



# Mystic visions

Sofia Gubaidulina has for many years made stringed instruments the vessel for her powerful, religiously inspired music. As the Russian composer turns 80, DAVID KETTLE asks leading soloists what makes her music so meaningful, profound and popular with performers

**P**ERHAPS THE MOST TELLING COMMENT IN Michael Kurtz's 2001 biography of Sofia Gubaidulina is this:

'Religion is an essential part of Russian existence. What we in the West would disparage as speculation or mysticism is entirely acceptable in Russia.'

Certainly a whole different set of values seems to apply when listening to Gubaidulina's heady, exotic, often religiously inspired music – or indeed playing it. Her works tell spiritual stories, ponder profound themes, even adopt religious symbolism in their forms and gestures. But why is it that Gubaidulina, who celebrates her 80th birthday this year, seems to use string music to convey her deepest mystical messages?

Violinist Gidon Kremer has had a long and fruitful musical relationship with the composer, and is the dedicatee of the 1980 violin concerto *Offertorium*, which made the composer's name in the West. He agrees that her music touches on some profound subjects: 'She is not an entertainer. She is not a composer who composes music for composers. Each piece by Sofia is motivated by impulses that come from the depths of its author. We are connected with some mystical meaning of the sounds.'

Gubaidulina was born in the Tatar Republic during some of Stalin's most brutal anti-Christian purges, yet religion was central to her from an early age – she cites pondering the wonders of the sky as her first memory, and once she had started composing at the age of seven or eight, her two passions came together, as she admits in Kurtz's biography: 'Music naturally blended with religion, and sound, straightaway, became sacred for me.'

**SHE'S A COMPOSER FOR WHOM RELIGION** and spirituality have the deepest of resonances. And it can't be denied that many of her profoundest utterances involve stringed instruments. The violin concerto *Offertorium* uses the destruction and reassembly of a Bach theme to symbolise death and rebirth. The dark, powerful Viola Concerto (1996) seems to deal in matters of love and hate, good and evil; and her double viola concerto *Two Paths* (1998) has a New Testament theme. Cynthia Phelps, one of the double concerto's original soloists, explains: 'It's based on the Biblical story of Mary and Martha, and how Mary chooses to ascend the heights of spirituality, and Martha stays and takes care of Lazarus, remaining very rooted in daily chores and earthly responsibilities. You can hear the faith and purity of Mary in the very high extremes of one viola line, and the insistent, earth-bound groundedness of Martha in the second viola part, with its low, growling trills.'

Gubaidulina's *Canticle of the Sun* (1997), for solo cello with chorus and percussion, is based on texts by St Francis of Assisi glorifying the planets, the elements and life itself (although critics at its premiere considered it more a glorification of Mstislav Rostropovich, the work's dedicatee). In the recent violin concerto *In tempus praesens* (2007), the soloist embodies the spirit Sophia, a symbol of wisdom central to orthodox Christianity, whom Gubaidulina describes as 'the female aspect of God – the creative principle of divine existence'.

Even in Gubaidulina's smaller-scale religious works, strings still play a central role. Her vision of Christ's last pronouncements from the cross (*Seven Words*, 1982) is for solo



*Offertorium*  
dedicatee Gidon  
Kremer with  
Gubaidulina and  
music journalist  
Anna Genina



SUSAN JOHANN



New York  
Philharmonic violists  
Cynthia Phelps and  
Rebecca Young  
(above) gave  
the premiere  
of *Two Paths*

CHRISTIAN STEINER

## 'When a finger touches a string, a transformation occurs; a spiritual force is transformed into sound'

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

cello, bayan (a Russian accordion) and string orchestra. And *In croce* (1979), for cello and bayan, uses its musical structures and themes to meditate on the meaning of the cross.

**WHY DOES SHE CHOOSE STRINGED INSTRUMENTS TO** articulate some of her profoundest religious themes? The answer isn't readily apparent. Gubaidulina isn't a string player herself – she studied piano and composition in Kazan, capital of the Tatar Republic, and at the Moscow Conservatoire. And she has experimented wildly with instrumentation throughout her composing career: as a student, she wrote an intermezzo for the outlandish combination of eight trumpets, sixteen harps and percussion, and her symphony *Stimmen... verstummen...* (1986) dispenses with instruments entirely in a silent movement for solo conductor.

Why string music is so central to her output is perhaps more to do with her close relationships with string performers. Gidon Kremer has been one of her longest-standing musical friends, as he explains: 'I have been privileged to know Sofia for more than

35 years. Each performance of her music has enriched my life as an artist and as a human being.' It was a chance meeting in a taxi in 1977 that led to Kremer asking Gubaidulina for the concerto that has become probably her best-known work, but his defection to the West in 1980 jeopardised the premiere of *Offertorium*, meaning that the score had to be smuggled out of the Soviet Union by her publisher for its 1981 premiere in Vienna. Since then Kremer has performed the work hundreds of times around the world, and the pair have remained close. 'I am always taken by Sofia's honesty and warmth,' he explains. 'She has always been radiant, enthusiastic, open-minded and enchanting. Most of all Sofia cherishes silence – it's no secret that her phone line is mostly disconnected.'

Like Kremer and *Offertorium*, it was Yuri Bashmet who asked Gubaidulina for a viola concerto, and Rostropovich who requested the cello work that later became *Canticle of the Sun*. And new-music patron Paul Sacher commissioned a violin concerto from her specifically for Anne-Sophie Mutter, which in 2007 resulted in *In tempus praesens*. Indeed, it was the two women's shared name – Sofia – that inspired the work's subject matter.

**IN KURTZ'S BIOGRAPHY, GUBAIDULINA REFERS TO** composing as 'a kind of worship', so it's no surprise that she views performing in spiritual terms as well. Describing Kremer's >

playing in Jan Schmidt-Garre's film *Sophia: Biography of a Violin Concerto*, she says, 'I was impressed by how he devoted himself to his music, that intimate feeling between his fingers and the strings, as if the entire strength of his sound crossed over to the strings. The point where the strings and fingers meet is the place of offering.' She goes further in the Kurtz biography, stating, 'An instrument is a living being. When a finger touches a string or a bow touches a bridge, a transformation occurs; a spiritual force is transformed into sound.'

So it wouldn't be going too far to say that Gubaidulina's string soloists and their instruments are the spiritual centres of her religious dramas, and indeed that they convey the mystical messages of her works. That's reflected in the music she writes for them. Gubaidulina's solo string lines themselves sometimes dwell obsessively on single notes, and at other times explore the heights and depths of the instrument's register (*Offertorium* ends on a stratospherically high D that the soloist holds for 20 bars). But they always offer a huge amount of freedom for individual interpretation. There are many passages marked using only the vaguest of rhythms, or cells that are to be repeated according to the soloist's will – the composer seems to be asking her soloists to use their own intuition in conveying her message.

For violinist Irvine Arditti, whose quartet premiered Gubaidulina's String Quartet no.3 (1987) and who has also performed *Offertorium*, her gender is key. 'Gubaidulina's world is very female, I think,' he says. 'You can detect a female hand in the writing – there's a certain delicacy in her music that you don't find in many other composers. Sometimes female composers don't write with such force, and she calls for some very interesting effects, such as tapping the fingers on the strings.' (Putting any stylistic traits down to a composer's sex might be a controversial view, but it's worth bearing in mind that Gubaidulina herself explored differences between male and female creativity in her 1983 vocal work *Perception*.)

**GUBAIDULINA USES THE FULL PANOPLY OF AVANT-GARDE techniques in her music, but instead of producing an arid, abstract sound world concerned only with itself, her creations – however dense or dissonant – always seem to point to a greater truth, often a religious or spiritual message. As Rebecca Young, Phelps's partner in *Two Paths*, says, 'It's like there's a narrative going on, and you can see meanings behind the gestures.'**



Mutter, Gubaidulina and Gergiev during the recording of *In tempus praesens*

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GIDON KREMER

And that's something that makes her music immediately attractive to performers. Yes, it's modern, challenging, demanding of players and listeners alike, but there's a real sense of meaning behind the music. As Kremer notes, 'The challenge is not to miss the message behind the technical difficulties, not to miss the overtones behind the notes.' Phelps explains: 'She's working with a storyline, and there's a lot of emotional energy that she translates into physical notes.'

What are the challenges of bringing this kind of music to life? It seems that, if anything, having a story makes things easier. As Young explains, 'I like to feel like I'm playing a role anyway. I tell my students, "When you're playing something, don't just play >



the notes – make up a story for it.” Here somebody else pretty much did that for us.’ Kremer also finds that having a theme aids his performance: ‘Sofia’s music doesn’t have empty places where you stumble over the meaning. Its flow is very genuine and very expressive.’

Given her profound subjects, performers preparing for the premieres of her works might expect the composer herself to be otherworldly and hard to pin down. Not a bit of it. ‘She’s so sweet, and she couldn’t have been kinder,’ says Phelps of preparations for the premiere of *Two Paths*. ‘But boy, that woman really knows what she wants! She’s very gentle, but underneath quite determined, and very committed to her beliefs.’ Arditti agrees: ‘She’s wonderful as a person – it was very interesting to be with her. But she knew precisely what she wanted, and she was very articulate.’

**SO PROFOUND THEMES, A STORY TO TELL, LOTS OF freedom of expression, and clear guidance from the composer – all good reasons why Gubaidulina’s string music has become so popular with performers. Given that she’s not a string player herself, how well does she write for the instruments? ‘I feel that Sofia is very well informed about the capabilities of any instrument she composes for,’ says Kremer. Phelps admires the viola writing in *Two Paths*: ‘She is able to get a lot of colour in her music, and the viola is a colour instrument, so this is good.’ Young**

is more direct: ‘With some new pieces you play, you think, boy, this guy is obviously not a string player. But it’s not like that at all – some of it is technically difficult, but that doesn’t mean it’s unplayable. I wouldn’t say it was very challenging.’

Arditti takes things even further, and suggests another reason why Gubaidulina’s music is so popular with performers: ‘She knows very well how to write for the instruments, but she’s not really extending things. It’s well within the capabilities of most classical players. That’s why a lot of people play her music. It’s user-friendly, so to speak.’ Which is no bad thing, according to Arditti: ‘I’d say you approach her music

like you would other classical music rather than like other contemporary music. There’s a feeling of great musicality in the traditional sense. There’s too much alienation with some contemporary composers. If some composers are writing the sort of music that is understood by audiences who don’t specialise in contemporary music, that’s good. It’s not good only to live in a ghetto.’

Is this the key element? It certainly plays a significant part. But in combining a musical message with solo lines that allow freedom and individuality but don’t place overly strenuous demands on the performer, Gubaidulina has created some radiant, transcendent string music that is equally valued by listeners and performers. And as she reaches the age of 80, her creativity shows no signs of diminishing. ■



Phelps and Young in a recent performance of *Two Paths* in New York

CHRIS LEE/NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

## GUBAIDULINA’S STRING MUSIC: WHERE TO START LISTENING

### In croce (1979)

Gubaidulina’s symbolism is well to the fore in this meditation on the cross for cello and bayan (a version for cello and organ also exists). The two parts approach and cross over each other, finally coming together in an ethereal conclusion.

**Julius Berger (cello)**  
**Stefan Hussong (bayan)**

WERGO WER 6684 2

### Offertorium (1980)

Gubaidulina’s breakthrough piece, a violin concerto that deconstructs the theme from Bach’s *Musical Offering* and reassembles it in a glowing, transcendent chorale.

**Gidon Kremer (violin) Boston Symphony Orchestra/Charles Dutoit**

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON 471 625-2

### Seven Words (1982)

A meditation on Christ’s final words on the cross, with a solo cello representing Christ, bayan as the realm of God, and string orchestra providing a commentary.

**Maria Kliegel (cello) Elsbeth Moser (bayan) Camerata Transsylvanica/György Selmeczi**

NAXOS 8.553557

### Dancer on a Tightrope (1993)

This short piece for violin and piano shows a lighter side to Gubaidulina’s music in its exhilarating dance rhythms.

**Gidon Kremer (violin)**  
**Vadim Sakharov (piano)**

BIS CD-898

### Viola Concerto (1996)

Dedicated to Yuri Bashmet, this dark, brooding piece really exploits the viola’s rich colours. Gubaidulina’s inclusion of a string quartet tuned a quartertone lower than the rest of the orchestra only emphasises the work’s sombre sound world.

**Yuri Bashmet (viola) Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theatre/Valery Gergiev**

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON 471 494-2

### In tempus praesens (2007)

Gubaidulina’s most recent string concerto is a stormy work for Anne-Sophie Mutter that explores the creative spirit.

**Anne-Sophie Mutter (violin) London Symphony Orchestra/Valery Gergiev**

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON 477 7450