



SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

Figures of Time

Introitus

Chaconne

Revue Music
for Symphony
Orchestra
and Jazz Band

Alice Di Piazza, Piano

NDR Bigband

Basel Sinfonietta • Titus Engel



Sofia Gubaidulina (1931–2025)

Figures of time • Introitus • Chaconne • Revue Music for Symphony Orchestra and Jazz Band

Sofia Gubaidulina was an iconoclastic maverick. Whether noise-like sounds, chance, serial techniques, electronics, cluster-spherical densities or jazz: Gubaidulina's *oeuvre* is synonymous with unprecedented openness and autonomy. The composer, who was born in 1931 in Tatarstan and lived near Hamburg from 1992 until her death in March 2025, paid a high price for this attitude. In the Soviet Union, performance bans and financial hardship were part of her everyday life. The Basel Sinfonietta's retrospective under Titus Engel, together with pianist Alice Di Piazza and the NDR Bigband, captures her highly diverse stylistic profile, a special tribute in memory of the great composer.

The rarely performed *Revue Music for Symphony Orchestra and Jazz Band* and the piano concerto *Introitus* date from the late 1970s. The latter is presented here as the first recording of the composer's 2016 revision in collaboration with Alice Di Piazza. This album also documents the Swiss premiere of *Figures of Time* in Basel in December 2024. The work from 1994 summarises essential creative aspects, which also shape this portrait album.

These include religious-spiritual symbolism and mysticism that have characterised Gubaidulina's tonal and formal language from the very beginning. She was also criticised for this in the Soviet Union. In *Introitus*, this religious reference is firmly anchored in the title. In a Catholic Mass, it marks the entrance. In Gubaidulina's *oeuvre*, this concerto constitutes the beginning of a major cycle of works with varied instrumentation: from *De profundis* (1978) and *In croce* (1979) to *Offertorium* (1980–86), *Decensio* (1981) up to *Seven Words* (1982).

Introitus is based on two central themes. One consists of three adjacent tones that are explored in four different sections: microtonality, chromaticism, diatonicism and pentatonicism. These sections characterise not only sonic landscapes, but also emotional soul spaces. The second theme is composed of major and minor thirds. A long trill is introduced at the end, Gubaidulina's reminiscence of a mullah's chant as sung by her grandfather in Tatarstan.

In particular, the tonal concept has been modified for the revision. This especially affects dynamics, the agogic organisation of the tempi, and some chord structures. The third pedal is now also used to prolong one part without affecting the others. Otherwise, the revision sharpens the soloistic role of the piano compared to the first version. What remains is an unusually lucid, material-less piano sound.

'You have to play with a very airy touch,' says Di Piazza. 'You must go beyond the material, gradually moving further and further away from it. It's a very sensual, sensitive experience – a liberation, like stepping into the light.' Such sonic spaces of light become human spaces of the soul, as in the *Chaconne* of 1963. Cast in variation form, an essential element of the traditional chaconne, the work unfolds with an atmospherically dense process of transformation. The very first chord expands the space. Yet despite all the extremes in register, dynamics and tempo, the music always remains tangible and soulful.

By contrast, with its cheeky-frivolous, bizarre mix of Orthodox chant and Russian sound poetry, jazz and symphonic music, as well as American Hollywood, disco, and big band sounds, *Revue Music* was considered outrageous in the USSR. In fact, *Revue Music* is among the masterpieces of subversive 'Moscow Conceptualism'. It works intertextually, cross-genre and multimedia-based, rejecting 'socialist realism' in order to break down the boundaries between mass, pop, sub and high culture. The premiere of *Revue Music* in Moscow in January 1978 was a veritable scandal, and posed a considerable threat to the entire Gubaidulina family. Even Sofia's father distanced himself from her in order to prevent any harm being done to them.

In *Figures of Time*, Gubaidulina draws to some extent on the 'everyday sounds' in *Revue Music*. The extensive use of percussion, flexatone, bass guitars and electro-acoustic amplification occasionally produces similar effects. Worlds collide to open up multilayered time frames. Gubaidulina once explained what it was all about to Simon Rattle during rehearsals for the premiere: 'Imagine you live in a big apartment complex, and there's a terrible noise of electric guitars everywhere. These people are obviously not sympathetic. Eventually you open up the floorboards to see what's underneath. And then you really realise it's hell down there.' In this work, however, Gubaidulina also achieves what she has long sought: the golden ratio as a unifying harmony in diversity. The work ends, as so often with Gubaidulina, on a soulful note. Her music is a comfort in dark times, and that is another reason why it is and will continue to be relevant.

Marco Frei

English translation: Jennifer Smyth

Alice Di Piazza



Photo: David Marchon

Alice Di Piazza is considered by international critics to be one of the most talented pianists of her generation. She has been invited to collaborate with distinguished conductors and orchestras all over the world and has performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus Concert Hall, KKL Festival in Lucerne, Stadtcasino in Basel and the Moscow State Conservatory Hall, among others. She began studying piano at the age of three, and while still a student was awarded a scholarship allowing her to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London. She also benefited from the advice of Krystian Zimerman and Maria João Pires. Several pieces by contemporary composers are dedicated to her. In 2011, she met Sofia Gubaidulina. As Gubaidulina said, 'It is no exaggeration to say that we are dealing with an artist of great talent. What a revelation! Technical perfection and artistic virtuosity, sense and willpower. I am sure that a personality of such stature and depth will be seen by the public as a real gift.'

www.alicedipiazza.com

NDR Bigband



Photo: Maik Floeder, NDR

The NDR Bigband is one of the oldest big bands in Germany. Founded in Hamburg in 1946 as a dance orchestra, the NDR Bigband is one of the most inspiring jazz orchestras in Europe. Musically, the ensemble transcends all genre boundaries and opens itself up to the most diverse cultures on the basis of the roots of jazz. The unmistakable sound of the NDR Bigband is characterised by its 17 outstanding musicians, who are not only unique soloists but also great composers. 1,600 concerts, numerous invitations to festivals at home and abroad, and 120 record releases tell their own story. Tours with artists such as Al Jarreau, Randy Brecker, Omar Sosa, Maria Schneider, Bobby McFerrin, Chet Baker, Carla Bley, Nils Landgren, Etta Cameron and many other artists from the world of jazz have taken the NDR Bigband not only to Europe, but also to other continents around the world. Programmes with young artists and projects with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin or the Ensemble Modern break down genre boundaries and create new sonic diversity.

Basel Sinfonietta



The Basel Sinfonietta specialises in contemporary music – making it a unique orchestra in the classical music scene. The principal conductor of the Basel Sinfonietta is Titus Engel. Driven by its commitment to performing music in tune with the times, the Basel Sinfonietta has been transcending classical concert conventions and embraces an exploratory approach to other genres and cultures in its programming. The orchestra has commissioned numerous works and has presented more than 240 world premieres and national premieres. Since its foundation in 1980, the Basel Sinfonietta has looked beyond the borders of Switzerland, and as far afield as Asia, with numerous guest appearances and invitations to renowned festivals. The Basel Sinfonietta is a self-governing orchestra and is financially supported by the Canton of Basel-Stadt, among others.

Titus Engel



Titus Engel has served as principal conductor of the Basel Sinfonietta since the 2023/24 season. He has appeared as guest conductor with the Philharmonia Orchestra, the SWR and WDR Symphony Orchestras, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, the Zurich and Munich Chamber Orchestras, Ensemble Modern and Klangforum Wien. He regularly conducts at the opera houses in Stuttgart, Hamburg, Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Hanover, Basel and Lyon, and was named Conductor of the Year in 2020 by *Opernwelt* magazine. Respected for his expertise in historical performance practice as well as his precise conducting of complex contemporary projects, the Swiss conductor and Berliner-by-choice can also be heard regularly with central works of the opera literature. Titus Engel studied musicology and philosophy in Zurich and Berlin, and learned his craft as a conductor in Dresden under the tutelage of Christian Kluttig. He has recorded numerous works for radio and on disc, is the initiator of the Akademie Musiktheater Heute, and has published several books on contemporary opera.

Sofia Gubaidulina was an iconoclastic maverick whose work is synonymous with unprecedented openness and autonomy. The rarely performed *Revue Music for Symphony Orchestra and Jazz Band* is an eclectic subversive masterpiece that caused a scandal at its premiere in the USSR in 1978 – the official reaction to which posed a considerable threat to Gubaidulina’s entire family. It contrasts greatly with the sensual piano concerto *Introitus*, heard here in the revised version created by the composer in collaboration with Alice Di Piazza. Worlds collide in *Figures of Time* – a work that combines chaotic effects with unifying harmony. The programme also includes the *Chaconne* for solo piano with its atmospherically dense process of transformation.

Sofia
GUBAIDULINA
(1931–2025)

- | | | |
|----------|--|--------------|
| 1 | Figures of Time (Zeitgestalten) for orchestra (1994) | 26:29 |
| 2 | Introitus concerto for piano and chamber orchestra (1978)
(revised version in co-operation with Alice Di Piazza, 2016) | 10:24 |
| 3 | Chaconne for solo piano (1962) | 13:08 |
| 4 | Revue Music for Symphony Orchestra and Jazz Band
(1976/1995/2002) | 16:25 |

Alice Di Piazza, Piano **2** **3** • **NDR Bigband** **4**
Basel Sinfonietta **1** **2** **4** • **Titus Engel** **1** **2** **4**

Booklet notes in German can be accessed at www.naxos.com/notes/551487.htm

Recorded: 8 December 2024 at Casino Basel, Switzerland **1**–**3**;

22 September 2024 at Jahrhunderthalle Bochum, Germany **4**

Producer: Valerio Benz • Engineers: Thomas Wegner, Fernando Quartana

Mixing and mastering: Thomas Wegner • Booklet notes: Marco Frei

Publisher: © Musikverlag Hans Sikorski GmbH, Berlin • Cover photo: Bodil Maroni Jensen

© 2024 Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF), & © 2025 Naxos Deutschland GmbH

www.naxos.com