

“A METAPHOR FOR THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TOGETHERNESS”: EXPANSION
PROCESSES IN GUBAIDULINA’S FIRST STRING QUARTET

1. *Purpose of the Study*

According to Michael Kurtz’s biography, Sofia Gubaidulina wrote her First String Quartet in 1971, during a time in her life when her music was not actively performed in the USSR. Although Gubaidulina is known for her compositions written during the 1980s, such as *Sieben Worte* and *Offertorium*, the First String Quartet is a “desk drawer” work of sorts, written to satisfy personal creative needs. As such, few performances have been made of the quartet, and even fewer scholarly articles have been written about this particular work. Since 1980, Gubaidulina has favored numerical series or religious concepts to organize her compositions, and the First String Quartet provides insight into the composer’s journey toward using these organizational principles. In the First Quartet, processes of expansion organize the musical materials. Gubaidulina’s use of expansion in pitch, rhythmic, and formal structures in the piece provides coherence in a seemingly episodic form. Thus, episodes involving rhythmic augmentation and those involving increasing pitch intervals can both be understood as different aspects of one expansion process (growing from small to large).

This thesis will argue that expansion processes, embodied in pitch, rhythm, form, and physical space,¹ unify the episodic materials of the First String Quartet. The pervasive expansion processes in the First Quartet also convey the composer’s ideas about the piece as a “metaphor for the impossibility of togetherness.” In addition to providing a continuous thread throughout the work, expansion processes demonstrate the composer’s philosophical approach to the piece,

¹ That is, how the performers embody expansion through their physical position and movements on the stage.

and provide a new perspective on writings about the religious symbolism in Gubaidulina's other works.

2. *Literature Review*

Existing scholarship on Gubaidulina's works extensively covers her use of religious symbols, but few published documents discuss the First String Quartet in detail. Michael Kurtz's biography of the composer discusses the circumstances surrounding the composition of the piece and quotes the composer's ideas about the First Quartet. Joseph Williams has explored some aspects of pitch and rhythmic expansions in the First String Quartet, but he has not connected them to the symbolic understanding of the First Quartet suggested by Svetlana Sarkisjan and by the composer. Michael Berry, Jennifer Milne, Young-Mi Lee, and Fay Neary have explored extramusical symbolism in Gubaidulina's later works and they provide a framework for understanding Gubaidulina's use of pervasive expansion processes to support a metaphor in the First String Quartet.

A. Biographical Study

In his biography of the composer, Michael Kurtz briefly describes the circumstances surrounding the composition of Gubaidulina's First String Quartet and quotes the composer's ideas about the piece. Gubaidulina connects expansion (or "contradiction") processes in the melodic materials of the quartet with "expansion" of the performers on the stage, relating them both to the "metaphor for the impossibility of togetherness." Kurtz quotes Gubaidulina's comments from a Russian biography of the composer (by Kholopova and Restagno):

The idea of disintegration, dissociation, lies at the heart of the First [String] Quartet. I have to say that there is a certain amount of pessimism in it, a metaphor for the impossibility of togetherness, of understanding one's neighbor, a metaphor for the utter deafness of humanity (life itself in those years was so dark, so sad and hopeless . . .). The work grows out of a single pitch, from a common point. But various aspects of the musical material—the rhythmic and melodic successions, the types of articulation, and the dynamics—gradually begin to contradict one another. This dissention within the tonal

material is emphasized visually as well. At the beginning the four instrumentalists are in center stage, grouped all together. Then the musical events drive them apart, in ever increasing distance from each other, to the four corners of the stage, where each player concentrates only on his/her own playing, already entirely unable to hear the others. Utter isolation to the point of madness.²

Both *Concordanza* (1971) and the First String Quartet use quarter-tones extensively, but the composer's approach to the First Quartet, with "the idea of disintegration, dissociation," at its heart, distinguishes the Quartet from its counterpart, *Concordanza*. The "disintegration" and "dissociation" ideas also inform the composer's pervasive use of expansion processes in the First String Quartet.

Kurtz places the composition of the quartet in a particularly ascetic period of the composer's life. Gubaidulina had just returned from abroad, and spent the fall and winter of 1971, the time she was writing the First Quartet, at Sortavala, a summer resort on Lake Ladoga. She was completely alone, and took "moonlight swims" in the freezing water. Gubaidulina's concept of "utter isolation to the point of madness" may have been inspired by her life at that time. Although the particular pessimism the composer describes might not be immediately apparent for all listeners, the effects of that concept are recognizable in the expansion ideas permeating the entire work. Thus, the "impossibility of togetherness" begins to take form as performers continuously move away from each other on the stage, or as a single pitch expands into a much larger pitch interval.

B. Studies of Gubaidulina's String Quartets

Joseph Williams is the first to describe "expansion processes" in Gubaidulina's First String Quartet in his master's thesis on Gubaidulina's four string quartets. Williams discusses examples of expansion processes in pitch and rhythm in the First Quartet, and categorizes the

² Michael Kurtz, *Sofia Gubaidulina: A Biography*, trans. Christoph K. Lohmann, ed. Malcolm Hamrick Brown (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 97.

expansions in two ways, namely, through wedge expansions in pitch and through additive processes in intervals or rhythms.

According to Williams, Gubaidulina's use of wedge expansion involves gradually increasing intervals, climbing up and down from a central pitch, although, Williams notes, Gubaidulina avoids exact wedge expansions, instead conveying the general idea of symmetry about a given area. For example, the opening motive in the second violin begins with the "center pitch C-half-#5"³ and "gradually expands outward in quarter-tone intervals until reaching D-half-#5 in the ascending direction and B4 in the descending direction."⁴ Example 1 shows part of Williams' Figure 2.3. I have added upward stems and a thin beam to connect the notes on the "expanding higher" side of the wedge, and downward stems and a thin beam to connect the notes on the "expanding lower" side of the wedge. The first note, marked *piano*, is the center point of the wedge.

Example 1: Williams Figure 2.3, First Line. Violin II, mm.1-2, from First String Quartet⁵

Violin II

Thus, the upper melodic line has ascended from C-half-#5 to D-half-#5 while the lower line has descended from C-half-#5 to B4, creating a "wedge." Williams notes that this melodic expansion, occurring in the very first measures of the piece, sets up a paradigm for the rest of the work.

³ Williams uses pitch designator C4 for middle C.

⁴ Joseph Williams, "Discontinuous Continuity?: Structural Analysis of Sofia Gubaidulina's String Quartets" (master's thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2007), 27.

⁵ Williams, 91.

Williams also describes additive expansion, in which intervallic size or rhythmic duration increases from note to note. He asserts that, although Gubaidulina uses wedge and additive expansion processes throughout the quartet, the sections are “texturally distinct and display relatively little surface-level commonality.”⁶

Williams’ ideas about expansion processes in the First String Quartet can be extended beyond “wedge” and “additive” expansion processes to other types of expansions in rhythm, pitch, and physical space, and also to the small- and large-scale form of the First Quartet. Additionally, connecting the pervasive expansion processes in the First String Quartet to the composer’s comments in the Kurtz biography about the origin and symbolism of the piece reveals that the purpose of these expansion processes is to create a metaphor for “the impossibility of togetherness.”

Swetlana Sarkisjan takes a different approach to the First String Quartet in her article about the aesthetics of Gubaidulina’s string quartets. While Sarkisjan notes “die zeitlich-strukturellen Verdichtung und Ausdehnung,” (temporal-structural contraction and expansion) as a critical element of Gubaidulina’s style,⁷ she focuses on the First Quartet as a symbolic work, representing a catechism of compositional methods and referencing Russian folk instruments. Referring to Gubaidulina’s religious beliefs, Sarkisjan asserts that even the string quartets, which have no overt program, have a religious meaning for the composer, whose religious viewpoint informs all of her compositions.⁸ For Sarkisjan, the First String Quartet, in particular, can be interpreted as a sort of “Katechismus,” (catechism) of the composer’s compositional methods,

⁶ Williams, 26.

⁷ Swetlana Sarkisjan, “Die Streichquartette Sofia Gubaidulinas als Versuch der Erschliessung des sonoristischen Raumes,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 2 (December 2005): 272.

⁸ Sarkisjan 273.

with G# fulfilling an important role as a component of melodic and harmonic structures.⁹

Sarkisjan finds that the viola's pizzicato section, at rehearsal number 40 before the reprise, links the structurally important G# with the sound of a traditional Russian instrument, the domra.¹⁰

According to Sarkisjan, Gubaidulina's interests in religion and folk music influence the timbre, rhythm, form, and pitch of the string quartets, which had been understood as works of "absolute music."

Sarkisjan's structurally important G# is the instigator of a large-scale, formal expansion that is crucial to understanding the overall form of the work. Sarkisjan connects this structurally important G# to Russian folk timbres, but the expansion processes in the First Quartet, like the one instigated by the G#, also connect with Gubaidulina's ideas about the metaphorical meaning of the First String Quartet and provide a common thread through episodic materials.

C. Studies of Gubaidulina's Symbolism

Michael Berry's article "The Importance of Bodily Gesture in Gubaidulina's Music for Low Strings" provides a basis for understanding Gubaidulina's use of physical gestures as a symbol in her compositions. Moreover, Milne, Lee, and Neary's writings about musical symbolism in Gubaidulina's works after 1979 also provide a basis for understanding symbolism in the First String Quartet, which is an earlier work.

While performing the First String Quartet, the performers must move their chairs across the stage, away from each other, until the performers are in the corners of the stage by the end of the work. The composer's instructions for the performers to move their chairs across the stage translate musical expansion processes into the dimension of physical space and symbolize Gubaidulina's ideas about the "impossibility of togetherness." Michael Berry writes about a

⁹ Sarkisjan does not explain why she finds the G# structurally important.

¹⁰ Sarkisjan 282.

similar use of “bodily gestures” as an extension of Gubaidulina’s musical symbolism.¹¹ He describes a “cross” motive that Gubaidulina uses in *Sieben Worte* for cello, bayan, and strings,¹² and goes on to describe the symbolism of bodily gestures in Gubaidulina’s music for low strings, including cross motives also present in the Sonata for double bass and piano,¹³ and a visual representation of the cross created by putting on and taking off the mute in *Ten Preludes for Cello Solo*.¹⁴ Berry also discusses Gubaidulina’s use of physical gesture as a symbol in some of her other works, including *Galgenlieder* and *Stimmen... Verstummen...*,¹⁵ but not the First Quartet. While Berry explores Gubaidulina’s use of physical gestures as they relate to extramusical ideas, such as the cross, his ideas about the composer’s use of physical gesture as a symbol can be extended to the First String Quartet. The performers’ movements across the stage during performance of the quartet symbolize Gubaidulina’s “impossibility of togetherness.”

Several authors discuss Gubaidulina’s use of religious and occult symbolism, including Valentina Kholopova,¹⁶ Jennifer Milne,¹⁷ Young-Mi Lee,¹⁸ and Fay Neary.¹⁹ Kholopova briefly discusses the First String Quartet in her biography of the composer, written in collaboration with Enzo Restagno and including interviews with Gubaidulina.²⁰

¹¹ Michael Berry, “The Importance of Bodily Gesture in Sofia Gubaidulina’s Music for Low Strings,” *Music Theory Online* 15, no. 5 (October 2009), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.09.15.5/mto.09.15.5.berry.html> (accessed September 21, 2011).

¹² Berry, Example 5.

¹³ Berry, Example 6.

¹⁴ Berry, Example 9.

¹⁵ Berry, Examples 13–15.

¹⁶ Valentina Kholopova and Enzo Restagno, *Sofīia Gubaidulina: monografīia* (Moscow: Izd-vo “Kompozitor,” 2008)

¹⁷ Jennifer Milne, “The Rhythm of Form: Compositional Processes in the Music of Sofia Gubaidulina” [PhD diss., University of Washington, 2007].

¹⁸ Young-Mi Lee, “Musical Contents and Symbolic Interpretation in Sofia Gubaidulina’s “Two Paths: A Dedication to Mary and Martha” (DMA document, The Ohio State University, 2007).

¹⁹ Fay Neary, “Symbolic Structure in the Music of Gubaidulina” (DMA document, The Ohio State University, 1999)

²⁰ Kholopova is a leading Gubaidulina scholar, but this source is in Russian and will be translated in upcoming thesis preparation.

Milne's doctoral dissertation divides Gubaidulina's work into three stylistic periods. The first period, from 1965 through the 1980s, involves a focus on new timbres and instruments while the composer continues to loosely use traditional forms to provide structure and to experiment with pitch and intervals to organize some formal areas.²¹ The First String Quartet falls in this stylistic period. The second period, beginning in 1983, involves a fascination with mathematical series as a means of providing large- and small-scale form. The composer's third stylistic period begins with the extensive use of microchromaticism for symbolic purposes in the Fourth String Quartet. Milne's dissertation focuses on the use of mathematical series in works from Gubaidulina's second period, *Silenzio* and *Meditation on the Bach Chorale "Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit."* Lee's doctoral dissertation describes musical symbols relating to the cross, transfiguration, and the dichotomy of heaven and earth in *Two Paths: A Dedication to Mary and Martha*. In her doctoral dissertation, Neary analyzes the extent of musical symbolism in the pitch organization, overall form, rhythm, timbre, and phrase structure of *In Croce* and *Garten von Freuden und Traurigkeiten*. Neary also presents translations of some interviews with the composer in an appendix to the dissertation. At the time of writing, few English-language resources existed for Gubaidulina scholars, and Neary's translations provide access to important interviews.

3. Analytical Sample

In the First Quartet, Gubaidulina explores many expansion procedures. These procedures permeate the work, providing a continuous thread that contributes to a metaphorical understanding of the piece. The dyadic cello solo after rehearsal number 31 embodies expansion in rhythm as well as in pitch interval. Because the rhythmic expansions (here, increases in

²¹ Milne 21–22.

duration) tend to align with expansion in pitch interval (here, increasing pitch intervals), short “phraselets” can be interpreted where one expansion “ends” and another expansion “begins.” This dyadic melody, presented here with pitch intervals and resultant rhythms, demonstrates one instance of intervallic and rhythmic expansion in the Quartet. Solid lines indicate boundaries between phraselets.

Example 2: Dyadic Cello Solo after Rehearsal Number 31, from Sofia Gubaidulina’s First String Quartet, with Pitch Intervals (PI) and Resultant Rhythm

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The top system shows the 'Resultant Rhythm' on a staff with a double bar line at the beginning, followed by a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a half note, and a whole note. Below this, the 'Cello' part is shown in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It features a sequence of dyads (two-note chords) with a dotted half note. Below the cello staff, the Pitch Intervals (PI) are listed: 4, 1, 1, 4, 2, 3, 7, 2, 4, 11. The bottom system continues the 'Resultant Rhythm' with a dotted half note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a half note, and a whole note. The 'Cello' part continues with dyads, including a dotted half note. Below this staff, the PI values are: 4, 7, 11, 2, 7, 11, 14, 19, 1, 6, 8, 11. A vertical dashed line is placed between the 11th and 12th notes of the cello staff, indicating an exception to the general pattern.

In this example, rhythmic “phraselets” generally begin with quarter notes and end with longer durations, such as a duration of two beats, represented by a half note in the resultant rhythm.²² The longer phraselets include longer note values, such as the whole note in the first phraselet or the dotted half notes in the last two phraselets. Moving from shorter durations to longer durations creates a type of rhythmic expansion, and repeating this expansion process at a slow tempo in

²² The exception represented by the dashed line will be discussed later.

this section sets up a paradigm: shorter durations (quarter notes) moving to longer durations (half notes, etc).

The analyst could also divide the dyadic melody into phraselets according to expansion in pitch intervals. Each phraselet would generally begin with smaller pitch intervals (for example, 1, 2, or 4) and move to progressively larger pitch intervals. The phraselets delineated by rhythmic expansion and the phraselets delineated by pitch expansion align in this melody, with slight deviations in the rhythmic expansion in the final two phraselets of the example. These two final phraselets both return to a shorter half note after reaching a longer dotted half note. Solid lines in the example demonstrate the end of each phraselet, marked by full expansion in both pitch-intervals and rhythmic durations.

The dashed line in the example indicates a moment of expanded pitch-interval without expanded rhythmic duration. This “elision” is created when the pitch interval 11 on a quarter note moves directly to pitch interval 2 on another quarter note. After establishing expectations about phrase structure in the first three phraselets, Gubaidulina then adds nuance to this paradigm by modifying it slightly.

By marking it with the most expanded procedures, Gubaidulina indicates the fourth phraselet as a sort of goal or high point for this phrase. The fourth phraselet contains the largest pitch interval of the phrase (19), it has the longest phraselet duration (13 quarter notes), and it expands or modifies expectations created by the first three phraselets.

4. Research Tasks and Timeline

Many manuscripts by and articles about Gubaidulina are housed in the Paul Sacher Stiftung. I have gained permission to study at this archive and am planning a visit for January 2012. Although the manuscript for the First String Quartet is not at the Sacher Foundation

library, the Foundation houses the manuscript for the First Quartet's companion piece, *Concordanza*, as well as manuscripts of the other three string quartets and important rare books and articles about the composer and her works.²³ I expect that study of these manuscripts and any available sketches will reveal interesting details about the origins of Gubaidulina's uses of expansion processes. Several articles about Gubaidulina are in Russian or German, although from my preliminary examination, only the Sarkisjan article and excerpts from the Kholopova-Restagno biography will need to be translated. Any necessary translation and further analysis of the quartet will be completed in December 2011. The main body of the thesis and preliminary revisions will be completed in Spring 2012.

5. *Provisional Outline*

Introduction and Review of Literature (10 pages)

Chapter 1: Processes of Expansion in Pitch (10 pages)

Chapter 2: Processes of Expansion in Rhythm, Form, and Physical Space (10 pages)

Chapter 3: Expansions Interacting (5 pages)

Chapter 4: Expansions Relating to Gubaidulina's Metaphor and Established Symbology
(10 pages)

Conclusion (5 pages)

6. *Bibliography*

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²³ The final section of the Bibliography contains a list of sources about Gubaidulina in the Paul Sacher Stiftung.

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