

# Panayiotis Demopoulos - Composer / Performer

## INTRODUCTION

Music and religion have traditionally been seen as closely connected practices; music and the principles of music theory have been viewed as a revelation of the divine in nature, and religion has treated music as part of divinity in the context of its music-centred rituals.<sup>1</sup> In post-enlightenment Western culture, the gradual secularisation of society and the increasing veneration of the individual have meant a steady decline in ‘religious’ music, which for many has also meant a decline in the quality of music altogether.

Once Christianity was established as the predominant religion of the European continent, much -and at times most, or even all- serious musical activity was in one way or other related to the dogma, ethics and liturgical customs of that religion. It was only gradually, in recent centuries, that liturgical music lost its central place in new music creation. Often, however, it was the music itself which caused this change in direction with regards to the extra-musical thematic content of pieces. A dislike for John Rutter’s music for example makes writing four-part church choral music an unattractive option for composers, for fear of association; such is the power of the marketplace. And with the exception of Messiaen, there seems to be no example of an important innovative composer who wrote mainly religious or liturgical music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that the resurgence of ecclesiastical aesthetics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may be a reaction to musical trends first and foremost. What renaissance polyphony stood for, for example, was a very controlled and disciplined treatment of pitch, a detailed and geometrically derived understanding of the properties of tension and release and a musical discourse which occurred in a very specific acoustical context. The post-war avant-garde, on the contrary, was developing ideas rapidly and often superficially, aiming to refute the principles established in the past as mere delusions that had become dogma. For those who saw a new *dictat* in this approach and little musical merit in the music it generated, religious music was a good platform for attempting to employ any archaisms they could otherwise not ever hope to justify aesthetically in their music. The examples of ‘spiritual’ composition in the late twentieth century share one main striking

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the word music itself derives from Muses, the deities of the antiquity.

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characteristic. Arvo Pärt, John Tavener, MacMillan and Gubaydulina among others, write mainly slow music or music with a very slow harmonic pace. This is a crude remark but it does describe a crude reality. Indeed, there is no better way to induce contemplation and spiritual activity in the concert hall than through stasis in music, even though to suggest that this is necessarily the only way is rather naïve in its absolutism. Archaisms especially, can only be acceptable, and indeed popular, when performed slowly, oddly enough. Successful as this approach may be, it is of course a form of demagogy and can be musically insipid and of no true poetic value.

If we were to compare an atmospheric pop-music piece which generates similar emotions of ‘wonderment’ and minimalist music, we will find little to distinguish between them on a technical level.<sup>2</sup> The differences are extra-musical; they are differences of verbal and dialectical argument, presentation and representation and in this way music becomes a side-product of a beautifully presented package - alas more often than not an empty one. There is another similarity of course: a doubtful right to claim authorship over a continuous use of C minor for some five-odd minutes for example. But that is another matter. Whether one should or should not be cynical enough to see no harm in this treatment of musical material as means to an end, or in the consequent assertion of ‘pro-pluralist’ forces in contemporary music, will not be the subject of this paper.

It is, however, worth noting that, since the paper discusses two prime examples of ‘spiritual music’, it better be kept in mind that by spiritual is now meant music, which in a non-musical way and purely through the use of symbols, refers to extra-musical ideas and therefore evokes spiritual notions. Would Gubaydulina’s piece have the same effect on the listener had it been entitled *The Seven Trumpets* or *The Seven Samurai*? ‘Surely not’ is this author’s answer. But for the composer the title was an indispensable part of the piece, she claims, while relating the fact that the piece was initially renamed and had the sub-headings removed by the Soviet authorities.<sup>3</sup> And it may also be kept in mind that this approach to music is diametrically opposite to Gubaydulina’s ideal: Bach’s music, where the evocation is so directly musical. Would *St. Matthew’s Passion* be as effective had it been named the *Leipzig Oratorio* or if the same music save the choral parts had been used for a funeral service or a secular piece

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from the fact that pop music makes a more interesting use of timbre and on this we can safely quote the opinion of unbiased listeners.

<sup>3</sup> McBurney, p.121

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commissioned by some aristocratic patron? 'Undoubtedly yes' is this author's answer. Thus, the term 'spiritual music' - when applied to both - loses its actual meaning. It becomes a label that signifies a non-being; i.e. the label is, conveniently for those who usurp it, the very content.

To end this brief, unjustly and furiously negative introduction, it must be explained that this paper will not be a polemic. For one thing this would be unfair, as both composers discussed are evidently very aware of the above ideas and so they have made their respectable choices from an informed standpoint. It would also be too easy a task and no challenge whatsoever to constantly deny non-pure music any musical value, as it would also be rather tedious to read and a flawed criticism in itself. On the contrary, the three sections which follow will concentrate on a very objective description of the pieces discussed and a commentary, which, - it is hoped - will be beneficial for the author and readers alike. A comparison will be to an extent inevitable, but it will not be an evaluation of the pieces against one another as much as an attempt to view them from a broad historical perspective and distinguish the idiomatic traits that define them.

The first section will briefly touch on the biographical element, arguing over the relationship between the composers' lives, the texts used in the pieces and the dogmas represented. In the second section the paper will focus on the music; it will be useful for the reader to refer to a recording and score while examining this chapter. The movements will be described in succession and the symbolism of the material will be exposed. In the final part of the essay, a few conclusive comments will be made, discussing the validity and creative dynamic of what is today commonly considered as spiritual music.

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## CHAPTER I

Even though James MacMillan (b.1959) and Sofiya Gubaydulina (b.1931) belong to different generations, they both came to prominence at the end of the 1980s. In the case of MacMillan events unfolded conveniently enough to bring him to the forefront of new music. Born in Ayrshire, Scotland, MacMillan followed regular music studies in British institutions and was employed by the Universities of Manchester and Edinburgh before pieces like *Tryst* and *Busqueda* attracted very positive reviews. His 1990 piece *Confession of Isobel Gowdie* was an unprecedented Proms success and brought him to international attention, securing his future. MacMillan's music is known for its directness and communicative power, not least through the use of evocative titles and references to the extra-musical. He is himself aware of attempting and achieving this communication with his audiences and explains how it is one of his primary aims.

...now more than ever before there's a danger that music can be enclosed in its own abstract ghetto-ization...so that music in our own time has ceased to have that communicative function...We needed a laboratory phase after the second world war, but that laboratory mentality has exerted itself, I think, far too much...it's important for me...that there's a substantive connection [between the musical and extra-musical] and that that connection is audible and meaningful to the people when they encounter the music.<sup>4</sup>

Even though MacMillan does not conceal his interest in the extra-musical, he is clearly aware of the abstract nature of music. Is Catholicism at all related to this choice of writing dialectical or pictorial almost music? He himself never asserts so. When asked to discuss similarities between his music and the music of the spiritualist Gorecki and the caricaturist Schnittke, MacMillan opts for Schnittke. His reasons are that Gorecki, like Tavener, achieves a mono-dimensional sound. Iconic and effective - he claims - as that may be, it lacks conflict, which he considers a vital part of his musical consciousness. And he opts for Schnittke and mostly for the Polish avant-garde<sup>5</sup> because the visceral conflicts in Schnittke's music are a central concern of his. This is an honest and accurate reflection by the composer on his own work. We shall see on a number of occasions in the *Seven Last Words* how sudden violent outbursts are set against a background of serenity very much in the Schnittke idiom. It may

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<sup>4</sup> Benn, p.1

<sup>5</sup> MacMillan stressed on this a number of times in a lesson with the author of the present paper (RNCM, Autumn 2002).

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seem like an exaggeration to view this attribute as all-important, but in the course of listening to a piece of music these punctuating exchanges of tension and release, or turbulence and calm are acting as structural and dramatic reference points, constituting elements of the musical discourse and markers of style and emotional departure.

MacMillan regards himself as a left-winger within the Catholic Church. It is quite interesting to see an absence of the dogmatic in his description of his effort to attain the spiritual in his music. Whether that is the manifestation of a politically correct consciousness which avoids dogmatic statements or the words of an agnostic Catholic cannot be answered; possibly not even by MacMillan himself. His words on the relationship of music and religion are nevertheless illuminating:

...there are very strong analogies between religion and music; between religious contemplation and the serious listening of music. We give something of ourselves up to the object, whether it be a musical performance or the divine. We are in awe of this encounter, we give over something of our time in order to grow and in order to be changed by it. There's [sic] very strong and powerful analogies between religion and music, between music and spirituality... between music and theology and it's because of those connections that I'm determined to explore more what the connections are and what they might be and for that reason I'm entirely at ease with giving space in my music for these considerations...<sup>6</sup>

By giving space, MacMillan means perhaps, that a certain degree of technical pseudo-control must be abandoned. But what is of primary importance and also prominent in Gubaydulina's line of thought is the notion of temporally 'giving time to the object'. The understanding of time in this music is usually the attempt to bring time to a stasis of completion, any metric idea to a pulse, the calculation of 'clock-time' to a timeless condition.<sup>7</sup> How and if this is achieved is entirely left to the judgement of the listener and commentator.<sup>8</sup> But for both composers, this is clearly a very central musical question.

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<sup>6</sup> Begg (1998) 2

<sup>7</sup> This locational, Messiaen-like time matter is denied by Gubaydulina (Polin (19..)p.19), but in praxis it seems to be embraced.

<sup>8</sup> K. Potter (1990) offers numerous interesting insights as to the way in which MacMillan's harmonic language being non-triadic, but tonal to an extent, contributes to a more successful and religiously fuelled "temporal application of the teaching of love" as the composer himself suggests (Regan, 2002).

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Sofya Gubaydulina was born in Cistopol in 1931 and grew up in the multicultural city of Kazan. She later moved to Moscow for her advanced musical studies. In contrast with MacMillan's rapidly obtained position in the international scene, it took the fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s for her to begin to gather acclaim in the West. She is now considered as one of the main exponents of the post-Shostakovich Russian school, but for the better part of her life, this was far from a guaranteed eventuality. Even then, however, Gubaydulina made little effort to write music other than that she felt had to be written. Gerard McBurney offers an interesting comment with regards to this Shostakovich-related categorisation:

For Shostakovich, in common with so many in the Russian tradition, the subject of his music was pre-ordained by the condition of suffering under tyranny... Gubaydulina has remained untouched by that problem... The religious nature of her work places her in a certain Russian tradition, albeit one almost entirely extinguished in the wake of 1917... [she] agrees that the tradition of religious and symbolic speculation which were so prominent in Russian art at the turn of the century are important to her.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, there is the obvious common context of creative life under communism. When Gubaydulina mentions the mass psychosis of Soviet crowds and speaks with disdain of her experiences in the post-war era, she may be indirectly explaining the introvert, almost cryptic if somehow directly communicative nature of her writing style, an experience shared with Shostakovich and any other Soviet composer. It is both moving and inspiring to hear how music was a haven from such a stark reality for this composer:

As I grew older, music became the single sustenance by which I was able to live and exist... all my life was grey, and I only felt good when I crossed the gate of the music school. From this moment I would find myself within a sacred space. I would hear the sounds coming out of the classrooms, I would feel a bond with all of the pupils, and all would be joined together in this polytonal harmony of sounds, and in this world I wanted to live.<sup>10</sup>

Gubaydulina is a Russian Orthodox and is not shy to share her convictions with her listeners. But Judaism, Islam and Roman Catholicism have been part of her immediate family's religious practice. Again, as in the case of MacMillan there is a keen interest to be all-inclusive and oecumenical in religious matters, in true Orthodox fashion

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<sup>9</sup> McBurney (121-123)

<sup>10</sup> Quotation from *Gubajdulina* (Restagno, 1991) in Neary (1999).

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perhaps. Making a very interesting statement, she speaks of a “simultaneous inner hearing of the whole”<sup>11</sup>. This is interesting for it has a temporal beginning, as so much of religion does.

Moreover, in this comment she seems to be discussing musical technique in terms of theology and ontology, conveying a desire to contemplate sound in mystical terms. Whether this is of musicological merit is questionable, but with regards to speculating about her intentions it is a vital piece of information. Needless to say that it is also a piece of information which is ingrained in the music and that this paragraph only seeks to illustrate this music’s character to the reader who isn’t acquainted with the piece, not to interpret or explain it.

The music of Gubaydulina is ultimately a music produced in a society which dictates a common consciousness. Surprisingly, since MacMillan adopts the opposite attempt to embrace the collective thought of centuries in a society which denounces anachronism, the two meet somewhere in the middle. This meeting point is one of balance and forward dynamic, and it is extremely interesting to see how two composers who are looking at the same theological object from the same or very similar angle create different worlds due to the different direction of their thought.

But what is the specific nature of this object?

The ‘Seven Last Words from the Cross’ are found in the Gospels of the Apostles. They are in themselves an almost complete account of the substance of the Christian faith. In these seven phrases, we witness divine forgiveness, the passion of Christ, human hubris, the commitment of the New World, the promise of resurrection and the Death of the Son of God. They are dispersed in the four Gospels, but common practice is to view them in the following order:

New Testament in Greek

King James Bible

Πάτερ ἄφες αὐτοῖς  
οὐ γὰρ οἶδασι τι ποιοῦσι

Father forgive them  
for they know not what they are doing

Γύναι, ἴδε ὁ Υἱός σου  
Ἴδε ἡ Μήτηρ σου

Woman, behold thy Son  
behold thy Mother

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<sup>11</sup> ibid.

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Ηλί Ηλί λαμά σαβαχθανί; Πάτερ ίνα τι με εγκατέλιπες; (transliteration from Aramaic)	Eli Eli lama Sabachthani? Father, why hast thou forsaken me? (transliteration from Aramaic)
Αμήν λέγω σοι, σήμερον μετ'εμού έση εν τω παραδείσω	Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise
Διψω	I thirst
Πάτερ, είς χειρας σου παρατίθεμαι το πνευμα μου	Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit
Τετέλεσται	It is finished

Heinrich Schütz, Joseph Haydn, Charles Francois Gounod, Théodore Dubois and Tristan Murail are only a few of the composers who have been inspired over the centuries to set the Seven Last Words from the Cross to music. Understandably so, as the texts are very attractive from a poetic point of view. Their aphoristic style is appropriately defiant of linguistic detail and semantic precision. For example, even though the translations from Greek to modern English are not entirely accurate they are dogmatically correct. This is not always true of longer, or more elaborate passages in the New Testament. As for the Latin and Russian texts, one expects that the same stands and that no theological or poetical inconsistencies occur in corresponding excerpts. Also, the still nature of the 'plot' as it were, with its introvert dramaturgy, is essentially bare of much luminous, exact meaning. Emotive as these last utterances of Jesus may be, they are not elaborate in themselves but they invite elaboration. It is here that music enters the picture. Where a visual or verbal commentary might touch on sacrilege, music offers an appropriately mystical and abstract way of communicating the depths of the Passion's last moments. In a sense what is required to comment on such a vast, mystical theme can only be a self-contained, compact medium with the ability to evoke hypnotic pathos in itself. In the words of MacMillan the choice is an obvious one: 'Music more than any other art form needs no reference other than to itself.'<sup>12</sup>

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For Gubaydulina the choice is a more symbolic one. She opts to assign signifying roles to instruments, notations, and structures so as to portray the drama. In this way her attempt is more of an external commentary than the transubstantiation from extra-musical to musical, which MacMillan attempts. It is nevertheless a mystical, musical commentary too, only more observant of the drama. Even so, and quite paradoxically, Gubaydulina's music is far less pictorial, for reasons that will become apparent in the next chapter.

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## CHAPTER II

Before the two pieces are closely examined it may be worthwhile presenting a number of crucial differences that define the frame of reference within which the music will be best understood.

As was said before, the creeds of the two composers are a significant point of distinction. The Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox Church have not shared a recent past in political or liturgical terms. The symbolism inherent in the liturgical practices of the Orthodox Church may in fact be very well one of the reasons why Gubaydulina's piece is almost ritualistic. To a lesser extent the same applies to MacMillan, but not quite with the same intensity and one cannot help but assume that this may in fact have to do with the aesthetics of the respective Churches.

Another factor that determines much of the dramatic and extra-musical value of the works is the time-frame within which they were conceived. In MacMillan's case, the piece's production was well-timed and well-received. It carried little in the way of a political message;<sup>13</sup> on the contrary Gubaydulina wrote her 'setting' in 1982, a few years after being denounced by the Soviet.<sup>14</sup> This was a time when a composer in the Soviet Union was not encouraged to compose religious music, a practice considered irresponsible towards the people and also a time when one could not purchase a Bible in that country. The sociological relevance pertaining to this work may have been initially higher than at later, more informed times. This is to say, the piece carried a message, and Gubaydulina must have meant it to carry a message. In this way, MacMillan's effort can have an extra-musical message attached to it by those who may comment on it but it might not have been conceived along these lines, whereas Gubaydulina appears to have intended the piece to be specifically relevant to certain people more than others. As Marina Frolova puts it, "the protest value of the piece is big and must be [ideally] part of the audience's experience".<sup>15</sup>

Finally, and taking care not to move into the music too much at this stage, it is clear that the choice of instrumentation is of primary importance. MacMillan makes use of

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<sup>13</sup> One could see a connection with the Irish question, but this seems rather tenuous.

<sup>14</sup> Alongside Denissov, Firsova, Schnittke, Ustvolskaya and others.

<sup>15</sup> In discussion with Marina Frolova-Walker.

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the SATB chamber choir and of a string orchestra, whereas Gubaydulina asks for a tripartite instrumental ensemble: the bayan which assumes the role of God the Father, the cello solo which portrays God the Son and a 15-part string ensemble which speaks as the Holy Spirit. Of course it must be noted here that the work was in effect commissioned by Wladimir Toncha and Friedrich Lips, the two soloists who were responsible for the first performance and first recording of the work, and so the choice of instruments was also practical. Gubaydulina considered these two performers to be co-authors of the piece, as many of the techniques employed such as chord tremolos in the cello or sound effect in the bayan part were recommended and even invented by the players.<sup>16</sup> The piece was eventually only dedicated to these two players and not attributed to them in any way, but it would be interesting to hear realisations of the score by other players. In the case of MacMillan, the orchestration is straight-forward and many performances are given of the work every year, especially during Easter.

Obviously, in Gubaydulina's piece no text is to be recited or sung. Rather, the instruments are called upon to communicate the essence of the words in gestural terms. Thankfully, banal mimicry is avoided almost exclusively. In MacMillan's work, the texts are sung and other texts are used in addition, whilst the music is in a way subservient to the 'plot' in that it reacts to the texts and stands detached from it. In this context what keeps the balance, in the case of MacMillan, is a good use of emotive familiar harmonic and melodic cells that assist in the communication of the words; what is traditionally known as word painting. In the case of Gubaydulina, where pictorialism is almost too much at times, balance is achieved by way of maintaining the absence of the lexical assertion of the imagery, i.e. using sung texts to justify the character of the musical material. In a sense, once one is aware of the symbolism in Gubaydulina's case one may find it hard to focus on the music. This raises the question of whether Gubaydulina meant for all the various levels of symbolism to be obvious to the audience or not, but the answer lies in the fact that the question itself could only be raised once the score is studied.

Awareness of these differences in overall style and scope is not essential in listening to the music. But for the composer and musician, clarifying what is not shared in the works also means clarifying the ability to distinguish between two musical sets of contents. What then remains is to discuss these contents in some detail.

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<sup>16</sup> As in 15 (according to Kholopova).

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## CHAPTER III

### I *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*

MacMillan's work sets off with an exact quotation from *Tuireadh*, his quintet for strings and clarinet. Whereas the very opening accompaniment texture (ex.1) may be heard as a Coplandesque V-IV in B minor (ascending melodic) with no clashes or false relations at any point, the melody with its use of G's and A's creates a sense of ambiguity and a complementary modal colour of F# Phrygian. So the two opening chords linked with a passing D can be heard as both an incomplete plagal cadence in B or as a reverse aeolian cadence in F# both at the same time as we fluctuate from a sonority containing a G onto one containing G#.

ex. 1

Where functional diatonic nomenclature cannot be sufficiently precise of course, it may not be used and so perhaps it is sufficient to say that the passage has a modal colour owing to the flattened leading notes and in spite of the triadic diatonic references. Or, to avoid risking any controversy, one may just say that the passage begins with a serene, fluctuating colouration and tonal instability. It must be noted here, that the harmony is approached possibly by the practical exploration of certain composite frequencies and register rather than the use of functional harmony. Not all semitone clashes will work as they do in this particular register as a minor ninth. Similarly, were the vocal line to be given to the bass, the harmonic function of the chords would have been immensely different and this can be easily -if not entirely accurately- verified at the piano, or the organ to be a little more consistent with the strings' sustained frequencies.

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At any rate, this cadential quotation underpins most of the first movement and recurs at key points in the piece. MacMillan uses three texts in this movement, a *Hosanna* for Palm Sunday sung for the son of David, a responsory from the *Good Friday Tenebrae* and the biblical text.

The use of musical material is predictably symbolic; the slow cadential ‘sorrow motif’ accompanies the voice of Jesus asking God the Father to forgive those who have wronged Him. In contrast the “fanfares” accompanying the Palm Sunday Osannas are triumphant music, which in a symbolical context shows why “they know not what they do”. The same people who glorified Christ on Palm Sunday, crucify him now, only a week later. Finally, the F# monotone which has been continuously present since the very beginning transforms into a commentary plainchant recitation of the Good Friday text. The fanfares are transformed into celestial chords and the “sorrow motif” passes on to the voices, leaving the F# on its own to end the cycle.

The writing is generally tonal and the deviations and embellishments of the melody lines are to account for the majority of the gestures, at least in the faster music. In a sense, the degree of pitch organisation and content in a lot of the writing is minimal and one may end up looking for substance where there is only effect. This conclusion follows immediately after the first hearing for the informed audience and is not something to be ‘discovered’ after long and close examination.

The same applies to Gubaydulina’s opening. It seems initially that the structure is based around Fibonacci durations. However, even if this has been the initial intention, the durations of phrases and sections in performance deviate from a Fibonacci-designed frame and so the whole issue becomes an irrelevance.

The music begins with a ‘crucifixion’ motif. As was mentioned earlier, there is ritualistic symbolism in the piece. Thus, on hearing a recording one is not aware of the symbolism of the crossing of strings on the cello for example. But this does happen and it is important; in the same way that crossing the body with the right hand is not prescribed as part of the liturgy for Orthodox Christians but it is an indispensable part of worship practice. Nevertheless, Gubaydulina is not writing theatre music, like Kagel for instance. This is allegedly ritual music, meaning that what is representation for a non-believing listener is transubstantiation for the faithful.

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Thus the work is immediately exclusive to those who will hear this poetry from a specific perspective and contribute to it with their spiritual effort.

This first movement contains all the symbols that Gubaydulina uses in the piece. The ‘crucifixion motif’ in the cello, a quotation from H. Schütz’s *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (ex.2) and notational crosses and symbols as well as the music played by the strings in homophony symbolising the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to see how the soloists are the avant-gardists so to speak and the orchestra only play a form of organum spelled in modern notation. Due to the commission she received, Gubaydulina might have had to write simpler music for the accompanying strings. It might, however, have been a musical choice alone to make the string section fit the ‘role’ of celestial harmonies played on diatonic modes mainly in order to depict heavenly purity. That is then the main characteristic of the opening: the music of the soloists and the chorus stand in direct contrast, the effect of close-part organum in this opening movement is strikingly haunting and the claustrophobic three-note fantasia of the soloists obsessively sets the tone for the whole piece.

Meno mosso  
♩ = 44

pp

pp

ex.2 Gubaydulina, end of 1st movement

V. I

V. II

Vla

JESUS

I thirst, I thirst.

Bass

p

pp

ex. 2 Schutz movement XXIII

II *Woman, behold thy Son!*  
*Behold, thy Mother!*

It is with the second movement that the iconic treatment of the text becomes apparent. Gubaydulina uses an identical structure; i.e. another icon very similar to the first, using the colours of the first, and only distinguishing it by way of the varied treatment of the details. The music ‘opens’ a little. The crucifixion motif is presented in linear form, the octave crossing motif is interjected frequently and the

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bayan accompaniment appears in clusters spanning sixths and sevenths, all emphasising this sense of the music being allowed some light, before the decorated Schütz quotation signifies the end of the episode. The broadening of the musical material is also evident in the initial absence of strict homophony in the strings' organum. When the chant is reinstated in all the parts, the register expands and compensates as the music gains both volume and 'height'. Still, the strings are playing within the range of the human voice. It will be seen later how the more unearthly is evoked by strings playing higher. Whether any of that relates to the title more than the previous music may be answered by the individual listener.

MacMillan's second movement is structured around a binary model. The words are uttered with authority significant for the text and then commented upon by polyphonic episodes in the strings. This happens with increasing intensity and harmonic elaboration. As the dissonance-consonance threshold opens up until the string parts have covered the range from the double bass C#1 to the c#'''' in the violins, the texture from unison to multiple-part<sup>17</sup> counterpoint to unison, and the dynamic range from *pp* to *fff* and back to *pp*.

Even though there is no direct reference to the words, the whole idea of having an arch structure for the movement with various subsistent arch phrases is corresponding to the completeness of the words; one feels that an 'incomplete', non-cyclic structure, would not be as 'fitting' for this assertive divine address.

The ultimate canonic gesture of the orchestra comprises of 7 layers and every layer has either 7 or 11 entries. Coincidentally the chorale is presented 11 times and this may for some commentators suggest a numerological organisation of the material, but this writer is instinctively convinced - and therefore possibly wrong - that the matter is pure coincidence.

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<sup>17</sup> It is not accurate to suggest a number, as parts transform and so the number is reduced or vice versa.

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III *Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise*

In the next movement MacMillan writes a much more obvious commentary on the verbal incident. There is something almost parodic about the Italianate, Verdi Aria-meets-Michael Nyman in the *Venite* section. One finds oneself at a loss sometimes with MacMillan's setting, as to whether this is irony or a peculiar form of post-modern expressionism. This is not to say that the work is not designed thus deliberately,<sup>18</sup> i.e. to cause this uncertainty, but there is overall a sense of doubt as to the intention rather than the effect. The movement is a set of alternating sections set to a Good Friday Versicle which begins on the word *Behold* to carry on from the previous movement. The vocal medievalisms and drones are set to the first two lines: *Ecce Lignum Crucis in quo salus mundi pependit (Behold the wood of the cross on which the Saviour of the world was hung)* contrasting greatly with the bel canto style of the music used for the next line: *Venite Adoramus (come let us adore him)*. Again there is a scheme of moving from the low frequencies to the high and in the process the character of the music also alters from solemn to other-worldly; this is an uplifting, *Sursum Corda* type of movement. When the music has reached the soprano register and the violin E strings, it stops for a moment, before the Gospel is sung evoking images and emotions of a celestial disposition.

Perhaps the temptation to make the obvious, popular choices for this point in the music, however mortal, imperfect and therefore 'inappropriate', is simply too powerful to resist. It is worth noting here, that in Gubaydulina's setting too, whereas neither of the first two movements employ any direct word-painting, in the end of the third the high string harmonies are unmistakably suggestive of heavenly sounds. The movement starts off where the second left before the string section took over. In fact the opening is identical to rehearsal mark 8 of the previous movement, transposed a semitone higher.

For the first time in the piece there appear two elements: a symbolical coming together of soloists and orchestra if only hesitantly and the extensive and extrovert use of sound effects in the bayan part. It is in fact these two new elements which allow the musical discourse to continue in the same vein without being monotonous. After the

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<sup>18</sup> Even though one can only hope that it is not designed to be ambiguous deliberately and that it is ironic.

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clearest Schütz quotation, the strings follow divided into 14 parts. Through the whole movement an obsession with [012] collections and contrasting octaves and unisons prevails until the organum appearance, even though this too deviates from its first species character at times, questioning our familiarity with its exact character.

## IV *Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani?*

Gubaydulina offers the next movement ample time. Whether there is enough dynamic drive in the music to make this time interesting is another matter, subject to one's aural tastes. There is little to say about the material; all the elements used, harmonic, textural and symbolic have already appeared in the previous movements. The interplay between soloists and orchestra is significantly extended nevertheless, and this fact alone does give some momentum to the textures while a sense of anger and abandonment permeates the music to create a dramatic effect. The actual sounds are still bound by [012] harmonies and well-organised rhythmic indeterminacy. As far as the symbolic is concerned the more obvious trait is the absence of the Holy Spirit motif. In a theological sense, this is the last temptation of Christ<sup>19</sup> which he overcomes with his next words. Otherwise, the music is delirious and many conflicting gestures contribute to an unfocused, undisciplined movement of sound. But as was said before this kind of symbolism is not meant to evoke, but to be meditated upon.

Far from this, MacMillan's fourth movement is a direct evocation of the words. Again, the music is presented in arch form, at least texturally, and the use of octatonic cells and symmetrical formations reflects this schema in microstructural terms. The vocal melodies are mostly presented in step movement and they are not energised. The occasional leap speaks of fateful anguish rather than confidence or foresight. The words come in various parts at different times, therefore signifying humanity and confusion, Jesus of Nazareth as opposed to God the Son, and the whole movement may be seen as a single utterance of the question posed by the crucified Jesus, even in

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<sup>19</sup> Contrary to common belief and a certain novelist's imagination.

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the way that the intonation of the whole or of the actual sung phrases rises and then falls at the end of the question.<sup>20</sup>

## V *I thirst*

The use of vocal inflection to depict an emotional state is also the focal point of the next movement in MacMillan's piece. The physical exhaustion of the crucified is well captured in the hallucinatory sound effect of various voices whispering over a still soundscape. This shadow music is punctuated twice by piercing, shuddering sounds and with the second of these instances the music dissolves into the very luminous sonority from which it rose. The pacing in this movement is clearly judged and the soundscape always transparent, which in psychological terms is very appropriate for this moment of physical catharsis.

Gubaydulina also writes visceral music for the fifth word. The string section in its absence signifies the desolate fate of human nature when confronting physical death. This music is a struggle between the immaterial and the sensual. At the conclusion, the two part their ways: the cello ascends and the bayan descends. Maybe it is not the intention of the composer, but it seems that the instrumental symbolism has a level other than and in conflict with that of the Trinity. The bayan often assumes the role of the lowly and earthly and the cello of the pure, transcending qualities. Certainly if one accepts this multiple-level symbolic functions, this is one of these instances of diversified musical onomatopoeia.

## VI *It is finished*

Another of these instances comes with the sixth movement. The organum accompaniment in the orchestra chorus is only a backdrop against which the essence of the drama is conveyed in the solo parts. The cello is of course symbolising the assertion of the Word. Its music is the music of the Law; it speaks 'it is finished'. But

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<sup>20</sup> Which is linguistically odd. Questions in most languages are characterised by a rise of the tone at the end.

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the bayan can be interpreted to be either the time of reckoning or the final sensual reaction to fate. After the strings stop playing the cello prevails over the bayan and has the last word, with a final crossing of the bow almost over the bridge. One of the more accomplished moments in terms of development and musical cross reference, this is a point when the octave and unison quotations from previous movements acquire another level of meaning.

If Gubaydulina's setting of this text is showing signs of turmoil and anxiety but retaining a connecting thread, MacMillan only does so after starting off this movement with a most curious choice of stampeding 'nightmare music' as in a Hitchcock film. The listener who is unfortunate enough to perceive the opening thus will not recover before the piece ends, but as perception is -to the dismay of dictators and composers alike- a subjective notion, one cannot stress enough on the need to try to hear the music differently. To rephrase the previous paragraph then, MacMillan opens the piece with an assertive, mechanical sound, but at the same time undermines the mechanism by the immediate use of irregular rhythmic variation. Within moments it becomes clear that this was only a deceitful introduction. The main body of the movement comprises the pursuit of the 'sorrow motif'. This is achieved once the accompanying text that MacMillan chooses for the movement reaches the words: 'Is there any sorrow like my sorrow?'<sup>21</sup>. The soprano which assumes the leading role in the movement remains asking the question after the music has expired, and the chordal stabs of the opening return to envelope the movement in the absurdity of inhuman, automatic sound.

### VII *Father, into Thy hands I commend my Spirit*

Many of the more beautiful sound-worlds are wisely and economically reserved for the closing movements, by both composers, to secure a last powerful communicative statement. MacMillan summarises much of the previous music. The opening declamatory cadences and the following vocal textures are madrigal-like, reminiscent of the second movement. With the very final words of Jesus, the 'sorrow motif' is played one last time and then a folk-like lyrical violin duet commences, again

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<sup>21</sup> A Good Friday Responsory.

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reminiscent of the third movement *Venite*. The technique behind much of MacMillan's melodic writing is explained by the composer: 'If I look at my music objectively, I can see the Celtic influence: a solid line punctuated by little flurries of ornaments.'<sup>22</sup> Ultimately the music transubstantiates reaching for an ever higher plane until it rests on a minor second which becomes a sonority rather than an interval, then a pulse and then nothing.

Gubaydulina's ending is quite different in the sense that there is no summary of what has already been narrated, but a new, fresh music of a very different character. As to cross reference and looking back into the rest of the piece, the focus remains on the cross with an almost obsessive devotion. Humanity is not symbolised in terms of folk culture but through the attempt to immerse wholly into the Passion. The structure for instance is ever arch-form. This is visually represented by the notation in a variety of ways in the last movement but also by the structuring of the entries of parts. A diagram may illustrate this more clearly:

The instrumentation structure is

Cello Cello Cello Cello Cello

Bayan Bayan Bayan

Strings

Finally, the acoustic narrative evolves as a macro-structure of accumulation and dissolution: a three-part structure begins with and ends with the other-worldly figuration in the cello. In between the last breaths of Christ are no longer made of perceptible, human dimensions but of superimposed musical elements, the bayan high decoration, the string unisons and the spectral appearances of [012] collections. In any event there are the obvious similarities in the way that the two pieces end, most strikingly the way they both die away to nothing as if denoting death with silence.

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<sup>22</sup> Ratcliffe (1999a) 40

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## CONCLUSION

The more observant reader will have noticed how the first movement was commented upon in many more words than the last. Indeed, the sharp decrease in matters of interest is no accident. Development of material, contrast of textures and variety of pacing are absent. It seems that one thing is said repeatedly without any intention to make this repetition a structural feature either. There is a very fitting but dishonourable and unfashionable quotation that will do to insert at this point, so as to 'hint' at the origin of this progress. In the film *Amadeus* the Emperor of Austria-Hungary says to Mozart: 'There are simply too many notes! That's all! Just cut a few and it will be perfect'.

It was promised in the beginning that this text would avoid becoming a polemic. So it did for the better part in the more naive times of the opening chapters! But it is fitting to end by posing questions, rather than drawing servingly positive conclusions, chiefly because the pieces invite general aesthetic query more than they inspire confident opinion.

The 21st century presents us with unprecedented cultural conditions, which directly affect Western Art music. Composers face the monolithic and simple-minded but effectively insurmountable obstacle that is the music industry. Some choose to climb on top of this monolith and lose any sight of poetry in the process. Others rest in its shade and lead convenient, servile and infertile para-musical existences, while those who attempt to push it and its acolytes aside usually end up buried underneath it, in the collective grave of Art music over which it stands. The audiences are told to admire this monstrosity and most do, for they have little else to admire, whereas the rest just ignore the issue altogether or see it as a necessary evil. There is the odd case when, by a combination of vision, luck and the industry's imperfect ability to police thought, a composer will demonstrate a refreshing, erosion-free creative voice.

But, unfortunately, these cases seem to be as numbered now as they were in less 'socially inclusive' times.

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The above paragraph must not be mistaken for a contemptible form of elitism any more than the mechanisms of the music industry should be mistaken for a benign force, serving in the interest of human consciousness. Music, like all other human experience is something that requires autonomous, non-verbal reflection upon itself before it can be truly understood. It cannot really exist in reference outside itself and in its purest form it cannot be a vehicle carrying non-musical signals. In saying that, when musical autonomy is even fleetingly achieved, then it is a vehicle for anything, from the abstract and temporal to the very trivial and finite. Of course, much of this writing is dogmatic, and dogma can easily lead to logical fallacy. But it is dogma, which is to account for the conviction permeating all true Art music too. Dogma, it seems, is 'dogmatically' avoided as a possibility in the pursuit of thought and in that sense becomes the latest taboo.

Perhaps these vague and lexically undefinable ideas must be more precisely put in context. MacMillan and Gubaydulina have produced two pieces that are obviously very much dependent on the calculation of the audience's ideological filtering process: not their musical perception, but their hermeneutical capacity.

The question is, must music be written like this, and if so how important is this music? Must the knowledge of 25 centuries of documented music theory in the West, or the efforts of so many musicians, theorists, instrument designers and composers not become praxis? Must all this information be adjusted to suit the formulaic demands of a categorised set of stylistic niches? Surely, such a musically insensitive decision cannot possibly have been made by true musicians or even free-minded listeners. Liberal minds immediately reply to these questions: 'No, music mustn't necessarily be written in this way, but it can be written in any way including this one: it is an inclusive experience and involves all extra-musical knowledge'.<sup>23</sup>

So it can, and so it is. How that is less dogmatic an approach, and therefore more virtuous than a view which seeks to disapprove of such a music, and why virtue or its logical pursuit are the issues here at all is not clear at all. One suspects that virtue and vice in aesthetic matters will not ever be clearly discussed issues through the medium of language.

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<sup>23</sup>Kramer (1995) Prospects, chapter I.

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The most fascinating thing about sounds is that they always prevail, even against our most vile attempts to defile them and make abhorrent combinations of them. Think of the most banal use of harmony and emotionalist stylistic cliché for instance: say for the sake of argument a pastiche of Richard Clayderman with a steady techno-pop beat in the background. In spite of the horrific aesthetic vacuum which results from this musical disaster, there is always interest to be had acoustically in the instrumental colours, in the overtones of frequencies and the geometry of the relationships between them. No matter what we do, sound will always be interesting and the bearer of poetry. Why then not focus on the interesting aspects and emphasise on these dimensions of sound, instead of deliberately trying to obscure them behind some old and worn marketable aesthetic, or some new, alternative, but ever marketable façade and whole varieties of pseudo-philosophical or pseudo-religious statements?

Ultimately, one question only matters to which we will arrive by asking a number of secondary questions. The music presented in this short paper was composed as a response to an extra-musical stimulus, without whose knowledge the composers would have found little to say with the musical material they use. Already in this, music is sidelined in a way. What purpose does this serve other than to prostitute sounds for the sake of immediacy and popularity? Is there any essential poetical difference between this music and the music used by the SS to promote an extra-musical, politically fuelled idea, since they both denounce musical autonomy for the sake of a message? And is there anything truly spiritual in denying music the possibility of a divine, non-political origin? Admittedly, we admire much music which was composed as a reaction to a political or other idea, but what we admire is the sound not the idea. When a piece is only its reference to an idea and the sound is of secondary importance then there is little to admire.

If the 'message' is the criterion for evaluating the music, isn't this a confusion of primitive politics with the art of sound? What is the appeal in replacing musical thought with non-musical objects? Can such attempts ever serve a musical purpose? And no matter what the aesthetic value of the presentation, regardless of the serious and sophisticated appearances, from the first sounds in both pieces discussed, a deleterious question appears: why write music if it is not pure music and more importantly why do that consciously? Why not write music for Music's sake? Regrettably, with the expiration of the last sound in both pieces, the question remains.

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