



Zaderatsky's Forgotten Voice

An Interview with Jascha Nemtsov

by Alan Mercer

At a recent event held at the Paris-based headquarters of the "Association Internationale Dmitri Chostakovitch," musicologist and pianist Jascha Nemtsov spoke about his recent world premiere recording of Vsevolod Zaderatsky's monumental Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues (1937–39), following on from his "Shostakovich Days" Gohrlich premiere performance of the work in 2015. He also played the first eight preludes and fugues of the cycle to the delight of the enthusiastic audience.

The *DSCH Journal* spoke with Nemtsov before the event, and began by asking how he discovered Zaderatsky and his music.

JN: As well as being a pianist, I am also a musicologist, and as such, I was asked by a very good friend, Manfred Sapper, chief editor of the magazine *Osteuropa* in Berlin, to write an article on composers in the Gulag: they were preparing a new edition dedicated to Varlam Shalamov.¹ I think that this was published in 2007.² And it was through my research for this article that I discovered Zaderatsky.

DSCH: Had there been any previous publications concerning Zaderatsky?

JN: Yes, there had, and they had all been written by his son, Vsevolod Vsevolodovich, who is now 81 years old, lives in Moscow, and is still active as a professor at the Conservatory, teaching musical theory. Although he is an influential person in the musical life of the Russian capital now, and still writes a great deal, right up until



Vsevolod Petrovich Zaderatsky was born in the Ukrainian city of Rivne on December 21, 1891. The pianist and composer was arrested several times and spent time in prison and Stalin's infamous Gulag Siberian camps. He died, shortly before Stalin, of a heart attack in Lviv, Ukraine, on February 1, 1953

the end of the Soviet Union he wrote nothing at all about his father, and as far as I know, was not able to promote his father's music very much. I met one of his former students from the Soviet era, who's now in her sixties, and she told me that, although she had studied with Professor Zaderatsky for some considerable time, he never once mentioned the name of his father. But this changed with the

fall of the Soviet Union, and since the beginning of the new millennium he has been very active in promoting his father's works, with several editions published in Moscow and in Lvov, Ukraine. The first substantial articles on Zaderatsky were published in the magazine *Sovetskaya Muzika*, over three issues, with the result that this turned out more like a biography than an article based on musical analysis.





Jascha Nemtsov

DSCH: Is there an official biography of Zaderatsky?

JN: Yes, and again this was written by his son: it was published three years ago. He also published several literary works by his father, who incidentally was also a very gifted writer. There is an edition of his writings in Russian, even though some of his early literary works were destroyed along with his music when he was arrested in the 1920s.

DSCH: You got to know the composer's son well?

JN: To begin with, it was difficult, and I was only able to find a few references about him on the internet, through his articles about his father. I read then that the composer's son was still in Moscow and was teaching at the Conservatory, and so one day, I telephoned and asked if I could speak to Professor Zaderatsky, and to my surprise, I was given his private number. So we talked, and I explained that I needed material to further my studies. He was very pleased and told me that he was happy that this work was being carried out. He sent me a great deal of material, including his article from *Sovietskaya Muzika* as well as several scores. I was truly amazed by the music when I saw it:

all I had known was that this was a composer who had suffered in the Gulag, but when I saw his work itself, I was really surprised. And so the question arose: should I study and play this music myself? And this was how I began work on the cycle of the Twenty-Four Preludes which were written in 1934.

DSCH: Did Zaderatsky's son send you manuscripts?

JN: No, some of Zaderatsky's works had already been published in Moscow and in Lvov.

DSCH: So back to your impression of the pieces—what surprised you most: the complexity, the originality, or the pianism?

JN: For me, it was about individual style. Inevitably, when you hear of a new name that no-one knows of—well, expectations are necessarily not very high! One thing that struck me early on was Zaderatsky's homages to other composers in his music, while at the same time retaining a strong sense of his own personality—especially in the Twenty-Four Preludes mentioned earlier where you can hear homages to Chopin, Schumann, and Rachmaninov. Take, for example, the F-major prelude: the movement is

very close as a structural idea to one of Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*—and in the same key—but at the same time, it is not necessarily the case that he was *influenced* by Schumann.

DSCH: Would you say that the context in which he wrote this work led him to want to pay homage to other composers?

JN: Yes, and in a sense, this aspect is comparable to the cycle of Shostakovich's Twenty-Four Preludes: after a time of experimentation and after consolidation, the composer comes back to the cradle, as it were, and to tonal language in a larger classical tradition. To my mind, this is the reason why Zaderatsky uses homages to several classical composers.

DSCH: Regarding the Prelude and Fugue tradition, you write that Zaderatsky deserves a special place in the musical history of the twentieth century: his cycle did predate those of Shostakovich and Hindemith.

JN: Yes, but I don't think Zaderatsky's adoption of the form was by chance. As a matter of fact, I have been thinking about this lately, in connection to events taking place to celebrate 500 years since the Reformation in Germany. One such event is an exhibition running at the Bach Museum in Eisenach. The exhibition is called "Luther, Bach—and the Jews," and for me this was a very disturbing event. There was a lot of press coverage, including an article in the German newspaper *Die Welt* entitled "Genius with Brown Spots": it was an article about Bach. The article begins by stating that it is now necessary to remove the "brown spots" from our culture and that "Bach is now also done." They are actually trying to be courageous by criticising Bach as an anti-Semite. This is so ridiculous and also quite dangerous. The whole basis of this attitude is the subject of Bach's Passions, which use texts from the holy scriptures. These people apparently would have expected Bach to improve the texts



according to political correctness! It's ridiculous, but I think it is also very typical of today's Germany.

So now I play this cycle by Zaderatsky, which is in a kind of dialogue with Bach, and I ask myself just why he wrote such a work when he was in the Gulag. And then why did Shostakovich write his preludes and fugues at the climax of the Stalin-led anti-Semitic campaign, and indeed why did Victor Ullmann use the name of Bach in one of his last compositions, the *Variations and Fugue on a Hebrew Folk Song*?³ Again, the fugue features in this work, and one of the subjects of the fugue is based on the name of Bach. This piece was written in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. And so all three composers regarded Bach not only as a great composer, but also as a symbol for humanism, and of European culture as the culture of humanism. In the case of Zaderatsky, I think this was the main reason for him to have chosen this form, clearly associated with Bach. When you refer to Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues, you immediately think of Bach. So Zaderatsky wrote his cycle because Bach was for him a symbol of humanism, and I think it is most important to understand this. Of course, a composition such as this is a microcosm, with so many different facets. I believe that, for him, with this music, he was creating his own reality—his own world, not affected by what was happening to him through outside events and circumstances.

DSCH: Did you learn about the conditions in which he lived and worked and where he wrote the Preludes and Fugues?

JN: All that we know about this subject comes not even from a second-hand source, but a third-hand one! This was because initially he spoke only to his wife about his time in the Gulag. Many years after Zaderatsky died, his widow told their son about his father's story; the boy was still a child when he died. The son reports that Zaderatsky had some kind of privileges in the camp



The composer's son, Vsevolod Vsevolodovich Zaderatsky

because he was an excellent teller of stories. So much so that he was held in high esteem, not only by his fellow prisoners, but also by the guards themselves, who would also listen to his storytelling. Zaderatsky was a very well-educated man and possessed the gift of communicating this knowledge in a pleasant, accessible manner. So in this way, he appeared to have been—to an extent—protected, which meant, in particular, that as a privilege he received paper and a pencil, items that were strictly forbidden. These were in fact blank telegraph forms as well as simple small blocks of paper: nothing at all suitable for musical composition. When you see scans of these documents, some are very, very small and contain only two or three bars of music. He was made to promise the guards that he would not write words but only notes—only music.

DSCH: So who actually reconstituted the score? Did Zaderatsky do it himself?

JN: No, it was preserved in the family archive as a bunch of papers, and in the end, it took over ten years, working with computers, to compile and publish the work. This work was carried out in Moscow prior to publication. In fact, there are two different computer settings. And I actually play the

first, unpublished version, as for me it's more pleasant and more appealing to my eyes.

DSCH: You also wrote about the impact of Zaderatsky's music never being performed in his lifetime: after he was released from the Gulag, his music might have been published and played, and his name become better known, but this didn't happen, and he remained almost unknown during his lifetime. What is your understanding of the circumstances that led to this outcome and of the impact on the composer? Was it in any way voluntary—was this for fear of speaking out, do you think?

JN: You can only speculate about the reasons why there was such total neglect of Zaderatsky's work. Yes, he lived in the Soviet Union, and yes, he was in prison, in the Gulag, but he was only there for short periods, and for most of his life, he lived in different provincial cities. It was very unusual for a composer to be completely unable to have his music performed in public. His son thinks that this may have been due to some secret order from the Soviet hierarchy for his works not to be performed in public because of certain links to the Tsar's family.⁴ It is so hard to imagine how a composer could live



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without any possibility of his works being heard by an audience. His son told me that Zaderatsky sometimes played his works privately for his family. This was his public. He once asked his son for his impression of some of the pieces, and his son shrugged and said that he hadn't really understood the piece, or some suchlike remark. As a consequence, the composer became angry—so angry at these remarks. He apparently cried out “*Durak!*” [fool].

DSCH: To come back to the challenge of performing the Preludes and Fugues, what happened next?

JN: When I first got the score, my thought was, “The challenge is too big!”—this was my initial reaction. The cycle is huge cycle and extremely complex; it is really more complex and demanding than Shostakovich. Some of the movements require big hands—which I don't have. And Zaderatsky is fond of using tenths, which is quite a challenge as well. So for a time, I thought perhaps somebody else ought to take on the piece, and left the music to one side for several months. But I still had the music in my head, and so I took out the score once more, played through the First Prelude and Fugue—and again concluded that the piece was very complicated. But in the end I finally decided to learn the whole cycle, which took me two-and-a-half years. Some of the fugues were extremely tricky; not only did I have to learn the notes themselves, and to get them “in my hands” as we say, but I also had to build a conception of the entire piece so that I could live with it, as it were.

DSCH: Can the work be divided into groups of preludes and fugues, rather

like Shostakovich's op. 87, played in two groups of twelve?

JN: No, I don't think so: you can regard the C major as an introduction to the work, and the final prelude and fugue certainly represents the finale, with the bells—this is really conclusive.



Manuscript of two pages from the Preludes and Fugues by Zaderatsky

But you can play all the other pieces in isolation—I've played excerpts several times.

DSCH: If you were to describe the work to someone who had not yet heard it, how would you describe the Zaderatsky Preludes and Fugues in terms of their musicality, language, and tonality?

JN: Well, of course this is tonal music, when you write a cycle in all the keys there must in some way be a connection with the keys themselves [laughs]! But it is a very special tonality—which somehow sits on the border between atonal and tonal music. For example, he took the idea of the G-major prelude from an early piano sonata—I know the sonata well, as I am preparing it for the next recording. The Second Piano Sonata was written

after he was released from prison in 1928: in fact, both the First and Second sonatas are actually the earliest compositions by Zaderatsky to have been preserved, and both of them are atonal. In the Second Sonata, there is a compositional idea, which, when you hear it in the sonata, is atonal—it consists of very fast passages

in the right-hand, with no tonal centre at all. For the Preludes and Fugues, the composer takes this same idea, and by simply changing a number of very small details, it becomes a piece in G major, and the prelude in G is born. This is quite amazing, and throughout Zaderatsky finds completely different solutions to build the work's tonal structures.

There were many wild experiments in music through the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, and again after the War. But already in the 1920s and 30s there were many far-reaching attempts to change the entire structure of

music—everything up to changing the tonal structures, including quarter-tone music and so on. It is much more difficult, however, to find new forms of musical expression inside existing structures, so Zaderatsky—and also Shostakovich—sought to push the boundaries here.

DSCH: How much music was written before Zaderatsky was imprisoned?

JN: Nobody knows, actually. I only know that he wrote an opera called *Nose*—just like Shostakovich! This was destroyed in the 1920s along with a great deal of material that was lost after he was arrested in 1926—he was 35 years old at the time. The secret police obliterated his whole archive—all of his manuscripts perished. In fact, he tried to commit suicide in prison because, for him, this was the



loss of his whole life's work. He tried to commit suicide, but luckily he was rescued. After spending two years in prison, he wrote the two sonatas I mentioned earlier: they are entirely atonal, and his son supposed that this would have been typical of his musical language before he went to prison, like many other Russian avant-garde composers. The sonatas are dated July and August 1928.

DSCH: Do these works also relate to his time in prison—is there anger in there?

JN: It is difficult to say. There is, of course, a great deal of very dark music, but many other Russian composers wrote dark music. It's not that unusual.

DSCH: We were talking about Bach earlier—are there any specific passages in the Preludes and Fugues that include clear references to Bach? Anything that you can single out?

JN: I'm not a Bach specialist or scholar, but in truth, there is nothing specific that I could really point out. There is a strong *sense* of Bach's work here: for example, the B-minor fugue is reminiscent of Bach because of the chromatic motifs in the subject, and there are certain subjects in the fugues that are reminiscent of Bach or of baroque music in general. But Zaderatsky's treatment of the fugue form is quite different in this work: it actually corresponds to a romantic treatment of the fugue, rather like César Franck, and there are octaves and chords in almost every fugue. Shostakovich wrote a more traditional form of fugue.

DSCH: Is there any way of knowing whether Shostakovich and Zaderatsky met?

JN: It is quite possible, because Zaderatsky was a member of the Association of Contemporary Music in Moscow.⁵ Shostakovich lived in Leningrad but often went to Moscow, and it was there that he performed his Twenty-Four Preludes during the same

time when Zaderatsky was living in the city. Zaderatsky was banished soon after this, but it is certainly possible that both composers were present at that performance, and also through their membership of the Association. Zaderatsky was a very good friend of Mosolov, although I don't know how close Shostakovich was to Mosolov. Zaderatsky spent four years in Moscow from the end of 1930 to 1934, when he was banned from Moscow.

It is very probable that Zaderatsky was inspired by the Shostakovich cycle of preludes, because it was regarded as being a very important work at the time.

DSCH: You mentioned your work regarding composers who had been in the Gulag in the camps—you wrote the article for *Osteuropa*. Have you also researched other works that were written in the camps?

JN: Not works written in the camps, no. I did write about a composer who was in the Gulag—Alexander Weprik—but it was not in connection with his Gulag works. A researcher named Inna Klause from Göttingen wrote an excellent dissertation on the subject that was later published. It includes extensive research about all aspects of musical life in the camps.⁶ In this context, we must mention Weinberg, who was also persecuted, as well as Mosolov and Protopopov. The latter is a very interesting composer.

DSCH: And this reminds us of Weinberg's opera *The Passenger*.

JN: Yes, although it's a typical example of the reality of life in the Soviet Union at the time of its composition. The composer writes an opera about Auschwitz but with no Jewish characters: it's what you might call a little strange! In Germany, it's known as the "Holocaust Opera," but it is not about Jews—there is only one Jewish woman who plays a marginal character in the opera—it's about Poles and Germans. Weinberg was not allowed to write an opera about the Jews.

DSCH: Tell us something about your own life. You were born in the Far East of Russia?

JN: Yes, I was born in 1963 in the city of Magadan, which was the administrative centre of a large Gulag region—I don't have any memories of the place because I was one-and-a-half years old when I moved to Leningrad in 1965. But my father told me a lot about his experiences in the Gulag, and of being arrested and subsequently tortured. He was kept for six months in prison before being deported to Siberia. So this was an important topic during my life as a child growing up at this time. In my family, we were all very critical of the Soviet regime and ideology.

DSCH: Was it clear early in your life that you had a musical destination?

JN: No, not at all. Until I was twelve, music was more of a hobby. I was more interested in the humanities, in subjects such as history and philosophy; I was also interested in mathematics. In the Soviet Union at the time, however, Jews were not allowed study the topics they necessarily wanted to study, and especially in such disciplines as history or philosophy, given that this was a part of Soviet ideology and Jews were not trusted to connect with this ideology. My mother prepared me very early for this and encouraged me to study music. My first and only teacher at the Conservatory was Alexander Icharev—he was not a big name, but he was a good teacher. He was well-known in St. Petersburg, but not internationally.

DSCH: So you must have felt the influence of contemporary composers who were working during that time?

JN: Well, no, because my early musical career was rather unusual, and I didn't really participate in musical life in Russia at all. I studied there and lived there, but I didn't have any connections to musical life itself—I was, in fact, isolated. It was only after I moved to Germany that I began to



be part of musical life. By then, I was thirty years old. In Russia, there were several circumstances due to which I was not able to establish myself and to be in contact with noteworthy people. I was a very shy person and stayed on my own. Moving to Germany was like a second birth for me—a new life with new possibilities.

DSCH: You have a strong empathy with, and interest in, Jewish music and Jewish culture.

JN: Jewish culture and the Jewish identity, yes, of course. And for me, Jewish music is part of Jewish identity.

DSCH: Shostakovich's affinity with Jewish culture is well documented although not altogether understood—do we actually know what the origins of this affinity and empathy may have been? What are your thoughts?

JN: I think that for him it was a symbol—the principal topic of Shostakovich's works is the notion of the person and the power. The massive, inhuman power that is set to annihilate the human being. I think the Jews, for him, were a symbol of the suffering and a symbol of this unprotected human being. By the way, Shostakovich was not my favourite composer until I was a bit older—during my

studies. Of course, he was important—but he was not part of my soul, my personality. It was only after many years that I felt differently towards him, probably as part of my own maturing process. Only in the last ten years has he become one of the most important musical figures for me. Apart from the Twenty-Four Preludes, I have performed the Sollertinsky Trio many times and the Quintet, the Preludes and Fugues, the Violin Sonata, and some smaller pieces. I have also played the First Piano Concerto, but not in public.

DSCH: And the *From Jewish Folk Poetry* cycle?

JN: I have only played this for myself—it would be great to perform this in public. It is difficult to find the right opportunity, but I will try to do this.

DSCH: What other aspects of Shostakovich studies are of interest to you?

JN: I know that there is an ambivalent attitude towards Shostakovich's memoirs by Solomon Volkov, but for me this book was like a revelation. I read some of the chapters up to three times, and I genuinely like this book a great deal. We really feel Shostakovich's personality in here—this sarcasm is the sarcasm you can recognise in the

composer's voice, and also in the letters that have been published. This book is very important. I am a scholar myself, but I have to say that I really do not care whether this book is deemed to be authentic or not. For musicians, it can be so extremely helpful to understand Shostakovich's personality, the spirit of his music, and its historical context. In the end, these are the most important things. It is a very impressive book, and one that influenced me very much. It is so important to me.

DSCH: You mentioned a new recording of Zaderatsky music?

JN: It will be a box of five CDs: there will be a new edition of the Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues, and also the cycle of Twenty-Four Preludes. This will be an anthology including three of the piano sonatas and a number of piano cycles and miniatures.

DSCH: Piano cycles?

JN: Yes, there are two large cycles for piano: I actually performed one of them in France. Its title is *Homeland*, and it is available on YouTube. This is extremely interesting music, with many vivid pictures; I would call this “plastic” music. It's rather like a large tableau, very much in the style of programme music.

Notes

1. Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov (Russian: Варлам Тихонович Шаламов; 1907–1982): a Russian writer, journalist, poet, and Gulag survivor, baptised as Varlaam.
2. Jascha Nemtsov, “‘Ich bin schon längst tot’: Komponisten im Gulag: Vsevolod Zaderackij und Aleksandr Veprik” [“I am already dead”: Composers in the Gulag: Vsevolod Zaderatsky and Aleksandr Veprik], *Osteuropa* 57, no. 6 (2001): 315–39.
3. Variations and Fugue from Ullmann's last work, his Seventh Piano Sonata, dated 22 August 1944. The fugue is based on Yehuda Sharret's *Song of Rachel*, a popular Zionist anthem. The work was dedicated to Ullmann's three eldest children: his youngest son, Pavel, had died in the camps at the age of three, and son Max died in Auschwitz at twelve.
4. Speculation is that Zaderatsky was targeted because in 1915 and 1916 he gave music lessons to the son of Czar Nicolas II Tsarevich Alexei, the heir to the throne until the murder of the entire ruling family in 1918.
5. Association for Contemporary Music (ACM) founded in 1923 by Nikolai Roslavets to allow composers to focus on the musical avant-garde. Its members included Mosolov, Popov, Shcherbachov, Myaskovsky, Shebalin, and Shostakovich.
6. Inna Klause, *Der Klang des Gulag: Musik und Musiker in den sowjetischen Zwangsarbeitslagern der 1920er- bis 1950er-Jahre* [The sound of the Gulag: music and musicians in the Soviet forced labour camps of the 1920s to 1950s] (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014).

