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Gubaidulina Drives A Triple Between Sound And Silence

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The Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andris Nelsons conducting, gives the premiere of Sofia Gubaidulina's Triple Concerto with soloists Baiba Skride, Harriet Krijgh and Elsbeth Moser. (Concert photos by Winslow Townson)

By **Keith Powers**

BOSTON – [Sofia Gubaidulina](#) creates silences. Pregnant with implied sounds, the silences frame her music. In the end, they carry a weight equal to the notes on the page.



Elsbeth Moser: Triple Concerto dedicatee.

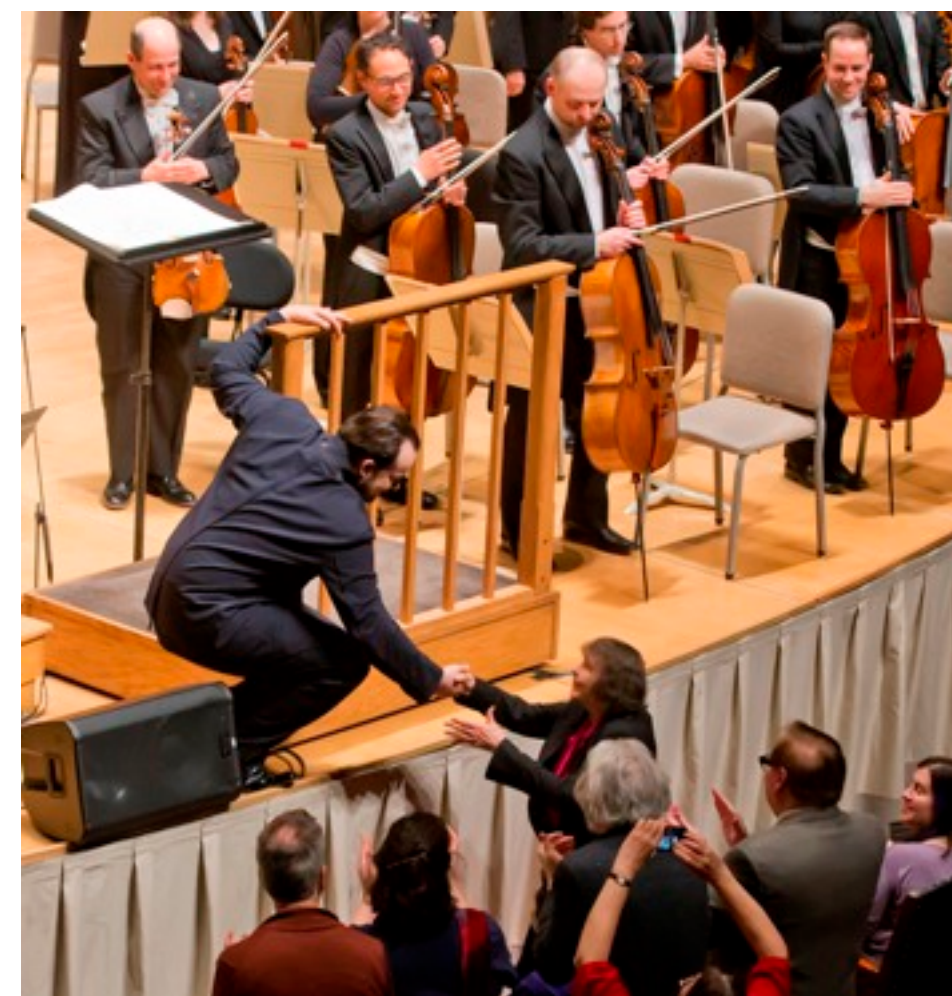
The [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#) premiered the Russian-born composer's Triple Concerto for Violin, Cello, Bayan, and Orchestra on Feb. 23 at [Symphony Hall](#), pairing it emphatically with Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 (*Leningrad*). The program will be repeated [Feb. 28 at Carnegie Hall](#).

Violinist [Baiba Skride](#), cellist [Harriet Krijgh](#), and bayan virtuoso [Elsbeth Moser](#), the work's dedicatee, were the soloists. [Andris Nelsons](#) conducted. The 85-year-old Gubaidulina was in attendance, in town for multiple performances, and to [receive an honorary doctorate from New England Conservatory](#).

The BSO first performed Gubaidulina's music in 1988, when Gidon Kremer played her violin concerto *Offertorium* under Charles Dutoit. Her [Viola Concerto](#) was performed by Yuri Bashmet (under Bernard Haitink) in April 1997, and that summer Gubaidulina was composer-in-residence at Tanglewood's Festival of Contemporary Music.

Another BSO commission, *The Light of the End*, got its premiere in 2003 under Kurt Masur. *Offertorium* returned to Symphony Hall in 2014, with Nelsons leading Skride in a performance.

There is a lot of listening in this Triple Concerto. For Gubaidulina's music, filling the empty space with overtones – implied (or barely heard) harmonics – gives the notes that are played a suspended quality, forcing the listener to strive for further resonances.



Andris Nelsons greets Sofia Gubaidulina after the performance.

Gubaidulina follows the notion of “Triple” literally and cosmologically. In her own brief note in the score, she mentions a tripartite structure and the use of simple triads as a base, with the resulting overtone series. She also refers to forces of intervallic attraction and repulsion: That force is, to her mind, the attraction of the neighboring partials, contracting the sonic world as the work proceeds, and the insertion of wider intervals, which expand those sonic ideas as the concerto builds.

It begins in the opening statements. The bayan plays a cluster of chromatic pitches, from low E to E-flat a major 7th above.

The cello plays a rising series as well, expanding on that major 7th, from the same E, up a major 7th, then a minor 7th, a major 6th, a minor 6th, and so on in decreasing intervals. The violin, for its part, begins on the open G string – its lowest note – rises an octave higher, then a 5th, then a 4th, and so on.

These are the contracting intervals that Gubaidulina uses to set the piece in motion. The concerto is built on short phrases – some left to resonate, some slurred or glissed. But traditional development is shunned for a purely sonic construction.

That is not to say the piece doesn't grow. Variations in dynamics, and frequent, invigorating crescendos, make the concerto accessible.

A single six-note rising and falling phrase serves as the sole linchpin. It shows up as a duet most frequently, for the string soloists, colored by the lowest registers of the orchestra. As the work reaches its conclusion – it is played as one movement, with two distinct moods, a cadenza for the string soloists, and a sturdy coda – the broader spaced intervals dominate. This moves the work both sonically and spiritually from narrower concerns to larger ones.

This concerto is dominated by the deepest tones of the ensemble and of the soloists. The orchestration, not dense but colorful, makes repeated use of contrabassoon, tuba, trombones, percussion, and basses. That fully complements the bayan, a chromatic button accordion, which is far more secure in its bass registers than its western counterpart.



Cello soloist Harriet Krijgh made her BSO debut. (Nancy Horowitz)

Krijgh, 25, was making her BSO debut. Playing with confidence, bowing with deep expression, she brought many of the challenging passages to life, and yoked discrete phrases together aggressively – no easy task. She and Skride had most of the solo lines, with Moser forming a consistent partnership with the lower voices in the orchestra.

Entrances were key in this work, given the volume of short phrases. Nelsons was alert to opportunities for blending ideas together.

Audience response has become unreliable in gauging a work's reception, in this age of standing at the conclusion of everything. But this reception, unanimously boisterous, seemed a genuine indicator of the Triple Concerto's initial appeal.

The BSO's Shostakovich journey continues, here with the formidable Seventh Symphony. Nelsons and the orchestra have successfully recorded [two Shostakovich disks](#), both winning Grammy Awards, as part of a complete cycle on Deutsche Grammophon. Performances of the composer's symphonies in Symphony Hall have taken on an unusual air of excitement.

Nelsons has been striving to shape this music from the score, rather than from the historic record. Burdened (and enhanced, in the case of the worldwide clamor that [greeted the premiere of the Seventh](#)) by context, Shostakovich's music, now half a century or more removed from the harrowing events of its creation, deserves to stand on its musical merits.

Nelson brought emphasis to the through-composed nature of the dozen or so variations in the prodigious first movement, with its *Bolero*-like, insistent snare drum, rather than treating them as separate ideas. Thus the gigantic crescendo seemed logical, not forced, and the minimalist, ironic return of the theme at the end of the movement all the more contrasted.

The chorale opening of the Adagio struck a particularly noble stance. The attack to the final movement was magnificent: transitioning from a gesture in the first violins, Nelsons allowed that phrase to nearly disappear, only to make its quietest moment morph into the angry gesture that marks the beginning of the finale.

Reaching out from the podium, extending his attention to the back rows for a figure in the violas (pizzicato in all the strings around them), was also a deft touch.

This symphony overstays its musical welcome in many areas, the second movement and the finale especially. But Shostakovich's expansive coda will always feel cathartic.

Date posted: March 1, 2017

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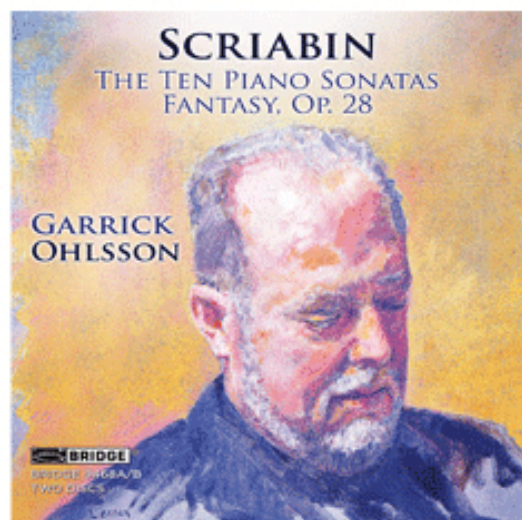
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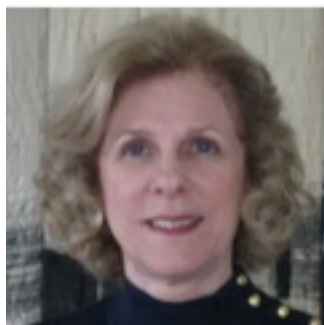
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Barbara Jepson
MCANA President

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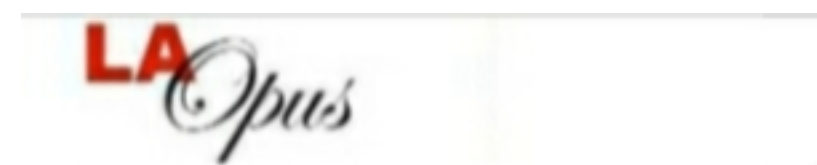
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