

July 15, 2025

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Preludes and Fugues of DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born: 1906
Died: 1975

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Born: 1810
Died: 1849

In 1722, Bach wrote a set of pieces for keyboard that he called The Well-Tempered Clavier. Bach's own description of this music suggests his intention: "Preludes and Fugues through all the tones and semitones . . . for the use and profit of young musicians anxious to learn as well as for the amusement of those already skilled in this art." The Well-Tempered Clavier has haunted composers ever since, and a number of composers have followed Bach's example and written preludes in all 24 keys: Chopin in 1838 and Shostakovich in 1950–51 (like Bach, Shostakovich paired each of his preludes with a fugue). Yulianna Avdeeva opens this program with a selection of this music.

The Prelude and Fugue in C Major begins with a chordal prelude that Shostakovich marks *dolce*. C Major is a "pure" key, without sharps or flats. The slow fugue that follows remains just as unclouded: there is not a single accidental in this long fugue in four voices.

The Prelude in E minor (Chopin) has become almost too familiar—everyone who has had a couple of years of piano lessons has played it. Yet this seemingly simple music (only 25 measures long) remains some of the most beautiful music ever written. It was played at Chopin's funeral.

In the Prelude and Fugue in A Major (Shostakovich), the active line leaps between the two hands, its progress enlivened by some very chromatic writing. The three-part fugue is built on a subject that sounds like a distant, delicate bugle call.

The Prelude in F-sharp minor (Chopin) is stormy music, in constant motion throughout, with

the driving theme in the left hand as the right accompanies with perpetual swirls of sound.

The Prelude in D-flat Major has become one of the best-known of all Chopin's compositions. His companion George Sand felt that its constantly repeating A-flats were inspired by dripping rain, and she nicknamed it the "Raindrop" Prelude. Chopin hated such phony nicknames and wanted nothing to do with them, but that nickname has unfortunately stuck to this music.

Shostakovich's cycle comes to its monumental conclusion in the Prelude and Fugue in D minor. The prelude, marked *Andante*, opens with a spare and declamatory statement—from the first instant of this music Shostakovich is aiming for a grand sonority. The music gradually turns quiet, and very quietly Shostakovich introduces what will be the subject of the fugue. The fugue drives to an overpowering climax marked *Maestoso*, and in the closing measures Shostakovich almost wrenches the music into a heroic conclusion in D Major.

CONCERT

Concerto in A Major for Piano and String Quartet, K. 414

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: 1756
Died: 1791
Composed: 1782

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante
- III. Rondeau. Allegretto

The year 1781 was one of the most crucial of Mozart's life. At the age of 25, he finally got free of his obligation to the Archbishop of Salzburg, in whose service he had long felt stifled. In that same year, he moved from Salzburg—a city he had grown to hate—to Vienna, which for Mozart was the musical capital of the world. His first task in his adopted city was to establish a reputation, and toward that end he took students and began to give subscription concerts featuring his own music and himself as a performer. It was for these subscription concerts that Mozart

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wrote three piano concertos during 1782–83: K. 413 in F, K. 414 in A, and K. 415 in C. In these concertos, he set out consciously to charm the Viennese public, and he described this music in a letter to his father on December 28, 1782: “These concertos are a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult; they are very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural, without being vapid. There are passages here and there from which connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction, but these passages are written in such a way that the less learned cannot fail to be pleased, though without knowing why.”

The Concerto in A Major, K. 414, the first of the three to be written (the Köchel numbers are not strictly accurate as to sequence), takes its character from the opening theme of the first movement, a straightforward and unaffected melody. The structure of this movement is entirely conventional: the orchestra (or string quartet) presents this first theme and then a march-like second before the piano enters with an exact repetition of the opening one. The second movement is an Andante whose long-breathed melodies have seemed, to many, to prefigure Schubert, and the final movement is a lively rondo. Throughout, the writing is accomplished and ingratiating—Viennese concertgoers could hardly fail to have been charmed by such music. Mozart, who of course was soloist in this concerto, provides the opportunity for cadenzas near the end of all three movements. His own cadenzas have been lost (he may never have written them down), and soloists today must provide their own.

Mozart specified that these concertos could be performed a quattro, with the pianist accompanied by a string quartet and with the wind parts (pairs of oboes and horns, in this case) omitted. This transforms the concerto into a piano quintet, and the music is heard in this form at the present concert.

Piano Quintet in F-sharp minor, Op. 67

AMY BEACH

Born: 1867

Died: 1944

Composed: 1907

- I. Adagio — Allegro moderato
- II. Adagio espressivo
- III. Allegro agitato — Adagio come prima — Presto

Amy Beach deserves to be remembered as more than just America's first successful woman composer, as she is often categorized. A child prodigy, she appeared as piano soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at 17 and began composing while still a girl. At age 18, she married surgeon H.H.A. Beach, who—though a cultivated man musically—did not want his wife performing in public. He did, however, encourage her to compose. Beach had no formal training as a composer (which in her day meant European training), and as a composer she was essentially self-taught. Nevertheless, over the next several decades, she produced a sequence of successful large-scale works. Her Mass in E-flat (1890) was the first work by a woman composer presented by Boston's Haydn and Handel Society, and her “Gaelic” Symphony (1897) and Piano Concerto (1900) were performed to critical acclaim. Upon the death of her husband in 1910, Beach—then 43—resumed her career as a concert pianist, making a particularly successful series of tours through Europe. She composed throughout her life (her list of opus numbers runs to 152), and she was still active as pianist and composer at the time of her death in 1944 at age 77.

Beach composed her Piano Quintet in 1907–08, and she was the pianist at its first performance on February 20, 1908, in Boston. The world of music was in ferment in 1908—in that year Mahler composed *Das Lied von der Erde*, Schoenberg his Second String Quartet, and Scriabin his Poem of Ecstasy. There is not the slightest trace of these new directions in Beach's Piano Quintet, which remains firmly rooted in the nineteenth-century musical traditions with which she had grown up. Brahms himself would have felt comfortable with the form and grand sonority

of her Piano Quintet, though he might have been surprised by the chromaticism of her writing.

Beach's Piano Quintet is a concise work: its three movements span only 24 minutes, and there are thematic connections between movements. Much of its big sound comes from Beach's decision to set the piano against the massed strings, which often play in octaves—that can make for a dramatic situation musically as well as an impressive sound. Some of that sound is heard in the opening moments of the Adagio introduction, though at the Allegro moderato the first violin sings its long, chromatic opening idea over nervous, rippling piano accompaniment. Beach marks the second subject of this sonata-form movement both *espressivo* and *dolcissimo*, and an extremely active development treats both themes before the movement comes to a quiet close.

Strings are muted as they lay out the opening idea of the Adagio *espressivo*, but those mutes come off as this movement rises to several grand climaxes, the first marked *appassionato* and the second triple forte. Beach titles the finale Allegro agitato, and agitated it certainly is, as it opens with racing runs and a return to the broad sonority of the opening movement. The viola has the long second subject before a fugue-like passage for strings leads to a recall of the music from the slow introduction to the first movement. This builds to a great climax, and a Presto coda drives the quintet to its sonorous close.

Piano Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 47

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born: 1810

Died: 1856

Composed: 1842

- I. Sostenuto assai — Allegro ma non troppo
- II. Scherzo. Molto vivace — Trio I — Trio II
- III. Andante cantabile
- IV. Finale. Vivace

Robert Schumann's marriage on September 12, 1840, to the young piano virtuosa Clara Wieck—a match that had been bitterly opposed by her father—brought joy to the young couple, and it also marked the beginning of the most productive three years of the composer's career. From the first year of their marriage came a great outpouring of song; from 1841 came symphonic works; and in 1842 Schumann turned to chamber music. He quickly wrote three

string quartets that summer, then the Piano Quintet in October. Working at white heat and assailed by "constant fearful sleepless nights," Schumann pressed on to complete the Piano Quartet at the end of November.

The Quartet has always been overshadowed by the Quintet, one of Schumann's greatest chamber works, but this is a strong work in its own right. It is one of the finest of all piano quartets—a form that presents composers with numerous problems of voicing, texture, and the balance between piano and strings—and its slow movement is one of the glories of chamber music. The Quartet opens with a slow introduction, marked *Sostenuto assai* ("Very sustained"); this quiet music will return twice during the course of the movement. The main section of the movement, Allegro ma non tanto, leaps out brightly on four sharp chords, and Schumann gives some idea of his conception of this music in his marking *sempre con molto sentimento*. The second subject is a big singing tune for cello (marked *espressivo*), and Schumann develops both themes across the span of this sonata-form movement. The very brief Scherzo: Molto vivace hurries along its steady pulse; Schumann offers two trio sections, both related thematically to the scherzo itself.

The third movement is appropriately marked *Andante cantabile*, for this music does indeed sing. It is in ABA form, and the cello's lyric main subject dominates the opening section. But the really impressive part of this movement comes in the middle section, which moves into the unexpected key of G-flat Major. In the childlike simplicity of its melodic line and the intensity of its expression, this music sounds very much like the slow movements of Beethoven's late string quartets. The cello does not play during the ornate return of the opening material, for Schumann asks here that the cellist retune the C-string down to B for the closing measures of the movement; this section outlines very slowly the theme-shape of the final movement, marked *Vivace*. Full of fugal entries based on this three-note shape, the finale gives the impression of never-ending energy. Even its lyric episodes seem touched with vitality.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger