UKARIA 24

about the music

Friday 25 – Sunday 27 August 2017
Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931)

Like Dmitry Shostakovich, Sofia Gubaidulina’s iconoclastic style met with stiff resistance from the musical establishment of the Soviet Union. Born in Chistopol in 1931 to a Tatar father and an ethnic Russian mother, Gubaidulina was exposed to music from the age of 5, going on to study piano and composition at the Kazan Conservatory where she graduated in 1954. Furthering her studies in Moscow with Nikolay Peyko, and then later with Vissarion Shebalin, it was around this time her music began to cultivate a reputation for being ‘irresponsible’ for its exploration of micro-chromaticism, and was subsequently denounced as ‘noisy mud instead of real musical innovation’ at the Sixth Congress of the Composers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

‘Being blacklisted and so unperformed gave me artistic freedom, even if I couldn’t earn much money,’ she told The Guardian in 2013. ‘I could write what I wanted without compromise.’ Like many composers before her, film scores provided both a financial supplement and a medium with which to experiment artistically. But the quality of her compositions did not go unnoticed: Dmitry Shostakovich praised a symphony she had written for her final examination in 1959, and advised her to continue down her ‘own incorrect path’.

‘I was freer than him [Shostakovich] or Prokofiev. They suffered so much from politics. We didn’t. It wasn’t life or death for us.’

- Sofia Gubaidulina

Gubaidulina earned her international reputation in the 1980s when Gidon Kremer championed her violin concerto Offertorium. Like Osvaldo Golijov, Gubaidulina was commissioned by the Internationale Bachakademier Stuttgart to write Johannes-Passion in commemoration of the death of Johann Sebastian Bach in 2000. Other notable works include Hommage à T.S. Eliot for soprano and octet (1987), a second violin concerto In Tempus Praesens (performed by Anne-Sophie Mutter at the Lucerne Festival in 2007), The Light of the End for large orchestra (2003), and Sieben Worte (Seven Words) for bayan, cello and strings (1982).
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Sieben Worte for bayan, cello and strings (1982)

A devout member of the Russian Orthodox Church, Gubaidulina associated music with notions of mysticism and transcendence, using it as an escape from the oppressing socio-political environs of Soviet Russia. Her style is characterised by the aversion of conventional triadic structures and tonal centres, replacing them with frequent chromaticism, glissandi (a musical metaphor for the steps to the divine) and cluster chords, relying on the contrapuntal interaction of voices to drive her music forward.

In 1645, the German composer Heinrich Schütz was the first to attempt to capture through music *Die Sieben Worte Jesu Christi am Kreuz* (The Seven Last Words of Our Redeemer and Saviour Jesus Christ spoken on the Holy Cross) – a tradition that numerous other notable composers have since perpetuated. Most notably, in 1786, Franz Joseph Hadyn wrote *The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross* – originally for orchestra and subsequently adapted in versions for string quartet, solo piano, and as an oratorio. Sofia Guibadulina made her own contribution to this tradition in 1982, with *Sieben Worte* (Seven Words) for bayan (a Russian accordion), cello and strings. First performed in Moscow by cellist Vladimir Toncha and bayan soloist Friedrich Lips, the work contains much of the characteristics that can be seen as the quintessential Guibadulina.

In addition to being based on a five-bar quotation from Schütz’s original version, *Sieben Worte* features prominent use of musical metaphors. The long-drawn sounds of the cello, together with glissando crossings in the orchestra (from unison to octaves and back again) outline the figure of the cross, while the accordion serves as both a visual and sonic metaphor for the lungs and ribcage.
The cello begins solo (Vater, bergib ihnen, den sie wissen nicht, was sit tun [Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do]) with plucked strings and scraping dissonances, echoed by the accordion in a mirror dialogue, with shimmering tremolos that build in intensity before becoming unified. Each of the subsequent movements are prefaced with a kind of orchestral ritornello – a ghostly chorale that serves dual purposes as both pacifier and intensifier of the icy chromatic dissonance.

The dialogue between cello and accordion becomes more vigorous and strident in Weib, siehe, das ist dein Sohn-Siehe, das ist deine Mutter (Woman, behold thy son, Son, behold thy mother). Tension builds as chromatic slides become more frequent. Here a brief melody surfaces in the cello, throbbing with brooding intensity and pain. The ensuing orchestral interlude this time culminates in a striking dissonance. The accordion expands and contracts with increasing volatility in Wahrlich, ich sage dir-Heute wirst du mit mi rim Paradiese sein (Verily, I say unto thee, Today thou shalt be with me in paradi), while erratic cluster chords provide a violent, confronting listening experience. The accordion takes over the melody, accompanied by the cello in deep, painful drones.

The ethereal strings enter once again, rising to a striking dissonance in the upper register in Mein Gott, mein, warum hast du mich verlassen? (My God, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?) More tremolos follow in the accordion, echoed by the cello. The accordion stretches to its full width (exposing the ribcage) and becomes increasingly soloistic, with rapid scalic ascensions and clusters in the upper register, as the orchestra joins in the dialogue, exacerbating the dissonance. Grating glissandos evoke the stretching and tearing of flesh.

A brief respite comes with Mich dürstet (I Thirst), the orchestra rich and mournful. But the tension builds again - this time in the cello - through plucked strings of increasing rapidity. Glissandi become virtually ubiquitous; the clusters in the accordion now savage and brutal.

The dissonance continues to escalate in Es ist vollbracht (It is accomplished) as both cello and accordion become progressively disjunct and deranged. The strings eventually drown out both instruments, until the tension finally breaks. In another striking metaphor, the cello now plays on the bridge, before passing behind it in the final movement, Vater, ich befehle meinen Geist in deine Hände (Father, into they hands I commend my spirit), symbolising the entry to another world. Rapid fingers click on keys in the accordion, and echoes of divine voices can be heard amongst the droning strings. The tension finally recedes, the music ending quietly.

Notes by Dylan Henderson

Sofia Gubaidulina’s Sieben Worte will be performed by James Crabb (classical accordion), Julian Smiles (cello) and Momentum Ensemble at UKARIA 24 on Sunday, 27 August.

Tickets available at www.ukaria.com/book