

In this piece what interested me was to create the circumstances for the play of contrasts, where the precise dance rhythm of the violin overcomes its inclusion in the eventful course of the piano part.

For example, this is achieved by the deformation of this rhythm by playing on the strings of the piano with a glass tumbler; by the gradual transformation of these transparent harmonic sounds into aggressive fortissimo on the bass strings by the serrated bottom of the tumbler; by the menacing sound of this rhythm when it is performed by the pianist using metal thimbles and, finally—the main event in the form of the piece by the transition by the pianist from strings to keyboard.

All these events are overcome by the violinist in an ecstatic dance that ascends finally to the upper register of the instrument to tremolo double harmonics; risk, overcoming, the flight of fantasy, art, dance.”

The **Concerto for Bassoon and Low Strings** (1975) is the first work she wrote for Popov. Gubaidulina describes the structure of the work as follows: “The first, third and fifth movements represent sections of sonata form. The first movement is the exposition (in which the main material is first set out), the third the development (in which the previous themes are transformed) and the fifth is the recapitulation (where the themes return in their original state). The second and fourth movements are intermezzi. The movements are moreover linked together: the episode that ends the first movement also begins the third, and the fifth movement begins with the same material which concluded the third.”

A remarkable range of color and expression are used to explore the dramatic tension between the soloist and the strings. This is in some ways in contrast to—even a parody of—the traditional romantic concerto—the idea of soloist as romantic hero. In an interview with Vera Lukomsky for the *Tempo* magazine, Gubaidulina says: “The Concerto for Bassoon and Low Strings is very theatrical. The bassoon represents a lyric hero; the low strings personify a “low” and aggressive crowd, which destroys the hero. Their pizzicato and col legno sound like pinching and beating.”

Sofia Gubaidulina was born in 1931 in Chistopol in the former U.S.S.R. Tatar Republic. She finished her studies at the Conservatory of Kasan in 1954 and then studied with Nikolai Pejko—an assistant of Dmitri Shostakovich—until 1959 at the Moscow Conservatory. Following that, she completed post-graduate studies with Vissarion Schebalin.

Sofia Gubaidulina has been a freelance composer since 1963. In 1975 she founded the group Astraea with fellow composers V. Artyomov and V. Suslin, which improvised on Russian, Caucasian, mid- and eastern Asian folk and ritual instruments, which has greatly influenced her work. Since the beginning of the 1980s, her works have garnered a large international following, and today she is considered, alongside Schnittke, Denisov and Silvestrov, a leading composer of the post-Soviet Russian generation. Aside from that, she is now also considered one of the world’s greatest living composers. The recipient of many awards from across the globe, her work is documented in an impressive number of CD and DVD recordings.

Typical of Gubaidulina’s works is the nearly complete absence of absolute music, with her work containing, almost always, something that transcends its being absorbed in its own abstract musical constructs. This “transcendental” idea might be a poetic text hidden beneath the music or between the lines, a ritual, or some instrumental “narrative”. A delightful paradox follows: in a way all this is captured *in* the music (some occasional theatrical embellishments aside), only to draw our attention *away* from the internal machinations of the music’s very clever and thought-out construction.

In her own words, “the goal is to achieve the sort of relationship to traditional and new composition techniques in which the composer masters all means at her or his disposal—new and traditional—but in a way that she or he does not lend more attention to one or the other. There are those composers who consciously build their works, but I count myself among those who ‘cultivate’ their works. This means that the entire perception of my world forms the roots of a tree, and from there the piece grows branches and leaves. One can call it new, but they are just leaves, and from this perspective, they are still traditional, old. The greatest influences on my work have been Dmitri Shostakovich and Anton Webern. Although these influences cannot be seen or heard in my music, even so these two composers taught me the most important lesson: to be myself.”

—Mark Menzies

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

PROGRAM 2: THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE BEGINNING

MAY 15, 2011 | 7:00 PM

presented by
REDCAT
Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater
California Institute of the Arts



SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

PROGRAM 2: THE JOURNEY (BACK) TO THE BEGINNING...

Sunday, May 15, 2011, 7:00pm

PROGRAM

In the Beginning There Was Rhythm (1984)

Anjilla Piazza, Isaac Watts, Dominique LaRussa, Nicholas Baker, Jodie Landau, Sean Woodman, Tony Gennaro, percussion; David Johnson, conductor

Duo Sonata for Two Bassoons (1977)

Archibald Carey, Julie Feves, bassoons

Quaternion (1996)

Derek Stein, Aniela Perry, Elizabeth Rettig, Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick, cellos

intermission

Dancer on a Tightrope (1993);

Mark Menzies, violin Dzovig Markarian, piano

Concerto for Bassoon and Low Strings (1975)

Julie Feves, bassoon
Elizabeth Rettig, Melody Yunn, Thea Mesirow, Iván Bohigas, cellos; Barry Newton, Carter Wallace, Ivan Johnson, basses; Mark Menzies, crowd referee

Sofia Gubaidulina's presence at these concerts has been funded by a generous grant from the Trust for Mutual Understanding.

In Radical Order: Soul's Journey

Sofia Gubaidulina in Los Angeles

One of the living greats, and understandably surrounded by much mystique, composer Sofia Gubaidulina makes a rare U.S. visit on the collaborative invitation of CalArts and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The five programs CalArts present this week which begin this visit present a kaleidoscopic view of a career that has brought astonishing and moving additions to the world's musical culture.

Illuminated from within with an original (radical) form of spiritual intensity, Gubaidulina's start was in the context of the Soviet regimes of the last century that were bleakly hostile to creative originality, let alone anything with "spiritual" aspirations, as are implied or explicit within all of her music. As all of that changed, and Sofia's music and unique artistic contribution have gently, but undeniably asserted themselves, so have her opportunities to focus the intensity of this inner light in abundance: now in her 79th year, compositions of the last decade or two reveal, with ever greater vitality, a creative spark and expressive mastery...

...well, that's how I thought of these series of events last year when the planning began in earnest to welcome Sofia Gubaidulina to Los Angeles. Now that we are in the middle of the preparations of the chosen repertoire in the weeks prior to the performances of these programs, what comes to mind is a phrase Sofia wrote about *Dancer on a Tightrope*: "...dancing on a tightrope is also a metaphor... : life as risk, and art as flight into another existence."

So, in answer, I think I can presume to honestly sum up our community's response to this truth about artmaking: "We sincerely hope the risk we feel we take playing your glorious music, Sofia, will take us all into those other existences you have already hinted to us in our rehearsals. Nothing you've written is an easy piece, or a creation of glib effects, and it is the reaching beyond the normal—and the exhilaration of that dancing—that has already vitalized us in a most special way, even before you have arrived to hear our rehearsals. We sincerely hope, Sofia, from the depths of our hearts, that the result we present to you, and to the audience which shares this with you, contains an inkling of what you had in mind!"

The Journey (Back) to the Beginning...

In the Beginning There Was Rhythm (1984) surely means a story about rhythms, but also about the "rhythm of form" that Gubaidulina so often speaks about; in other words, the dimensionality of an "instrument-drama": and toward what, it is implied, that these instrumental "personae" reach.

About time, Sofia writes: "The most important goal of a work of art, in my view, is transforming time. Human beings have within themselves this other time, the time of the soul lingering in the spiritual. But it can be repressed by our quotidian experience of time."

Through the use of percussion instruments, there is a heightened capacity to explore the richness of sound, its depth and its complexity. That's a depth of experiencing time in the context of the complexities of different vibrations. The dramatic unfolding of *In the Beginning There Was Rhythm* organizes these vibrations in ways that lead us down unexpected paths and into unpredictable trajectories, perhaps startling even to the sounds themselves.

Music for multiples of a single instrument shows up regularly in Sofia Gubaidulina's output. The result is almost always an abutment of the instruments' radicalized capacity for expression. Or radical expression. Or radical abutment—the order of the words works each time. The **Duo Sonata for 2 Bassoons** (1977) was written for the Russian bassoon virtuoso, Valeri Popov. The mid-section of the work makes startling use of multiphonics, flutter-tongue, glissando-like passages, and a long ascending microtonal scale in the second bassoon. The idea of a radical kind of contrast is established from the beginning: an opening descending scale in the first bassoon and a leaping motive in the second bassoon—connected by tremolos—define the material for the first section. As a formal as well as textural contrast, the second section develops contours and colors evocative of Orthodox chant—radicalizing the experience by adding microtones along the way. The opening material returns in the end—the work concludes with a descending scale and tremolos—characteristically off-set by a multiphonic.

Quaternion (1996), a work for four celli, is dedicated to Vladimir Tonkha. The literal sense of the title is ambiguous: four parts, voices in quarter-tones. Of the four celli, the third and fourth are tuned a quarter-tone lower; this scordatura is kept from the beginning to the end of the work. In this way the strict scale of twenty-four steps becomes a pitch scale in which all the intervals are played with absolute precision.

There is a drama of the intervals expanding in quarter-tone steps. In response to this expansion a kind of dramatic evolution results that culminates in the uniting of all four instruments. This sound cannot be determined precisely. It is somehow there and yet not really." ...which is how Gubaidulina expresses the essential processes in *Quaternion*. It's not an easy piece, despite the performing freedoms it gifts to the players (a feature of most of Sofia's music): in a (19th-century) mathematical theory William Hamilton attached to the term "quaternion", there are combinations of dimensions where one real dimension is associated with three imaginary. Depicting this idea in music, the sections with "real" notes—including the complex task of the alternating conversations in quarter-tones—are in contrasted to an array of musical ideas where the stability, or predictability of the notes is undermined: the cellists using thimbles; ricochet passages *col legno* (with the wood of the bow) and otherwise, *glissandi* galore...

About ***Dancer on a Tightrope*** (1993), Gubaidulina writes: "The title stems from a desire to break away from the confines of everyday life, inevitably associated with risk and danger. The desire to take flight, for the exhilaration of movement, of dance, of ecstatic virtuosity.

A person dancing on a tightrope is also a metaphor for this opposition: life as risk, and art as flight into another existence.