CONCERT PROGRAM IV:
Preludes and Fugues

JULY 27
Saturday, July 27, 8:00 p.m., The Center for Performing Arts at Menlo-Atherton

PROGRAM OVERVIEW
Bach elevated the simple construct of prelude and fugue to profound heights. More than an academic two-part structure, the prelude and fugue, in Bach’s hands, spoke to something deeply human. The prelude is an invitation into Bach’s fantastical imagination, and the fugue is an extension of the prelude’s expression into the formal complexity of Bach’s contrapuntal mindscape. That Bach’s preludes and fugues captivated Haydn and Mozart is evident in their writing; two centuries later, Britten and Shostakovich, too, would call on the same Bachian tradition to give voice to a wholly distinct worldview.

SPECIAL THANKS
Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Jim and Mical Brenzel with gratitude for their generous support.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)
Selections from The Well-Tempered Clavier (1722)
Prelude and Fugue in E Major, Book I
Prelude and Fugue in E minor, Book I
Prelude and Fugue in G Major, Book I

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–1791)
Adagio and Fugue in c minor, K. 546 (1788)
Gilles Vonsattel, piano

JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)
String Quartet in f minor, op. 20, no. 5 (1772)
Allegro moderato
Minuetto and trio
Adagio
Fuga a due soggetti

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)
Capriccio in e minor, op. 81, no. 3 (1843)
Danish String Quartet: Frederik Øland, Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen, violins; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; Fredrik Schøyen Spålin, cello

INTERMISSION

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)
Prelude and Fugue no. 4 in e minor, op. 87 (1951)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)
Selections from Préludes, Book 1 (1909–1910)
La fille aux cheveux de lin
Minstrels
La cathédrale engloutie
Gilles Vonsattel, piano

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898–1937)
Three Preludes for Violin and Piano (1923–1926) (transcribed by Heifetz)
Allegro ben ritmato e deciso
Andante con moto e poco rubato
Allegro ben ritmato e deciso
Ian Swensen, violin; Gilles Vonsattel, piano

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)
Prelude and Fugue for Eighteen Strings, op. 29 (1943)
Arnaud Sussmann, Jorja Fleezanis, Sean Lee, Frederik Øland, Rune Tønsgaard Sørensen, Nicole Jeong, Kristin Lee, Ian Swensen, Sumin Chang, Reiji Papa, violins; Paul Neubauer, Mark Holloway, Asbjørn Nørgaard, violas; Colin Carr, Fredrik Schøyen Spålin, Laurence Lesser, cellos; Scott Pingel, Charles Chandler, basses

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Program Notes: Preludes and Fugues

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
(Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach; died July 28, 1750, Leipzig)

Selections from The Well-Tempered Clavier
Composed: 1722

Other works from this period: Brandenburg Concerti, BWV 1046–1051 (1721); Fantasia in C Major, BWV 575 (1722); French Suites, BWV 825–830 (1722–1725)

Approximate duration: 6 minutes

Bach composed the first volume of The Well-Tempered Clavier in 1722. The set of twenty-four preludes and fugues, spanning all twenty-four major and minor keys, was designed, according to Bach, “for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study.” By utilizing all of the major and minor keys, The Well-Tempered Clavier also set out to demonstrate how modern systems of tuning (or temperament) allowed keyboard music to be played in any key (whereas previous systems might sound pleasing in one key but out of tune in another).

Some two decades later, Bach would compose another set of Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues, commonly referred to as The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2. The two volumes together represent one of the most enduring and influential works not only of the keyboard literature but indeed of Western music at large. In the nearly three centuries since its composition, The Well-Tempered Clavier has established a paragon of contrapuntal composition, and it continues to serve as an essential resource in keyboard pedagogy.

The Well-Tempered Clavier established the pairing of prelude and fugue as a signature Bachian format. The preludes are fanciful and formally free; the fugues then draw the expressive character of their corresponding preludes into their labyrinthine sophistication. The particular splendor of Bach’s preludes and fugues lies largely in, first, the creation of a captivating musical world in the prelude—and then the further blossoming of that world within the rigorous contrapuntal design of the fugue that follows.

—Patrick Castillo

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg; died December 5, 1791, Vienna)

Adagio and Fugue in c minor, K. 546
Composed: 1788
First performance: June 26, 1788

Other works from this period: Don Giovanni, K. 527 (1787); Divertimento in E-flat Major, K. 563 (1788); Symphony no. 40 in g minor, K. 550 (1788); Piano Concerto no. 26 in D Major, K. 537 (1788); Symphony no. 41 in C Major, K. 551 (1788); Così fan tutte, K. 588 (1790); Requiem in d minor, K. 626 (1791)

Approximate duration: 7 minutes

Mozart’s Adagio and Fugue began life as the Fugue in c minor, K. 426, for two keyboards. Composed in 1783, that work (to which Mozart would add the Adagio introduction when preparing the string quartet arrangement) appeared as part of a flurry of new pieces the composer produced upon his arrival in Vienna in 1781. Indeed, Mozart’s productivity during these years seems to have known no limits. Between 1781 and 1785, his output included numerous piano concerti and symphonies; important chamber works including violin sonatas, the Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, and the six Haydn Quartets; the Mass in c minor; and the operas Die Entführung aus dem Serail and Le nozze di Figaro.

Ironically, the string quartet version of the Adagio and Fugue came about under quite different circumstances. By the late 1780s, Mozart’s popularity (and, consequently, his income) had taken a downward turn. Although Le nozze di Figaro had been wildly acclaimed in Prague, the opera’s Vienna premiere in 1786 was not received well and its production did not prove lucrative for Mozart. The following year, Don Giovanni likewise failed to please: it was criticized as being overly learned, not from the heart, and too sophisticated for the general listener. In order to generate much-needed income in the summer of 1788, Mozart composed at a furious pace, completing a symphony, a violin sonata, a piano trio, a piano sonata, and this arrangement of the piano duo Adagio and Fugue in the span of only a few weeks.

The character of the Adagio and Fugue is severe and serious throughout. The opening dialog between the cello and the rest of the ensemble establishes a majestic rhythmic feel. Using an uncompromising pattern that continues for the rest of the introduction, Mozart intersperses music that serves to contrast with the aggressive, conquering opening measures. This contrasting material—as mysterious as the opening is obvious—infuses the Adagio with a disturbing and ominous atmosphere. It is Mozart the opera composer at work, introducing a shady character who puts everyone on edge. As the loud, stentorian sections remain the same length (in effect repeating themselves), the shadowy phrases get longer and longer, eventually leaving the Adagio in a mood of great tension and anticipation.

The cello once again has the first say as the angular fugue subject breaks in. As in the fugues he arranged from Bach’s The Well-Tempered Clavier, Mozart—still under the Baroque master’s spell—demonstrates here a complete mastery of fugal technique. The Fugue serves simultaneously as an homage to Bach and as an announcement to the Viennese musical community of the arrival of a compelling and individual compositional voice.

—Patrick Castillo

JOSEPH HAYDN
(Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Lower Austria; died May 31, 1809, Vienna)

String Quartet in f minor, op. 20, no. 5
Composed: 1772
Published: 1774

Other works from this period: Symphony no. 43 in E-flat Major, Mercury (1772); Cello Concerto no. 6 in D Major, Hob. Vllb: 4 (1772); String Quartet no. 19 in C Major, op. 9 (1771–1772); String Quartet no. 25 in E Major, op. 17 (1771); String Quartet in E-flat Major, op. 32, no. 2, The Joke (1781), The Seven Last Words of Christ (1786)

Approximate duration: 20 minutes

The set of six string quartets published as Joseph Haydn’s Opus 20 represents an important milestone in the creative evolution of the composer recognized as the father of the string quartet: in their thematic ideas, ensemble writing, and overall strength of character, they demonstrate a level of sophistication that laid the groundwork not only for Haydn’s later
quartets but likewise for those of Mozart, Beethoven, and the generations of composers who followed.

The Opus 20 quartets, published in 1774, reflect the influence of the *Sturm und Drang* movement emergent at that time and which would become a defining aesthetic of *Romanticism*. This movement, led by such figures as the great poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, favored deep and subjective expressive power over the well-mannered *Rococo* style galant that characterized music of the early Classical period. With his Opus 20 quartets, Haydn showed a greater interest in composing in what became known as “the learned style”—serious and intellectually stimulating music, characterized by sophisticated technique and part writing that asserted the individuality of all four voices—rather than the galant style, which was less serious entertainment music, generally featuring a light, attractive melody above simple harmonies and homophonic textures.

The Fifth Quartet of the Opus 20 set, in f minor, departs immediately from the galant style in its opening measures. The first theme, intoned by the violin, is stern and introspective.

As the work begins, the second violin, viola, and cello play the role of supporting cast while the first violin offers the first theme. But just a moment later, as the music warms from f minor to A-flat major and the first violin shows a sunnier side of the theme, the accompaniment in the lower strings becomes more involved—as if we can hear each instrument breaking free of the old style and establishing its identity within the ensemble.

Firmly in the major key, Haydn integrates all four instruments to introduce the second theme.

The close of the exposition further reinforces the independence of each voice, and the textural interest of the music grows richer as the movement progresses into the development section. Even at the arrival of the recapitulation (which, typically, would begin with a near-verbatim account of the exposition), Haydn enhances the main theme with new dialog between the first and second violin.

Further evidencing the emergence of the *Sturm und Drang* aesthetic, the second movement minuet bears little of the aristocratic grace typically associated with that dance form. Instead, the severity of the first movement’s main theme is carried over and prevails over the minuet’s elegant triple meter. The contrasting trio section offers the listener some respite from the gravity of the minuet, spinning a new tune in F major.

The second movement ends with a return to the f minor minuet, but the slow movement that follows revisits the key of F major with a gently rocking lullaby.

The final movement offers the quartet’s strongest example of “the learned style” and of Haydn’s advanced writing for quartet: ironically, how it demonstrates the forward progress of Haydn’s compositional language is by looking back to a musical form most closely associated with Bach. The finale is a fugue on two distinct subjects: the first, presented initially by the second violin, is a disjunct melody of half notes and whole notes; against it, the second subject is a more lithe melody, played first by the viola.

All four instruments quickly get involved. The fugue represents the quartet’s shortest movement, but it is pithy and tautly constructed—and, in its mastery of a hallowed Bachian technique, it points the way forward for an immensely rich quartet literature to come over subsequent generations.

—Patrick Castillo

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg; died November 4, 1847, Leipzig)
Capriccio in e minor, op. 81, no. 3
Composed: 1843
Other works from this period: Allegro brillant in A Major, op. 92 (1841); *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, op. 61 (1843); Symphony no. 23 in a minor, op. 56; Scottish (1843); Cello Sonata no. 2 in D Major, op. 58 (1843); Piano Trio no. 2 in c minor, op. 66 (1845)
Approximate duration: 6 minutes

Felix Mendelssohn’s Opus 81 comprises four short works for string quartet, composed at different times of his life but assembled and published posthumously; they were assigned the opus number 81 to follow Mendelssohn’s last string quartet, the f minor, op. 80. The third work of the Opus 81 set, the Capriccio in e minor, betrays the deep influence of Bach on Mendelssohn’s compositional style throughout his life. (From a historical perspective, the connection between Bach and Mendelssohn is, moreover, significant—see Concert Program VIII, p. 39.)

The capriccio, composed in 1843, follows the model of Bach’s preludes and fugues. It comprises two distinct sections, beginning with a doleful *Andante con moto*. This music—consisting of just twenty-eight bars—serves as a short prelude to the main body of the capriccio. It arrives at a brief, *cadenza*-like passage in the first violin. With this phrase hanging in the air like an open question, the impassioned *Allegro fugato* begins.

—Patrick Castillo

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

(Born September 12/25, 1906, St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975, Moscow)
Prelude and Fugue no. 4 in e minor, op. 87
Composed: 1951
First performance: December 23, 1952
Other works from this period: String Quartet no. 5 in B-flat Major, op. 92 (1952); *Katerina Izmaylova*, op. 114 (1954–1963); Symphony no. 10 in e minor, op. 93 (1953); *Festive Overture* in A Major, op. 96 (1954)
Approximate duration: 8 minutes
In 1950, Shostakovich visited Leipzig, the city where Bach lived and worked for the last three decades of his life. Attending a Bach competition, Shostakovich heard the Russian pianist Tatianna Nikolaeva perform Bach’s The Well-Tempered Clavier. Inspired by what he heard, he set out soon thereafter to compose his own series of Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues for Piano in each of the major and minor keys. He completed the set, published as his Opus 87, between October 1950 and February 1951.

The Opus 87 Preludes and Fugues invite obvious comparison to Bach. But despite the homage to the Baroque master, Shostakovich’s preludes and fugues strongly demonstrate his own, modern voice. Like Bach’s The Well-Tempered Clavier, they exemplify impeccable counterpoint and fugal technique and demonstrate a deep understanding of writing for the piano. But in their expressive character, the Opus 87 Preludes and Fugues are unmistakably Shostakovich.

—Patrick Castillo

CLAUSE DEBUSSY
(Born August 22, 1862, St. Germain-en-Laye; died March 25, 1918, Paris)

Selections from Préludes, Book 1

Composed: 1909–1910

Other works from this period: La Mer (1903–1905); Danse sacrée et Danse profane (1904); Images (1909–1912); Première rhapsodie for Clarinet and Piano (1909–1910); Six épigraphes antiques (1914); Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp (1915)

Approximate duration: 12 minutes

Debussy published his first book of Preludes for Solo Piano in 1910. The volume comprises twelve short but compelling works, demonstrating in miniature the rich nuance of Debussy’s musical imagination and, specifically, his command of harmonic color in writing for the piano.

Concert Program IV offers a set of three of Debussy’s preludes, beginning with The Girl with the Flaxen Hair, one of the composer’s most enchanting creations.

The final prelude of book I, Minstrels, is a playful send-up of much of the popular music of the early twentieth century; its angular rhythms and piquant harmonies might also be heard as a nod in the direction of Stravinsky’s Pulcinella and, of course, that of Debussy’s contemporaries.

The set concludes with one of Debussy’s most breathtaking creations, The Sunken Cathedral. The title alludes to an ancient Breton myth about a cathedral submerged underwater off the coast of the Island of Ys which emerges on clear mornings, transmitting the sound of bells, organs, and chant across the sea. Debussy uses modal and parallel harmonies to evoke antiquity, while the music’s slow-moving rhythm creates a feeling of hushed awe.

—Patrick Castillo

GEORGE GERSHWIN
(Born September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York; died July 11, 1937, Hollywood, California)

Three Preludes for Violin and Piano (transcribed by Heifetz)

Composed: 1923–1926

Other works from this period: Lady, Be Good! (1924); Rhapsody in Blue (1924); Piano Concerto in F Major (1925); An American in Paris (1928); Porgy and Bess (1935)

Approximate duration: 6 minutes

By the time George Gershwin had published his Three Preludes for Piano in 1926, he had already risen from a young piano-roll maker to a mature international composer—two years prior, he had debuted his wildly successful Rhapsody in Blue. His authentic ‘American’ style of combining aspects of blues, folk, jazz, and classical music in his writing elevated him to one of the greatest cross-genre composers in American history. These three short preludes are nothing short of pure Gershwin writing. Though he originally planned the set to contain twenty-four preludes, Gershwin revised his manuscript to only seven pieces. Two of the works were recycled into Short Story for Solo Violin, and two others were denied publication by Gershwin’s publisher. These three preludes are what remain of that set. The short compositions for piano captivated the great violinist Jascha Heifetz, who transcribed them for violin and piano.

The first prelude, Allegro ben ritmato e deciso, carries a strong baião rhythm (a signature syncopated rhythm from Bahia, Brazil) in the piano, while the violin soars playfully with a light, jazzy melody. Incorporating an assortment of “blue notes,” Gershwin makes hefty use of the blues chromatic scales. Beginning and ending with a pensive melancholy, the Andante con moto e poco rubato creates a lullaby-like reprieve before the brilliant Allegro ben ritmato e deciso brings in a call-and-response duet between the two instruments.

—Andrew Goldstein

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
(Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft, Suffolk, England; died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, England)

Prelude and Fugue for Eighteen Strings, op. 29

Composed: 1943

Published: 1951

First performance: June 23, 1943, London

Other works from this period: Sinfonia da Requiem, op. 29 (1939–1940); Divisions for Left-Hand Piano and Orchestra, op. 21 (1940); Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes, op. 33 (1945)

Approximate duration: 10 minutes

The 2013 season marks Benjamin Britten’s centenary. He lived from 1913 to 1976 and was during his lifetime, and remains today, a cherished English cultural icon. Britten cultivated a uniquely personal and deeply expressive compositional language, while still adhering to certain musical principles of the past. In a time when composers experimented with twelve-tone structures and the dissolution of traditional harmony, Britten combined directly communicative tonalities with sophisticated formal structures. Like other prominent English composers—a group including Edward Elgar, William Walton, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Britten’s contemporary Michael Tippett—Britten was conscious of creating a distinctly English style. One thing that distinguished him somewhat from his contemporaries, however, was his fervent admiration—and to some extent his emulation—of the music of the past, notably the music of the Baroque composer Henry Purcell. Britten sought to capture what he identified in Purcell’s music as a synthesis of “clarity, brilliance, tenderness, and strangeness.”

The Prelude and Fugue for Eighteen Strings—like any work classified as a prelude and fugue—inevitably calls to mind the precedent established by Bach. But like the Opus 87 Preludes and Fugues of Britten’s contemporary and confidant Dmitry Shostakovich, Britten’s Prelude and Fugue superimposes onto that Baroque tradition his own uniquely modern perspective. The ensemble comprises eighteen distinct string parts: ten violins, three violas, three cellos, and two double basses. The Prelude begins with...
an impassioned exchange of loud pizzicato and declamatory chords, anchored by octaves in the double basses. Two distinct melodies emerge: one, presented in quiet solidarity by seventeen of the players, serves as a backdrop to a plaintive violin solo. At the close of the prelude, the music works its way back to the declamatory chords of the opening, now voiced in an expectant pianissimo.

The launch of the fugue, marked Allegro energico, brings an abrupt change in character. The sprightly fugue subject is presented in succession by each of the eighteen instruments, beginning with the second bass, then the first, followed by the cellos and violas, one after the other, up to the first violin, steadily building a massive orchestral sonority.

The fugue traverses various episodes of different characters. In one such episode, the inner strings—second violins and violas—sing a long, sustained melody, while the first violins dance around fragments of the fugal subject. That music’s sweeping lyricism soon yields to a more puckish section, marked by loud pizzicato and fragments of the subject jumpily tossed back and forth throughout the ensemble.

Britten’s management of eighteen individual voices is particularly impressive with the stretto near the end of the fugue: he staggers overlapping entrances of the subject, again in each voice from the second bass up to the first violin, as he builds towards the music’s intoxicating climax.

A coda to the fugue turns dour; the plaintive violin solo from the prelude returns, leading to a reprise of the prelude’s opening chords. But the ebullience of the fugue has the last word.

—Patrick Castillo