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The Little Man and the Masses
Expression, Form and Politics in Sofia Gubaidulina's *Concerto*
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He is balding, short, pockmarked, and in possession of an extremely worn out overcoat. Despite his colleagues' constant ridicule, he delights in his office work and keeps to himself and his simple life in the evening: an unlikely hero, perhaps, but not an unlikeable fellow. He is Akakii Akakiievich, the petty government clerk of Russian author Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat", and a famous representative of a broader type in Russian literature: the "little man."¹ Ordinary and oppressed, this type of character functions as a contrast to and victim of an unjust system.² The system is not only unfair but fatal: in Gogol's story, Akakii Akakiievich's death is the result of negligence on the part of a government officer to pursue justice. In her *Concerto for Bassoon and Low Strings* (1975), Sofia Gubaidulina explores this character type, casting the bassoon as the "little

¹ George Gibian, ed., *The Portable 19th Century Russian Reader*. (New York: Penguin, 1993), 202-232.

² Other notable examples of the little man in Russian literature include characters in Pushkin's 'Bronze Horseman' and Gogol's 'The Nose.' Rosalind J. Marsh, *Literature, history and identity in post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*. (Bern: International Academic Publishers, 2007), 404.

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man.”³ Like Gogol’s hero, the bassoon is mocked and attacked by the unjust system of his society, here an angry crowd of four cellos and three contrabasses. This concerto is not a retelling of Gogol’s tale so much as an adaptation of the literary figure of the little man to a musical context.

In this work, Gubaidulina successfully combines a traditional genre, extended techniques, and a modified sonata form to create a work that challenges and engages both performer and listener in its portrayal of ordinary human suffering and oppression. As quoted by Fay Damaris Neary in her DMA Dissertation “Symbolic Structure in the Music of Gubaidulina”, the composer claims she strives to compose music with a “logical structure” and “dramaturgically considered build-up” that also has the capacity to “disturb and stir up ruthlessly the listener’s feelings.”⁴ This piece is written in a modified sonata form that mirrors the development of the extra-musical narrative. Additionally, the composer’s subversion of the traditional dynamic between soloist and orchestra as well as the instrumentation and sonic effects develop the characters and drive the narrative throughout all five movements. As for engaging the listener’s feelings, Gubaidulina (again as quoted in Neary) also strives to “find a correspondence to the complex situation of mankind today” through her music.⁵ Gubaidulina uses the archetypal story of the little man to explore ideas about society in the twentieth century and engage her listeners.

³ Elizabeth Turner-Hinkler, “Report from Iowa: World Premiere of Tower’s Night Fields,” IAWM Journal (June 1994): 30.
www.iawm.org/articles_html/HinkleTurner_Iowa.html (accessed November 20, 2010).

⁴ Fay Damaris Neary, “Symbolic Structure in the Music of Gubaidulina” (DMA diss., Ohio State University, 1999), 10.

⁵ Ibid.

This concerto belongs to Gubaidulina's early period, and shows the influence of her sonic experimentation from that time.⁶ Gubaidulina was working to find new sounds, by drawing on regional folk music, or working the contentious "avant-garde" style.⁷ This search included co-founding the performing ensemble Astreya, a group dedicated to improvisation and Russian folk styles. In the bassoon concerto we see the fruits of this experimentation employed to great expressive effect in conveying the story of the little man. The influence of improvisation is clear in passages that feature free rhythm and indeterminate pitch, such as those in the cadenza that will be discussed later.⁸ Also, the bassoon's most singable melody evokes folk music. The shifting compound meter and simple diatonic cycling through the notes of a G major triad suggest a dance tune, albeit a rhythmically off-kilter one. It is first heard shortly after rehearsal 30 with a more extended presentation illustrated below.



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and programmatic ends. The concerto features the little man as a bassoon opposed to an ensemble of cellos and double basses that Gubaidulina, quoted in an interview with Vera Lukomsky, describes as a “‘low’ and aggressive crowd” who destroy him.⁹ The bassoon’s timbre has led it to be stereotypically connected with buffoons and grandfather figures. In casting our hero as a bassoon, Gubaidulina suggests a specific kind of character that would not as readily be understood were our protagonist a more typically virtuosic piano or violin. Gubaidulina also establishes commonality between the little man and the crowd: they are all bass instruments, just as the little man and his colleagues are all human. However, as the only wind instrument, the bassoon is clearly set apart. The seven low strings, uniform in shape and register if not size, stand in clear visual contrast to the bassoon. In Gogol’s story, the little man’s colleagues antagonize him for being different. Here, that difference is established before a note is played, by drawing from clearly different families of musical instruments for the ensemble. The contrast between the little man and the crowd is clearly defined, both aurally and visually.

Gubaidulina explores this antagonism further in the way she upsets the traditional genre of the concerto as well as sonata form to convey the drama. In an interview with Vera Lukomsky, she describes the need for composers to move beyond concepts of concerti representing the soloist as a “victorious”, “outstanding individual” who “knows where to lead the crowd.”¹⁰ She believes this largely 19th century paradigm is found wanting in light of the reality of the 20th century. Gubaidulina’s misgivings about the twentieth century, in particular a mistrust of powerful political leaders and their effect on people, likely come at least in part from her experiences in the USSR. The banning of

⁹ Lukomsky, “Eucharist,” 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

Western composers in her school in Moscow, the restrictive employment opportunities for Soviet composers, and the lasting horror of “mass psychosis” that she experiences all contribute to her need to rethink the traditional concerto.¹¹ Having a programme, even one that pits the soloist against the orchestra, is not especially groundbreaking. However, the idea of the concerto’s soloist being an awkward, uncharismatic “little man” who is attacked or ridiculed and then finally defeated by the ensemble is an unsettling development. Thus, while the small orchestra still functions as accompaniment and contrast, it primarily an angry mob collectively making life miserable for the little man.

While the piece is a concerto, Gubaidulina identifies the overall structure as a modified sonata form where the modifications parallel the development of her extra-musical narrative. The first, third and fifth movements act as the exposition, development and recapitulation.¹² The second and fourth movements are interludes. Thus the main storyline is developed in the odd numbered movements while the intermezzi serve as reflections and foreshadowing, the first focused on the mob and the second on the little man. Within the sonata form movements, Gubaidulina’s formal innovations are critical to our understanding of her perspectives on twentieth century society. As might be expected she challenges the hierarchy of main and subordinate themes, but she does so in a highly unusual way. One possible innovation could be to cast the subservient little man as the subordinate theme, and then have the subordinate theme triumph over the main theme in the end. This is not the story of the little man, however, nor is it the story of the reality of the twentieth century in Gubaidulina’s eyes. Another

¹¹ Neary, “Symbolic Structure”, 6.

¹² Suslin, Liner Notes.

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possibility would be to again cast the little man in the subordinate theme and then present a tyrannical main theme that defeats the little man and crushes him. Gubaidulina's point, however, is subtler. Instead, the subordinate theme is the angry mob, and the subordinate theme defeats the main theme of the little man. Gubaidulina warps the sonata form in a comment on the systemic nature of the oppression at play. Both the oppressed and the oppressor are caught in a system of behavioural expectations and abuse. There is no room for the little man in the society because he dares to be different, and so is doomed to die, just as the strings are doomed to remain oppressors. The hierarchy of main and subordinate theme is secondary to the fact that they are both trapped in a larger, inherently antagonistic system that governs their existence. The composer, like others before and after her, uses the idea of the little man to explore the relationship between the individual and systemic political oppression throughout history.¹³

The first movement of this work is the exposition, both in terms of the musical form and the narrative. Just as a typical exposition in sonata form explores two themes or theme groups, Gubaidulina explores the conflicting themes of the little man's autonomy and the crowd's attempts to destroy it. The movement opens with a bassoon solo, establishing the little man as our hero. This introductory solo does not last long before the abuse starts as the strings enter one at a time, *sul tasto*, each new voice entering a major seventh lower than the previous one. The little man's struggles with his abusive colleagues are established via elements of traditional sonata form, approximating main and subordinate theme groups respectively. The attacks on the little man continue for the better part of the movement, whether rapid *pizzicato* exchanges in m. 29, severe homophonic march rhythm

¹³ Marsh, *Literature*, 404.

in all seven string parts at rehearsal 23, or the wild trills in rehearsal 26. In a bold deformation, the strings (as subordinate theme group) seem to be triumphing over the main theme. However, the bassoon survives this onslaught, eventually finding refuge in the dance tune described above that he asserts towards the end of the movement. The strings whine below his tune then gradually fade away. For now, the little man is still safe, and the traditional hierarchy of main and subordinate theme is preserved.

The second movement is removed from the sonata form, taking shape as a soft and foreboding intermezzo. The strings move homophonically in their low registers, suggesting the mob as it considers the fate of the little man. The bassoon's quiet multiphonics are protestations of the everyday abuse. The interlude is a reflection on the status quo established in the exposition, a pause from sonata form as the characters likewise pause to contemplate their next move.

The third movement, which Gubaidulina identifies as the development section, opens with the little man's dance tune, unsettlingly accompanied by soft shakes in the cello and glissando pizzicato in the double bass parts. A double bass solo in rapid sixteenth notes suddenly enters at rehearsal 3, challenging the bassoon's brief dominance. The other strings add their voices, as if shouting in agreement, each playing a short pizzicato solo. They then take over for the remainder of the movement, silencing the little man. Just as the little man's colleagues refuse to leave him in peace in Gogol's story, our hero cannot escape into his own world of wistful dance melodies. However, he also can't exist on his own. Just as a government clerk's employment and existence is dependent on the government, here we would not have a sonata if there were no subordinate theme strings to torment the main theme bassoonist. Are the strings really cruel or is it the fault of the system into which the composer has forced them all? Their conflict is

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dictated as much by the trappings of musical form as it is by any real personal animosity. The crowd asserts its control over the situation, making the character of the mob the primary material of the development. The little man must conform or be crushed. This realization takes shape in the fourth movement's opening bassoon cadenza, where he imagines his bitter fate in great detail.

The cadenza that begins the fourth movement takes the listener and performer through a staggering range of emotions, with a wide variety of extended techniques, indeterminate notation and interpretive flexibility in the solo part. As the first intermezzo focused on the strings so does this one now turn to the thoughts of the little man. This makes it an ideal place to more closely examine the connection between extended technique and programmatic expression that is so essential to this work. This cadenza is not an actual confrontation with the crowd; the strings are silent until later in the movement. Rather the cadenza explores the inner turmoil of the little man prior to the struggle and defeat of the fifth movement, where we hear this same material reworked in opposition to the strings.¹⁴ I will refer to the score and to three different bassoonists' interpretations of the work. The bassoonists are Valeri Popov (1999), to whom the work is dedicated, Sergio Azzolini (2005), and Harri Ahmas (1993), whose interpretation includes the infamous scream discussed below.¹⁵

¹⁴ A woman could certainly perform this work, however, throughout this analysis I will refer to the bassoonist with masculine pronouns both because of this role of the bassoon as the "little man" of Russian literature as well as the fact that in all three recordings under consideration the performer is male.

¹⁵ The brief mention of this work in *The Rest is Noise* by Alex Ross refers only to the soloist's "bloodcurdling yell."

Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. (New York, Farrar Strauss and Giroux: 2007), 529.

This concerto makes highly theatrical demands on its performers, particularly the bassoon. Not only must the performer be a formidable bassoonist: he or she must fully embody a specific character for the almost half hour of the concerto's duration. While technique, musicality and interpretive ability are all part of basic musicianship, most works do not require screaming, heavy breathing and significant input as to the realization of indeterminate notation, all in line with the hero's story.¹⁶ Gubaidulina must trust the performer's dramatic capacities for a successful performance, and each performer must decide how to execute the score.

The rehearsal numbers in the score serve as ideal dividers for the different sections of the cadenza, which correspond to changes in the bassoon's state of mind.¹⁷ The first four sections of the cadenza, including an introduction and the first three rehearsal numbers, establish the character of the little man as he imagines facing the crowd. The introduction in the first three measures is marked "rubato (quasi 'swinging')" and features a leaping dotted eighth-sixteenth figure. At rehearsal 1, a rising figure of eighths and sixteenths is to be played "con aggrissione comico" – with comical aggression. These two gestures suggest that despite his swinging swagger, the bassoonist is doomed from the start, his assertion laughable. At rehearsal 2, the bassoonist advances with a technique identified in the score as "fast lateral movements with a finger on the E key." On the Ahmas recording it resembles a very wide vibrato; both Azzolini and

¹⁶ Lukomsky, "Eucharist," 32. Another concerto Gubaidulina wrote makes similar demands in terms of emotional involvement: in *Aus Dem Studienbuch*, based on a poem by Rilke, the solo cello represents a monk who fears God is leaving him as he nears death. Gubaidulina speaks of needing "a soloist capable of incarnating this experience, to understand it, be affected by it."

¹⁷ Sofia Gubaidulina, *Concerto for bassoon and low strings*. (Hamburg : H. Sikorski, 2001), 48.

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Popov also add flutter tongue or growling to the sound. Each performer's understanding of the little man's experience is shown through their interpretive decisions. This section is marked "con paura": with fear. Despite his frightened fluttering and trembling, the bassoonist presses ahead apprehensively. The next passage at rehearsal 3 features quick pairs of sixteenth notes, descending through a large part of the bassoon's range. The little man's full capacities are displayed as he prepares himself to face the mob.

In rehearsal numbers 4-8 the little man imagines his confrontation with the strings. The trills at rehearsal 4 are not virtuosic ornamentation. Marked "seriamente" (seriously), the bassoon softly growls to the bottom of its register, making his first of three attempts to convince the crowd to leave him alone. When the trills aren't enough, he tries multiphonics at rehearsal 5. On a monophonic instrument such as the bassoon, playing multiphonics requires a change of embouchure which creates a different timbre along with the expected addition of pitches from the overtone series. Gubaidulina uses these unsettling experimental sounds to convey distress and anguish as the little man is pushed beyond the limits of his ordinary and subservient character. He no longer speaks quietly but denounces the crowd with bold multiphonics that crescendo to forte. The next section at rehearsal 6 is marked "rubato (con sentimentalita volgare)": with vulgar sentimentality. This almost jazzy, whining section is perhaps, in the wake of the angry multiphonics, a whimpering and undignified appeal to the crowd. At rehearsal 7, he makes a final appeal, marked "dispertamente" ("desperate"). Glissandi ascending half steps in the bassoon's extreme upper register are interspersed with breath marks. In the Azzolini recording these are interpreted very effectively as clearly audible, strained breathing. The glissandi accelerate and become a wide trill. At rehearsal 8, the little man, pushed beyond breaking, unleashes a

wild scream. Whether performed with voice or bassoon, this is a shattering moment of defeat.

This scream is the peak of the drama for the little man, as he realizes in the cadenza that he has already lost. The execution of this theatrically demanding moment, however, is up for debate. The directive given, “quasi ‘clamore’”, over a rectangular note head with no clear pitch indication, can be translated “as if an outcry”.



Gubaidulina leaves much to the performer to decide, trusting in their dramatic capacity to convey this devastating moment, with different results from each. Popov sustains the pitch from previous measures, growing ever louder and more strident.¹⁸

Azzolini suddenly drops to a note in the bassoon’s extreme low register and sustains it as a strained, howling cry.¹⁹ Ahmas, however, leaves his bassoon behind and lets out a truly frightening vocal scream at this point.²⁰ His bold interpretation is forgivable, even laudable, as the score is not decisive. Ahmas’ is also the oldest recording under examination; later choices from performers such as Azzolini and Popov imply that Ahmas may

¹⁸ Sofia Gubaidulina, *Bassoon Concerto*, Russian State Symphony Orchestra, Valeri Popov, perf. Gubaidulina: Works for bassoon, Chandos compact disc CHAN9717, 1999, Naxos Music Library, www.naxosmusiclibrary.com (accessed November 20, 2010).

¹⁹ Gubaidulina, *Bassoon Concerto*, Kammerakademie Potsdam, Sergio Azzolini, perf. Fagottkonzerte, Capriccio compact disc C67139. 2005, Naxos Music Library, www.naxosmusiclibrary.com (accessed November 20, 2010).

²⁰ Gubaidulina, *Bassoon Concerto*, Lahti Chamber ensemble, Harri Ahmas, perf. Sofia Gubaidulina: Bassoon Concerto, Concoranza, Dettto II, BIS compact disc BIS-CD-636, 1993, Naxos Music Library, www.naxosmusiclibrary.com (accessed November 20, 2010).

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have deviated from Gubaidulina's directions. However, the composer herself heard Ahmas perform the work and liked it enough to suggest it be included on the CD.²¹ His daring move clearly intrigued her as a possible expression of the little man's suffering.²²

Finally, in rehearsal 9, the bassoon is marked “‘ridendo’ (alla saxofono)”: laughing and like a saxophone. The bassoon, with his nasal, whining attempt at the saxophone timbre, sounds like he is laughing through wavering sobs, their indeterminate pitch indicated by pointed note heads with wavy lines through them. Towards the end we have another example of the theatrical demands Gubaidulina places on the soloist: the bassoonist is to sound “‘zunehmend ‘verkatert’” or “‘more and more ‘hangover’”[sic].²³ Perhaps our defeated hero has had to drown his sorrows in bitter laughter and vodka. The strings join at the end, for a sinister calm before the triple forte storm that ends the movement, heralding the final conflict that is yet to come.

The last movement is the recapitulation, where the conflict between the little man and the angry mob is played out and we determine whether the main theme or the subordinate theme will dominate in the end. The movement opens with the crowd of strings murmuring in soft pizzicato sixteenth notes. Starting at rehearsal 2, the bassoon revisits all the material from the cadenza: the little man's imagining of his fate is finally realized. We hear the strings attack the bassoon; in an interview with Lukomsky, Gubaidulina says their pizzicato and col legno sound like ‘pinching’ and ‘beating.’²⁴ Extended techniques are

²¹ Ibid.

²² Suslin, Liner Notes.

²³ The word also translates to “‘hung-over.’”

²⁴ Lukomsky, “Eucharist,” 30.

again employed for specific expressive purposes, becoming integral to the low strings' character as the crowd attacks the bassoon. After revisiting the various sections of the cadenza, the bassoon returns to the start of it briefly, as the little man makes a final attempt to save himself and assert the main theme in the wake of this entirely untraditional overthrow. Then, after a low murmuring trill, the bassoon falls silent. As in Gogol's tale, the crowd defeats the little man. His last words are a final, whimpering multiphonic in the bassoon. At this, there is a fermata and then a full bar rest as the crowd pauses for a moment, inspecting its victim. The strings then drive mercilessly to the end, playing a crescendo with increasingly strident timbre: first arco, then sul ponticello, then al tacco, finishing with a harsh snap pizzicato in all seven parts.

The theme of the little man from Russian literature has parallels in situations humans face in any political system. Gogol's petty government clerk and his abusive colleagues are just one example of the dynamics of oppression that govern the relationship between the people and the state. Gubaidulina is in the company of many other writers and dramatists who have used the little man as a means of exploring the situation of humankind under oppressive political systems. Here, the soloist and orchestra are transformed into the oppressed and the oppressors. The bassoon is the little man as well as main theme, and the strings are the angry mob and the subordinate theme. Gubaidulina stirs up her listeners' feelings as they get to know and care about the little man through the expressive extended techniques and formal innovations that tell his story. And yet the little man does not triumph. The subordinate theme defeats the main theme and the status quo is unhappily restored. The concerto finishes with the soloist dead as the audience is confronted with one composer's portrait of societal injustice in the twentieth century.

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