Subject: Today's Recommendation: 20th Century Classical
Posted by elektratig on Tue, 15 Mar 2005 13:35:35 GMT
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I obviously have too much time on my hands. Here goes.I think of certain composers whose careers extended into the 20th Century as “really” belonging to the 19th Century and its late Romantic tradition. Composers such as Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss (who was still writing works of great beauty at the end of World War II) took Romanticism and stretched it to its limits, but not beyond.It strikes me that Dmitri Shostakovich was the converse (or is it the obverse?): a true 20th Century "new man" and non-Romantic composer who was forced to look back to the Romantic and pre-Romantic traditions for inspiration or cover or both.By virtue of the time and place of his birth (St. Petersburg 1906), Shostakovich wound up living in a totalitarian state ruled, for a good portion of his career, by one of the true monsters of recorded history. Musically, the regime (read: Stalin) was extremely conservative. Most famously, in 1936, Pravda published a front-page article (almost certainly authored by Stalin himself), entitled “Muddle Instead of Music”, condemning Shostakovich’s then-new play, Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk:“From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing roar. To follow this ‘music’ is most difficult; to remember it, impossible. * * * “Here we have ‘leftist’ confusion instead of natural human music. The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, ‘formalist’ attempt to create originality through cheap clowning. It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly.”(The entire Pravda article may be found at http://www.geocities.com/kuala_bear/articles/muddle.html .)Shostakovich, then 29, nearly wound up the Gulag, or worse, and he knew it (if there was any doubt, the Great Terror demonstrated what "end[ing] very badly" meant). He suppressed his Fourth Symphony, then in rehearsal, which was not publicly performed until 1961. He began producing politically acceptable “public” works, beginning with his Fifth Symphony. His more radical works, notably the quartets, he wrote “for the drawer.”Ironically, Shostakovich’s genius was such that he was able to produce works of greatness despite – or possibly because of – the ruthlessly-enforced musical conservatism of the regime, notably his the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies – and the work that is the subject of this post.Shostakovich’s “24 Preludes and Fugues”, written in 1950-51 (shortly after he was again criticized for “formalism” in 1948), may be the single greatest piano work of the last century. It certainly exemplifies the contradictory impulses that formed Shostakovich’s genius: a truly “modern”, post-Romantic work that is, at the same time, inspired by Romantic and pre-Romantic traditions. Explicitly based on Bach’s corresponding works from 200 years earlier, Shostakovich succeeded entirely in creating a work every bit as great as the master’s. Alternatively formal and playful, austere and frivolous, serene and dance-like, majestic and introspective, it is wonderously beautiful, conveying and evoking every emotion, from elation to laughter to sorrow and loss. Shostakovich wrote the Preludes and Fugues to be performed at a Bach commemoration and competition by Tatiana Nikolayeva, who has a beautiful version available on Hyperion. Nonetheless, the version I’m recommending is that by Keith Jarrett on ECM. It’s a close call. If you read the Amazon reviews of the performances, you’ll see that both have their advocates and that even those who have strong preferences have a hard time explaining why. If I had to sum up the difference, I suppose I’d say that Jarrett places slightly more emphasis on the architecture and “public” aspects of the piece, through the use of greater dynamics and rhythm, although without being inappropriately

dramatic, theatrical or “jazzy” in any sense; Nicolayeva’s softer playing slightly emphasizes the gentle, playful, introspective and wistful elements. Although both are superb, I think Jarrett strikes a slightly better balance. To top it off, the ECM discs are also better recorded and significantly lower in price.There are a handful of classical piano works that I would take to my desert island. After Bach, the Shostakovich “24” tops the list.
24 Preludes and Fugues
