EVGENY KISSIN
piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)
Partita No. 2 in C minor BWV 826
Sinfonia
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Rondeau
Capriccio
(approx. 19 minutes)

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810–1849)
Nocturne in C# minor Op. 27 No. 1
(approx. 4 minutes)

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810–1849)
Nocturne in A-flat major Op. 32 No. 2
(approx. 6 minutes)

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810–1849)
Scherzo No. 4 in E major Op. 54
(approx. 11 minutes)

- Intermission -

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)
Piano Sonata No. 2 in B minor Op. 61
I. Allegretto
II. Largo
III. Moderato (con moto) — Allegretto con moto — Adagio — Moderato
(approx. 26 minutes)

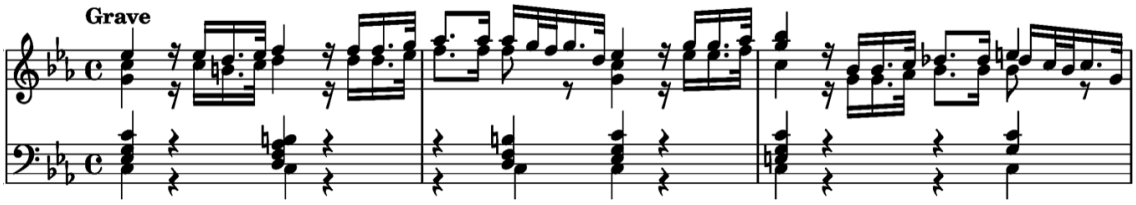
DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)
Preludes and Fugues Op. 87
No. 15 in D-flat major
(approx. 5 minutes)

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)
Preludes and Fugues Op. 87
No. 24 in D minor
(approx. 12 minutes)

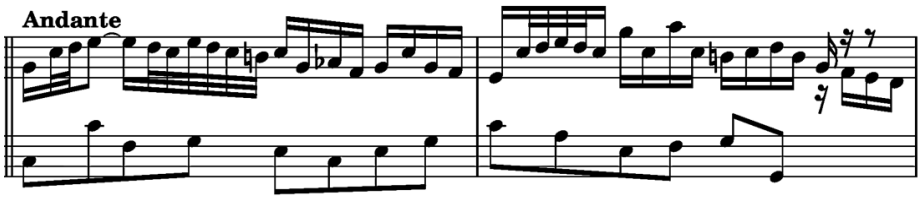
Johann Sebastian Bach
Partita No. 2 in C minor BWV 826

From 1726 to 1731 Bach published one *partita* a year as the first part of a collection that he called *Clavierübung*, i.e., "Keyboard Exercise." And a good deal of exercise they did indeed provide to the middle-class amateur musicians who were their target audience. Remarkable for the extreme technical demands they place on the performer, these partitas also differ from Bach's previous "English" and "French" suites in the choice of movements they add to the traditional dance sequence of allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue.

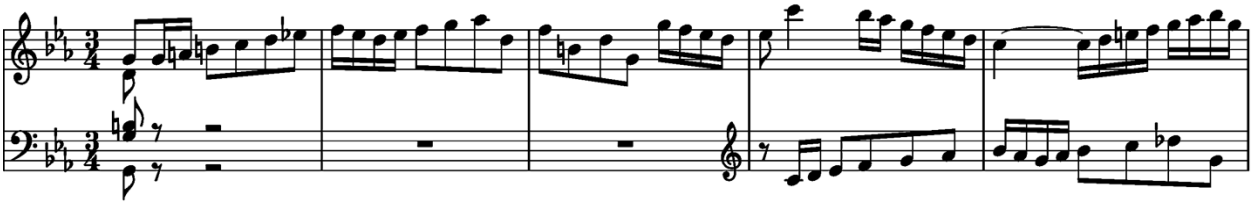
The second of the set, the ***Partita in C minor,*** is among the most eccentric in this regard. It begins in a tone of high seriousness with a ***Sinfonia*** in three sections, moving from an austere and pungently dissonant "French-overture" introduction with a pervasive dotted rhythm and long-held bass pedal tones



to a more congenial *Andante* section featuring a naively childlike melody ambling wide-eyed over a "walking" bass line, an Andante at once innocent and arch, in the mouth of which butter would not melt,

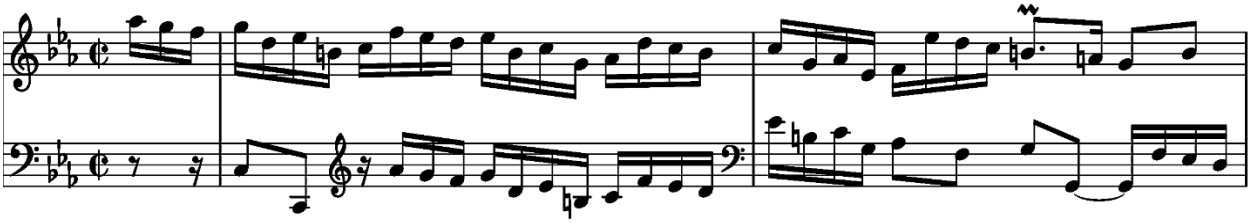


before bolting out the gate with a restlessly animated fugue in two parts framed entirely in alternating passages of 8ths and 16ths between the hands.



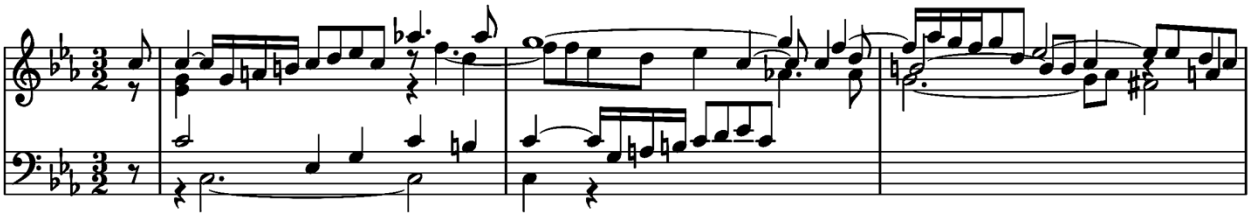
This is an astonishing progression of moods that defines the ambitious scope of this suite.

The moderately paced *Allemande* that follows is much less dramatic.



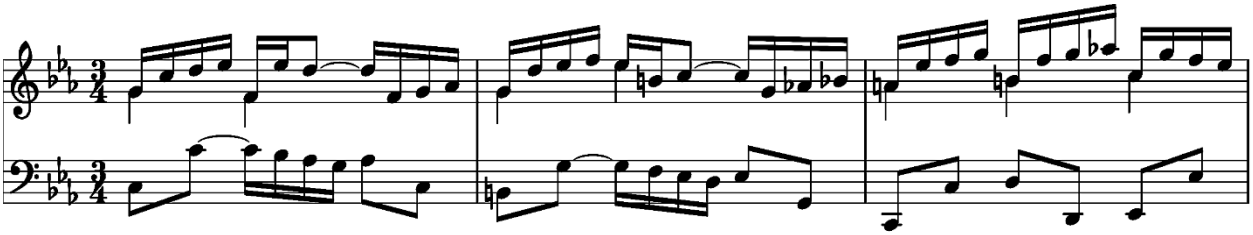
More akin to a civilized conversation between two (occasionally three) musical voices, it largely proceeds in an even flow of 16th notes, making frequent use of its initial four-note motive by way of sequential repetition.

The *Courante* is much more emphatic and assertive



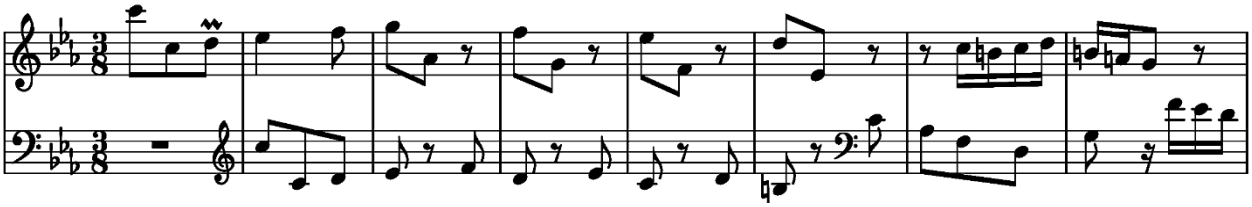
but at the same time much harder to pin down rhythmically due to the seemingly erratic interplay of an intricate web of chattering melodic voices that keep you guessing which one your ear should be following.

The *Sarabande,* while simpler in texture, is similarly slippery, with its normal emphasis on the second beat of the bar being effectively masked by a continuous, soothing flow of 16th notes

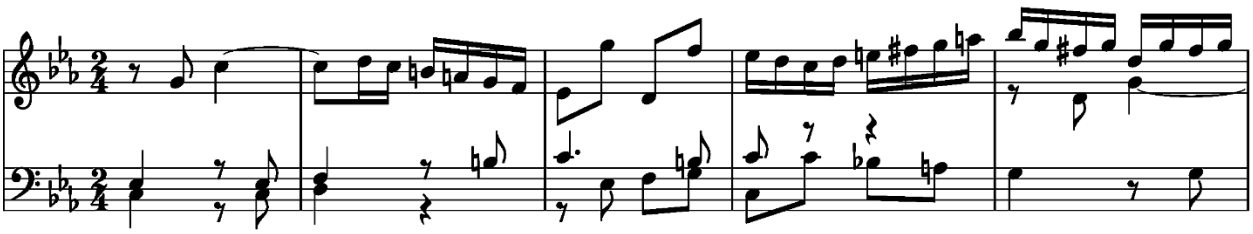


that nonetheless often create many piquant harmonic surprises in the melodic line.

The *Rondeau* is structured in a succession of *couplets*, like the verses of a strophic poem. The first of these, with its characteristic bold leaping intervals, is used as the recurring refrain.



To conclude, Bach gives us a toe-tapping *Capriccio,* so named, perhaps, for its whimsical emphasis on large leaps, although much of the texture is fugal in character.

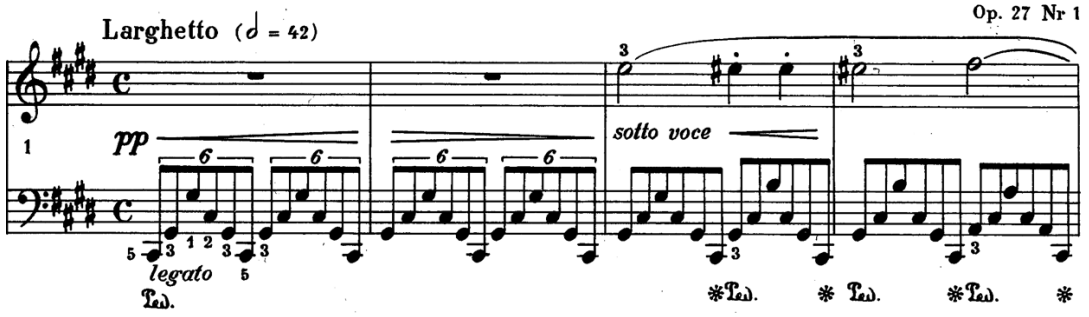


Like the traditional gigue that it replaces in this position, it is laid out in two clear halves, with its principal motives inverted in the second half.

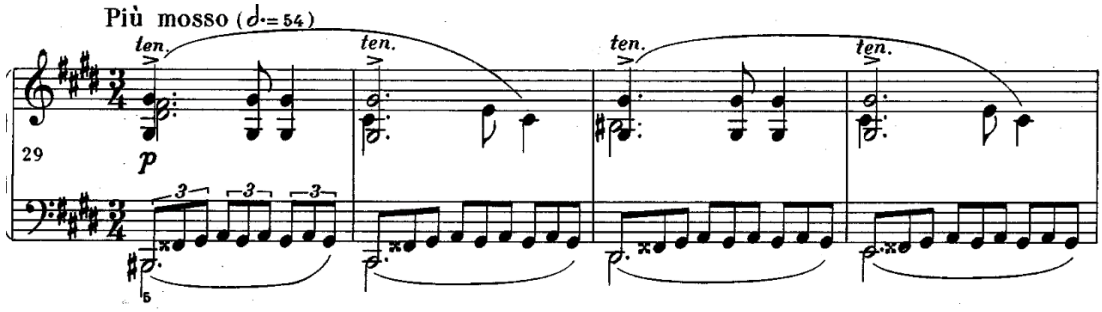
Frédéric Chopin
Nocturne in C# minor Op. 27 No. 1
Nocturne in A-flat major Op. 32 No. 2

Chopin's nocturnes owe much to the keyboard textures invented by Irish pianist John Field (1782–1837). Under Field, and then Chopin, the nocturne evoked the timeless stillness of nighttime by means of its trademark pairing of a serene, singable melody in the right hand floating atop an accompaniment constantly murmuring with the gentle ripples of widely spaced arpeggiated harmonies in the left. These harmonies, when pedaled, produce a hazy mist of overtones vividly suggestive of the night-owl's half-drowsy awareness of his surroundings.

Chopin's *Nocturne in C# minor,* Op. 27, No. 1, published in 1837, is a classic example of the genre. As it opens, the acoustic resonance created by the open 4ths and 5ths of its left-hand accompaniment contrasts markedly with the narrow range and semitone intervals of its plangent melody, a melody that catches our attention immediately when it moves from minor to major in its very first two notes.



But trouble lurks in the darkness of night when, in the middle section, the roles are reversed, and the placid left-hand accompaniment begins to erupt with rumblings of discontent while the right hand struggles to hold its ground on a succession of pedal tones in the treble.

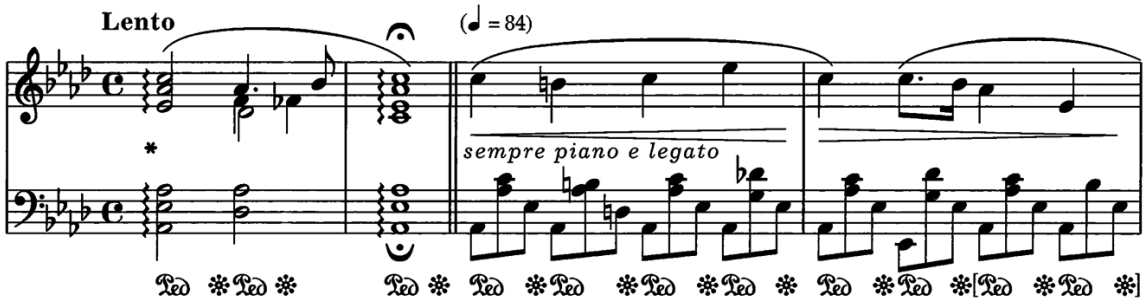


Peace is restored, however, in the final section with the return of the opening material, and in the closing bars the ambiguity between minor and major is resolved convincingly in favour of the latter.

* * *

A similar narrative arc plays out in the *Nocturne in A-flat major,* Op. 32, No. 2, but it is more gently nuanced.

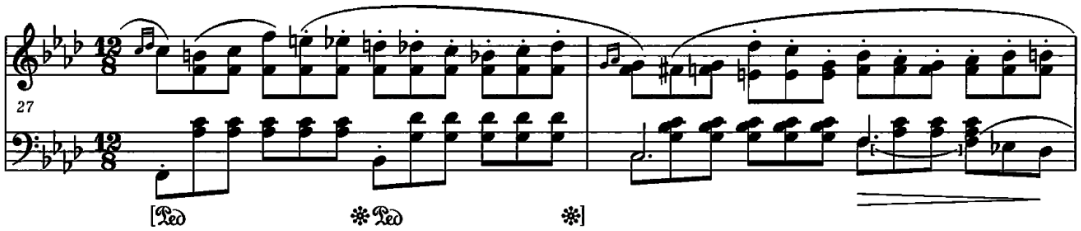
It opens with a harp-like introduction that bookends the piece at the beginning and end, as if reminding us that what unfolds within is a dreamlike tale.



The main melody is an endearing waltz-like tune, made ever more affectionate as it goes along by the application of elegantly spun-out melodic embroidery *à la Bellini.*

The refinement and dancelike character of this theme prompted Russian composer Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936) to give it a major role in his orchestrations of Chopin's music for the ballet *Les Sylphides*, premiered in Paris in 1909 by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

The innocence and grace of the opening, however, turns anxious in the middle section in F minor, when the lilt of the accompaniment's triplets take over the entire texture and the diatonic melody-making of the previous section turns chromatic in a breathy fit of fretting.



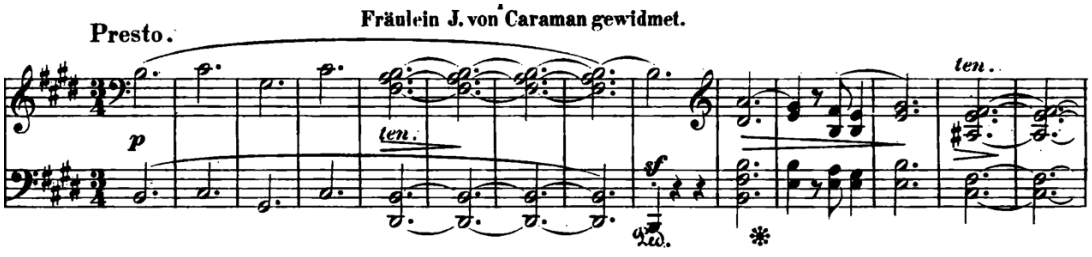
The return of the opening then follows as a kind of "triumph" over this hand-wringing mood, with a re-affirmation in the repeat of the opening harp-strummed chords that it all might well have been a dream.

Frédéric Chopin
Scherzo No. 4 in E major Op. 54

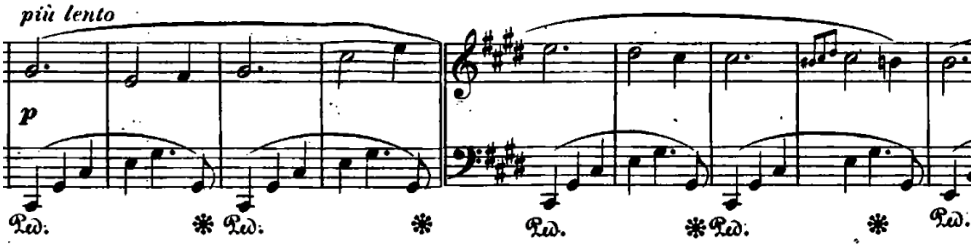
The scherzos of Chopin are a long way from the "joke" movements that substituted for the minuet in Beethoven's sonatas and symphonies. While Beethoven replaced courtly decorum with an idiosyncratic display of personal whimsy and good-natured ribbing, Chopin kicked down the door to announce a new level of emotional intensity, a new, wider playing field for what was possible on the keyboard at the extremes of musical expression.

Belying his popular image as the composer of exotic, delicately perfumed salon pieces, Chopin's scherzos are big-boned works, muscular essays in pure pianistic power that project real anger, defiance and even ferocity, with only the last of them, the *Scherzo No. 4 in E major* (1842), displaying any of the mischievous but innocent scamper that would define the genre in the hands of Mendelssohn.

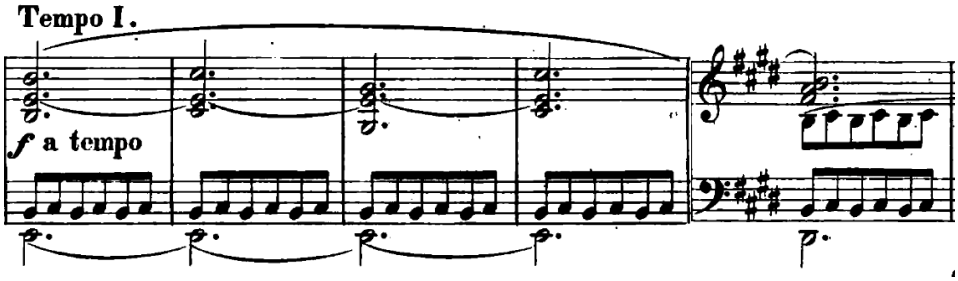
The E-major Scherzo stands out for its unusually carefree mood and its psychological buoyancy. This is a piece that definitely knows how to stop and smell the roses. Beginning with a simple five-note motive, uttered at the outset one note to the bar,



it flits this way and that, indulging its every capricious whim, until settling into a slower tempo to ruminate soulfully and introspectively on the melancholy side of its Slavic soul with a weepy melody uniquely appropriate for crying into one's beer.



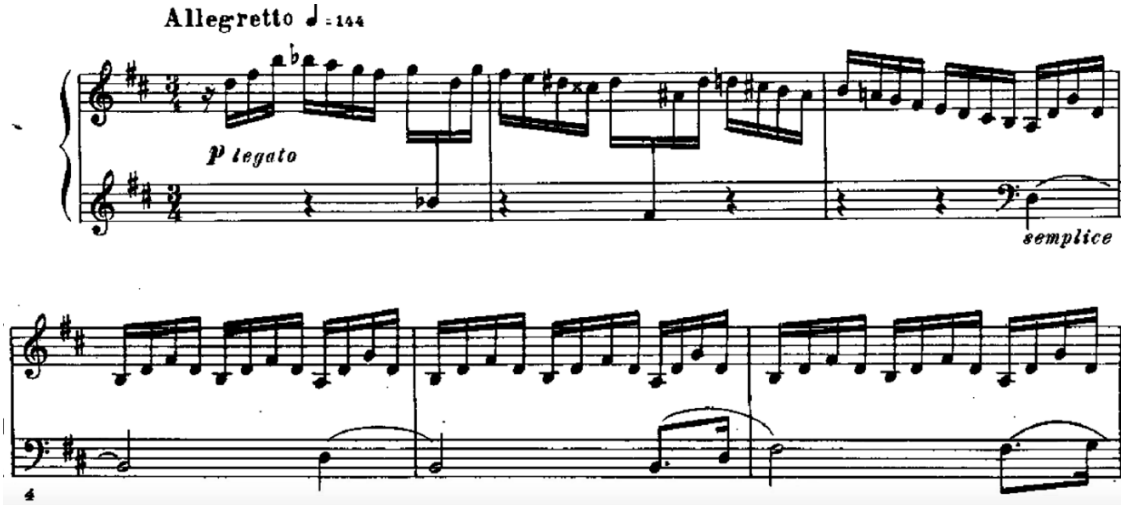
Unable to stay down for long, though, its opening sprightliness returns, with an enriched sonority of trills bubbling up from the middle of the texture,



before heading for the finish line in a flurry of octaves and a dazzling multi-octave scale to the high register.

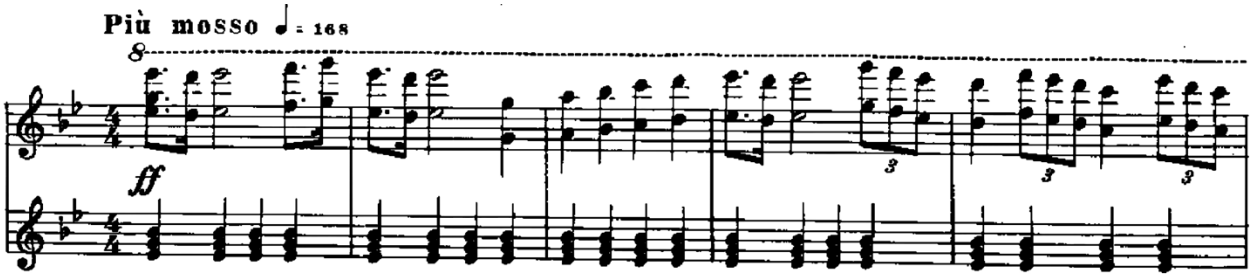
Dmitri Shostakovich
Piano Sonata No. 2 in B minor Op. 61

Shostakovich's *Second Piano Sonata* (1943) features a first movement in rough sonata form, a funereal slow movement and a theme-and-variations finale. The sonata opens with a restless scurrying of right-hand 16th notes in B minor, against which an ominous "falling 3rd" motive plays out in the left hand.



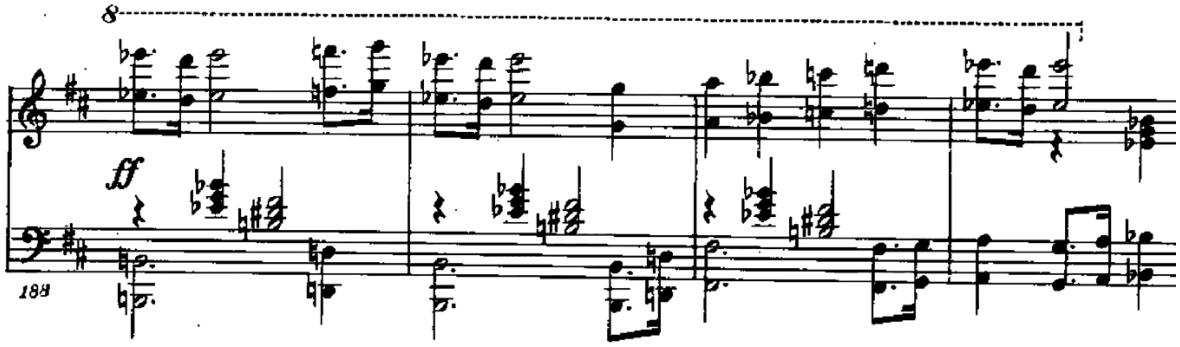
Despite the concentrated energy of its dotted rhythms, the mood of this opening is unsettled and unsettling, as if some kind of desperate search were underway.

The "mad march" in E-flat major that arrives as the sonata's second theme, with its clownish flute-and-drum scoring, is just the opposite, registering as somewhere between buoyantly exhilarating and worryingly manic.



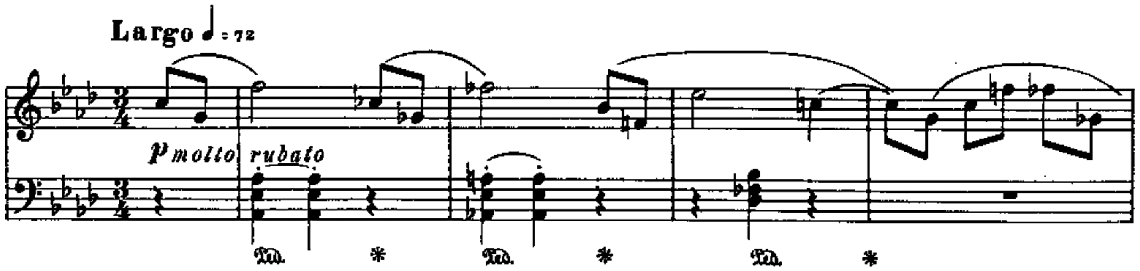
The "robotically" static harmony, hysterical pitch range and extreme dynamics of this theme give it the quality of a "forced grin" that borders on the grotesque.

After a development section fully engaged in the traditional techniques of thematic fragmentation and accelerating juxtaposition of motives, this grinding incongruity of affect reaches its climax in the recapitulation, in which the two themes, in B minor and E-flat major, are superimposed one on top of the other.



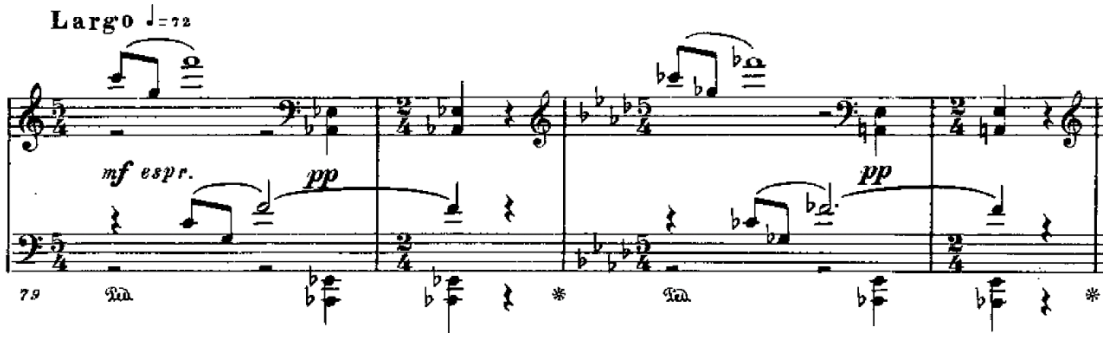
And the "salty sweet" tonal aesthetic of this movement is emphatically confirmed when, at the very end, a seemingly "triumphant" B-*major* chord in the upper register has its foot stomped on by a shockingly abrupt B-*minor* final chord that contradicts it down below.

The second movement ***Largo*** is a whispered funeral march masquerading as a slow — *very* slow — waltz.



With its glacial pace, hushed dynamics and dissonant texture, this will be the movement of the sonata that listeners will find most “alien.” Its melodic lines, many of which begin with a falling 4th, are made up largely of a series of medium- to large-sized leaps, making them less-than-suitable for singing in the shower.

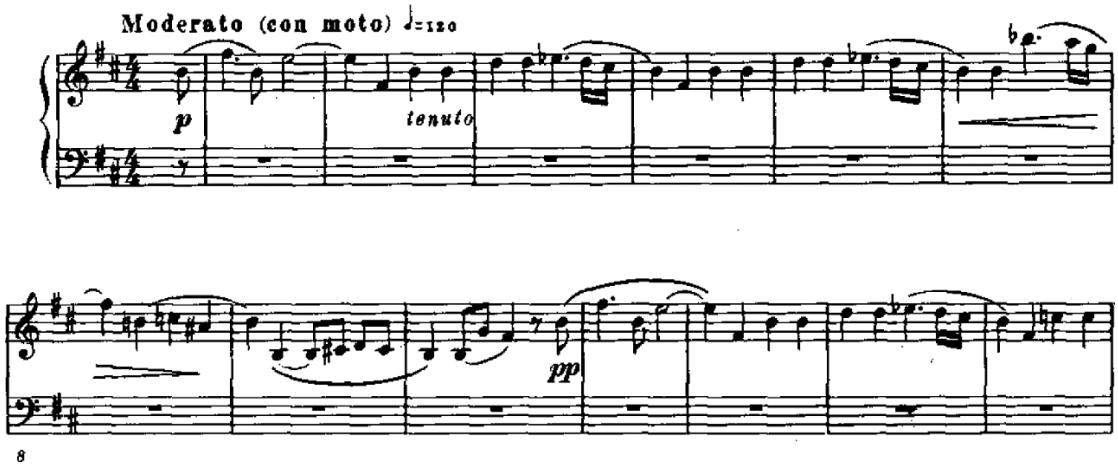
But on the other hand, the texture is spare, allowing one to follow the bleak path of the movement’s many contrapuntal lines, prominent among which is the canon at the reprise of the opening material.



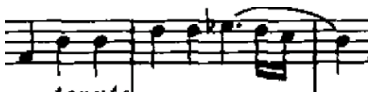
Shostakovich’s theme-and-variations finale is long, as long as the sonata’s two previous movements combined, and its opening theme is full of the kind of eccentricities for which the composer is famous.

For one thing, its unharmonized monophonic melody is a full 30 bars long. And while pulsing onward in a regular, almost toe-tapping rhythm, it wanders in and out of the notes of its B-minor tonality like a tone-deaf drunken sailor humming to himself while stumbling home from the bar.

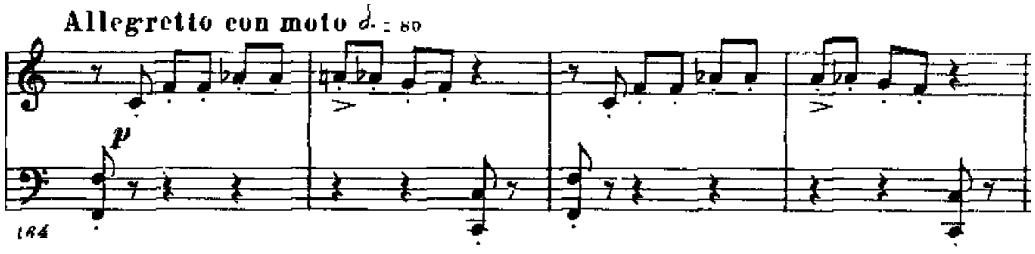
Here is just the first part of that theme:



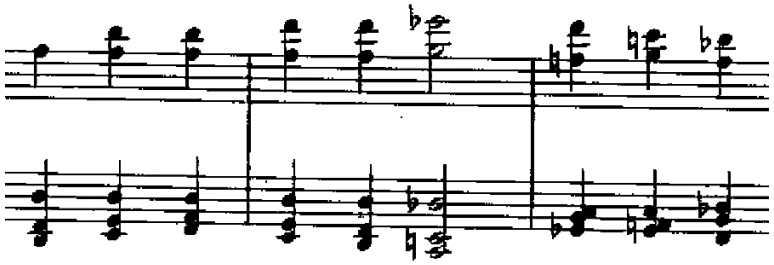
And yet, eccentric as it is, this movement is perhaps the easiest one to follow, due to the prominence given throughout to this memorable repeated-note snippet from the main theme:



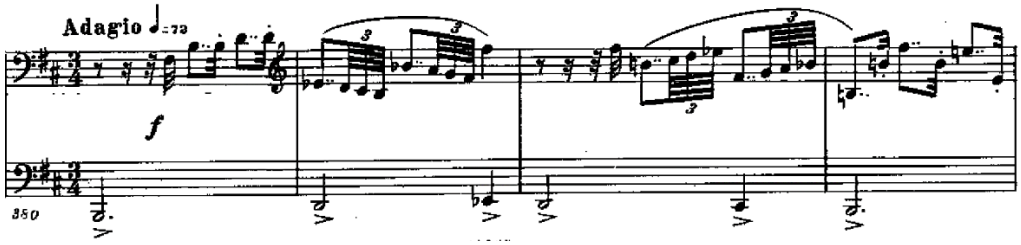
the characteristic intervals of which are easily recognizable when played scherzando,



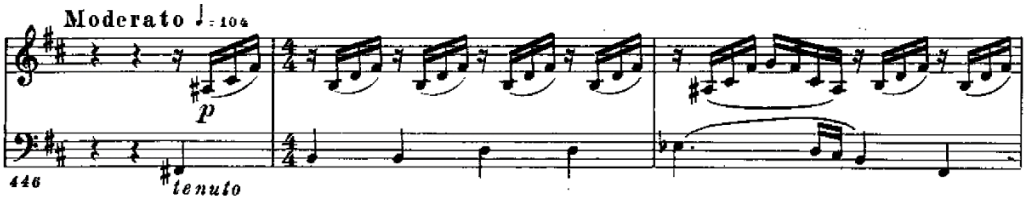
in full (but dissonant) harmonizations



or at slow tempo, accompanied by itself in augmentation.



Shostakovich brings his sonata full-circle in its concluding pages by combining the theme from the last movement with the scurrying 16th-note figures from the first movement



before letting the whole three-movement structure ebb away softly into the lowest register of the keyboard in its final bars.

Dmitri Shostakovich
Preludes and Fugues Op. 87
No. 15 in D-flat major – No. 24 in D minor

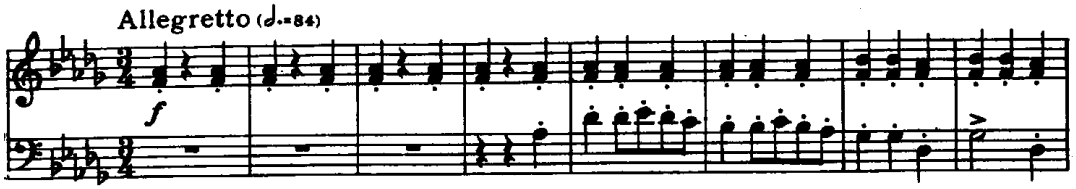
In an officially atheist society such as the Soviet Union, Shostakovich's embrace of the compositional style of a "religious" composer such as Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was a provocative challenge to the very *idea* of state-controlled, ideologically driven musical culture.

And yet in 1950, the 200th anniversary of Bach's death, he began composing a set of ***24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87*** in all the major and minor keys, completed in 1951.

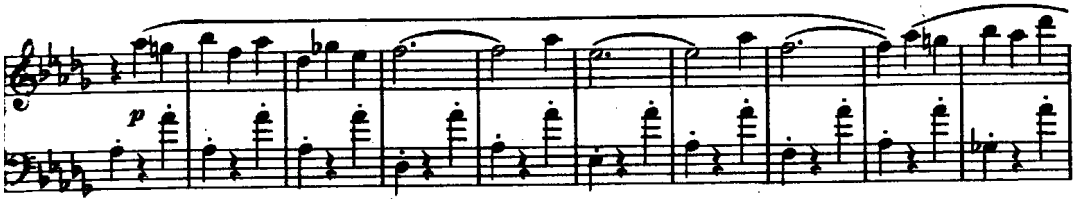
The reference to the two volumes of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722, 1744) could not have been clearer. Nor could the choice of performer for the set's premiere: Tatiana Nikolaeva (1924–1993), gold medal laureate of the recent International Johann Sebastian Bach Competition in Leipzig (1949), at which Shostakovich had sat on the judging panel.

* * *

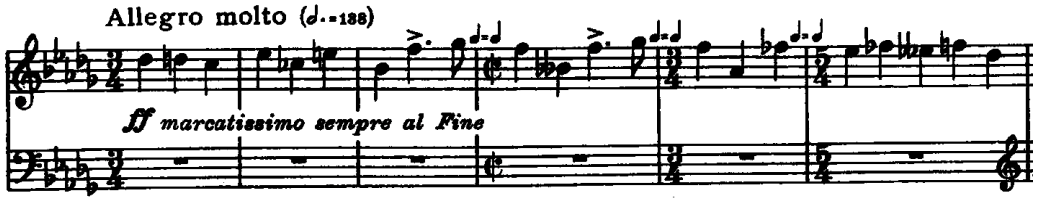
Prelude & Fugue No. 15 in D-flat major sits on the same knife-edge between homage and sarcasm as the Sonata No. 2. Its Prelude is full of brutalist humour, opening with a galumphing waltz tune full of simple phrases reinforced with stomping accents,



although its middle section attempts to be even more naïve and "cute."

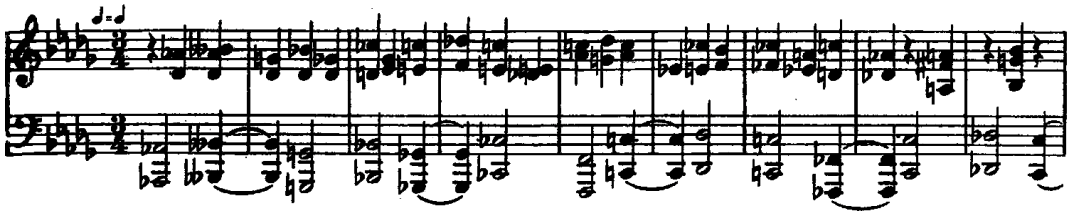


The snappily paced Fugue that follows adopts as its subject an abstract pattern of widening intervals from its tonal home-base note of D flat.



The fact that this theme features 11 of the 12 chromatic tones of the octave (only G natural is missing) has led some to opine that Shostakovich might well be satirizing here the 12-tone school of composition championed by serialist composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951).

But the use of theme augmentation, as is done in the bass of this passage



grounds this fugue firmly in a Baroque sphere of reference.

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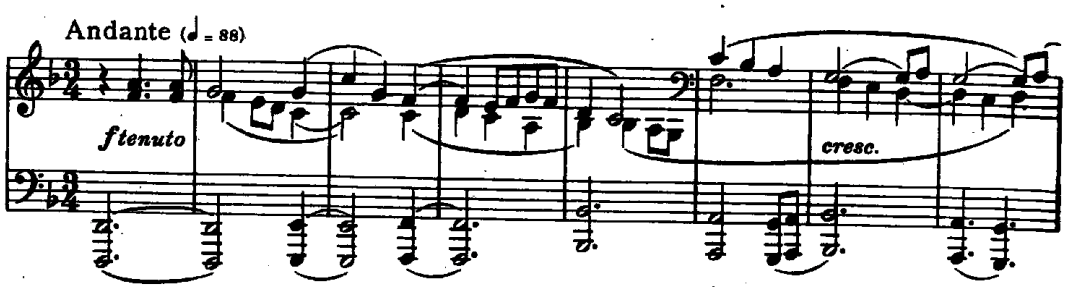
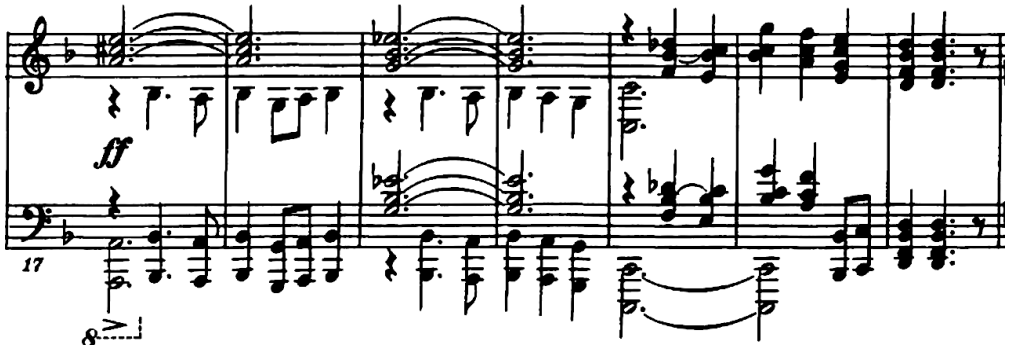
In the *Prelude and Fugue in D minor*, the last in his set of 24, Shostakovich pulls out all the stops to evoke the majesty of Bach's contrapuntal achievements in a virtuosic channeling of the Thomaskantor's trademark style of writing.

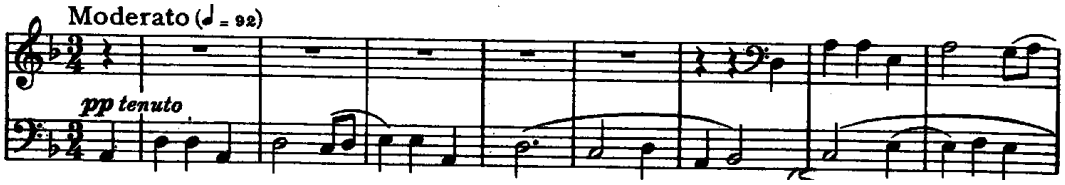
The Prelude seems almost to have been written for organ, the rumbling octaves in the low bass register in the role of the instrument's pedals.



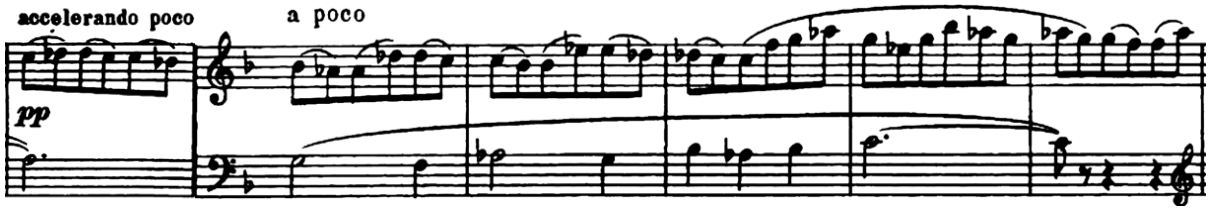
And the impressive tonal range of the organ is evoked even more strongly as the Prelude proceeds.



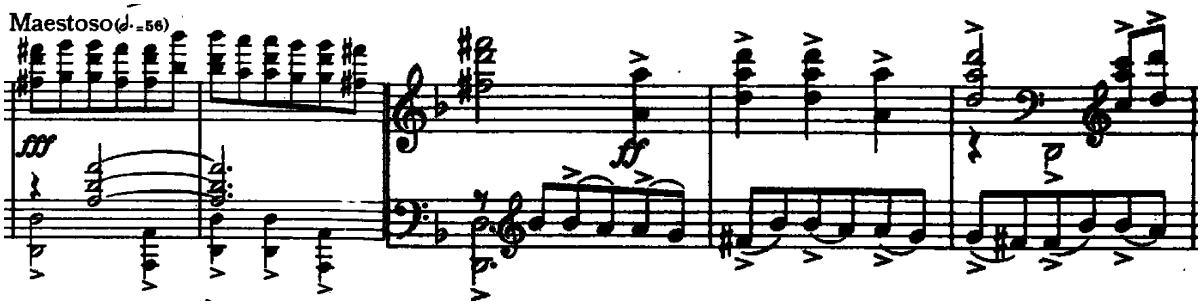
What follows is a double fugue, with its first subject in simple quarter and half notes



while its second subject is instantly recognizable for being entirely in 8th notes.



After applying the full range of contrapuntal techniques to these two subjects, Shostakovich of course has to bring them together to bring a climactic ending to this fugue and to the set of 24 preludes and fugues as a whole.



Donald G. Gíslason 2025