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**Postmodernism
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The music of Sofia Gubaidulina (and others): 'as if the history of music were at an end'

Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931), as a citizen of the Soviet Union, who studied in Moscow during the 1950s and 60s, was shaped by the political realities of the Cold War. After a period of slow development and relative obscurity her music began to reach a wider audience in the mid-1980s, the point at which she was allowed to travel outside the Soviet Union, and which coincided with the shifting political landscape towards the new conditions that would be formed in the post-Cold War world after 1989. Gubaidulina's positioning in, and relationship to, this changing political context can be seen as part of a shared and comparative experience with other composers of a similar generation and background. Alastair Williams suggests an obvious association between Gubaidulina and Alfred Schnittke (1934–98): 'two strong individualists whose lives nevertheless share core experiences'.¹ These common experiences included the enduring of the 'intolerable Soviet regime'. Both composers worked in film music in order to support themselves, and both were influenced by the music of Shostakovich. Although oppressed by the Soviet system they would later share a 'deep apprehension at what the collapse of the same system left behind'.² Gubaidulina believes that we are all 'essentially shaken by what has happened to our country'.³ Against this background Schnittke and Gubaidulina would, in different ways, compose music that reflects what Williams describes as an 'ambivalence towards modernist systems'.⁴

Schnittke – Concerto Grosso

In the music of Schnittke this 'ambivalence towards modernist systems' is articulated through a self-defined polysystemism. This terminology reflects a highly plural notion of what constitutes musical style as defined by the play with elements drawn from different musical styles, including primarily the juxtaposition of new and old music. In much of Schnittke's music we encounter sudden changes, or a dissolve effect, between different musics that reflect distinct historical and stylistic origins. This description suggests a point of convergence with some of the music discussed in chapter 4, even if the reference is not towards musical romanticism as such, and the effect is very individual. It suggests an intertextual relationship to already-existing

music, but this relationship is not directed only to specific details, such as an identifiable moment in, or material from, earlier works; it is also often located at the level of more general characteristics of style and genre. This emphasis on a coexisting plurality of style as asserted by the term polysystemism brings Schnittke's music into the wider perspectives of postmodernism in music.

Schnittke's relationship to old music is already evident in many of the titles of works that refer to historical genres – symphony, concerto, string quartet – while some works do relate to specific precursors, including Mozart and Haydn. In the series of works titled Concerto Grosso, Schnittke's engagement with old music, and his polysystemism, comes most clearly to the surface. The title of Concerto Grosso already indicates the music of the baroque, specifically J.S. Bach and Handel, as a point of reference. Schnittke's Concerto Grosso No. 1 (1977) has been described as using a polysystemism that is 'torn between a clashing pluralism and a yearning for the certainties of tradition'.⁵ This description captures an essential tension between a recognizable playfulness with past musical materials and a sense of loss for the value that such material once held. This critical tension pervades much of Schnittke's music. Such factors are aurally present in the Concerto Grosso No. 3 (1985) for two solo violins and string orchestra, which also utilizes harpsichord, piano, celesta and bells. The first movement, of five, begins with a remarkable pastiche realization of a baroque-sounding music that is clearly intentionally retrospective (see Ex. 8.1).

The initial harmonic event, the chord that initiates the first movement, indicates a G minor tonality. This tonal reference immediately signifies old music. We hear the ensemble play through a rapidly moving sequence-based contrapuntal texture that immediately recalls the Brandenburg Concertos of J.S. Bach as well as other examples of the genre. This generic reference is reinforced by the presence of the harpsichord, which suggests the continuo role within the baroque ensemble. This beginning also seems to recall the engagement with baroque music in the neoclassicism of earlier twentieth-century composers, including Hindemith, whose *Kammermusik* series also often made a quite explicit gesture towards the concerto grosso. However, having established the rhythmic, textural and thematic consistency that is typical of the baroque period and concerto genre there is a sharp, dramatic intrusion. The music suddenly changes; it comes apart, breaking down into fragmentary textures that seem to have little relationship to the opening gesture (see Ex. 8.2).

This moment of rupture at Fig. 4 is defined by a strong vertical harmony marked *ff* and the sounding of the bell, which heralds the change. There is no real sense of preparation for this moment; the contrapuntal lines do not move inevitably towards this point. Also, although D is featured as the bass of this harmony, there is no recognizable harmonic relationship to the suggested G minor tonality of the opening material. Any possible indication of a harmonic connection between D and G is

Allegro

Example 8.1 Alfred Schnittke, Concerto Grosso No. 3, first movement, opening

immediately undermined by the highly chromatic nature of the other pitches of this chord.

After this interruption we still hear aspects of a baroque-sounding music, but they are fragments that lack any sense of coherence or direction. The two solo violin parts now seem out of step with each other, while the upper lines of the ensemble articulate a glissando effect that has a maximum distance from what has come before. This distance is also reflected in the bass line, which, following the D at Fig. 4, now moves ceaselessly around neighbouring pitches. This process of fragmenting, breaking down textures and disrupting any notional consistency or unity, is defined at the conclusion of this first movement. At this point the texture reduces to essentially leave only a descending bass line that moves downwards through a chromatic motion to arrive on a sustained C₄ (see Ex. 8.3). This ending is now very different from the G-minor-based baroque texture with which the movement began.

The composer himself provides a highly evocative description of this movement:

It begins 'beautifully', neo-classically – but after some minutes the museum explodes and we stand with the fragments of the past (quotations) before the dangerous and uncertain present.⁵

[Allegro]

Example 8.2 Alfred Schnittke, Concerto Grosso No. 3, first movement, from Fig. 4 to Fig. 5

Example 8.2 (cont.)

The image that the composer evokes of the beautiful beginning (Ex 8.1) that then explodes (Ex 8.2) captures the essence of this movement, but it also provides an insight into Schmitke's music in general, of which this is a good example, and its association with postmodernism. It is notable that in this description it is the 'museum' – the repository of the past – that explodes. It is taken apart, deconstructed into fragments that can never return to their original unified state. We are familiar now with fragments of past music being quoted and redefined, but also with how a postmodern culture becomes a series of fragments. This music is a meaningful musical illustration of such processes. In this instance Schmitke does not directly invoke postmodernism to describe his own music but he is using language, and composing music, that already relates to what we now understand as postmodernism.

Gubaidulina

If Schmitke and Gubaidulina share a common background and starting point, the music they have composed has looked in different directions, with the coexistence of

Example 8.3 Alfred Schmitke, Concerto Grosso No. 3, first movement, ending

1) Vierzehnerstimmung / un quarto di tono più alto [quarter-tone higher]
 2) Vierzehnerstimmung / un quarto di tono più basso [quarter-tone lower]

The musical score for Example 8.3 (cont.) consists of five staves: Flauti (Fl.), Violini I (Vln. I), Violini II (Vln. II), Violoncelli (Vcl.), and Contrabbassi (Cb.). The Flauti part begins with a dynamic marking of *mf* and includes a 'quasi glissando' instruction. The Violini I and II parts also feature 'quasi glissando' markings and dynamic markings of *mf*. The Violoncelli part has a dynamic marking of *mf* and includes a 'quasi glissando' instruction. The Contrabbassi part starts with a dynamic marking of *ppp* and includes a 'quasi glissando' instruction. The score is written in a complex, multi-measure style with various articulations and dynamics.

Example 8.3 (cont.)

these different directions also defining their own spaces, telling their own story, within the broad pluralities of postmodernism. Gubaidulina's music and its changing reception have been marked by large-scale political realities, but what makes her music so distinctive in the context of the debate about postmodernism in music is the sense of

retreat from that reality and the withdrawing into a profound sense of selfhood. Such qualities may suggest that Gubaidulina's music might have some point of connection with that of other composers who emerged from an East-European background – Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki – and whose work has been described through the rather misleading and unhelpful term of a 'holy minimalism'.⁷

Pärt and Górecki

In the case of Estonian-born Arvo Pärt (b.1935), his early career included an engagement with serialism that was strongly discouraged at the time. This was followed by a developing interest in the music of J.S. Bach that culminated in a work titled *Credo* (1968), a setting of a religious text for choir that is supported by orchestra and solo piano. The musical starting point for this work is the C major Prelude from Book 1 of J.S. Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues, which we hear played on the piano in a highly literal way, after the intentionally Bach-like initial choral statement, and which is then accelerated into a process of minimal repetition that becomes distorted and fragmented. The subsequent events of the work are defined through juxtapositions of intense and reflective orchestral sound, bold choral statements and the intrusions of the piano part. The return of the piano to the Bach prelude leads towards the concluding climax and a reminder of the opening choral statement.

The essentially tonal nature of the initial musical material, and its explicit Christian symbolism, already marked it as highly individual. While that symbolism provoked an official scandal,⁸ it would also become a defining factor in drawing a wider audience towards this music. By the mid- to late 1970s the composer established an international reputation based upon a sequence of works – including *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten*, *Frater* and *Tabula rasa* – which now involved a clarification of musical form and content in conjunction with an essentially contemplative aura. Following Pärt's move to the West in 1980 these works, and others, would come to find an audience through the increasing availability of recordings. For David Clarke, Pärt's 'very rise is symptomatic of the post-modern era we have now entered, under which modernism's one-time central position in 20th century art has itself been dislodged'.⁹ The positioning of Pärt's music as symptomatic of postmodernism is based not only in the distance between this music and the assumptions of modernism, but also in changing values and modes of reception. According to Clarke:

The wave of enthusiasm for Pärt's music – or at least for those works written since the late 70s – belongs to the same syndrome that has driven Górecki's Third Symphony and Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* to the top of the CD charts.¹⁰

This syndrome, which was highly prevalent in the early 1990s, when Clarke was writing, may have been driven, as he suggests, by a critical reaction against an 'alienating atonality' and 'complex structural abstraction' in 'modern music'.¹¹ In contrast, the 'religious aura' of the music listed by Clarke 'has a strong allure for a secularised culture that no longer has any collective way of articulating the spiritual'.¹² Of course, Clarke will proceed to complicate this scenario, but it is difficult to avoid the convergence between a notable simplification of form and the aura of spirituality that accrues to this music. Clarke also mentions the third symphony of the Polish-born Henryk Gorecki (1933–2010), and the popularity of this work in the early 1990s was truly remarkable, not only the commercial success of the CD, but also, as Luke Howard documents in admirable detail, the sampling of, and references to, this music in many different popular music contexts.¹³

Gubaidulina – *Offertorium*

Although Gubaidulina's music has reached a wider audience than many contemporary composers and there is a shared concern for a sense of spiritual transcendence in music that could reflect, after Communism, what Mikhail Epstein defines as a 'post-athetism',¹⁴ the actual sound of her music is very different from that of Part and Górecki.

One of Gubaidulina's most significant works is *Offertorium* (1980), in effect a concerto for violin and orchestra that is dedicated to violinist Gidon Kremer, who did a great deal to bring Gubaidulina's music to a wider audience and who is responsible for the recording through which the work is best known. *Offertorium* begins with another retrospective gesture, the sounding of the 'royal theme' from J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering* (see Exx 8.4a and b), but the notes are distributed throughout the orchestra in what Alex Ross describes as 'Second Viennese School style'.¹⁵ This reference to the second Viennese school suggests that it is reflective of the conception of the *Klangfarbenmelodie*, the sound-colour of melody, as related specifically to Webern, whose highly transparent textures and sparse lines were highly influential on later, modernist composers. For Gubaidulina this moment through the use of the Bach theme and its Webernesque articulation, serves to 'unite the two personalities in the history of music who have produced the greatest impression on [her]'.¹⁶ In retaining the actual pitches of Bach's theme Gubaidulina brings both



Example 8.4a J. S. Bach, *Musical Offering*, 'royal theme'

[all transposing instruments written in C]

Example 8.4b Sofia Gubaidulina, *Offertorium*, opening

baroque counterpoint and twentieth-century modernism into close proximity and in doing so treats both as historical subjects.

This opening statement is given as Ex. 8.4b and summarized in outline as Ex. 8.4a.¹⁷ The accuracy with which Bach's theme is preserved, as is its modernist distribution, is immediately evident. The initial phrase of the theme – D–F–A–Bb–Cf – now begins on the trombone, then moves to bassoon, trumpet and then the horn, but it is notable that this opening statement withholds the final D of Bach's theme, leaving the work open rather than closed at this stage.

In her study of this work, which forms part of a consideration of music from a feminist perspective that is informed by the philosophy of Deleuze, Sally Macarthur highlights a certain deconstructive violence in Gubaidulina's music:

Unlike that of her former Soviet compatriot Kanchehli, Gubaidulina's music does not concern itself with the struggle between violence and silence, yet the struggle between these two determinants is perceptible in her music. Rather, and this is the case in *Offerorium*, some of her music will set up a theme or an idea or a musical argument and then set about demolishing it. Gubaidulina will often employ her musical equipment like a weapon, wielding it upon the themes or remnants or fragments of themes she composes until they are metaphorically pulverised into musical mulch before reconstituting them in entirely new ways. She adopts a cyclical process of composing, decomposing and recomposing the music: to recall Jankélévitch, 'violence [in Gubaidulina's music] ... massacres determinants that are nonetheless constantly being reborn'.¹⁸

While the possible comparison of the music of Gubaidulina and Kanchehli would be interesting, it is Macarthur's suggestion of the setting up of a thematic idea only for it to be demolished that is of most immediate relevance. In *Offerorium* this process, as Macarthur indicates, appears to be realized. The opening projection of the Bach theme is revisited but only for it to be deconstructed and finally, as a moment of resolution, returned to in something like its original form even if its projection will sound rather different from its initial appearance. The composer herself describes the theme as offering 'itself up as a sacrifice',¹⁹ and there is an underlying relationship to the original thematic material that can be defined as deconstructive.

This engagement is already evident at the outset of the work. Following the Webernesque unfolding of the Bach theme, the solo violin enters with the repetition of the pitches F and E (see Ex. 8.4b), resisting the downward pull towards D as in the original source. The composer extracts this semitone from the Bach theme and interrogates its thematic potential. As the work progresses through its single-movement, three-section formal shape, the semitone gesture is subjected to further interrogation through changing articulations and transformations.

There are moments of real intensity, and increasing textural and harmonic complexity which validate the identification of violence as a force of meaning in this work before we reach the conclusion, which consists of an expansive, contemplative transformation of the thematic material. The sustained high D in the solo violin part finally defines this ending while the bass line gravitates downwards towards its sustained D (see Ex. 8.5).

This ending in effect completes the theme with the resolution of the move from F through E to D having been suppressed until this moment. Alex Ross provides a highly evocative description of this concluding moment:

By the end, Bach's theme has somehow mutated into an ancient-sounding liturgical melody, passing through a murmuring orchestra like an icon in a procession.²⁰

The proposed image of the icon in a procession translates Gubaidulina's music into visual terms, but it is a meaningful translation that reflects well the spiritual journey that this music takes. In purely musical terms it can be described as one of three octaves, from the missing D of Bach's theme in its original register to its final placement three octaves higher. But this process, and the moment of arrival, also acts as a musical representation of a transcendent purity. Between these two points – the initial withholding of D and its concluding realization – many, often violent, things occur, but the icon remains intact to secure its elevated place in the concluding procession. Ross's description of this process as part of 'an ancient-sounding liturgical melody' again suggests a sense of history to this music. This is not a musical past as conjured up through the specifics of intertextual quotation, although the initial use of the Bach theme could be positioned in this way, but it is a more generalized evocation of a mythologized past, perhaps a utopian one, that is seen as a spiritual retreat from the harsh reality of the real world. But, if this signifies a removal from the contexts of that reality, this is not a return to a vision of music as autonomous. This is a music that is loaded with an abundance of meanings.

However, if this is an effective description, the definition of this music as post-modern now seems more difficult. The reference to Webern, and the increasing complexity of the music as it unfolds, could suggest that it retains a definition of a musical modernism. The final arrival on D could also be heard as a resolution, a goal, perhaps even as a source of unity. These possibilities now look towards the question asked in many different ways and in different contexts in this book thus far: why should we describe this music as postmodern? Judy Lochhead provides a highly effective description of Gubaidulina's music in general, which already begins to provide a meaningful answer to this question:

[all stringing instruments within a C]

134 $\text{♩} = 84$

135 $\text{♩} = 108$

Example 8.5 Sofia Gubaidulina, *Offertorium*, ending, from Fig. 134

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Example 8.5 (cont.)

This musical score, labeled 'Example 8.5 (cont.)', features a large ensemble of instruments. The top staves include Flute (Fl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. Bb.), Trumpet (Trp.), Trombone (Tbn.), Horn in F (Hr.), Violin I (Vn. I), Violin II (Vn. II), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Db.). The score is written in a complex, multi-measure format with various dynamics and articulations. A rehearsal mark '137' is visible at the top right of the score.

Example 8.5 (cont.)

This musical score, labeled 'Example 8.5 (cont.)', continues the ensemble from the previous page. It includes Flute (Fl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. Bb.), Trumpet (Trp.), Trombone (Tbn.), Horn in F (Hr.), Violin I (Vn. I), Violin II (Vn. II), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Db.). The notation continues with various musical notations and dynamics.

Example 8.5 (cont.)

Gubaidulina's music speaks to the postmodern desire for a pre-modern world using figures and sounds which allude to a medieval world of a muted expressivity that claims access to essential being. Yet this pre-modern expressive mode is won by utilizing avant-garde musical techniques, and hence the discourse about Gubaidulina's music is bound up with the modern as well as the pre-modern. While seldom named as such the postmodern is everywhere evident in Gubaidulina's music and in the critical discourse that accompanies it.²¹

I think that the description of a 'postmodern desire for a pre-modern world' is a very good way of describing this music. It makes sense of the starting point of the Bach theme in *Offertorium* but more generally it brings into focus the importance of expressive qualities that were seen, perhaps unfairly in some instances, to have been suppressed in later versions of modernism. But if this is postmodern music there is still a meaningful trace of the modern in Gubaidulina's version of the postmodern.

The music of Gubaidulina does not always sit too easily within a description of a 'holy' or 'mystical minimalism', but it is always concerned with the spiritual in music. It gives sound to a mythologized 'pre-modern' world that denies the assertion of an inevitable historical progress, rejects the consequences of modernity by now treating modernism as just another historical subject, and returns into its own fictionalized postmodern construction of the past.

The suggestion of a 'pre-modern world' and the allusion to a 'medieval world of muted expressivity' are readily evident in other works by Gubaidulina and could be seen to form part of what Alexander Genis considers from a purely Russian perspective to be an 'archaic postmodernism', even though his discussion does not actually extend to music and his context is quite distinct.²² For example, in Gubaidulina's large-scale orchestral work *Pro et contra* (1989) we hear hints, rather than literal statements, of Russian orthodox chant that have a deep if distant sense of

history. This suggestion of a distant history is also evident in works such as *In croce* (1979) for bayan, a Russian accordion, and cello, and *Silenzo* (1991) for bayan, violin and cello. The titles of these works already begin to suggest a concern with an apparently lost spiritual expressivity in music, with the use of the bayan adding a feeling of a distant folk-like origin to the music. These factors are most clearly defined in *Seven Words* (1982), for cello, bayan and strings, another extended purely instrumental work that is intended to convey a recognizable symbolism while also carrying historical traces that somehow remind us of earlier attempts, by Schütz and Haydn, to tell this particular story through music.

In a brief overview of what he describes as 'mystical minimalism' – which involves reference to Görecki, Pärt and Kanchevi and which at least in terms of the 'mystical' may be extended to Gubaidulina – Alex Ross claims that they are 'writing as if the history of music were at an end'.²³ This statement captures a certain timelessness of some of this music, both in terms of at times almost static forms and textures, but also through a wider positioning of a disruption of the assumed directions between past, present and future.

Ross does not really justify his conclusion, which comes very early in his essay, and such justification would not perhaps be fully required in the largely journalistic context in which he is writing. But, while it might be desirable to avoid over-interpreting this brief comment by Ross, it is very intriguing and does invite further speculation. The claim of an 'end of history' has been made in many different contexts, but in terms of philosophy it has its origins in the early nineteenth-century Idealist thought of Hegel, in which the end of history comes as a consequence of a dynamic, goal-orientated view of historical change, a metanarrative which postmodernism refuses to invest belief in.²⁴ The 'end of history' has been restated in a different way in more recent times by Francis Fukuyama, who sees the post-Cold War world as constituted in highly conservative political ('democracy') and economic ('market economy') terms as if not perfect then at least seemingly beyond change and therefore beyond history.²⁵ Of course, Ross is not making a direct reference to either Hegel or Fukuyama, but there is a sense in which modernism was seen, or saw itself, as a consequence of an inevitable historical progress while the emergence of postmodernism, in contrast, involves a new historical awareness. This awareness does not extend to projecting a future but rather becoming more, after modernism, preoccupied with the past. The music discussed in this chapter, along with examples discussed earlier in this book, can be heard as part of that historical awareness. It does not reach the moment at which it seems 'as if the history of music were at an end' as a state of perfection, but it does form part of a realization that, at the very least, any possibility of consistent, coherent stylistic renewal and progress is now deeply problematic.

Chapter 9

Repetitions and revisions: from bebop to hip hop

In his epic history of jazz music Alyn Shipton begins his discussion of what he considers to be 'postmodern jazz', the focal point of this chapter, with the following statement:

Up until the 1970s, the story of jazz is a straightforward narrative. It is one in which there may be changes of emphasis ... but there is a clear sense of development, of the music moving forward.¹

It is possible to outline the main developments in jazz music in a recognizable chronological framework and to trace the impact of major contributors to the music. However, on the basis of Shipton's account this comes to an end through what he terms the 'information age'. This is the point at which the abundance of information, through the impact of technology, disrupts that 'straightforward narrative', a disruption that coincides with, and can be defined by, postmodernism.

It is significant that Shipton situates this moment of ending in the 1970s, which coincides with much of the historical territory already covered in this book as defined by David Harvey's noted emergence of postmodernism somewhere between 1968 and 1972, the third stage of the historical outline sketched in chapter 1. From this point, as Shipton argues, it becomes more difficult to follow lines of stylistic evolution. Rather than moving forwards, jazz moves sideways into fusions with rock music, backwards in terms of revivals and recycling, fuelled in part by the increasing availability of recordings as historical documents, and away from any wider audience through the continuation of the avant-garde aspirations of free jazz.

However, jazz music may have appeared to move forward in a relatively straight line up to this point, but, as the details of Shipton's history often reveal, this is a rather misleading image. Many jazz styles overlap and intersect rather than merely following one after another. The close proximity between, for example, swing and bebop, the reception of which is imaginatively contextualized by Bernard Gendron, posed questions of what constituted the new and the modern in jazz in the 1940s. Jazz is also a music that may have become even more diverse after a certain point, but it was always already plural, always a cultural and musical hybrid. According to Kim Gabbard: