



Wunderkind?

Craftsmanship in Shostakovich's Prelude in A Minor

by Andrew Schartmann

It is all too easy to overlook a composer's childhood works as mere exercises on the way to something more accomplished. In many cases, we are justified in our assumptions concerning such nascent efforts—Mozart's first symphonies are a case in point—but every now and again we encounter a surprising level of artistic refinement in a future master's earliest essays. Such is the case with Dmitri Shostakovich.

Unlike history's most impressive *Wunderkinder*, Shostakovich did not exhibit supreme musical talent early on. His abilities were discovered quite late, when his mother gave him his first piano lesson at the age of eight.¹ From that point on, however, his progress was nothing short of extraordinary. With respect to this progress, much has been written about the composer's prodigious musical memory and natural affinity for the piano. But very little has been said about his first trials in composition. As a step toward filling that void, this essay provides a brief tour of a prelude written by Shostakovich just a few years after his first lesson at the piano: Prelude in A minor (ca. 1919) from *Five Preludes*.²

Upon examining the score, one is struck by its maturity and originality. From the very start, we are able unequivocally to hear the musical "voice" of Shostakovich. This is not the work of a mimicking child; it is the product of a unique and readily identifiable creative talent. That is not to say, of course, that the composer's work is devoid of influence. Surely Shostakovich absorbed the sounds

around him. But even at an early age, he was able to separate himself definitively from his predecessors. And this is perhaps what is most impressive about the prelude at hand.

Shostakovich's distinct character penetrates the music through and through, making it is somewhat difficult to identify specific models on which it might be based. One likely candidate is Tchaikovsky's *Children's Album*, op. 39. We know that the young Mitya had an affinity for these works and performed them often. And it is likely no coincidence that Dmitri's early preludes, including the one in A minor, share certain formal characteristics with a number of Tchaikovsky's vignettes. Both composers employ a ternary structure (ABA'), in which the A section comprises a single eight-measure theme. And both resort to long-standing pedal-tones to extend the return of the A section. But these similarities are only skin deep. Shostakovich's harmonic language, rhythmic disposition, and overall character are wholly different from Tchaikovsky's, and in some respects, different from anything the young composer might have encountered by that point.

A quick glance at the main theme (Ex. 1) reveals many features that would come to shape Shostakovich's distinct style: an affinity for *ostinati*, off-beat accentuation, percussive treatment of the piano, and a sparse texture. The influence of classical style comes forth in the periodic structure of mm. 1–8: even without a clearly defined harmonic progression, Shostakovich implies a half close in m. 4 and a complementary full close in m. 8 by altering just two notes.

Example 1 - Shostakovich, Prelude in A minor, mm. 1–8 (A section)

[A]
Antecedent

Allegro moderato e scherzando

p

sempre staccatissimo

Consequent

off-beat accent

off-beat accent



The B section (Ex. 2) brings a change in texture, with the melody now placed in the upper voice. Shostakovich also reverses the general trajectory of the melody: whereas the melodic line in A descends, that in B ascends to a half close at the end of m. 12. Note also how the off-beat accents from the A section are developed in the more active and chromatic B section. That he draws our attention to a specific detail and then develops it at length demonstrates a keen awareness of the perceptual impact of his musical ideas. We know that this approach to composition (i.e., the notion that a small detail can grow into a pervasive feature) was taught in Russian conservatories, which were highly influenced by the writings of composer/theorist A.B. Marx.³ In addition to defining sonata form as a succession of modules derived from simpler forms, Marx is known for advocating the moment-to-moment influence of specific musical ideas—seeds that a composer nourishes as the music moves forward.⁴ It is thus unsurprising to find a thorough working out of suggestive details in Shostakovich's later music. What is surprising, however, is to find it at such a young age. When Shostakovich composed the Prelude in A minor, he had not yet received conservatory training, thus suggesting that he reached the same conclusion as Marx independently.

This same creative force pervades the return of A (Ex. 3). In the opening theme (Ex. 1), both the antecedent and consequent occupy exactly four measures, thus creating a hypermeter of 4 (2 + 2) + 4 (2 + 2), where each phrase beginning (mm. 1 and 5) acts like a large-scale downbeat. When the consequent phrase returns at mm. 19ff., however, Shostakovich plays a trick on the listener. Instead of allowing the section to run its balanced course in conjunction with the prelude's opening, he introduces a canonic entry at m. 21. This creates a *strong* accent on the *weak* beat of a four-measure hypermeter—a beautiful elevation of the main theme's off-beat accent to the level of the phrase.

Shostakovich gives us one last surprise in the closing section. At m. 25, he sounds the main idea over a tonic pedal, bringing in yet another canonic entry at m. 27. Given the preceding passage, this entry is no longer surprising; we have been conditioned to expect it. But once again Shostakovich thwarts our expectations by preventing the canonic entry from reaching completion, cutting it short at the start of m. 28. More than this, after two short gasps—fragments of the opening theme—we are thrust from the comforting ground of a tonic pedal and bombarded with a descending chromatic bass line (A–G-sharp–G–F-sharp–E), thus recalling the colourful adventures of B as yet another aspect of the earlier passage that infiltrates the return of A.

Two final observations demonstrate how Shostakovich achieved an artistically pleasing choppy surface without producing a disjunct form. As Example 2 shows, the entire B section, though relatively chaotic on the surface, is joined by a gradually descending lower line from C in m. 9 to A in m. 15. This exemplifies the single most important principle of composition, as advocated by the great French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger: *la grande ligne* (the long line). And so despite the manic ongoings of the pianist's fingers, our ears are gently guided by smooth voice leading at a deeper level of structure.

Shostakovich also smoothes over our experience in mm. 15–16, demonstrating that compositional craft is often at odds with schematic accounts of musical form. One of the central tenets of most formal theories is that large sections stand adjacent to one another, except in cases where they overlap by a single chord (typically referred to as elision).⁵ In mm. 15–16, however, it is unclear where the return of A actually begins. If we judge based on tonal and thematic material alone, it begins clearly in m. 15. But that ignores a crucial aspect of our experience: the fact that the main theme's entry is somewhat camouflaged by a continuation of the B section's right hand figuration. For some listeners, the return of A

Example 2 - Shostakovich, Prelude in A minor, mm. 9–16 (B section)



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becomes obvious only at m. 17. The point, of course, is not to choose between these two options, but rather to relish the ambiguity that Shostakovich has built into the music.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, even the smallest

of pieces can reveal the extent to which a composer has honed his craft. It is my hope that these few paragraphs on Shostakovich's Prelude in A inspire a greater appreciation for the richness of his art and the sheer skill behind its creation.

Example 3 - Shostakovich, Prelude in A minor, mm. 15–30 (A'[?] section)

[A'] ?

Allegro moderato e scherzando

large-scale off-beat accent

Closing Section

Cresc.

p

Endnotes:

1. Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9.
2. The genesis of this work is potentially confusing, since the prelude appears under two different guises: *Eight Preludes*, op. 2, and *Five Preludes* (without opus number). To complicate matters further, many recordings conflate these two by referring to the *Five Preludes* as op. 2. In short, at least four of the *Five Preludes* comprise a subset of the *Eight Preludes*, op. 2, the score to which has been lost. In 1921, Shostakovich recycled some of the original *Eight Preludes* for a joint compositional effort with his fellow students Pavel Feldt and Georgi Klements. The result of this collaboration—a set of 18 preludes in total (24 were planned)—survives, and so we have a score for a handful of Shostakovich's op. 2.
3. For more on the influence of A.B. Marx in Russia, see Yuri Kholopov, "Form in Shostakovich's Instrumental Music," in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
4. See Scott Burnham, "Form," in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Andrew Schartmann, "Shostakovich's Sonata Forms and the Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61," *DSCH Journal* 38 (January, 2013), 32–36.
5. One notable exception is Janet Schmalfeldt's theory of becoming, which holds that the same passage of music can take on different functions as the piece unfolds. In short, subsequent music colours our interpretation of previous events. See Janet Schmalfeldt, *In the Process of Becoming: Analytic and Philosophical Perspectives on Form in Early Nineteenth-Century Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

