87 appear through its characteristic tonality, melodic contour, and limited pitch range. Also, considering the tonal functions, I selected numbers 3 and 6 (both starting on the tonic and ending on the dominant), and number 24 (starting on the dominant and ending on the tonic) as examples.

At the beginning of Prelude No. 3, Shostakovich presents seven measures of unison in Theme 1, followed by a contrasting passage featuring higher octave notes in the upper voice against sustained chords in the alto and bass (Example 1) . As Sofia Moshevich explains, referencing Alexander Dolzhansky, The way the two themes are placed together makes it feel like a conversation or disagreement, similar to the style of old Russian epic folklore, [13] an oral style of narrative singing, often centered around heroic themes. The opening theme of Fugue No. 6 (Example 2), the low-register unison melody, and the Prelude No. 24 all evoke the tragic sound of Russian male choirs. Additionally, the fugue theme of No. 24, which begins with a perfect fourth and has a narrow melodic range, reflects typical traits of Russian folk music (Example 3).

Example 1. Prelude and Fugue No. 3 mm1-15

Example 2. Prelude and Fugue No.6 mm 1-5



Example 3. Prelude and Fugue No.24 mm1-6



4.1.2. Personal Expression

Personal Expression in Shostakovich's Op. 87 has two main meanings. First, during the 1940s–1950s, Shostakovich was expected to compose works that fit Soviet ideals. The Prelude and Fugue, being a complex and highly self-conscious musical form, stood apart from these demands—this is the first interpretation of “personal expression.” Second, Op. 87 incorporates Jewish musical elements, which were seen as undesirable or even “anti-Soviet” at the time.[14] This represents the second meaning of “personal expression.”

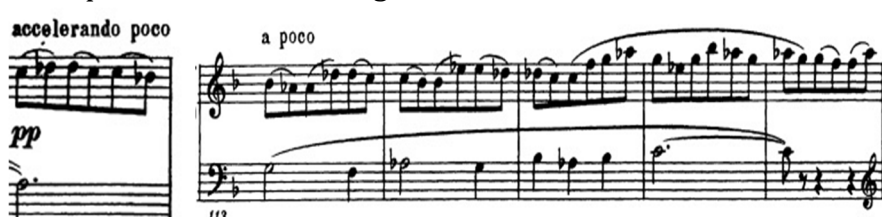
Joachim Braun, in his paper *The Double Meaning of Jewish Elements in Dmitri Shostakovich's Music*, gave the definition of Jewish elements as follows:“(a) subjects defined as Jewish by the composer, or by the author of the text used by the composer (e.g., Op. 133 or Op. 91; see Table I); (b) Jewish folk poetry (e.g., Op. 79); (c) a melos based on the transformation of well-known Jewish secular or liturgical melodies (e.g., Op. 79 and Op. 87); and (d) a musical idiom which shows modal, metro-rhythmical, and structural affiliation to East European Jewish folk music and is commonly accepted as Jewish by Soviet listeners, both professional and nonprofessional (e.g., Op. 67, 77).[15]

In Op. 87, several pieces feature obvious Jewish musical elements. For example, the fugue of No. 8 has a theme that comes from the weekday morning service (Eisenstein). Braun also compared this melody to “Lebele Alikster's chanting” (Ephros), and concluded that they are the same. [16] The Prelude of No. 14 has a right-hand melody and a trilled left hand that together create a recitative-like feeling, as if imitating vocal music. The use of the minor third and flattened fourth gives it a distinctly Jewish musical character(Example 4).[17] A similar effect appears in the Fugue of No. 24, specifically in the second theme(Example 5).

Example 4. Prelude and Fugue No.14 mm1-5



Example 5. Prelude and Fugue No.24 mm112-117



In summary, understanding the national character in Op. 87, whether through Russian-style or Jewish musical traits, helps students feel how cultural background gives the music its own character. They're Shostakovich's musical language that express feeling and individuality. Developing this kind of awareness is an important step in learning Op. 87. Before students can think about texture, structure, or contrapuntal balance, they need to understand the musical character behind the notes. This kind of understanding also helps students see how Shostakovich combines tradition with innovation in his own way.

4.2. Tradition and Innovation

4.2.1. Tradition

Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier was the primary inspiration for Shostakovich's Op. 87, Preludes and Fugues. Before Op. 87, Shostakovich had already written some polyphonic pieces, such as Op. 34, Twenty-Four Preludes. Many traits in the WTC—such as the use of all major and minor keys in a complete tonal cycle—can also be seen in Op. 87. Shostakovich utilized traditional polyphonic compositional procedures that were evident in Bach's WTC, such as subject, answer, and stretto, as seen in Op. 87. The motivic connection between prelude and fugue can also be found in some pieces of Op. 87. For example, in No. 2, the top line of the prelude includes a descending motive: E–D–C–B. The same motive appears in the fugue. In No. 12, the passacaglia-style prelude ends with a contrapuntal statement that becomes the subject of the fugue. Similarly, in the final piece, No. 24, the fugue's theme is came from the prelude. Like Bach, Shostakovich also liked to explore dance styles and other familiar musical forms in his polyphonic music. In Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, some pieces clearly show these styles. For example, No. 8 in E-flat minor sounds like a sarabande, No. 13 in F-sharp major is like a gigue, and No. 17 in A-flat major has the feel of a minuet.[18] Other pieces include different styles too, such as an aria in No. 10 (E minor), a toccata in No. 7 (E-flat major), and a two-part invention in No. 11 (F major). Similarly, in Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues, some pieces also show dance and traditional styles. For example, the fugue in No. 2 has a polka-like (It's a fun and lively couples' dance in 2/4 time that started in Bohemia) dance character,[19] and No. 9 has a strong march style—often called "the marching song." The prelude of No. 12 is written in the style of a passacaglia, a form based on repeated bass patterns.

4.2.2. Innovation

The prelude and fugue form inherited many of Bach's traditional polyphonic compositional techniques, as well as elements of Baroque genres, including dance forms. However, as a 20th-century composer, he also employed various modern approaches to expand and develop the prelude and fugue, including innovations in harmony, rhythm, and structure.

Mazullo mentions that "the fugue suggests the neoclassical influence: its subject is composed of sharply articulated subphrases made up of basic shapes—such building blocks of the classical style as repeated notes, upper neighbors, leaps of fourths and fifths, and a scalar descent from the fourth scale degree to the tonic." [20] In Op.87, almost all of the fugue subjects begin on either the tonic or the dominant note—except for one: Fugue No. 7. Its subject is based entirely on the notes of the tonic triad, making it stand out from the rest (Example 6). Repeated notes, though not harmonic in themselves, often emphasize structural tones such as the tonic or dominant. They also help shape how the harmony feels and flows. Russian musicologist Dolzhansk discussed that in Shostakovich's music, repeated notes have two different rhythmic meanings: choreic primes and yambic primes. In the former, the first pitch is accented and the second non-accented. In the yambic prime, the accent shifts to the second pitch. Shostakovich used these repeated notes to express a main element of the thematic idea,[21] as seen in Fugues No. 5(example 7) and No. 24 (Example 5).

Example 6. Prelude and Fugue No.7 mm1-5



Example 7. Prelude and Fugue No.5 mm1-7



For traditional fugue, or Bach's fugue, "on the model ultimately derived from Bertali, but including by this time frequent use of a countersubject and episodes and eventually incorporating tonal harmony and modulation to related keys." [22] Thus, there is generally no large-scale formal structure in the fugue, such as sonata form. In contrast, Shostakovich combined sonata form in his Preludes and Fugues, a practice that came from Tchaikovsky's First Suite. For the First Suite, "Tchaikovsky conceived the fugue's development section as a sonata development, with its own transformation of the subject." [23] In Shostakovich, for example, in the fugue of No. 24, the first theme covers 28 measures and serves as the exposition. Measures 29–60 form the middle section, functioning as the development, which ends on F major. The remaining statements of the first theme make up the final section and coda. The second theme follows almost the same structure, except that the final part becomes a double-subject area.

Because Op. 87 may seem to be a pure contrapuntal collection, students often treat the pieces simply as counterpoint exercises, without thinking about phrasing or rhythmic structure. However, each prelude and fugue has its own pulse and musical logic, and the phrasing should grow naturally from that rhythm. For example, No. 12 shows the passacaglia character. The repeating bass line gives a steady, walking rhythm, usually felt in three—like 3/4 or 3/2 time. Students should feel the slow, steady pulse under the hands, as if the music keeps walking forward with weight and gravity. The variations above it should sound like natural breathing, not something mechanical. About repeated notes: the challenge is how to keep the sound alive without making it harsh or boring. The key is to use the arm and bigger muscles to control weight instead of only pressing with fingers. The tone should stay round, but each pair of notes needs a little phrasing: one leading, one answering. So it feels alive and expressive. Practicing one short slur many times, listening for how much weight to give and how it changes the sound that helps students find balance and comfort. For the fugues with a sonata-like structure, phrasing is also very important. We can think about how to "develop" a section—not only through dynamics, but through direction and energy. Students should try to build the intensity step by step, aiming for the climax of the piece. These pieces often have orchestral characteristics, with a huge, grand sound. Therefore, when using the pedal, students should not be afraid of it. One of its main purposes is to help increase the overall volume and resonance.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Shostakovich's Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87, should be understood not only as a tribute to Bach's contrapuntal tradition, but also as a deeply personal and historically shaped work. The cycle brings together several layers of meaning: the formal model of the prelude and fugue, Russian and Jewish musical elements, Soviet cultural pressure, and Shostakovich's own modern harmonic and rhythmic language. These elements make Op. 87

more than a technical exercise in counterpoint. They show how Shostakovich used an old genre to create a modern and personal musical statement.

From a pedagogical perspective, this understanding is especially important. Students often approach prelude-and-fugue cycles mainly as exercises in voice leading, subject entries, and contrapuntal balance. Op. 87 certainly requires these skills, but it also asks students to hear character, historical tension, national style, and emotional expression. Teaching this work therefore should combine analysis with imagination: students need to understand how a theme returns, how a texture develops, how rhythm shapes character, and how cultural background influences interpretation. In this way, Op. 87 offers a rich opportunity to train both the mind and the ear, helping students connect technical control with musical meaning.

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