



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26176/mosconsv.2021.46.3.002>

Научная статья | Research Article

TO THE 90<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY OF SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

## Sofia Gubaidulina's Symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen... An Interpretation*

Dr Ivana Medić

ORCID: [0000-0002-8917-9734](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8917-9734) ✉ [ivana.medic@music.sanu.ac.rs](mailto:ivana.medic@music.sanu.ac.rs)

*Institute of Musicology, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts,  
35, Kneza Mihaila St., 11 000 Belgrade, Serbia*

**Abstract:** In this article I discuss Sofia Gubaidulina's landmark twelve-movement symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* (1986), renowned for its creative employment of the Fibonacci numbers and the 'Golden ratio' as main constructive principles, as well as the 'silent solo' for the conductor. This symphony was Gubaidulina's first substantial orchestral work, written during the period of her artistic maturity and just before her international breakthrough. The title of the symphony symbolises the importance of not only sound, but also of silence, pause. While this work is commonly interpreted with respect to its religious-mystical narrative, in accordance with the 'clues' that the composer herself and her biographers have provided, here I argue that Gubaidulina's musical symbolism is neither literal nor unambiguous, and that alternative interpretations are both possible and welcome. Namely, in spite of Gubaidulina's readiness to provide mystical 'programmes' for her works, the ambiguity of musical signifying 'codes' enables us to offer different interpretations, which can acknowledge Gubaidulina's autopoietic statements, but do not have to depend on them. Thus, although Gubaidulina herself has never hinted at any of the following as being her hidden 'programmes', it is possible to interpret the symphony as a musical illustration of the oppression and the brutal 'silencing' of the voices of Soviet citizens during the decades of the communist rule. Furthermore, one could argue that the symphony depicts how religious expression was crushed in the USSR, yet managed to survive – or, else, that the composer problematised the relationship between the individual and the system in more general terms.

**Keywords:** Sofia Gubaidulina, 20<sup>th</sup>-century symphony, *Stimmen... Verstummen...*, Fibonacci numbers, golden ratio, Nicolai Berdyaev, religion, perestroika, interpretation

**For citation:** Medić, Ivana. 2021. "Sofia Gubaidulina's Symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen... An Interpretation.*" *Nauchnyy vestnik Moskovskoy konservatorii / Journal of Moscow Conservatory* 12, no. 3 (September): 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.26176/mosconsv.2021.46.3.002>

К 90-ЛЕТИЮ СОФИИ ГУБАЙДУЛИНОЙ

## Симфония Софии Губайдулиной «Слышу... Умолкло...». Опыт интерпретации

Ивана Медич

ORCID: [0000-0002-8917-9734](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8917-9734) ✉ [ivana.medic@music.sanu.ac.rs](mailto:ivana.medic@music.sanu.ac.rs)

*Институт музыковедения Сербской академии наук и искусств,  
Сербия, 11 000 Белград, ул. Князя Михаила, д. 35*

**Аннотация:** В этой статье я обсуждаю знаковую 12-частную симфонию Софии Губайдулиной «Слышу... Умолкло...» (1986), прославившуюся творческим использованием чисел Фибоначчи и золотого сечения в качестве основных

конструктивных принципов, а также «тихим соло» для дирижера. Эта симфония стала первым значительным оркестровым сочинением Губайдулиной, написанным в период творческой зрелости, незадолго до ее прорыва к международному признанию. Название симфонии символизирует важность не только звука, но и тишины, пауз. Хотя произведение принято толковать с точки зрения его религиозно-мистического нарратива (с помощью «ключей», предоставленных самим композитором и ее биографами), я считаю, что музыкальный символизм Губайдулиной многозначен и не поддается буквальному прочтению; альтернативные интерпретации не просто возможны, но и необходимы. А именно, несмотря на ту готовность, с которой Губайдулина снабжает свои сочинения «мистические программы», неоднозначность музыкальных кодов позволяет нам предлагать иные истолкования — признающие автохарактеристики Губайдулиной, но не зависящие от них. Тем самым, симфонию можно интерпретировать как музыкальную иллюстрацию притеснения и жестокого «заглушения» голосов советских граждан на протяжении десятилетий коммунистического правления — пусть сама Губайдулина никогда не давала понять, что в ее скрытых программах присутствуют подобные мотивы. Более того, можно утверждать, что симфония описывает историю религиозного самовыражения в СССР — подавленного, но сумевшего выжить, — или, иначе говоря, что композитор ставит проблему отношений между человеком и системой в общем плане.

Ключевые слова: София Губайдулина, симфония XX века, «Слышу... Умолкло...», числа Фибоначчи, золотое сечение, Николай Бердяев, религия, перестройка, интерпретация музыкального произведения

Для цитирования: Medić I. Sofia Gubaidulina's Symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* An Interpretation // Научный вестник Московской консерватории. Том 12. Выпуск 3 (сентябрь 2021). С. 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.26176/mosconsv.2021.46.3.002>

**I**n this article I discuss Sofia Gubaidulina's 1986 symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* (Russian: *Слышу... Умолкло...*; English: *Voices... Silenced...*).<sup>1</sup> This unusual symphony in twelve movements is dedicated to the conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, who premiered the work in West Berlin with the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra on 4 September 1986.<sup>2</sup> The title of the symphony originated from the final verse in Gubaidulina's 1983 work *Perception* for soprano, baritone, and strings, the text of which is based on her correspondence with the poet Francisco Tanzer (1921–2003).

While the symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* is commonly interpreted with respect to its religious-mystical narrative, I wish to emphasize that Gubaidulina's musical symbolism is neither literal nor unambiguous. I will begin by offering the usual 'clues' for an informed reading of Gubaidulina's scores (religion, numerical mysticism, the influence of Berdyaev, organicist discourse); after analysing the score, I will attempt a somewhat 'revisionist' interpretation, which may provide additional insight into the artist's creative decisions and sources of inspiration.

Gubaidulina is a rare contemporary composer who has never written 'absolute' music; almost all of her works are infused with 'extramusical' ideas and thus 'programmatic' in the broadest sense of the word. As observed by Gerard McBurney, "her interest in sheer sound and in the symbolism of religion are to her indivisible, allowing her a whole vocabulary

<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this article are based on my previously published research: [17; 18].

<sup>2</sup> The CD with the recording of this symphony performed by Rozhdestvensky and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra (Chandos 9183) won the Koussevitzky International Recording Award in 1993.

of what she calls ‘musical metaphor’ or ‘instrumental symbolism’” [16, 120]. Although this does not imply that Gubaidulina is unconcerned with maintaining musical integrity, an acknowledgment of her musical symbolism is crucial for a profound understanding of her creative objectives.

The main source of Gubaidulina’s artistic inspiration is her faith. Gubaidulina’s biographer Michael Kurtz reconstructs the moment from her childhood when she first saw an icon of Christ and experienced a profound and lifelong connection between her faith and her music: “For a long time I had been praying in our Kazan courtyard — a completely irrational prayer; but suddenly I understood the connection between my prayer and that icon. <...> Music naturally blended with religion, and sound, straightaway, became something sacred for me” (cited in: [11, 14]). Kurtz also provides ample testimonies that in Gubaidulina’s works even the score markings bear religious meanings [ibid., 96], and that seemingly abstract pitch structures have programmatic qualities [ibid., 137]. Vera Lukomsky highlights Gubaidulina’s “predilection for mysticism and metaphysics, her religious spirituality and musical fantasy that often project images of the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment, her preoccupation with musical symbols of crucifixion, resurrection, and transfiguration” [13, 6].

In Gubaidulina’s artistic consciousness, the basic polarity of horizontal and vertical is best embodied in the symbol of the Cross; she finds it necessary to crucify the vertical of the multidimensional divine sense against the horizontal of time (cf. [4, 257, 324]), which is why any work of art appears to her as a crucifix. This applies to her understanding of the difference between the full vibrating sound (especially of a string instrument) and the flageolet as well: “The string ‘chorus’ adheres to the register of human voices, but at certain moments it suddenly rises into the register of harmonics (flageolets), personifying the breath of the Holy Spirit” [ibid., 202]. Gubaidulina has explicitly stated that “to compose means to pray” [12, 32] and emphasized this position in many interviews:

Religion — it is our natural spiritual life, and art — it is our artificial spiritual life, that is, something done by human hands, our human spiritual activity, our answer to the love of the Creator. Religion — it is what is given to us and art — it is what we have to do [4, 64].

Why was man created? Did God need to create us? I think he needed to. Precisely so that we produce the type of energy that reaches him, so that these energetic substances form a kind of life, a correspondence between what is given to us and what we give back [1]. Art is the *re-ligio* (connection) to God in our fragmented, quotidian life [11, 96].

I am convinced that serious art can be distinguished from the ephemeral by its connection to God <...> Any convincing form of worship is a path to His Throne. Music is a form of worship’ [20, 16].

In Gubaidulina’s artistic consciousness music and religion merge into a single, spiritually-infused creative experience. However, her God is not to be understood in a narrow Christian sense. As an artist of mixed ethnic and religious background, Gubaidulina has never identified with a single tradition, because she sees the entire universe as a whole. Although she is a practicing Orthodox Christian, her concept of the supreme deity is infused with many different teachings and traditions, incorporating elements of numerous religions, mystical and spiritual systems, resulting in an idiosyncratic pantheistic synthesis; cf. [17, 107].

While her personal religious commitment emerged very early in life, Gubaidulina's 'spiritual' compositions also correspond to a broad trend in Soviet society since late 1960s, especially among the intelligentsia and the artists who had lost belief in the viability of communist system, and to whom religion offered an intellectual and moral stimulus.<sup>3</sup> George Kline observed in 1968 that "their position may be defined, tentatively, as a 'philosophical' and non-ecclesiastical theism, in some cases quite close to pantheism" [10, 168]. Boris Belge also highlights that this renewed interest in religion was not limited to the Russian Orthodox Church, but also to 'heretical' movements such as occultism, parapsychology, Buddhism and other Eastern teachings [6, 204]. As I have discussed in my comprehensive study of polystylism:

The composers' spiritual quests corresponded with the Soviet intelligentsia's desire to reengage with its long-taboo religious heritage(s) and to find substitutes for the discredited communist ideology. The (re)discovery of various church music traditions (Orthodox, Gregorian, Lutheran) and the revival of the early twentieth-century mysticism not only enabled the composers to take up the roles of moral and spiritual guiding lights, but also enriched the scope of creative solutions and compositional techniques. Stylistic artefacts extracted from various contexts were put in the service of the narratives that were considered problematic and/or challenging in the Soviet context; at the same time, they offered a viable alternative to the still reigning official canon [18, 137].

Gubaidulina has singled out the mysticism of Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) as the most decisive influence. She was introduced to Berdyaev's teachings by her husband Pyotr Meshchaninov (1944–2006), who was a pianist of the State Symphony Orchestra of the USSR and allowed to travel abroad extensively, bringing back censored books with him [11, 135]. Gubaidulina was particularly attracted to Berdyaev's ideas on cosmic universalism and Christian existentialism. According to Berdyaev, God created man in his own image, hence man is a 'theurg', a divinely inspired creature who participates in the endless creative process [ibid., 105].

Another feature of Gubaidulina's music (and her discourse on music) is organicism, intertwined with mysticism and pantheism. Gubaidulina regards musical material as a living being which needs care, nourishment and 'curing' in order to grow and develop. For example, she has said:

I experience the material as very aggressive substance. Its richness is in its excess. I call this an illness. The material requires the artist to find a solution for healing the pain. To the extent of my ability, I want to cure the material with the process I just described. I am absolutely convinced that resolving dissonance to consonance with regard to time proportions heals the material (cited in: [15, 29]).

Musical material is a living organism. It has a history, an evolution of its own <...> We do not invent it; it is like soil, like nature, like a child — it asks for, it wants, it needs something (cited in: [7, 287]).

One may say that Gubaidulina sees herself as a life-giving goddess, a 'Mother' who gives birth to musical material, nurtures it and allows it to develop its full potential. Gubaidulina's music is unrestrainedly beautiful, plastic, arabesque, despite the abundance of contemporary compositional techniques.

Gubaidulina and her Soviet peers were introduced to all techniques of the Western post-war avant-garde simultaneously and belatedly in the early 1960s. However, unlike

<sup>3</sup> This trend was aided by the relaxation of the official position towards religion during Leonid Brezhnev's rule. Cf. [9, 10–37; 2; 21].

some of her colleagues, who eagerly jumped the avant-gardist wagon and started experimenting with the latest compositional trends, already in the 1960s Gubaidulina saw dodecaphony and serialism as finished styles/traditions, which could be utilized in an impartial way:

Musical theory explains us that dodecaphony appeared as a result of the evolution of musical language. But why a system based on the identical value of pitches is preferable to that organized hierarchically? I think that the reason <...> lies in the intrinsic requirements and needs of the musical material which, so to speak, experienced the drama of its existence, the drama of its evolution. <...> The technique of dodecaphony was born as an answer to the suffering of the atonal musical material; it flattens the surface in order to prepare a sounding ground for the properties of the future condition of music (cited in: [7, 286–287]).

Thus, Gubaidulina has refused to ascribe the ‘avant-garde’ techniques any kind of supremacy over more traditional artistic means; in her view, all compositional methods are equally valid and all can be employed as desired. Although she studied and assimilated the entire spectrum of contemporary techniques, and did not shy away from experimenting with electronics and free improvisation, Gubaidulina always distilled those through her artistic temperament and resented the appeal of novelty *per se*.<sup>4</sup> In many interviews Gubaidulina voiced her opposition to labelling her art ‘avant-garde’ and stated her reservations about the very concept of constant innovation in music [13, 8–10]. She has rejected both modernist progressivism and postmodernist historicist irony, and said: “Perhaps the purpose of our actions today is not to invent more and more novelties; the filters need to be turned on, not the generators. <...> It’s time to give something up, in order to work inside the material, not just with it, to get a feel for its inner resistance and make use of it” [11, 69].

Although Gubaidulina bypassed an uncritical adoption of the dodecaphonic technique and any other type of serialism, she still needed a firm yet flexible system of organizing rhythmic, metric and structural proportions of her compositions. She found a suitable method in the creative employment of the Fibonacci sequence (in which every number is the sum of the previous two: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144 etc.) and the ‘Golden ratio’, to which she has assigned a symbolic/mystic significance, believing that the rhythms based on the Fibonacci sequence reflect the deepest laws of the life [13, 36–37, *endnote* 8]. Gubaidulina has said: “I like this system because it does not deprive me of my freedom, does not limit my fantasy. I remain a pupil of Berdiaev in the sense that freedom is the most important thing for me” (cited in: [15, 30]). The Fibonacci sequence has enabled Gubaidulina to design “numerical plots” [3] for her large-scale works. She first used the Fibonacci numbers in the aforementioned work *Perception* for soprano, baritone and strings; the symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* can be regarded as a conceptual continuation of the ideas originally presented in *Perception*. In her interpretation of numbers, especially the golden ratio, Gubaidulina reveals continuity with a long historical tradition, which saw universal laws of nature in numbers and presented them, among other things, as the foundation for creating music whose goal is “spiritual restoration” [ibid.]. Gubaidulina has stated in several interviews that Webern, next to J. S. Bach, was the most crucial formative influence on

<sup>4</sup> On Gubaidulina’s reasons for belated turning to the study of twelve-note music see: [11, 65]. On her attitude towards the notion of ‘novelty’ see: [ibid., 138].

her. Although Gubaidulina's compositional technique has almost nothing in common with Webern's own, she was inspired by his 'musical mathematics', which for both composers expressed "a divine order manifest in Nature" [20, 3]. Thus, Wilfrid Mellers observes that "traditional European notions of progression and development are irrelevant to this music" [ibid.].

Michael Kurtz remarks that Western audiences were disappointed with the 'belatedness' of Gubaidulina's style [11, 144], because they neither understood the Soviet context from which her works emerged, nor attempted to decode her musical symbolism. Gubaidulina fully believes in the spiritual purpose of art and, for her, the employment of (relatively) traditional expressive means is perfectly appropriate, since she does not think in categories of style, but sees the musical material as a unified sonic substance. Thus, she feels free to utilize any portions of that substance that she finds convenient and, when choosing her material, she is predominantly concerned with its symbolism [13; 14; 15].

In accordance with Gubaidulina's organicist approach, a majority of her compositions employ a bare minimum of thematic material, which is then allowed to grow and flourish. Although she used quotations in a handful of pieces, those are rare exceptions, and she has refused to be classified as a polystylistic composer [13, 24–27]. Furthermore, many of her works are based on the principle of oppositions, such as horizontal/vertical, chromaticism/diatonicism, dissonance/consonance, staccato/legato, movement/stasis etc. She assigns programmatic roles to these antitheses, regarding them as the oppositions of the ordinary (earthly) and spiritual (transcendental) phenomena respectively [7, 287].

The symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* was Sofia Gubaidulina's first substantial orchestral work, written during the period of her artistic maturity and just before her international breakthrough. This symphony belongs to the group of large-scale works which established Gubaidulina as a distinctive compositional voice throughout Europe during the decade just before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These works are predominantly lyrical, displaying a non-conflicting dramaturgy. Gubaidulina freely mixes various methods of pitch organization — modal, tonal, chromatic, serial and micro-tonal, as well as compositional techniques of heterogeneous origin, as long as they help her narrate the story. The title of the symphony symbolizes the importance of not only sound, but also of silence, pause, possibly inspired by the reading of the Quran in Islam [4, 205–206]; thus the semantic center of the work is a unique solo of the conductor, consisting only of gestures, with the silence of the orchestra.

The entire symphony *Stimmen... verstummen...* is built out of two diminutive motifs, in lieu of 'proper' symphonic themes:

- (1) a major triad (initially a D-major triad, in the first, third, fifth and seventh movements, then a G-major triad in the tenth and twelfth movements) that represents the sphere of the 'divine', and
- (2) chromatic movement and glissando, which stand for the 'earthly' sphere of martyrdom and suffering.

Aside from this motivic delineation, another prominent duality is that of sound and silence, as indicated by the very title of the work.

Gubaidulina rarely employs traditional forms of European art music. In the symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* she uses two semantic spheres, but does not confront them

in a sonata form. Instead, she places them into separate movements, which results in an unconventional structure of the symphony. It consists of twelve movements in which the two opposed spheres constantly alternate; hence, the overall form resembles double variations. The symphonies based on the form of a set of variations or preludes were not unprecedented in the Soviet Union: one could single out Rodion Shchedrin's Symphony No. 2 (1962), which comprises 25 preludes; Nikolai Karetnikov's Symphony No. 4 (1964), a set of 13 variations; as well as two of Alexander Lokshin's eleven symphonies — No. 4 (1968) and No. 11 (1977). What distinguishes Gubaidulina's symphony is that its twelve movements are very uneven; namely, some movements are under a minute long, while the longest, eighth movement, lasting approximately 11 minutes, takes up a third of the entire duration of the symphony.

*Stimmen... Verstummen...* begins with a long, vibrant D-major triad in high strings which lasts for over a minute. These 'heavenly' D major movements, up to the conductor's solo, are almost completely static and impenetrable: the celestial perfection, the cosmic harmony depicted by the vibrant 'twinkling' of the D major chord in high registers of strings and winds, does not require any modification or development. As Wilfrid Mellers points out:

The first section is strictly speaking a *non*-movement, since it offers a single D major triad spaced in various instrumental and metrical permutations. The sound of the D major triad *is* the musical experience, and the composer's exquisite aural sensibility is intermediary between God's perfect euphony and us. Only at the very end does a D flat triad insituate itself into the D major triad's unsullied heaven; and carries us into the second section, in which there is linear movement which none the less seems atemporal because it is fragmented and discontinuous, both in intervallic sequence and in metre [19, 4].

The seemingly idiosyncratic macro-form is actually based on numerical proportions: namely, the 'odd' D-major movements (1, 3, 5, and 7) become progressively shorter according to the proportions of the Fibonacci sequence, while the 'even' movements increase in length. These ever shortening D-major movements culminate in — silence: namely, in the ninth movement, which serves as an (anti)climax, the conductor performs a 'solo', a 'choreography' in front of a 'silenced' orchestra. The conductor's choreography is based on the Fibonacci sequence.

On the other hand, the 'even' movements (2, 4, 6, 8) get progressively longer and more ominous; the 'silencing' of the ninth movement is a direct consequence of the apocalyptic predicament presented in the longest and the most dramatic eighth movement, which depicts an depicts "apocalyptic catastrophe" [15, 30, *fn.* 6]. As described by McBurney, the D major movements "are static, even ecstatic, brightly lit and of diminishing size. The even-numbered ones on the contrary are darkly introspective, chromatically fluid and unstable, and get progressively larger. The effect is of a huge oscillation, which tilts the listener over from one kind of world into another" [16, 124]. These 'earthly' movements are not based on the proportions of the Fibonacci sequence. They are characterized by a disjointed, discontinuous linear movement which 'crosses' the vertical, heavenly chords. These linear sections gradually become more complex, suppressing and eventually stifling the celestial voices. They utilize a variety of sonic material, but the basic formative 'blocks' are exposed in the beginning of the second movement: the ascending 'microtonal' glissandos and the chromatic, micropolyphonic canons — both

associated with the 'earthly' sphere in Gubaidulina's artistic consciousness. As noted by Mellers, the two initial movements

establish the concept and pattern of the whole symphony, in which each alternate section returns to the paradisaical perfection of the D major triad, while the intervening sections grow gradually longer and more complex, exploring in depth a height various kinds of sonorous resource — close-knit linear canons organized with mathematical exactitude, glissandi embracing a multiplicity of pitches, figurations derived from (God's) natural harmonics, note-clusters and percussive noises, and so on. Sound itself becomes substance: infinitely varied as compared with the changeless D major triad of the opening, yet celebrated as acts of God, like things viewed or heard in the natural world [19, 4].

From rehearsal no. 5 of the sixth movement, the prominent semitone G — A-flat expands into G major and A flat major chords in organ, which are then arpeggiated in the strings: this is an important moment, because G major will be the first tonal centre heard after the 'silenced' ninth movement. At rehearsal 10 this semitone (G — A-flat) is, however, transposed back to D — E-flat, and then to B — C. These brief 'tonal' centres are interspersed with ascending and descending chromatic scales: as if Gubaidulina is hinting at the possibility of the existence of 'heaven on Earth,' but then quickly suppressing it.

The eighth movement continues where the sixth has left off, and utilises the same material. The brief tonal 'islands' include C major at rehearsal no. 17, and F major (accompanied by the E major chord) at rehearsal no. 20. Starting from the sixth movement and continuing here, the tonal centres have progressively moved down the circle of fifths: D (+E-flat) — G (+ A-flat) — C (+B), — F (+E); however, the pattern is broken at rehearsal no. 30, where the composer redirects the music to G-flat major, to be followed by D major at no. 31 and B-flat major at no. 36. From there on, musical texture slides into tonally 'disoriented' triads, soon to be extinguished by the overwhelming chromaticism; as in the sixth movement, paradise on Earth is symbolically revealed as unattainable. The 'apocalypse' that the composer has talked about is depicted by aleatoric passages, chromatic lines clashing with one another, harsh polytonal chords, and from rehearsal no. 70 onwards, diatonic and pentatonic passages in organ. It ends with the glissandos that the second movement had begun with.

In *Stimmen... verstummen...* the 'silent' ninth movement coincides with the point of the 'golden section' of the whole. Also, the progressively decreasing number of vibrating dotted quavers in the odd, 'heavenly' movements corresponds with the numbers of the Fibonacci series. Gubaidulina has said: "The Ninth movement — it is a 'rest': it is a solo for the conductor. It is as if music had come to 'zero': in the first movement there was 55 quarters [*sic*], in the third — 34, in the fifth — 21, in the seventh — 13, and, finally, in the ninth — zero" [15, 30]. However, I have counted 55 dotted quavers of the D major chord in the third movement, 34 in the fifth, and 21 in the seventh. It is unknown to me whether the composer was misquoted, or she made a lapsus. Either way, these numbers still correspond to the Fibonacci sequence.

The conductor's solo in the ninth movement, which Gubaidulina has called "the hieroglyph of our connection with the cosmic rhythm," [*ibid.*, 31, *fn.* 7] strictly adheres to the Fibonacci series. While the conductor 'performs' the rhythm of the silence, the constantly changing metre comprises bars that contain the number of crotchets related to the row: 3/4, 5/4, 8/4, 13/4. Furthermore, near the end of his solo, the conductor is

instructed to 'organize the silence' by making progressively wider movements with his hands, to correspond to the following time units: 1–2 and back to 1; 1–2–3–2–1; and finally 1–2–3–5–8–13–8–5–3–2–1. Gubaidulina structures time according to the Fibonacci sequence in an attempt to reinstate the cosmic balance, which was 'destroyed' in the previous, eighth movement. For her, silence is not really 'silent'; she hears the rhythm of the universe, and instructs the soloist to perform it (see **Example 1**). She has said:

I think that this empty space, not filled with sound, is actually filled. The conductor's solo in the center of the symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* was a very important moment for me. This is not just silence, but rhythmic silence, i.e. the rhythmic structure that is performed in the composition is formulated here with the help of gestures. This is neither a cadence, nor an improvisation, but a fulfillment of the basic rhythmic formula that is present in the composition. This is the rhythm of a space, which is actually silent, but in the depths it sounds somewhere in another dimension of life — that's what it means to me [1].

After the 'solo', the 'reinstatement' of the heavenly sphere is no longer embodied by a D major chord. The tonal center switches to G in the beginning of the tenth movement, as the organ and violins play the G major chord in high register. According to the composer herself, the G major triad symbolizes "eternal light," which begins to shine after the catastrophe in the cleared lucid space [15, 31]. The even movements (tenth and twelfth) are now associated with the major chord, and the 'odd' eleventh movement with chromaticism (however, this polarization is not as strict as it had been before the silent solo).

After the conductor's 'solo' of the ninth, and the static G major chord of the tenth movement, the zone of the earthly phenomena regroups (in the eleventh), before the final confrontation of the two spheres in the twelfth movement. The 'earthly' sphere dominates the final movement, as Gubaidulina prescribes improvisatory and aleatoric moments; and although the 'heavenly' D major chord makes a return at rehearsal no. 29 and concludes the symphony, we are left without a clear 'winner.' One could argue that the composer's message is that the two spheres are destined to coexist, sometimes crossing paths, with the earthly realm of human activity occasionally trying to emulate the celestial perfection, and occasionally trying to disturb the cosmic order; but, despite these temporary 'crossings', the divine sphere remains unaffected. Wilfrid Mellers offers an interpretation along these lines:

We might therefore risk suggesting that the linear and polymetric sections of the symphony 'symbolize' human activity within Nature's cosmos and that tension between the human and the divine increases cumulatively until the D major triad is threatened, even changed, and primeval chaos takes over in the partially aleatoric final section. Even so, if order and disorder are equally attributes of God, he and they are alike eternal and indestructible. At the very end the D major triad re-sounds in its pristine if flickering radiance, fading into a silence which, in Gubaidulina's music, is sound's inevitable complement [19, 5].

The interpretations of the symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* such as this one benefit from the 'clues' that the composer herself, as well as her biographers and interlocutors, have supplied us with. However, this symphony can also be read entirely differently. Namely, if we weren't familiar with the composer's religious-mystical musings, we would have only focused on the title *Voices... Silenced...*, and on Sofia Gubaidulina's association with the 'dissident' or 'unofficial' circles of Soviet composers and other artists, as well as the year when the work was completed — in 1986, at the dawn of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. It is well known that *perestroika* brought a turning point in the professional life of Gubaidulina, who was only allowed to travel to the West for the first time in 1984:

Example 1

S. Gubaidulina. *Stimmen... Verstummen...*  
9th movement — the conductor's 'solo'

IX

(Cadenza per direttore)

\*) Die Gesten des Dirigenten / The conductor's gestures:

- |  |  |  |  |                     |  |  |                               |
|--|--|--|--|---------------------|--|--|-------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  | Bewegung / movement |  |  | Stillstand / standstill       |
|  |  |  |  | Frage / inquiry     |  |  | Konzentration / concentration |
|  |  |  |  |                     |  |  | Zeichen S. 111 / ...          |

“Since 1985, her position as a practically banned composer began to change. Rapidly, over the course of several years, she gained worldwide recognition. At the 1988 International Festival in the USA, the headline in one of the newspapers read: ‘The West Discovers Sofia Gubaidulina’ Genius” [5]. Having these in mind, we would be inclined to interpret the symphony as a musical illustration of the oppression and the brutal ‘silencing’ of the voices of Soviet citizens during the decades of the communist rule. The odd, dissonant movements could be associated with the gloomy days of terror, while the reinstatement of the major tonal sphere in the tenth movement could mean that the Soviet citizens managed to survive the decades of oppression and to have their voices heard again.

If we were familiar with Gubaidulina’s religious affiliation, we could also assume that the ‘celestial’ D- and G-major movements depict believers and their faith, while the dissonant, brutal movements show that religious expression was crushed in the USSR. Boris Belge asserts that Gubaidulina began her professional career when Nikita Khrushchev’s socialist authoritarian policies were in place: “One field in which he clearly aimed to discipline Soviet people was the field of religion. He launched new anti-religious campaigns and forced the closure of churches and mosques. Although few people were directly accused or even repressed for practicing religion, religious behaviour became more and more unusual in Soviet society. Thus, being pious was something exceptional” [6, 204]. We could then affirm that, in a closed and paranoid Soviet system, where art was expected to contribute towards building the new socialist society, Gubaidulina courageously wrote music inspired by her religious and moral convictions and protested against the silencing of creative artists, but also of common people, adherents of various religions. We could also argue that, by using non-verbal, ambiguous musical symbolism, the composer provided a commentary on the decades of repression and problematized the relationship between the individual and the system. In the symphony *Stimmen... Verstummen...* the forces of good are battered and bruised, but not defeated; there is hope amidst despair, leading to the ultimate triumph of believers.

While Gubaidulina herself has never hinted at any of these as being her hidden ‘programmes’, the symphony readily offers itself to such interpretations. I am emphasizing these opportunities for alternative ‘readings’ of Gubaidulina’s symphony because they rebuke the critics such as Ivan Hewett, who has claimed that the main problem with Gubaidulina’s music is that “idea and effect are locked into a pre-set pattern by the composer” and that the listeners are “deprived of any freedom to interpret what we heard” [8]. This is not true, and despite Gubaidulina’s readiness to provide mystical ‘programmes’ for her works, the actual musical symbolism is neither literal nor banal. The ambiguity of musical signifying ‘codes’ enables us to offer different interpretations, which can acknowledge Gubaidulina’s autopoetic statements, but do not have to depend on them.

#### References

1. Gorelova, Galina K. 2014. “Sofiya Gubaydulina: ni strochki bez khoroshego nastroe-niya! [Sofia Gubaidulina: Not a Single Line without Good Mood!]”, interview with S. A. Gubaidulina. Belorusskaya gosudarstvennaya akademiya muzyki [Belarusian State Academy of Music]. Accessed August 15, 2021. [https://www.bgam.by/science/student\\_society/detail.php?ID=2745](https://www.bgam.by/science/student_society/detail.php?ID=2745). (In Russian).
2. Gulyanitskaya, Natalia S. 2002. *Poetika muzykal'noy kompozitsii: teoreticheskie aspekty*

- russskoy dukhovnoy muzyki XX veka* [Poetics of Musical Composition: Theoretical Aspects of Russian Sacred Music of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century]. Moscow: Yazyki slavyanskoy kul'tury, 2002. (In Russian).
3. Steklova, S. V. n.d. "Gubaidulina Sofia Asgatovna." *Bol'shaya rossiyskaya entsiklopediya* [Big Russian Encyclopedia]. Accessed August 15, 2021. <https://bigenc.ru/music/text/5819392>. (In Russian).
  4. Kholopova Valentina N. 2008. *Sofiya Gubaydulina. Monografiya. Interv'y u Entso Restan' o — Sofiya Gubaydulina* [Sofia Gubaidulina. Monografia (with an interview by Enzo Restagno)]. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Moscow: Kompozitor. (In Russian).
  5. Kholopova, Valentina N. n.d. "Sofia Gubaidulina." *lafamire.ru* (online encyclopedia of music theory). Accessed August 15, 2021. [http://www.lafamire.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1782&Itemid=1036](http://www.lafamire.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1782&Itemid=1036). (In Russian).
  6. Belge, Boris. 2020. "Spirituality as Personal Denomination: Religious Expression in Sofia Gubaidulina's Work." In *Orthodoxy, Music, Politics and Art in Russia and Eastern Europe*, edited by Ivan Moody and Ivana Medić, 203–15. London—Belgrade: Centre for Russian Music, Goldsmiths, University of London; Institute of Musicology Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. <https://dais.sanu.ac.rs/handle/123456789/10390>.
  7. Hakobian, Levon. 1998. *Music of the Soviet Age, 1917–1987*. Stockholm: Melos Music Literature.
  8. Hewett, Ivan. 2007. "A Composer Crushed by her own Symbolism." *The Telegraph*, 16 January 2007, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/3662587/A-composer-crushed-by-her-own-symbolism.html>.
  9. John, Michael. 1996. *Auf dem Wege zu einer neuen Geistigkeit? Requiem-Vertonungen in der Sowietunion (1963–1988)*. Vol. 9 of *Studia slavica musicologica*. Berlin: Ernst Kuhn.
  10. Kline, George L. 1968. *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
  11. Kurtz, Michael. 2007. *Sofia Gubaidulina. A Biography*. Translated by Christoph K. Lohmann. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
  12. Lesle, Lutz. 1992. "Eine Art Gottesdienst. Die religiöse Semantik in der Musik Sofia Gubaidulinas." *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 153, no. 1: 30–34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23984996>.
  13. Lukomsky, Vera. 1998. "Sofia Gubaidulina: 'My Desire Is Always to Rebel, to Swim against the Stream!'" *Perspectives of New Music* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 5–41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/833574>.
  14. Lukomsky, Vera. 1998. "'The Eucharist in My Fantasy': Interview with Sofia Gubaidulina." *Tempo*, issue 206 (October 1998), 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200006707>.
  15. Lukomsky, Vera. 1999. "'Hearing the Subconscious': Interview with Sofia Gubaidulina", *Tempo, New Series*, issue 209 (July 1999), 27–31. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200014662>.
  16. McBurney, Gerard. 1988. "Encountering Gubaidulina." *The Musical Times* 129, no. 1741 (March 1988): 120–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/965272>.
  17. Medić, Ivana. 2012. "Gubaidulina, Misunderstood." *Muzikologija-Musicology* no. 13, 101–23. <https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ120303014M>.
  18. Medić, Ivana. 2017. *From Polystylism to Meta-Pluralism: Essays on Late Soviet Music*. Belgrade: Institute of Musicology SASA. [https://hdl.handle.net/21.15107/rcub\\_dais\\_4072](https://hdl.handle.net/21.15107/rcub_dais_4072).

19. Mellers, Wilfrid. 1993. Liner notes for CD “Sofia Gubaidulina: Symphony ‘Stimmen... Verstummen...’ — Stufen”. Chandos CHAN 9183.
20. Polin, Claire. 1994. “The Composer as Seer, but not Prophet.” *Tempo. New Series*, issue 190 (September 1994), 13–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200003673>.
21. Redepenning, Dorothea. 2008. *Geschichte der russischen und sowjetischen Musik*, vol. 2: *Das 20. Jahrhundert*. Laaber: Laaber-Verlag.

Received: August 22, 2021

Accepted: September 15, 2021

#### Author’s Information:

**Dr. Ivana Medić** — Ph. D., Senior Research Associate, Institute of Musicology, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Belgrad), Visiting Research Fellow (Centre for Russian Music) at Goldsmiths University of London, Vice President of Serbian Musicological Society (Belgrad)

#### Использованная литература

1. Горелова Г. К. София Губайдулина: ни строчки без хорошего настроения! [Интервью с С. А. Губайдулиной] // Сайт *Белорусской государственной академии музыки*. 01.10.2014. URL: [https://www.bgam.by/science/student\\_society/detail.php?ID=2745](https://www.bgam.by/science/student_society/detail.php?ID=2745) (дата обращения: 15.08.2021).
2. Гуляницкая Н. С. *Поэтика музыкальной композиции: Теоретические аспекты русской духовной музыки XX века*. М.: Языки славянской культуры, 2002. 430 с.
3. Стеклова С. В. Губайдулина София Асгатовна // Большая российская энциклопедия. URL: <https://bigenc.ru/music/text/5819392> (дата обращения: 15.08.2021).
4. Холопова В. Н. София Губайдулина. Монография. Интервью Энцо Рестаньо — София Губайдулина. 2-е изд., доп. М.: Композитор, 2008. 400 с.
5. Холопова В. Н. София Губайдулина // Музыкальный портал *lafamire.ru*. URL: [http://www.lafamire.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1782&Itemid=1036](http://www.lafamire.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1782&Itemid=1036) (дата обращения: 15.08.2021).
6. *Belge B. Spirituality as Personal Denomination: Religious Expression in Sofia Gubaidulina’s Work // Orthodoxy, Music, Politics and Art in Russia and Eastern Europe / ed. by Ivan Moody and Ivana Medić*. London: Centre for Russian Music, Goldsmiths, University of London; Belgrade: Institute of Musicology SASA, 2020. URL: <https://dais.sanu.ac.rs/handle/123456789/10390> (accessed 15.08.2021).
7. *Hakobian L. Music of the Soviet Age, 1917–1987*. Stockholm: Melos Music Literature, 1998. 493 p.
8. Hewett I. A composer crushed by her own symbolism // *The Telegraph*. 16 January 2007. URL: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/3662587/A-composer-crushed-by-her-own-symbolism.html> (accessed 15.08.2021).
9. *John M. Auf dem Wege zu einer neuen Geistigkeit? Requiem-Vertonungen in der Sowietunion (1963–1988)*. Berlin: Ernst Kuhn, 1996. 180 S. (Studia slavica musicologica, Bd. 9).
10. *Kline G. L. Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968. 179 p.

11. Kurtz M. Sofia Gubaidulina. A Biography / translated by Chr. K. Lohmann. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007. XX, 338 p.
12. Lesle L. Eine Art Gottesdienst. Die religiöse Semantik in der Musik Sofia Gubaidulinas // Neue Zeitschrift für Musik. Jg. 153 (1992). H. 1. S. 30–34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23984996>.
13. Lukomsky V. Sofia Gubaidulina: 'My Desire Is Always to Rebel, to Swim against the Stream!' // Perspectives of New Music. Vol. 36. No. 1 (Winter 1998). P. 5–41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/833574>.
14. Lukomsky V. "The Eucharist in My Fantasy": Interview with Sofia Gubaidulina // Tempo. Issue 206 (October 1998). P. 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200006707>.
15. Lukomsky V. 'Hearing the Subconscious': Interview with Sofia Gubaidulina // Tempo. New Series. Issue 209 (July 1999). P. 27–31. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200014662>.
16. McBurney G. Encountering Gubaidulina // The Musical Times. Vol. 129. No. 1741 (March 1988). P. 120–125. <https://doi.org/10.2307/965272>.
17. Medić I. Gubaidulina, Misunderstood // Muzikologija-Musicology. Issue 13 (2012). P. 101–123. URL: <https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ120303014M> (accessed 15.08.2021).
18. Medić I. From Polystylism to Meta-Pluralism: Essays on Late Soviet Music. Belgrade: Institute of Musicology SASA, 2017. URL: [https://hdl.handle.net/21.15107/rcub\\_dais\\_4072](https://hdl.handle.net/21.15107/rcub_dais_4072) (accessed 15.08.2021).
19. Mellers W. Liner notes for CD "Sofia Gubaidulina: Symphony 'Stimmen... Verstummen...' — Stufen". Chandos, CHAN 9183, 1993.
20. Polin C. The Composer as Seer, but not Prophet // Tempo. New Series. Issue 190 (September 1994). P. 13–18.
21. Redepenning D. Geschichte der russischen und sowjetischen Musik: in 2 Bdn. Bd. 2: Das 20. Jahrhundert. Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2008. 836 S.

Получено: 22 августа 2021 года

Принято к публикации: 15 сентября 2021 года

#### Об авторе:

**Ивана Медич** — доктор философии, старший научный сотрудник Института музыковедения Сербской академии наук и искусств (Белград), приглашенный научный сотрудник Центра русской музыки Голдсмитского колледжа (Лондон), вице-президент Сербского общества музыковедов (Белград)