



T B S



Sofia Sacco - piano



14 January 2024
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Programme

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750)

English Suite No 6 in D Minor, BWV 811

Prelude; Allemande; Courante; Sarabande; Gavottes 1 & 2; Gigue

Although the dating of the six English Suites has long been a matter for debate, it now seems most probable that they were fairly early works dating from as early as 1715, during Johann Sebastian Bach's employment as Konzertmeister at the court of Duke Wilhelm Ernst, at Weimar. But their uniformity of structure, and planning as a complete group, also suggest the Cöthen years. Why these works for keyboard became known as English Suites is also open to conjecture. Just as the French Suites have little in common with French style, the English Suites are even less English in character. It has been suggested that their greater sobriety and reserve, or Bach's preparation of a copy for a visiting "Englishman of rank" may have been responsible for their designation.

Each of the six suites adopts the traditional layout of Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue, but with an extra dance, or two dances to be played *alternativement*, between the Sarabande and Gigue. In the Sixth Suite it is a pair of Gavottes. Another feature which sets the English Suites apart from their French cousins is the addition of an opening Prelude, and it is these movements that are particularly outstanding, incorporating concerto-like fugal and ritornello elements. In the D minor Suite an introductory section in the Prelude leads to a fugue which is in itself longer than any other Prelude in the set. Although the fugue subject is short and simple, extraordinary intensity is achieved.

The Allemande, has what appear to be awkward melodic intervals, but these are essential to the rather peculiar expressiveness of the piece and, in some ways, are reminiscent of the Prelude. In the Courante a spare French-style melody is accompanied by a walking bass. As expected, the Sarabande is typically stately as it develops from a series of chords into a fuller melody. There follows a less chordal, but more intricate variation, or double. Of the two Gavottes, the first is bright and busy while the second, based on a pedal point, suggests rustic merry-making with an imitation of the musette, a simple bagpipe-like instrument. Massive left-hand trills and a pre-occupation with inversion and imitation make the Gigue a technical tour-de-force, vying only with the Art of Fugue, to bring the series of six suites to a fitting conclusion.

Notes by John Dalton

Dimitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975)

Preludes and Fugues Opus 87 1, 11, 3, 13, 14 & 15

After the Second World War, Dmitri Shostakovich was Russia's most prominent composer. Although out of favour with the Soviet Communist Party, he was still sent abroad as a cultural ambassador. One such trip was to Leipzig in 1950 for a music festival marking the bicentennial of JS Bach's death. Shostakovich was asked to sit on the judging panel for the first International Johann Sebastian Bach Competition. One of the entrants in the competition was the 26-year-old Tatiana Nikolayeva from Moscow, who won the gold medal playing these pieces. →

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Inspired by the competition and impressed by Nikolayeva's playing, Shostakovich returned to Moscow and started composing his own cycle of 24 preludes and fugues. He worked fairly quickly, taking only three days on average to write each piece. As each was completed, he would ask Nikolayeva to come and visit him in his Moscow apartment where he would play her the latest piece. Shostakovich dedicated the work to Nikolayeva, who undertook the public premiere in Leningrad on 23 December 1952.

The 24 Preludes and Fugues are a set of 24 musical pieces for solo piano, one in each of the major and minor keys of the chromatic scale. The cycle was composed in 1950 and 1951 while Shostakovich was in Moscow, and premiered by pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva in Leningrad in December 1952.

Each piece is in two parts—a prelude and fugue—varying in pace, length and complexity.

JS Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier, an earlier set of 48 preludes and fugues, are widely held to be the direct inspiration for Shostakovich's cycle. References to and quotations from Bach's cycle appear throughout the work. For example, Shostakovich begins his C major prelude, the first piece in the cycle, with exactly the same notes that Bach uses in his own C major prelude, BWV 846. On a larger scale, the whole structure, ordered and sequenced as it is with no apparent extra-musical narrative, is largely a response to Bach.

1 C major The prelude's unbroken chords evokes the first Prelude of The Well-Tempered Clavier by Bach. The tone is mostly pianissimo. The parallels with Bach continue in the Fugue; whereas Bach begins with a scaled 4th, Shostakovich has a bare 5th. In contrast to the characteristic harmonic complexity of the prelude, the fugue is written in pandiatonic C major, without a single accidental.

11 B major In the prelude elements of a simple folk melody are subverted into something humorous and unpredictable. The fugue, a virtuosic Hopak folk dance, follows straight on from the prelude in similar mood, this time anticipating the finale of the Tenth Symphony. It modulates freely throughout, abruptly returning to the tonic key at the end.

3 G major With its echoes of Orthodox chant and bell, the prelude is composed of a juxtaposition of a pesante theme and a lighter quicker theme. The following fugue is the only one set in 6/8 time, although this meter is also shared by the F# major prelude.

13 F# major The prelude, mostly in 6/8 time, has a flowing song-like melody underpinned by more regular pulsing chords, which leads to an equally calm fugue, the only one in the set with five voices. The fugue is wide-ranging in its tonality and uses many of the formal techniques of pure fugal writing, such as stretti, augmentation and diminution. Peter Donohoe has called it "unpianistic", but at the same time "one of the most profoundly beautiful piano works of the 20th century".

14 Eb minor Octave tremolos feature prominently in this Adagio. In contrast, the lighter fugue is free-flowing with few dissonances. This pair reverses the usual scheme of short prelude and longer fugue.

15 Db major The prelude is a waltz typical of Shostakovich. The vivace fugue is highly chromatic and verges on atonal. The subject contains 11 of the 12 semitones available, with the twelfth only introduced at the very end of the fugue. Ronald Stevenson has suggested this to be a sardonic commentary on serial music, as by the end of the piece tonic/dominant harmony is finally established.

Sofia Sacco

Italian born pianist Sofia Sacco began playing the piano at a young six, before furthering her skills at Conservatorio Pollini in Padua. Solo recitals at prestigious Italian venues include Sale Apolline of Teatro la Fenice, Cappella dei Mercanti in Turin, Velletri Auditorium, Academic Theater in Castelfranco Veneto, and she appeared as soloists in festivals such as the Monferrato Classic Music Festival, the Beethoven Sonata Piano Festival, and the Royal Academy of Music Summer Festival among others.

Her performance of Beethoven's 4th Piano Concerto with the Pollini Symphony Orchestra was a notable highlight. Sofia is an enthusiastic chamber musician, playing regularly in ensembles. She also had the chance to perform Poulenc's Concerto for two pianos and orchestra in Auditorium Pollini and Metousiosis by Iasonas Maroulis with the contemporary music orchestra Audentia Ensemble. Sofia placed first at various competitions, including the Crescendo International Piano Competition, and Piove di Sacco National Piano Competition, she won the Francis Simms Prize at the Royal Academy of Music.

Sofia is passionate about JS Bach and Shostakovich, of whom she is recording the monumental work Preludes and Fugues Op. 87.

Graduated summa cum laude in 2016, Sofia was awarded the Bettin Scholarship which allowed her to continue pursuing her musical studies with Massimiliano Ferrati. Inquisitive and widely curious, she graduated in Physics at University of Padua before deciding to commit entirely to music.

Sofia is currently based in London where she graduated with Distinction and DipRam Award for outstanding achievements at the Royal Academy of Music as a scholarship student under the mentorship of Professor Rustem Hayroudinoff. Sofia was appointed Hodgson Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music starting from September 2022.

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