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RUSSIAN SOUL

The exotic grandeur of Sofia Gubaidulina.

BY ALEX ROSS

A GOOD argument can be made that the twentieth century is the Russian century in music. The long-standing German monopoly seemed to expire with the death of Richard Strauss, in 1949; Germany and Austria have produced some well-regarded names in the last few decades, but no one who can stand up against a monumental tradition. Russian composers, by contrast, have not been overshadowed by the past. Stravinsky became so regally renowned that Frank Sinatra once asked for his autograph. Shostakovich and Prokofiev appear more often than Schubert and Mendelssohn on orchestral programs (according to statistics compiled in recent years by the American Symphony Orchestra League). Alfred Schnittke and Sofia Gubaidulina have broken out of the "new music" ghetto to win the attention of a broader audience.

FEDERICO BOTANA

Why has music mattered more in Russia than in other places? A few anecdotal explanations suggest themselves. One is historical: composers were among the most gaudily celebrated Russians of the nineteenth century, and an obsessive culture of musicianship evolved in their wake. A second explanation might be called ethnic-geographical: music has thrived on the country's sprawling cultural incoherence, absorbing and stylizing a whole subcontinent of folk sources. A third explanation, the tricky one, is political. Composers mattered to a wide public because they were able to speak—or seemed to speak—thoughts about repressive regimes which were not allowed in print; audiences of the Soviet era scanned works of Shostakovich and Schnittke for ironies, tragedies, farces, and fake triumphs. (I say "seemed" because the concept of musical irony—music saying one thing and meaning another—presumes that we can agree on what music is saying in the first place. Usually, we cannot.)

The Russian sound dominates twentieth-century music, but it remains maddeningly difficult to define. A brilliant attempt is being made by the musicologist Richard Taruskin, who, following up his massive study of Stravinsky, has a new collection of essays, entitled "Defining Russia Musically." The book shows Russians struggling to reconcile or overcome the contradictions of identity: Tchaikovsky immersing himself in Viennese classicism, Stravinsky reaching for a primal folkish tone, Scriabin preaching abstract apocalypse and transcendence, Shostakovich caught in a gruellingly ambiguous relationship with Soviet ideology. Taruskin destroys romanticized conceptions of Russianness, yet still insists on the need for definitions, for perceptions of difference. In a discussion of Schnittke he talks about "heroic subjectivity": this suffices as shorthand for what the best living Rus-

sian composers offer. They are still unafraid of the grand, dark-syllabled phrase.

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA, a woman of contradictions, is a central voice in Russian music. She was born in 1931, in the Tatar Republic, the granddaughter of a mullah. Although her music rarely cites Tatar folk sources note for note, it seems to remember a world outside the European tradition. At the same time, she is a devout and outspoken Christian. Soviet cultural bureaucrats of the sixties and seventies did not approve of her religiosity; they also condemned her intermittent experimentalism. But Shostakovich encouraged her, issuing one of his typical gnomic utterances: "I want you to continue along your mistaken path." Like her contemporary Alfred Schnittke, she was neglected in Soviet concert halls and had to make a living as a film composer. She found an audience in Europe in the eighties and now makes her home outside Hamburg. Her Viola Concerto had its première at the Chicago Symphony in April; I attended its subsequent run at the Boston Symphony. It was the strongest new work I have heard this season.

Schnittke and Gubaidulina are often paired, but they are not alike. Where Schnittke reacts to a swirl of preëxisting styles, Gubaidulina isolates and reinvents the basic materials of music. She can take something as familiar as a major triad and send it spinning through all registers and tone colors until it becomes a new creature. When her players take moves from the avant-garde manual—cascades of overtones in the strings, raucous woodwind flutter-tonguing, tone-bending brass glissandos—the effects are controlled and developed until they become characters in a drama. As a painter in sound, this composer has learned not only from Webern's eerie pointillism but also from the bold, clean strokes of Britten.

She is, most of all, a genius of narrative, marshalling sounds in a free, vital, and unstoppable procession. Sometimes she operates in conditions of quiet: Webern-like wisps of timbre hover in all registers, arabesques curl through small groups of instruments. At the next moment, she may unleash a tumult of tam-tams, tubas, and electric guitars. Her structures often culminate in what she calls "transfigurations," moments of abrupt clarity. A now famous example is the chant for strings which enters toward the end of her "Offertorium," for violin and orchestra: it's like a holy icon at the end of a procession, and what sets it apart from the streamlined neo-medieval sound of Henryk Górecki and Arvo Pärt is the activity surrounding it. There are rustles and rumbles, like the flow of robes and the tread of feet.

Since the success of "Offertorium," in the eighties, Gubaidulina has been much in demand as a composer, with at least one big work arriving every year. Her music appears on dozens of recordings: two essential disks are "Offertorium," on DG, and the symphony "Stimmen . . . Verstummen," on Chandos. A couple of important recent pieces have yet to be recorded or performed locally; I've heard them with help from her American publisher, Schirmer. A cello concerto entitled "And: The Festivities at Their Height" has a Brucknerian fanfare at its center and a wild, high-pitched cadenza at its close. "Figures of Time" threatens to turn into a world-class cartoon score: in one sequence, a romantic melody that would have pleased Rachmaninoff is run over by battling bass guitars and roaring trombones. Gubaidulina seemed to be seeking ever-greater brightness and boldness—but the new Viola Concerto takes a darker tone.

The work is dedicated to the phenomenal violist Yuri Bashmet, who played it in Chicago and Boston and will bring it to the London Proms this summer. The soloist begins alone, testing all possible permutations of the note D. Strings steal in with a typical chantlike theme, somewhat fragmentary and forlorn. Flutes answer with a gently lapping four-note minor-key figure—an idea that has appeared in other Gubaidulina works and seems to have some undisclosed significance. A long developmental sequence begins with the pitch-black sound of a trio of Wagner tubas: they snake upward in register and gather a hoard of menace. A contrasting section dilates on the flutes' falling theme, now doubled by celesta (a combination that brings to mind Morton Feldman). Then the fury returns: a trudging figure in the double bass incites a full-orchestral stampede.

The last minutes of the concerto are riveting and unsettling. The orchestra lets its rave-up dissolve into eerie downward glissandos. The Wagner tubas slither back, making a move into the key of A-flat minor, distant from the original D by the diabolical interval of a tritone. The timpani play a beat distinctly reminiscent of Siegfried's Funeral Music, and the strings echo that rhythm in ghastly fashion, tapping out A-flat-minor chords with the woods of their bows. A last viola cadenza is spelled out in the score only with a seismographic scrawl; Bashmet, who led a Russian rock band before mastering the viola, somehow makes it sound like feedback on a guitar. (Despite such unconventional effects, the viola keeps a meditative distance from the orchestra throughout. This is not a concerto of conflict. To quote Eliot's "Four Quartets," which serve as the text for a Gubaidulina song cycle, the solo voice is the still point of the turning world.)

What could be the import, though, of those closing cries and whispers? Having just heard the "Ring" cycle at the Met, I wondered particularly about Wagnerian echoes—how A-flat minor in the "Ring" signifies rage, repression, and deception, how the tubas recall the sinister sound that follows Hagen, the arch-villain of "Götterdämmerung." I also heard—or thought I heard—coded references to Shostakovich, who quoted the same bit of Wagner in his Fifteenth Symphony, and of Schnittke, who wrote a haunting viola concerto for Bashmet in 1985, just before suffering a stroke that nearly killed him. Does this music say something about the fate of Soviet composers? Is it right to hear links with Gubaidulina's overpowering choral work "Now Always Snow," with its fantasia on the words "terrible Moscow night"? (That music must not be missed by anyone at or near the Tanglewood festival on August 10th.)

There are strict limits to this kind of interpretation. Gubaidulina, unlike Shostakovich and Schnittke, does not deal in satire and lament. She is an honest-to-God mystic, transmitting holy symbols through precise technique. The Viola Concerto even lacks a cryptic clue by way of a title, like "Figures of Time." Still, the music exerts great pressure of significance; meanings are felt, if not grasped. Spiritual exhilaration is followed by intellectual panic. The composer could have come from nowhere but Russia. ♦