

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

Dances of the Dolls (11:22)

- | | | | |
|---|-----|------------------|--------|
| 1 | I | Lyrical Waltz | (1:47) |
| 2 | II | Gavotte | (1:29) |
| 3 | III | Romance | (2:19) |
| 4 | IV | Polka | (1:17) |
| 5 | V | Petite Ballerina | (2:38) |
| 6 | VI | Hurdy-Gurdy | (:48) |
| 7 | VII | Dance | (:42) |

Ten Aphorisms, Op. 13 (14:11)

- | | | | |
|----|------|----------------|--------|
| 8 | I | Recitative | (:45) |
| 9 | II | Serenade | (1:15) |
| 10 | III | Nocturne | (1:30) |
| 11 | IV | Elegie | (1:20) |
| 12 | V | Marche funebre | (1:12) |
| 13 | VI | Etude | (:40) |
| 14 | VII | Totentanz | (:54) |
| 15 | VIII | Kanon | (:59) |
| 16 | IX | Legend | (2:09) |
| 17 | X | Lullaby | (2:53) |

Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 12 (12:50)

(one movement)

18 Allegro (7:49) 19 Lento (3:25) 20 Allegro (1:36)

Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 61 (28:28)

- | | | | |
|----|-----|---------------------|---------|
| 21 | I | Allegretto | (7:40) |
| 22 | II | Largo | (6:39) |
| 23 | III | (Moderato con moto) | (13:55) |

Melvin Chen, piano

Notes by Malcolm MacDonald

Shostakovich began to show signs of musical talent as a child, and at first it was not clear whether he was going to be principally a pianist or a composer. He started his first piano lessons at the age of nine with his mother, Sofiya Vadilyevna Kokaoulina, who had studied the piano at Irkutsk in her native Siberia and later at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire. He was such a quick learner that he soon progressed to study with the distinguished but irascible piano teacher Ignati Albertovich Glyasser; and two years later entered the Conservatoire at the age of thirteen as a member of the class of Alexandra Rozanova, who had been his mother's piano teacher. Later he became a pupil of Leonid Nikolayev, a highly cultured composer and pianist whose piano pupils included Shostakovich's friends and contemporaries Maria Yudina, Lev Oborin and Vladimir Sofronitsky. During all this time the pull of composition was getting stronger – he had improvised little piano pieces almost as soon as he learned to play, and his first published works for piano were written while he was still a Conservatoire student. But Shostakovich admired and valued Nikolayev, his piano teacher, much more than his composition teacher Maximilian Steinberg, and immediately after leaving the Conservatoire he was ranked as a promising concert pianist. The piano remained important to Shostakovich throughout his career: he wrote some of his most important works for it including the two concertos, the two sonatas, and the monumental set of *24 Preludes and Fugues*. Moreover he usually played the piano parts of his chamber works and songs at their first performances, and there is no doubt that he had the requisite technique to play even the most challenging of his own keyboard inventions.

Shostakovich's *First Piano Sonata*, Op. 12, one of the most radical compositions of his entire career, was composed in Leningrad in September–October 1926 and apparently originally bore the title *October* or *October Symphony*; in fact his *Second Symphony, To October*, would be written only six months later. The composer gave the first performance in Leningrad on 12 December 1926 and also the Moscow premiere on the following 9 January. Before writing the Sonata Shostakovich had experienced a creative block (after finishing his wildly successful *First Symphony*) that had lasted nearly a year. He was also seriously thinking about a career as a concert pianist, and in a sense the Sonata may be seen as a pianistic as well as compositional manifesto. Though a highly individual achievement, it also fits into a context of highly-compressed and adventurous Russian piano sonatas which had been begun by Skryabin in his late sonatas and had already produced such potent and passionate effusions as the respective *Third Sonatas* of Prokofiev and Miaskovsky, as well as sonatas by Medtner, Mossolov, Roslavets, Anatoly Alexandrov and Samuil Feinberg. Magnificent though some of those works are, Shostakovich's sonata surpasses them all in sheer daring.

It is uncertain whether he was yet aware of Schoenberg's method of 12-tone composition, but a homegrown Russian variant was already observable in the music of Nikolai Roslavets; certainly Shostakovich's Sonata is full of melodic and harmonic formulations that encompass all twelve tones of the chromatic scale without subjecting them to a strict serial ordering. With its sinewy, propulsive counterpoint magnified through barnstorming multi-note complexes

for both hands, cruelly fast tempi and raw, barbaric dissonance, the work is at once primitive and highly sophisticated, relentlessly anti-Romantic, and at the same time a kind of ultimate test-piece that presents the virtuoso player with challenge after challenge. The fact that Shostakovich himself played the work many times is an eloquent testimony to his keyboard technique as a young man.

The Sonata is in a single movement that falls into three clearly-defined sections. It opens with two simultaneous lines starting on a semitone clash and proceeding away from one another in contrary motion, settling into a kind of manic tarantella rhythm and climaxing on an ardent, almost Skryabinesque fanfare against hard, crystalline figuration in high register. There is little sense of key here, but as the sonata proceeds the music makes repeated attempts to ground itself in C major, or at least on a fundamental of C. The motoric, machine rhythms resume and again climax in wild fanfares. A convulsive descent in glissandi to the bass register (*Meno mosso*) introduces a grotesquely jaunty march-music and a hallucinatory tune, *semplice*, that gutters out the piano's lowest depths. Here, *sotto voce*, the march-music combines with the right-hand line from the work's opening before building to a fresh eruption of the percussive and tumultuous tarantella music. Another harsh, bravura climax is followed by a further descent into the piano's absolute lowest register, with cluster-chords battering away over a deep, thunderous tremolando that resounds on with the sustaining pedal. A mysterious swirl in the depths, with the Miaskovskian marking *tenebroso*, introduces the central *Lento* section.

Here the music is laid out on three staves, with the principal angular, chromatic melody in the middle register against rising-falling patterns in the bass and glittering right-hand harmonies reminiscent of Skryabin's *ailé* (winged or floating) writing. The mood is withdrawn, enigmatic: chorale-like music brings a moment of near-repose before the third and final section of the work breaks in *Allegro* in the style of a steely *perpetuum mobile*. This portion is very short: it rises to a raucous return and expansion of the tarantella-music and a stark coda based on a fusillade of repeated chords, with an ending of repeated C sharps and a sign-off on the piano's two lowest C's of almost shocking suddenness.

On hearing the first performance of the Sonata, Shostakovich's piano professor Leonid Nikolayev (1878-1942) is said to have commented: 'Is this a piano sonata? No, a sonata for metronome with piano accompaniment!' But two months later Prokofiev, who was revisiting the USSR for the first time since the Revolution, heard Shostakovich play the work at a *soirée* for young composers in Leningrad. This was the two composers' first meeting, as Prokofiev recorded in his diary for 20 February 1927, taking the Sonata's modernistic idiom in his stride:

[Shostakovich] plays boldly, by heart. His sonata starts with lively two-part counterpoint in Bach-like style. In the second movement, which follows without a break, the harmonic style is quite mellow and there is a melody in the middle – nice enough, but diffuse and a bit too long. This *Andante* changes into a fast *Finale* which, compared to the rest, is disproportionately short. And yet [compared to a work he had just heard by Schillinger] it is so much more lively

and interesting that I am quite happy to start praising Shostakovich.

Shostakovich's next piano work was hardly less challenging, though in an entirely different genre. The cycle of ten miniatures for piano entitled *Aphorisms*, Op.13 was written between 25 February and 7 April 1927. Though each of the short movements movements has a title that defines its genre or character, Shostakovich was at first at a loss for a general title for the work as a whole: the name *Aphorisms* was a suggestion by his friend, the composer and theorist Boleslav Yavorsky, to whom he subsequently presented the autograph score. The Moscow-based Yavorsky (1877-1942) was very much his mentor at this time (Shostakovich had considered transferring from Leningrad to Moscow in order to study with him), and he had arranged for Shostakovich to take part, along with other leading young Soviet pianists, in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. That was just before he began writing opus 13. Shostakovich played the world premiere of the *Aphorisms* in Leningrad in the Autumn of 1927.

Here again he was composing against a background of contemporary models – the *Sarcasms* and *Visions fugitives* of Prokofiev, the *Flofionki* of Miaskovsky, the *Newspaper Advertisements* of Mosolov – but taking the idea of the pithy, fantastic miniature off in his own directions. The pieces' extreme brevity perhaps reflects a knowledge of Webern, too (who seems to be satirized in the 'Canon'). In their biting, absurdist humour the *Aphorisms* look towards the idiom of Shostakovich's Gogol opera *The Nose*, which he would begin shortly afterwards.

The traditional expectations implicit in such titles as 'Recitative', 'Serenade', 'Nocturne' and so on are subverted by Shostakovich's ruthless and vinegary application of his very contemporary sense of humour, already evident in the wildly angular introductory 'Recitative'. The dry 'Serenade' punctuates its monody with guitar-like chords; the melodic line restlessly changes time-signature from bar to bar. The 'Nocturne' is very much about things going bump in the night – or, as Ronald Stevenson has suggested, about things that go on at night: fornication, graphically depicted. The 'Marche Funèbre' is jauntily quick and set about with cheerful toybox fanfares; it features passages of harmonics obtained by silently depressing the piano keys. The gleeful goblin energy of 'Danse macabre' recycles the Dies Irae plainchant as a moto perpetuo figuration in waltz time. The feverish, skeletal 'Canon' in three voices proclaims its 'atonal' modernity through jagged octave displacements and silences. These caricature-like movements leave us uncertain how to interpret the others, such as the comparatively deadpan 'Elegy' (all eight bars of it), 'Étude' (a five-finger doodle) and 'Legend' (with its wandering ostinati); but at least there seems nothing false in the expressivity of the gentle concluding 'Lullaby'.

The 1920s were a period of youthful experimentation for Shostakovich, but his imbrolios with the Communist Party establishment in 1936, which led to the withdrawal of his *Fourth Symphony* and the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk*, and the composition of the *Fifth Symphony* in a radically changed style, had a lasting effect on his musical language, which became more essentialized and in one sense more traditionally based. This development is graphically illustrated by the *Second Piano Sonata* in B minor, Op.61. Shostakovich began writing this

work in Kuibishev, in January 1943, and completed it at Archangelskoye, near Moscow, in March. It bears a dedication to the memory of Leonid Nikolayev, who had died the previous year, and Shostakovich performed the premiere in Moscow on 6 June 1943. The Sonata was the first significant work he had completed since the *Seventh Symphony* (the Leningrad) over a year before, though some of the intervening time had been occupied by work on the opera *The Gamblers*, which was destined to remain unfinished. Compared to the epic, public and somewhat rhapsodic *Symphony No. 7*, the Sonata is an intimate work, entirely without excess: the argument is pared down to essentials and an overall elegiac mood hangs in the air. While some of that may be a reflection of the wartime circumstances in which it was composed, it is likely that it also enshrines the composer's private grief for the loss of his one-time teacher. The Sonata manifests affinities, in Shostakovich's own terms, with the late piano sonatas of Beethoven (which he had studied with Nikolayev), perhaps especially with Beethoven's Op.109 and Op.110. Certainly the forms are classical: the first movement is in a strict sonata form, the second in ternary song form, the finale a set of variations. There is no suggestion here of the 'sonata for metronome'.

The opening Allegretto is strictly based on two contrasting themes, the restless, suavely serious first subject with its purling-stream figuration opposed to the superficially debonair, rather Prokofievian second idea. The development is stark and economical in its working-out in two-part counterpoint. At the start of the recapitulation the two subjects (which are indeed rhythmically and melodically related) are combined in a bitonal passage of baleful struggle, B minor against E flat major, that seems to resound with tolling bells. The recapitulation and coda

confirm a tendency for phrases to answer and imitate each other from opposite ends of the keyboard.

The Largo slow movement is poignant and angular. The harmonic and melodic content of the opening section, built on fourths, seems withdrawn and self-communing, but giving birth to brief shafts of song-like melody. Here again there is a tritonal opposition, here between A flat and D, this time inherent in the structure. The central section is dry, almost desiccated, with repeated pianissimo chords separated by silences bearing up melancholic scraps of tune. At the reprise of the opening section the material is presented in canon, with the sustaining pedal adding a welcome resonance to the music.

As in many Beethoven sonatas, these two comparatively short movements preface a longer finale on which the work's expressive weight is thrown. The theme is a 30-bar single line that suggests at different times both B minor and E flat (separating out the clashing elements of the first movement). It is ripe with motivic elements apt for development, and has a pastoral air, suggested by its initial piping phrase (an introductory motif to the theme proper) and its orientally-inflected scale. The nine variations are deftly dovetailed one into the next: the first two proceed in two-part counterpoint, and introduce triplet rhythms. The angular, staccato third seems to make direct reference to Beethoven's Op.109, the fourth is a kind of chorale, and the fifth a scherzo working up to the sixth, an obsessive dotted-rhythm canon at the 7th taken at great speed. The tempo relaxes again through the seventh variation, in which the underlying vein of elegy comes to the fore; while the eighth is a gaunt, austere majestic variation

in quasi-Baroque double-dotted rhythms. In the transition to the final variation – a remarkable extended passage that deserves to be accounted a variation in its own right – the dotted rhythms become a kind of funereal drumbeat and the theme congeals into a set of sad, seraphic harmonies. Then in the final variation the theme is presented in the left hand against flowing semiquaver figuration in the right, reminiscent – but in a very subdued manner – of the Sonata's opening bars.

Dances of the Dolls is a suite of seven pieces for children written in 1952. However, the music is not original but arranged, shortened and simplified from movements in Shostakovich's 1949 *Ballet Suites* for orchestra, which are themselves arrangements of movements from the full-length ballets Shostakovich had written in the early 1930s, as well as from film scores and theatre music. While some of the original works from which these movements derive had an overt political or even propagandist message, their incarnations as charming pieces for young players demonstrate rather Shostakovich's innate gift for light music, a talent which earned him, early in his career, the sobriquet of 'the Soviet Rossini'.

The opening 'Lyrical Waltz' derives from the ballet *The Limpid Stream* (1934-5) and the following Gavotte from incidental music to a play based on Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* staged in Moscow in 1934. The 'Romance' and the 'Polka' are other pieces from *The Limpid Stream* (the 'Polka' was originally for pizzicato strings). Shostakovich gave the fifth piece, a delicate 'Waltz-scherzo', the title 'The Petite Ballerina' in *Dances of the Dolls*: it began life as part of the

'socialist-realist' ballet *The Bolt* (1930-31). The sixth piece, here called 'Hurdy-Gurdy', was a polka in *The Limpid Stream*, and this was also the ultimate source of the last piece, a 'Dance-Scherzando', performing the function of a cheerful farewell.

MELVIN CHEN

A native of Tennessee, pianist Melvin Chen is recognized as an important young artist, having received acclaim for performances throughout the United States and abroad. As a soloist and chamber musician Mr. Chen has performed at major venues in the United States, including Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, Weill Recital Hall, the Frick Collection, Kennedy Center, and Boston's Jordan Hall, in addition to other appearances throughout the United States, Canada, and Asia. In recent seasons Mr. Chen's concerts have included two solo recitals at Weill Recital Hall, concerto performances with the American Symphony Orchestra, the Springfield Symphony, and the Marin Symphony, as well as numerous solo and chamber music appearances internationally and in the United States.

He was the pianist in Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus and Euridice*, which was presented by Lincoln Center in 2005 and which received a special citation from the Obie awards. Mr. Chen's performances have been featured on radio and television stations around the globe, including KBS television and radio in Korea, NHK television in Japan, and NPR in the United States. Recently released

recordings include Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* on the Bridge label and a recording of Joan Tower's piano music on the Naxos label. A Recording of Gordon's *Orpheus and Euridice* is forthcoming in 2007.

An enthusiastic chamber musician, Mr. Chen has collaborated with such artists as Ida Kavafian, Steven Tenenbom, David Shifrin, Steven Isserlis, Pamela Frank, and Peter Wiley; with the Shanghai, Tokyo, Miami, Penderecki, Borromeo, and Miro quartets; and in contemporary music collaborations with the Da Capo Chamber Players and The St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble. Mr. Chen is an alumnus of Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center: Chamber Music Society Two, where he appeared with members of the Chamber Music Society in performance and educational programs for two seasons. A performer in numerous music festivals, he has performed at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival, Music Mountain, Chautauqua, Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, Chamber Music Northwest, Bard Music Festival, and Music from Angel Fire, among others.

Mr. Chen completed a doctorate in chemistry from Harvard University, and also holds a double master's degree from The Juilliard School in piano and violin, where he studied with Seymour Lipkin and Glenn Dicterow, respectively. At Juilliard, he was the recipient of the U.S. Department of Education Jacob Javits Fellowship, as well as the William Petschek Piano Scholarship and the Ruth D. Rosenman Memorial Scholarship. Previously, he attended Yale University, receiving a bachelor of science degree in chemistry and physics. Upon graduation he was awarded the New Prize by the fellows of Jonathan Edwards

College. During his tenure at Yale he studied with Boris Berman, Paul Kantor, and Ida Kavafian.

Mr. Chen is on the piano faculty of the Bard College Conservatory of Music, where he is associate director, and has previously served on the piano faculty at the Yale School of Music. He is also the artistic director of the chamber music program at the Hotchkiss Summer Portals.

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