

**Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931) and Edison Denisov (1931-1996)**

**Swimming against the Stream**

Having spent their formative years trapped inside the Soviet Union where creative genius and forward-thinking was often denounced, denigrated, and strictly prohibited, Sofia Gubaidulina and Edison Denisov share a very important motivation; a profound need and desire to break free from these bonds, and speak their truth. These two composers of the Soviet avant-garde who reached musical maturity around the time of Stalin's death, possessed a strong will that despite all odds would not allow them to conform to the strict directives of the Union of Soviet Composers, and who in the face of adversity held fast to their own musical style and inspiration and refused to play the game whose arbitrary rules were determined by bureaucrats, not musicians.

While Gubaidulina showed a very early interest in music by dancing to the tunes of the neighborhood bayan player and begging for piano lessons (and getting them), Denisov initially thought that music was for girls. He was rather interested in mathematics and chemistry, the former in which he holds a degree from the Physics and Mathematics Department of the University of Tomsk. Interestingly enough, while studying Math, his first musical interests also sprung from the music of a neighbor who played mandolin. Denisov shortly thereafter learned mandolin, clarinet, guitar and eventually piano.

Shostakovich seems to have spurred both Denisov<sup>1</sup> and Gubaidulina to pursue careers in composition saying to Denisov, "Dear Edik, your compositions have astonished me...I believe that you are endowed with a great gift for composition. And it would be a great sin to bury your talent". With this, Denisov set his mind straight on the goal, and in a

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<sup>1</sup> Denisov, like Shostakovich used a musical signature based on his name D, E, Eb.

couple of years passed the entry exams for the Moscow Conservatory.<sup>2</sup> Shostakovich is said to have told Gubaidulina to “continue along [her] mistaken path” at the conclusion of her final examination at the Moscow Conservatory where Shostakovich was on her committee.

Gubaidulina’s musical style is a mosaic of many important influences, not the least of which was her having grown up in the Tatar Republic which represents the gateway between the East and West. Oriental colors and sounds are mixed with folk-like melodies, and instruments such as kotos, bayans<sup>3</sup>, and other folk instruments form a unique place in her oeuvre. Another unmistakable trait that persists in her music is transcendental mysticism and religious fervor which can be seen in works like *Offertorium*, *In Croce*, and *St. John Easter*. She is famously known for saying that religion and music exist to “restore the legato of life”. Her compositional raison d’être is spiritual renewal and at the times in her life when for one reason or another she has been away from her musical creation<sup>4</sup>, it seems as if her life-blood were sucked from her. Although the Russian influence in her music is clear (her *Alleluia* contains a quotation from an early Russian chant), and much of her spiritual music is inspired by the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>5</sup>, the intent is not a nationalist music, but rather a humanist music. Germanic music and western influences have played an equally significant role in her musical development as she claims Webern and Bach as two of her favorite role models.

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<sup>2</sup> Denisov failed the entry exams once, returned to Tomsk to finish his specialist degree in ‘functional analysis’ and then returned to Moscow, convinced the Conservatory to let him take preparatory lessons for a second attempt, passed the test and in 1951 became a student of the Conservatory.

<sup>3</sup> A bayan is a button-accordion named after a legendary ancient Russian fairytale.

<sup>4</sup> For example, having a baby and a husband who was constantly away at work, and who forbade her to compose.

<sup>5</sup> Sofia Gubaidulina was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church in 1970 after several failed earlier attempts. When she was 14, she had been very sick with malaria, and despite possible repercussions, her mother took her to a nearby church to be baptized in secret, but alas, the priest was drunk, and could not perform the rite.

Symbolism, the divine, and the eternal all somehow find their way into Gubaidulina's music and the sonic experience of listening to her works is truly something unique. Her music is colorful, sometimes brazen, and she explores sound material in innovative ways that make her music unlike that of any composer; it is sometimes terrifying, as if one is standing alone on the day of reckoning, and sometimes more peaceful and tranquil than lying on the banks of a gently flowing river (perhaps the Volga) on a spring day, staring up at the sky. This dichotomy and both musical (silence and sound) and extramusical (darkness and light, life and death, etc) contrasts are what drew Gubaidulina to expressing her innermost thoughts, questions, and musings in this malleable medium of music.

Both composers have enjoyed successful international reputations since their music was first introduced to the West. In 1965 was the Darmstadt premiere of Denisov's *The Sun of the Incas* which was subsequently and very successfully performed by Pierre Boulez in Paris. Denisov introduced Gubaidulina's music, as well as that of Alfred Schnittke and other of his contemporaries to the West through his connections with musicians and performers beyond the iron curtain. It was this same clandestine activity that allowed them to see the scores or listen to recordings of composers like the Second Viennese School and others during times of strict Soviet regulation at the Conservatory.

While Denisov's music may be more akin to that of Debussy's, with occasional hints of Glinka (his favorite composer), Gubaidulina's is perhaps more like Boulez in that she often manipulates many independent lines at once to create a texture that is dense, rich, and multifarious.

Neither composer is dogmatic in his/her approach to composition. They composed for unusual chamber ensembles, placing instruments with contrasting timbres together in a way that challenges established traditions. They both used serialism, graphic notation,

dabbled in electronic music, prepared piano, microtones, and extended techniques, but all of this was for the sake of a desired sound effect in service to their musical concerns. They weren't afraid to experiment with new techniques such as small rubber or plastic balls being bounced on strings in Gubaidulina's Fourth String Quartet which she dedicated to the Kronos Quartet, or multi-colored beams illuminating different parts of performers while they execute musical and theatrical tasks in Denisov's *Blue Notebook*.

Although both composers spent time away from Russia in their later years, Denisov in Paris and Germany, and Gubaidulina who has been living in Hamburg since 1992, they don't deny their Russian roots.

What we will remember from Denisov's music is his ultra-decorative means of expression, fractured rhythms, angular lines, and contrast of textures which no matter how complex remain transparent, and a certain adeptness at slipping in and out of tonal allusions. What we will remember of his life is that despite being black-listed by Khrennikov and the Union of Soviet Composers, he persisted in standing for innovation, personal truth in music, and new expressive means, forms, and methods. His music was banned, he was forbidden to accept invitations by various international festivals and organizations, and ensembles seeking commissions from him were told that he was "too busy" or some other such nonsense. Yet despite all of this Denisov maintained an undying commitment to composition and bridging the musical gap between Russia and the rest of the world<sup>6</sup>. In part thanks to him many composers from the Soviet Union are known to us in the west, and vice versa.

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<sup>6</sup> When he joined the higher ranks of the Composers' Union in the mid 1980's he felt it was finally his chance to change the status quo and bring to light the works of composers whose music had been ignored, banned or defamed for so many years. Once in that position, he then established and developed two music cycles at the Conservatory where contemporary Russian and foreign composers could have their works performed. This, of course, did not happen without friction, but he succeeded nonetheless.

Gubaidulina's music will most likely be remembered as dynamic, dramatic, and ultra-modern (or "far-out" according to Alex Ross). Using a wide range of rhythmic systems<sup>7</sup>, diverse techniques of sound production, and a unique combination of diatonicism, chromaticism, and micro-intervallic language, her sound palate is distinctive and unforgettable. Somewhat of a firebrand in her outright refusal to conform to Soviet musical conventions, she not only paved a path for other women composers of her generation, but is leaving behind her a legacy of inventive and resourceful music that puts her in the top of her class of not only great Russian composers of the 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but of significant women composers as well.

Both pioneers of the Soviet musical avant-garde and musical dissidents, Gubaidulina and Denisov have left their mark not only in the annals of Russian history, but have a solid position in the world of contemporary music.

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**Sources:**

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<sup>7</sup> Gubaidulina was interested in and used the Fibonacci series, and other numeric considerations.