

A Listening Guide

This is a whimsical, informal compilation of some interesting details, things to listen for, or maybe just a way to keep your place!

Bach F# Major Prelude: Short, over inside a minute. Simple, gentle, wistful. Like smiling through tears.

Bach F# Major Fugue: Warm, but objective, not overly emotional. The fugue subject divides neatly in 2 parts: the first asks a question, ornately. The second half answers it, simply.

Bach F# Minor Prelude: Quite short! Serious. Busy - lots of notes (The technical term for that is perpetual motion). But those many relentless running sixteenth notes decorate a melodic structure that is quite simple: a 4-note scale, rising or falling.

Shostakovich F# Minor Prelude: Also very short. Impish and mischievous. Very Russian sounding. Could be interpreted as biting, sarcastic, or mocking, even macabre. Nervous. Obsessive. Shostakovich was often described this way himself. This is one of the characters Shostakovich is famous for. The Prelude segues directly (called *attacca*) into its Fugue.

Shostakovich F# Minor Fugue: This fugue is exceptionally long, 6.5 minutes, partly because the fugue subject itself is so lengthy. Three voices ultimately take up the dark, mournful, aching cry, sometimes waiting for one another to finish, sometimes interjecting their desolate swells in stretto (voices interrupting one another). Listen for how the anguish multiplies as the voices rub against each other in sometimes strident harmonies.

Bach F# Minor Fugue: This fugue subject shares similarities with the Shostakovich you just heard. Though more aspirational (the line rises), the two share interesting rhythmic ties and syncopations, rhythmic irregularities that amplify the sense of melancholy and longing.

Bach G Major Prelude: Merry and rollicking, this is a brisk and lively jig - think jig!

Shostakovich G Major Prelude: Open the grand gates of Kiev for this ponderous, thundering stern, massive display of power. You can feel how cold it is there, smell the icy landscape.

Shostakovich G Major Fugue: This piece at first glance is jaunty and jovial, like the Bach G Major Prelude, but the jabbing accents, jaggedness of the leaps, viciousness of the constant staccatos (sharp, short notes) and the omnipresence of the interval of the seventh (a dissonant interval), we are forced to wonder whether this merriment is genuine.

Bach G Major Fugue: this fugue is in the same key as Shostakovich's G Major Fugue, written in the same time signature of 6/8, using the same rhythms and the same prevalence of 7ths... only all of Bach's 7ths resolve properly to the interval we expect to hear, dissolving all the harmonic tension instead of capitalizing on it. Bach's G Major is genteel, elegant, gracious, warm, and generous.

Bach G Minor Prelude: Poignantly mournful in a hypnotic way. This Prelude uses long trills and oscillating figurations in the left hand to captivate the listener. Some very unexpected harmonies provide surprising turns around unexpected corners.

Shostakovich G Minor Prelude: Interestingly, Shostakovich also uses a repeating rhythm in the left hand to create a sense of trance or stasis - in this case not an oscillating chord but a repeated block chord that morphs every few bars into a slightly different, slightly weirder chord. There are next to no expected harmonic changes in this piece. For me the G Minor Bach is emotional. This piece is emotionless. The last three notes, deep in the bass register, foreshadow the most significant interval in the Fugue subject.

Shostakovich G Minor Fugue: A direct segue from the Prelude, as all of the Shostakovich pairs are. This sweetly sad fugue subject has a rhythm that makes it sound like it sways back and forth.

Bach G Minor Fugue: This fugue is one of my favorites. It's jaunty, and dance-like, while maintaining a rather emphatic and assertive attitude. You will really hear the rhythm of the fugue subject pop out if you sing along the words "My socks are dir— —ty... and I don't give a damn!"

Bach Ab Major Prelude: This prelude is Italianate in style and very elegant. Particularly when heard right after the G Minor Fugue, it is noticeably lighter and more graceful in affect.

Bach Ab Major Fugue: The slow tempo of this fugue, combined with the regularity of the rhythm and the simplicity of the melodic material make it seem spiritual to me, sacred, perhaps chanted by monks.

Shostakovich Ab Major Prelude: This prelude has a "Once upon a time..." quality. It is a little bit sing-songy, due to the simple arpeggiated left-hand texture and the swinging predictable quality of the rhythms in the right hand melody. It has an A section, then a contrasting B section that is curious, staccato, questioning, and quirky. The A section then returns, providing closure. Parallel fifths, which were an absolute taboo during the Baroque period, are abundant and highlighted. Shostakovich must be thumbing his nose at the prohibition.

Shostakovich Ab Major Fugue: This fugue is one of the longest of the evening. It is written in an unusual meter, with five beats in a measure. This symmetry is balanced by highly regular 4-bar phrases. Light and charming, this fugue is ornate and complicated. At times playful, at others, pompous.

Bach G# Minor Prelude: This graceful, achingly sad, very touching prelude is dance-like in nature, but has a very slow, refined tempo. It abounds with notes that are intentionally dissonant, that resolve with great relief into more consonant tones and harmonies.

Bach G# Minor Fugue: I have found a character of this fugue difficult to pin down. Sometimes I think it is jaunty and bouncy, and other times I hear more yearning.

Intermission

Bach A Major Prelude: Tender and sweet, with a walking chromatic bass line. Melodically expressive, but gently lilting. Quite brief.

Bach A Major Fugue: This fugue subject is startling! It starts with an abrupt single note, followed by a conspicuous silence - the subject's head effectively separated from its tail. The mood is jaunty and jovial with lots of rhythmic games.

Shostakovich Prelude In G# Minor: This prelude is a passacaglia, a slowish, somber piece that begins with a lone bass line which then repeats over and over throughout the Prelude, with different variations unfolding on top of it.

Shostakovich G# Minor Fugue: This fugue, like Bach's A Major, begins with a fragment followed by a conspicuous rest. Unlike the Bach, which only has one pregnant pause in the subject, this fugue has two. It is in the unsettled and asymmetrical meter of 5/4. The subject is angular and disjunct and the mood is insistent and aggressive. This fugue is quite long, lasting

Bach A Minor Prelude: Brief, but serious, ornate, and with a persistent propulsive dance rhythm.

Bach A Minor Fugue: one of the longest, most substantial and weightiest fugues in Book I. The subject is long by Bach's standards (but not by Shostakovich's.) Four voices create a complicated layered texture.

Bach B Flat Major Prelude: almost like an improvisation. Very ornate and decorative, a perpetual motion piece with highly rhetorical, declamatory passages.

Shostakovich B Flat Major Prelude: also defined by perpetual motion. The left hand pulses gently back and forth between chords while the right hand skates all over the keyboard in quickly moving cascade]into sixteenth notes. Light and playful.

Shostakovich B Flat Major Fugue: A whirling waltz that seems joyful at first glance, but had moments of discord that belie a darker nature, like a carnival ride gone wrong.

Bach B Flat Major Fugue: Light, graceful, and dancing - the first measure of the subject gets decorated in the second measure, and further ornate in the 3rd and 4th.

Bach Prelude In B Flat Minor: mournful, deeply melancholy. The melody stretches higher and higher over a fixed bass note, like a rubber band whose one end has been pegged while the other end stretches away.

Bach B Flat Minor Fugue: carrying on in a similar emotionally anguished vein as the Prelude displayed, this Fugue subject begins with a painful sigh, two half notes, falling. After a beat to catch its breath the subject soars up a minor ninth and weeps 4 notes of a downward scale.

Bach B Major Prelude: Patient, generous, and warm, this prelude is built using scales long and short. It seems young at heart, uncomplicated.

Bach B Major Fugue: This fugue subject has lots of rhythmic diversity. It has a beginning of 4 notes that rise, a decorated middle, and ends with a trill. Graceful, bouncing, but also lyrical.

Shostakovich B Major Prelude: one of the few Shostakovich pieces that IS as merry and light as it sounds and doesn't have a darker undertone. Quirky and whimsical, humorous and spirited.

Shostakovich B Major Fugue: This fugue subject has also a merry rollicking temperament, marked by lots of syncopations and unexpected offbeats.

Bach B Minor Prelude: one of the very few times that Bach indicates a tempo! This prelude is marked Andante, which means “walking tempo.” It is Corellian in style and has a walking bass line, a binary two-part form, and a simple nature, not overtly emotional, that belies the intense Fugue to come.

Bach B Minor Fugue: this fugue beautifully fits its final position in Book I. At the end of an entire book exploring chromaticism, Bach writes a fugue whose subject contains all of the notes in the chromatic scale, expressed in painful, sobbing half steps the great anguish and suffering he associated with the key of B Minor. He almost certainly associated this suffering with that of Christ on the cross. At the end of the Prelude appear the three letters S.D.G., which stand for “Soli Deo Gloria,” to the glory of God alone.