Program
Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87 [Sel.]
Dmitri Shostakovich
Born: September 25, 1906
Died: August 9, 1975
Composed: 1950-1951
Last PCMS performance: Daniil Trifonov, March 2017
Duration: 40 minutes

Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960
Franz Schubert
Born: January 31, 1797
Died: November 19, 1828
Composed: 1828
Last PCMS performance: Andreas Haefliger, March 2011
Duration: 40 minutes

Just back from a trip to Leipzig in the early autumn of 1950 where he heard Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier at the Bicentennial Bach Competition played by the Russian pianist Tatiana Nikolaeva, Shostakovich began his own series of 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87, based on Bach’s model. He composed them quickly, starting on October 10, 1950, and finishing on February 23, 1951. While his work would pay homage to Bach, Shostakovich’s work would have several fundamental differences. First, the order of the individual pieces would be organized around the circle of fifths with a prelude and fugue in the relative minor following each major key piece rather than in ascending semi-tonal order of Bach’s work. Second, Shostakovich’s pieces would be composed in order -- that is, C major - A minor followed by G major - E minor followed by D major - B minor -- and, more significantly, this order would have a sort of subliminal narrative sub-text, taking the music from the “innocent” tonal world of the C major Prelude and Fugue to the profound and sublime severity of the concluding D minor Prelude and Fugue. Finally, Shostakovich’s work, although conservative in its counterpoint and harmony -- that is, there are no examples of invertible or reversible themes or counterpoint and the pieces are for the most part recognizably tonal in language -- is still clearly the work of a modernist composer; his counterpoint and harmony may be conservative but the emotional and spiritual worlds of the preludes and fugues is at once sincere and ironic. The result is a work which can not only stand comparison with Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, it is both Shostakovich’s masterpiece for the piano and one of the contrapuntal masterpieces of the twentieth century.

After a short lifetime of incessant musical creativity, Franz Schubert died on November 19, 1828. His final year was one of astonishing difficulties and achievements, haunted by ill health and poverty. The finest of Schubert’s music was as yet unknown and unperformed. What little fame he had was largely confined to Vienna and was based on the popularity of the songs and piano trifles he seemed able to create without effort in huge quantities. It was the steady stream of dances and marches intended for private amateur entertainment in well-to-do homes that just barely paid the bills and brought a measure of condescending recognition. But by August he was ill enough that he had joined his brother at what was to be his final address. Certainly, a syphilitic would have been aware of the gloominess of any long-term prognosis. Schubert would have experienced the debilitation of the disease, but did he know that his end would come with such catastrophic swiftness? Is this the awareness we hear in the B-flat Sonata, the last of the three? It may have been inconceivable to him that this last, most inward-looking creation could be anything more than an act of private conversation. What, then, do we make of the first movement’s depiction of a dreamlike calm when it is disturbed by a menacing distant trill? How are we to respond to the desolate minor-key sadness of the second movement when a ray of redemptive serenity breaks through? Is the third movement Scherzo as carefree as it seems? And is any consistent approach to the enigmatic finale possible, or do we embrace the ambiguity which the great 20th-century Schubert champion Artur Schnabel described when he put words to the opening theme of the last movement: “Ich weiss nicht, ob ich lache, ich weiss nicht, ob ich weine” (I know not if I’m laughing, I know not if I’m crying)?