The Twenty-Four Preludes, Op. 53 (hereinafter referred to as The Preludes) were published in 1988 and are unique in their relationship to other works in this genre. Kapustin follows the key sequence set forth by Chopin in his Op. 22 Preludes: all major and minor keys beginning with C major, traversing the circle of fifths with each major key followed by its relative minor. Though there are musical figures that reappear throughout The Preludes, this does not seem to be an attempt to create structural integrity through repeated, unifying motives.

Composers began writing sets of preludes in the 17th century, and though these were often grouped by key sequence, composers have followed several distinct methods of organization. Though there were others before him, Bach established a method of chromatic organization with his two sets of twenty-four preludes and fugues in all keys, published as The Well-Tempered Clavier, Books I and II. Several composers have followed this organizational method, including twentieth-century composers York Bowen, Robert Cumming, Fernando Lopes-Graça, Niels Viggo Bentzon, and Henry Martin. Though influenced by Bach, Chopin chose to compose preludes without fugues and to organize his set around the circle of fifths. Chopin’s influence is easily as strong as Bach’s and many composers have followed his lead in organizing their own sets, including Felix Blumenfeld, Ferrucio Busoni, Dmitri Kabalevsky, and Dmitri

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Shostakovich. Robert Casadesus, Alexander Scriabin, and Rodion Shchedrin (preludes and fugues) also composed their sets with the same structure but with some enharmonic equivalents. Two of the most popular and influential twentieth-century preludes were by composers who did not group them according to key. Sergei Rachmaninov composed 24 preludes in all keys, but did not group them in a set order and published them in three collections over the course of his lifetime (Op. 2, 23, and 32). Claude Debussy’s compositional method did not follow such strictly defined rules and his preludes were composed in two books of twelve pieces, but without any defined key relationships or tonal organization.

Though composers from many countries have contributed to the genre of preludes, it is interesting to note that a large number of Russian composers have done so. This list includes Scriabin, Blumenfeld, Cui, Rachmaninov, Glière, Shostakovich, Kabalevsky, Soulima Stravinsky, and Shchedrin. Kapustin has doubly contributed with his Twenty-Four Preludes, Op. 53 as well as the Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues for Piano, Op. 82. Kapustin’s organization of the Preludes and Fugues is interesting in that it does not fall neatly into any of Beuerman’s classifications: major keys traverse the circle of fifths, while the minor ones that follow are a major third below. So the sequence begins C, g♯, F, c♯, etc.

The fashionable twentieth century idea of a composition as an inviolable whole does not apply to The Preludes. When asked whether they should be played as a cycle,
Kapustin responded, “Actually, no. I think they’re too long that way—pianists can play any part of it. It doesn’t matter.”

I have selected the Preludes for this study because these short pieces, in contrast to the longer sonatas, more closely resemble the jazz models Kapustin emulates. A collection of twenty-four short pieces also invites a broad stylistic range within the scope of one collection, and Kapustin takes full advantage of the opportunity. Analyses of specific Preludes will illuminate the broad range of his stylistic references.