of the Etudes. But there is ample reward in Alexeev's reserve. He may not 'emit light and be surrounded in an air of witchcraft' (a description of Scriabin's own playing) but his overall musicianship brings its own rewards, and he has been well recorded. Bryce Morrison

**Shostakovich**

Preludes and Fugues, Op 87

Craig Sheppard

Roméo ® 7315/16 (62' • DDD)

Recorded live at Meany Theater, Seattle, April 2015

In his accompanying notes to this live recording, Craig Sheppard quotes Kurt Sanderling’s comment that if Shostakovich’s 24 Preludes and Fugues are his crowning and austere keyboard masterpiece, they are also his most ‘intimate diary’. This surely hints at the inwardness and complexity of an awe-inspiring opus created under painful and troubling circumstances. Composed at white heat in 1950 and 1951, Op 87 is a reply to the Soviet authorities’ scorn for music beyond their comprehension and a reaching-out to those with less banal musical expectations. First performed by Tatjana Nikolaeva, their dedicatee, in 1952, they are a ‘testament to triumph over adversity’ (Sheppard) and a worthy successor to Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Generally, short preludes are followed by extended fugues, both understandably a witness to extreme mood-swings and uncertain tempo. Even a direction such as *trillum* is tinged with irony and the overall effect is powerful and sardonic. The anguish of Prelude No 14, expressed in shuddering *tremolando*, hints at the pressure Shostakovich worked under, while the innocent and beguiling start to Prelude No 13 leads typically to vehemence and unrest. Again, and characteristically, the crazy-paving Fugue No 15 turns mordant wit into savagery, and it is only in Fugue No 24 that defiance turns to victory in a massive carillon of Moscow bells.

The demands both musical and technical are immense and were met by Nikolaeva and Melnikov (not forgetting selections by Richter, Gililas and a single offering of No 15 from Terence Judd, whose virtuosity in the 1978 Tchaikovsky Piano Competition set his Moscow audience by the ears) with unfailing skill and dedication. Sheppard now joins their company in performances of unfailing lucidity and musicianship. His previous recordings of Bach’s major keyboard works – to say nothing of the daunting fugue from Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* Sonata – tell us that he has no fear of even the most intimidating part-writing. And here, clearly at the zenith of his career, he achieves a brilliantly inclusive poise and brizo that go to the very heart of Shostakovich. He ends the Fugue No 24 in a blaze of *maestoso* glory and a storm of cheers. Finely recorded, this is a memorable issue. Bryce Morrison

Selected comparisons:

Nikolaeva (850) (HYPER CD14490)

Melnikov (810) (BARM CD14490 1999/92)

**Vieuxtemps**


La chasse, Op 32 No 3

Reito Kuppel

Vieuxtemps was among the foremost of the post-Paganini generation of violinists-

20th Century Harpsichord Music*

**Durey** Dix Inventions Française Deux Pièces

**Martinu** Deux Impromptus. Deux Pièces

**Harpischord Sonata Poulen** Suite française

Christopher D Lewis

Naxos ® 8 573376 (60' • DDD)

The presence of the pioneering harpsichordist Landowska in 20th-century Paris inspired many composers to write for her. Instrument of choice was a heavily cased Pleyel model with a keyboard and a wide variety of registers designed for the concert hall rather than the salon. Since Christopher Lewis is not ‘authenticity minded’, he has recently restored 1930s Pleyel.

Although Landowska did not record any of these pieces, it wouldn’t be presumptuous to read a few ‘Vande’ into the rhythmic swagger and speed of articulation that Lewis brings to Poulen’s *Suite française*: the grace notes, Pavane’s rolled chords or the Compagnon masterful finger *legato*, for example. In turn, the oaken timbrel lute stop in the impact of the dissonances through the first of Francais’s previously unreleased *Deux Pièces*. Of the three Martinu works, the three-movement Sonata holds the most interest with its disarmingly simple melodies that give way into unpredictable, asymmetrically playful directions. Yet the first of his 1935 *Pièces* features gaily slow-moving music that benefit from the Pleyel’s weight.

Although Louis Durey’s *Ten Inventions* (another first recording) were originally scored for various instrumental combinations, they resonate beautifully on the Pleyel from one register to another such as No 3’s slowly cascading passages, No 7’s wide interval leaps and No 8’s Bach allusions and the modal No 10’s closely overlapping counterpoint. Kevin Lewis for exploring a fascinating composer of 20th-century harpsichord history in the right way, and to the terrific booklet by Graham Wade. Jed Distler