

The concept of Christian symbolism in *Sieben Worte* for cello, bayan and strings by Sofia Gubaidulina

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Abstract: The personality of the composer Sofia Gubaidulina represents a model of creative force, being an active presence from the second half of the XXth century until today. Her compositional style is tributary to a so-called moderate avant-garde, in which innovative language techniques are intertwined with certain elements belonging to the legacy left by the great composers of music history. The interest in spirituality and religion is demonstrated through a compositional concept called **Christian symbolism**, applied in many works. Of these, *Sieben Worte* for cello, bayan and strings is a special one by the versatility of the use of Christian symbols, differentiated in certain distinct typologies, which place this piece among the most unique concert creations of the '80s.

Keywords: Gubaidulina, cello, bayan, symbolism, Christianity.

1. Introduction

For those who are aware of the situation of contemporary music, the name of the composer Sofia Gubaidulina is not a foreign one, but shows a landmark personality of universal music. Now at the age of 91, she is a surprisingly dynamic spirit, through her artistic activity, being still preoccupied with composition and hearing her own works, performed by important ensembles and soloists from Europe, Asia and the United States of America. Her destiny is also linked to the Soviet Union, where she lived for almost 60 years, a period in which she encountered many difficulties in making her music known due to the refusal to collaborate with the propaganda body. It should also be noted that the style of her music was not in line with the aesthetics of *socialist realism* (the official direction in Soviet art until 1988), representing an essential aspect in understanding her artistic path.

Her emigration to Germany in 1991 brought about a positive change in her life, but especially in her profession. Today, Sofia Gubaidulina's art is appreciated in all corners of the world, being the consequence of the long work dedicated to music, in which one of the most important causes was the religious dimension and, of course, the Divinity. For this, the concept of symbols is nothing more than one of the most significant composing techniques by which the sound is unified with spirituality. From this point of

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view, a relevant piece in terms of the ingenuity of using Christian symbols is *Sieben Worte*, for cello, bayan and string orchestra.

2. Gubaidulina and the bayan

In 1946, the *Gnesin* Music Institute in Moscow was the first institution of artistic higher education to introduce a course in the study of the bayan. This chromatic accordion with buttons arranged diagonally, was quite present in the folklore of the Soviet republics, but in academic music it had a deficient repertoire. With the 70s, certain Soviet composers became preoccupied with contributing to the formation of a repertoire worthy of its expressive and virtuoso possibilities. One of the first creators in this regard was Vladislav Zolotariov, who in 1975 (aided by the bayanist Friedrich Lips) presented a program consisting of works for bayan, before a commission responsible for his acceptance into the Union of Composers. The committee also included Sofia Gubaidulina, who was impressed, following which Friedrich Lips suggested the idea of writing music for this type of accordion. Shortly after, the composer began a series of decisive encounters with Lips in which he demonstrated to her the possibilities of the instrument in question, so that in 1978 the first of the works for bayan appeared: *De profundis* for bayan *solo*, a composition considered today a standard for the contemporary repertoire of this instrument.

All of the works for the accordion or bayan can be divided into three stages, differentiated by certain aesthetic-stylistic coordinates and which also belong to the interpreter with whom the composer collaborated during these periods. The first constitutive phase covers the late 70s to the middle of the next decade (from 1978: *De profundis* to 1985: *Et expecto*) and is defined by the exploration of the technical and expressive capabilities of the instrument. At the same time, it was then that the concept of *instrumental symbolism* was adopted for the first time. The second phase is specific to the 90s (from 1991: *Silenzio* to 1996: *Galgenlieder à 5*), and the works belonging to them betray the fact that the writing for solo instrument typical of the first compositions, was adapted for other various and wider instrumental compositions. At the same time, at the level of compositional techniques, Gubaidulina will organize the parameters through the **rhythm of the form**, a concept adopted since the '80s. The last phase – from the early 2000s to the present days (from 2003: *Under the Sign of Scorpio* until 2017: *The triple concerto for violin, cello and bayan*) has as a defining feature the incorporation of instrumental symbolism in the large, orchestral forms.

3. *Sieben Worte* – history and genesis

Sieben Worte for cello, bayan and strings (1978) belongs to the first stage of compositions intended for the bayan or accordion. The story behind it began

with a recital by cellist Vladimir Tonha at the *Gnesin* Institute on December 27, 1980, where he performed an arrangement (for cello and strings) of *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze* [The Last Seven Words of Our Savior on the Cross] by Joseph Haydn. After the recital, Tonha proposed to Sofia Gubaidulina to create a work of the same name to those written by J. Haydn and Heinrich Schütz. Taking into account that at that time the bayanist Friedrich Lips had also ordered the composer a new piece for her own instrument, the artist found a middle solution: a piece for cello, bayan and string orchestra. Wanting to use one of the important themes of Christianity, the choice of Jesus' Last Seven Words on the Cross as the subject was an appropriate one. Two years later, when the composition *Sieben Worte* was completed, it was scheduled for a concert of the Moscow Autumn Festival in the Small Hall of the Conservatory (October 20, 1982). The conductor was Yuri Nikolaievski, with the *Ricercar* Chamber Orchestra, which accompanied Vladimir Tonha and Friedrich Lips. Because of the censorship specific to the Soviet system, the work could not be presented under its original title with religious connotations, so in the poster and hall program the original name was replaced by *Partita*.

Unfortunately, the absolute premiere of the work in question was not successful, the reception by the public being unsatisfying. In the months that followed, *Sieben Worte* underwent some substantial changes to have the chance of a “second premiere”, made on April 5, 1983. At that time, the program of the event consisted only of works of the Russian composer (unlike the previous concert, when *Partita* followed after two works of a mediocre level!), and due to the changes made to the composition, the audience reacted positively. From that moment on, other successful programming of the *Partita* followed in the Soviet Union, and from 1986 also in the West (with the real name, this time!).

4. The structure of the work

Sieben Worte relies programmatically on Jesus' last seven utterances on the Cross. Thus, although it is a purely instrumental piece, the name of each part comes from verses of the Gospels of Luke, John and Matthew, and the music is composed in accordance with their meanings. Below, we have designed a table that clarifies the macrostructure of *Sieben Worte*, along with the translation into English language of the names of the movements and the correlation with the corresponding Bible verses:

Part	Original name of the part	Name translated into English ¹	Biblical Belonging
I	<i>Vater, vergib ihnen, denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun.</i>	<i>Father, forgive them, that they do not know what they are doing!</i>	Luke 23:34
II	<i>Weib, siehe, das ist dein Sohn. – Siehe, das ist deine Mutter.</i>	<i>Woman, behold your son! John, behold your mother!</i>	John 19:26-27
III	<i>Wahrlich, ich sahe dir: Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradiese sein.</i>	<i>Verily I say unto you, today thou shalt be with me in paradise.</i>	Luke 23:43
IV	<i>Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?</i>	<i>My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?</i>	Matthew 27:46
V	<i>Mich dürstet.</i>	<i>I'm thirsty.</i>	John 19:28
VI	<i>Es ist vollbracht.</i>	<i>It is done.</i>	John 19:30
VII	<i>Vater, ich befehle meinen Geist in deine Hände.</i>	<i>Father, in Your hands I entrust My spirit.</i>	Luke 23:46

Table 1 The original name of the movements, the English translation and the correlation with the corresponding Bible verses

5. Christian Symbols in Sieben Worte

Finally, a substantial component of Gubaidulina's compositional style is the concept of Christian symbolism. In fact, at the basis of each of his works there is a certain philosophical, literary, religious idea, or visual art. The period in which *Sieben Worte* was written coincides with Sofia Gubaidulina's artistic maturation and the formation of her own style, due also to her increased interest in religion and Christian symbols. The use of symbols in Soviet music had become an almost natural aspect, especially in the practice of creators who were not followers of the doctrine of *socialist realism*. "Through symbolism, composers were able to give their works a sense of meaning and purpose. [...] Symbolism was a means of expression which generally could be employed without compromising one's own personal safety (an overt expression of religious beliefs was wholly unacceptable to the militant atheist State.) [...] A religious title, or text, might result in the work being banned or officially 'renamed', yet religious symbols, such as a cross in the shape of the notation in the score, were likely to pass through the censors unnoticed. In this way, layers of symbolic and mystical meaning could be woven into a piece of music, imparting a religious message to be unravelled and understood by a sympathetic audience." (Askew, 2002, pp. 93-94)

According to the musicologist Valeria Tsenova, "mysticism, ritualisation and submission to some external laws are very typical of Gubaidulina's creative method" (Tsenova, 2022, p. 254). Therefore, the

¹ The translation of the names of the movements of the work *Sieben Worte* belongs to us, being correlated with the corresponding passages from the verses of the Bible of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the edition published in 2008.

symbolism in the composition of Sofia Gubaidulina – and implicitly in *Sieben Worte* – can be understood by dividing into a few categories, as follows.

5.1. Descriptive symbolism

“Do you know why I like this monster [bayan], so much? Because it breathes!” (Džinović, 2017, p. 30), declared the author at one point. The category of descriptive symbolism is aimed in particular at the compositions for the accordion or bayan, due to an essential characteristic of the instrument in the vision of the creator: the breath. This intrinsic property of the bayan was necessary for *Sieben Worte* because of the symbolizing property of Jesus Christ's "heavy breathing" on the Cross. Specifically, in VI. *Es ist vollbracht* [It is done], the author realizes a dramatic moment in the bayan's speech, alternating a downright heart-breaking *cluster* (as if the instrument were screaming!) with the effect produced by the manipulation of the bellows, which suggests the arduous breath of the One crucified on the cross.

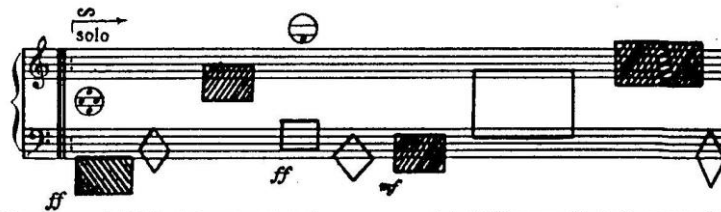


Fig. 1 Sofia Gubaidulina, *Sieben Worte* [Seven Words], VI. *Es ist vollbracht*. [It is done.], p. 75

5.2. Narrative symbolism

Narrative symbolism is an essential component of the aesthetic dimension of *Sieben Worte*, built on several distinct layers. The upper layer is obtained by offering a “role” to each participating instrument in the intrinsic dramaturgy of the play, being also a peculiarity of Gubaidulina’s compositional conception. Thus, the cello represents the Saviour on the Cross, the bayan – the realm of God the Father, and the string orchestra signifies the Evangelist, who gives voice to the Holy Spirit. These aspects certainly influence the sonorous discourse, in that the dialogue between the instruments and the general structure of the play is related to the metaphorical dramatization of the evangelical narrative. The psychological anguish and bodily suffering of the Saviour on the cross is in opposition to the heavenly realm of God and the Holy Spirit. What is striking is that the symbolic personification of the instruments also involves the application of concordant and different writings, in such a way that the soloists' lines are organized on the basis of the chromatic and the microtonal system, and the sonorities of the “divine choir” are modal-diatonic.

The lower layer of the narrative symbolism is based on two dramatic themes, also illustrated by the three participants in the speech: **suffering** (cello and boy) and **salvation** (string orchestra). Christ's death and His passing to the heavenly realm are metaphorically suggested quite ingeniously. At the end of movement VI. *Es ist vollbracht*. [It is done.], the Saviour's death is visually exemplified by the cello movement that illustrates the shape of the cross, through the intersection between the bow and the instrument's bridge. Then, in the last part, VII. *Vater, ich befehle meinen Geist in deine Hände*. [Father, in thy hands I commend my spirit], the instrumentalist has the task of singing after the bridge, symbolically moving beyond the point of the cross, towards the next level of existence.

5.3. Instrumental symbolism

5.3.1. The symbol of the Cross

“The crucial thing for me was the idea of the crucifixion. I like very much the idea of instrumental symbolism, when the instrument itself, its nature and individuality, hints at or implies a certain meaning. The instrument's quality and the meaning of music join each other. The word ‘symbol’ means ‘synthesis, or fusion of meanings’. I wanted to find the idea of the **cross** in the instruments themselves.” (Lukomsky, 1996, p. 20) In fact, the fundamental Christian element mentioned has fuelled the aesthetic thinking of Sofia Gubaidulina since the 70s. As she mentioned in an interview with Karen Campbell, “those two lines, horizontal and vertical, make a cross, and I think about that when I compose” (Smith, 2010, p. 31). “As she composes, Gubaidulina often thinks about these two crossing lines, the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’. [...] The horizontal line symbolizes the human experience in life and the vertical line represents men's striving for full realization in God. The meeting point of these lines is crucial, for it is there that a human being undergoes transformation.” (Smith, 2010, p. 31) After all, the compositional mechanism in question is cyclical, crossing several creations of the composer, under various contours, and concretely it is achieved by the intersection of two opposable phenomena.

One of the first sound gestures with the role of symbol of the cross arises in the onset of Part I. *Vater, vergib ihnen, denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun*. [Father, forgive them, for not knowing what they are doing!], by emitting the sound *a* in *arco* by the cello. It is centred by the upper and lower “leading tones” (*G sharp* and *B flat*) in the *pizzicato*, which are immediately dragged into the same interval frame of the minor third. Even on a graphical level, this double *glissando* suggests the image of the cross of St. Andrew:

Sieben Worte für Violoncello, Bajan und Streicher

I. Vater, vergib ihnen, denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun.

Sofia Gubaidulina

Fig. 2 I. Vater, vergib ihnen, denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun.
[Father, forgive them, that they do not know what they are doing!], p. 3

Throughout the work, it is important to specify that each open string of the cello will be “crucified” in similar manners. In the dramaturgy of *Sieben Worte*, the appearance of the symbol of the cross in the cello is continued by the echo of the other soloist instrument. More precisely, the bayan produces a microtonal effect through a *portamento* deployed between the upper and lower leading tones of the “crucified” sound.

Among the most cryptic solutions that the composer reaches by inserting the Christian sign aimed at unfolding the dramaturgy is through the visual. In the score, the lines of the divisions of the string orchestra are distributed in a

special way, which form the image of the cross. *Sieben Worte* has only one moment of this type, in movement VII. *Vater, ich befehle meinen Geist in deine Hände* [Father, in Your hands I entrust My spirit], of fundamental importance in the dramaturgy of work. After consuming the “cross” as a graphic symbol, the texturally built music acquires the character of a general conclusion, metaphorically following the transition to the higher plane of existence, in the divine realm.

98

21'' 2 J = 98

Vc. solo

Bajan

Vni I

Vni II

Vcllo

Vc.

Cb.

H.S. 1827

Fig. 3 VII. *Vater, ich befehle meinen Geist in deine Hände*
[Father, in Your hands I entrust My spirit.], p. 98

5.3.2. The symbol of transfiguration

On the other hand, the symbol of transfiguration means a transformative process of sonority, being obtained by manipulating the writing. “I think that transfiguration is what we most desire in the creative process, because this transformation into something completely different is what unites us with our creator. Without this our efforts are futile. Only the transfigurative element in

art acts like this, so it becomes the necessary bread, the spiritual bread for those who participate in this act.” (Askew, 2002, pp. 94-95) In other words, Gubaidulina considers it necessary in this piece to create a parallel between the auditory transfiguration of the colour of the sound with the cruciform symbol.

The soloist cello – having the specific technical-expressive possibilities – is chosen by Gubaidulina as a versatile generator of the symbol of transfiguration, due to the diversity of the effects through which its appearance is obtained. For example, in most parts of the piece, the sound gesture emitted *arco normale*, then the *ponticello* roll with its metallic stamp and again by the initial process, is a suggestion of the transition from one dimension to another dimension. To thicken the desired effect, tremolo is accelerated when the sound becomes metallic, and when returning to normal *arco*, a deceleration in the speed of sound throttle occurs:

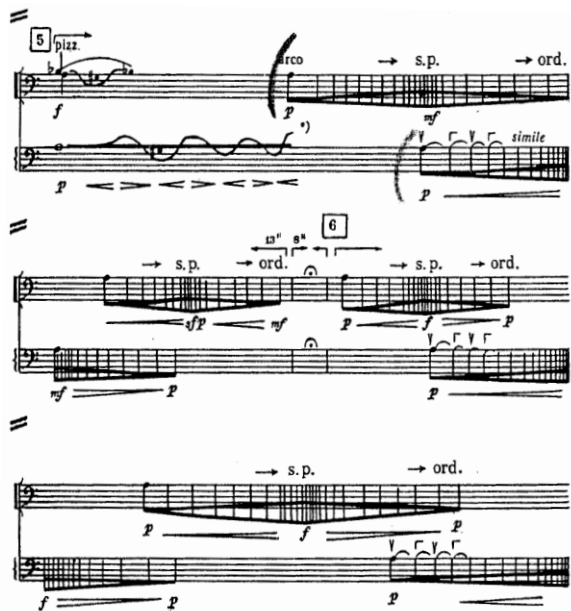


Fig. 4 I. Vater, vergib ihnen, denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun
[Father, forgive them, that they do not know what they are doing!], p. 4

Through the melodic line of the bayan, it contributes even more to the creation of the idea of sound transfiguration. After shaping the sound gesture of cello transfiguration, a captivating dialogue is formed with the other soloist instrument, through imitations in the same character (with the exception of the *sul ponticello* effect, which is impossible to achieve at bayan!).

The culmination of the amplification of the symbol of transfiguration is reached when it is generated by the string ensemble. Specifically, the harmonic language abounds in *cluster* formations, and in IV. *Mein Gott, mein gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?* [My God, my God, why have you forsaken

me?]) for example, Gubaidulina explores the expressive qualities of these vertical structures by alternatively modifying the sound emission, from *ordinario* to *artificial flageolets*;

The image displays a complex musical score for a string ensemble, consisting of 12 staves. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The notation includes various rhythmic values, slurs, and dynamic markings. Key performance instructions are repeated across the staves: 'ord.' (ordinario), 'p' (piano), and 'vibr.' (vibrato). The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, and there are repeat signs at the beginning and end of the section. The overall texture is dense and expressive, characteristic of Gubaidulina's style.

Fig. 5 IV. *Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?*
[My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?], p. 36

Last but not least, in finale of the movements, the transformation of the timbral colour takes place by passing the *cluster* from normal *arco* to *sul ponticello*, as in *Wahrlich, ich sahe dir: Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradiese sein*. [Truly I say unto you, today thou shalt be with me in paradise.]

5.4. Numerical symbolism

“Gubaidulina highly values two important elements in the compositional process: the constructive principle and symbolic meaning. She bases the constructive principle on numbers that become the core on which the whole

composition is constructed”² (Tsenova, 2002, p. 253). Then, regarding the numerical symbolic meaning, the number **seven** is decisive for this composition, the subject of *Sieben Worte* being derived from the Last Seven Words of the Savior on the Cross, and the movements are in the number of seven.

5.5. Symbolism by inserting quotations

Religious symbolism is also obtained through the much-used technique of quotation, Gubaidulina even heading towards one of the works with the same subject, that is, the passionate oratorio *Die sieben Worte Jesu Christi am Kreuz* by Heinrich Schütz (completed in 1645 and revised in 1657). “Discussing this [the technique of quoting in *Sieben Worte*] and other quotations in my music, some musicologists talk about polystylism. I absolutely disagree with such a notion. My use of quotations differs from Schnittke’s in principle: I do not play with styles. For me it is not an issue of style. [...] This is exactly as if a writer put an epigraph at the beginning of his or her novel. [...] A writer uses an epigraph not because he or she wants to appropriate the style of the person he or she is quoting. A writer wants to adjoin, to come into contact with, a person who lived a long time ago. And the epigraph is a point of meeting or contact with another writer. In *Seven Words* my quotation from Schütz is actually an epigraph. The only difference is that the quotations are located not at the beginnings but at the ends of movements.” (Lukomsky, 2002, pp. 25-26)

Let’s identify this epigraph, an essential element of the sound discourse of the work. The five-measure quote from Schütz’s oratorio, containing the phrase *Mich dürstet*. [I’m thirsty], unleashes an expressive intonational contrast in *Sieben Worte* due to its tono-modal organization. Here’s the original snippet:



Fig. 6 Heinrich Schütz, *Die sieben Worte Jesu Christi am Kreuz*
[Jesus Christ’s Seven Words on the Cross], p. 153

² This idea refers to the so-called concept of rhythm of the form, a technique of original composition used by Gubaidulina to date, based on numerical strings. To deepen this issue, we recommend the biographical work *Sofia Gubaidulina*, a biography by Michael Kurtz and *Zahlenmystik flax Der musik von Sofia Gubaidulina* by Valeria Tsenova.

And one of the quotes created in the gubaidulinian *opus*, made by the soloist instruments, in III. *Wahrlich, ich dir sahe: Heute wirst du mit mir im paradiese sein*. [Truly I say unto you, today thou shalt be with me in paradise]:

Fig. 7 III. *Wahrlich, ich sahe dir: Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradiese sein* [Verily I say unto you, today thou shalt be with me in paradise.], p. 29

6. Conclusions

Finally, we can consider that the analysis made of the piece *Sieben Worte* for cello, bayan and strings by Sofia Gubaidulina reveals a unique sound world, relevant and even bold for the times in which it was written. The sonorous language, together with the specific style and aesthetics converge towards the composing solution of Christian symbols, a concept according to the subject of the Last Seven Words of Jesus on the Cross. Moreover, we appreciate that the perennial value of *Sieben Worte* is proven both by the success it had after the second premiere in the ex-Soviet and Western space, until today's times, and by the rich palette of typologies of sound symbols, from the most discernible, such as the technique of quotation or instrumental descriptivism, to the most enciphered hypostases (the graphic symbol of the cross or the narrative symbolism, for instance).

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