

Interpretation versus Performance in the work *De Profundis* by Sofia Gubaidulina

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Abstract: *Sofia Gubaidulina's work introduces new sounds and an incessant search for spirituality through sound. De Profundis, Et Expecto, Silenzio, Last seven Words, Fachwerk, Under the sign of Scorpio are some of the composer's works inspired by the orthodox chants that insert the Bayan (accordion) as a scholarly instrument and essential vehicle for metamorphosis in musical language. The article is presented in three sections: general notions about the composer and work, interpretive analysis and the interpreter's point of view (interpretive practice).*

Key-words: *De Profundis; Sofia Gubaidulina; Interpretive Practices; Contemporary Music.*

*"Life reduces humanity to so many facets that I know of no more serious mission than to help it through music to restore its spiritual integrity."
Sofia Gubaidulina*

1. General notions about the composer and the work

De Profundis was the first piece written in 1978 by Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931) for accordion, in collaboration with accordionist Friedrich Lips, who also participated in its writing and arrangement (namely in terms of sound effects on the instrument).

The piece portrays the instrument in its maximum capacities, whether in terms of sound, effects, timbres and interpretations. The composer uses various effects, such as bellow shake, portamento, which consists of detuning a note to a tone below the real level, and gives special emphasis to glissandos/clusters and the use of air that enters and leaves the bellows as an effect sound.

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Fig. 1. *Sofia Gubaidulina*²

“De Profundis” has an approximate duration of 11' and, in the 1982 edition of the publisher Musikverlag Hans Sikorski, it has 212 bars (some parts with effects are played in free time, with no bar indication). Religious thought, in the context of Russian orthodoxy, is evident in all of Sofia Gubaidulina's works (Picón, 2005). De Profundis is inspired by Psalm 130 of the Bible “From the bottom of the abyss I cry unto you, Lord”, which remains symbolically present throughout the work³.

“It describes the spiritual journey of the human soul from the darkest and deepest points of despair, struggling to find light and hope” (Picón, 2005).

The work creates an image of human suffering and portrays a hope that is born in the midst of pain. The choral part of the piece reflects concepts of hope, trust and mercy. Throughout the piece, growth from the depths is present. The darker side is represented by the lower register and the divine by the higher register. The piece presents a sharp contrast between the applied effects and the melody of the psalm that appears throughout the work⁴.

Below is a schematic structure of the work De Profundis. Its general shape can be condensed into three main elements⁵:

- human suffering in the depths (A), almost always described by chromatisms;
- choral sounds that symbolize hope in exiting the abyss (B1), trust in better moments (B2) and mercy for the maleficence (B3);
- and rising from the depths to light (C).

Regarding the presentation of the main elements, it is observed that the choral theme (B) appears interspersed with the theme of human suffering in the

² <http://www.irene-zandel.de/view.php?cat=kuenstlerportraits>

³ Booklet from CD Sofia Gubaidulina, Grammfon AB BIS, 1995

⁴ Booklet from CD Sofia Gubaidulina, Grammfon AB BIS, 1995

⁵ Booklet from CD Sofia Gubaidulina, Grammfon AB BIS, 1995

depths (A), which occupies a large part of the work. The alternation with the ascent to the light (C) only appears at the end of the work. The presentation pattern of the main elements is represented in the figure below.

A B A A B A B A A B A C

Fig. 2. Sofia Gubaidulina, *De Profundis* (presentation of the main elements)

2. Interpretive Analysis of the Work

The **introduction** comes through a chord with two interspersed minor 2nd intervals, in low range (the lowest notes on the right-hand keyboard), creating a dark environment (E-F and G-Ab). With a *pp* sound and medium low register, it is performed in a bellow shake in *ad libitum* tempo. In this image of the abyss, the initial motif becomes more agitated and each new expansion is carried out in a progressively more acute range, but always returning to the initial chord. There are moments of rest between each new exposure of the initial subject.

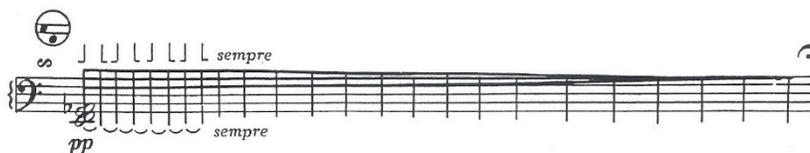


Fig. 3. Sofia Gubaidulina, “*De Profundis*” (initial motif in bellow shake and in a low register)

In the initial chord (two interspersed minor 2nd intervals), the low notes E and F will be kept in a kind of bass line, while the upper 2nd minor of the chord will progressively increase by half tones until the perfect 5th distance is reached, returning to the first chord.

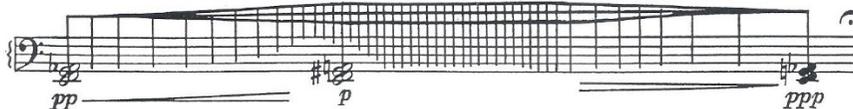


Fig. 4. Sofia Gubaidulina, “*De Profundis*” (development of the initial motif)

Then, a cluster executed in the initial E-Ab interval is expanded in glissando with ascending / descending movements to the high region, interrupted by a *sforzando*

in very strong sound and sudden keyboard change with exposure of the initial clustered motif in the left hand, in dynamic ppp.

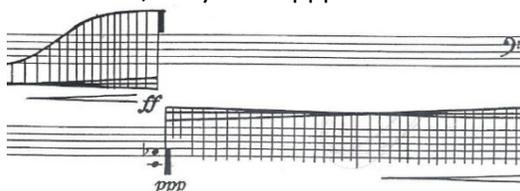


Fig. 5. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (*sforzando and keyboard change*)

The cluster made in the left hand is extinguished and, in system 4 on page 3, a 3rd major interval appears (E, G#) that will be chromatically expanded in a clearly defined direction for the high register. In this exhibition of **element A**, which intends to represent the first attempt to get out of the abyss, chaos will be created by dissonant sounds complemented by clusters, executed in ascending motion on the left-hand keyboard.



Fig. 6. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis"
(*element A - chromatically expanded motif*)

This dissonant sound will resolve into a sound of major chords, giving rise to the choir played by long notes on the left-hand keyboard, in chromatic undulations. This appearance of **element B1** evokes the hope of exiting the abyss and is performed in a brilliant register (medium/high). The chords that make up the choir will be sustained by ascending and descending wanderings towards an increasingly acute range.



Fig. 7. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis"
(*element B1 - choral theme in the lower voice*)

The following vibrato construction corresponds to the presentation of **element A'** (variation of element A) and reproduces a lament. In this chromatic descent, the simultaneous chords are performed in a ppp sound with light sforzandos. This is followed by a swirl of clusters in glissando, first assumed in an ascending and then descending direction. The return to bass tessitura is accompanied by a change of register.



Fig. 8. Sofia Gubaidulina, *De Profundis* (element A' - vibratos)

Intervals of 5th diminished (tritone) performed in vibrato complete the A' element. These intervals are shifted by glissandi to a lower minor 2nd and, in conclusion, to wider and wider intervals.



Fig. 9. Sofia Gubaidulina, "*De Profundis*" (element A' - vibrato)

In master register (all instrument voices activated), the next block corresponds to **element A''** (element A with variations) and gives us the image of the second attempt to exit the abyss. Clusters executed on the right-hand keyboard are expanded in ascending chromatic movements and emphasized in sforzando, always towards a higher register. This is followed by a change to medium/low register, with opposite movements performed by both hands and complemented with the introduction of trills in the left hand in ascending chromatic movement.

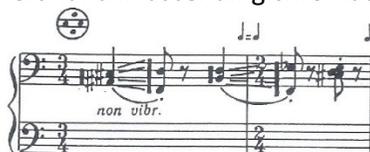


Fig.10. Sofia Gubaidulina, "*De Profundis*" (element A'' - cluster expansion)



Fig. 11. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis"
(element A" - opposite movement of voices)

The work returns to a choral theme (**element B2**), which describes a moment of confidence in better moments. The descending chromatic motif (F, E, D#) is presented in counterpoint with chromatic ambulations performed in sixteenth-note quintines, presenting a motif that is repeated, although with inconsistent rhythmic durations.

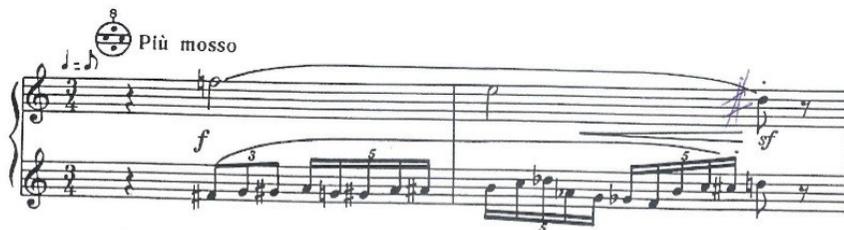


Fig. 12. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (element B2 – choral theme)

Section A" above is now repeated, but with greater amplitude in the intervals that conclude the glissandi. This **A"** **element** evokes the third attempt to rise from the depths. The environment caused by the 2nd minor interval (D#, E) and ascending clusters creates a state of tension.



Fig. 13. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (element A")

The canonical motif appears in an ascending impulse, the notes being consecutively supported by chromatic passages (D, Eb, Hb, H, C, C#, D). This **element B1'** repeats

material already presented in B1 and seeks to represent the hope of exiting the abyss.



Fig. 14. Sofia Gubaidulina, "*De Profundis*" (element B1' - canon)

Then, disconcerting trills appear in order to culminate the previously presented canon, that is, chromatic motifs now appear simultaneously and at an 8th distance between the keyboards. This block, intense in chromaticism, corresponds to the **A''' element** and transmits inner agitation. In a tessitura crescendo, the speech increases to the sound of *fff*.



Fig. 15. Sofia Gubaidulina, "*De Profundis*" (element A''' - disconcerting trills)

A short section presents a rhythmic game of clusters between the two keyboards. At this point of great tension, performed in *fff*, the return to **element A''** (to the final exposition of section A'') seeks to describe a desperate attempt to rise from the depths. There is a progression in the tessitura and the use of a bellows shake cluster at the end, which will make the transition to a new section.

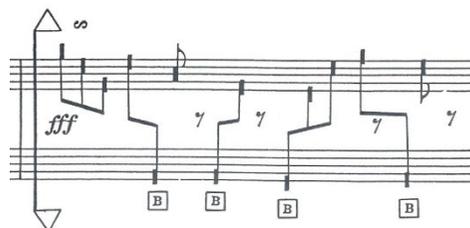


Fig. 16. Sofia Gubaidulina, "*De Profundis*" (element A'' - rhythmic play through the action of clusters)

The **B3 element** gives us the image of a plea for mercy for the maleficence, completed in a cry of agony (cry to the Lord) and an exhaust sigh. Major chords are presented in ascending and descending chromatic movements in irregular tempo, in counterpoint with an expanding motif (left-hand keyboard), in an *fff* sound. This motif will lead to the climax of the work: a cluster at both ends of the high and low keyboards, in an *ffff* sound. Both hands appear in contrast by the action of the clusters presented in opposite movement. Breathing is immediately evidenced by the action of the bellows.



Fig. 17. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis"
(element B3 - chromatic chords in *fff* sound)

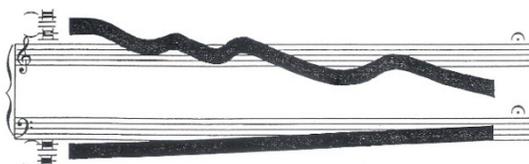


Fig. 18. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (element B3 - cluster in glissando and opposite movement)

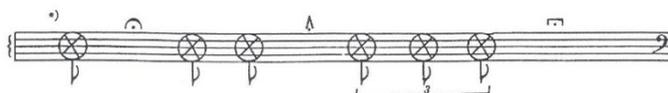


Fig. 19. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (element B3 - bellows movement effect)

The **element A'** then reappears claiming to represent a lament. A chromatic motif is highlighted by the use of a possible effect on the accordion, called portamento, which consists of detuning a note to the maximum extent of a descending tone by the action of the bellows and the balance of the pressed button. An environment then appears with one voice that moves to the depths, in a register that grazes the lowest note produced in the accordion (E1).



Fig. 20. Sofia Gubaidulina, “*De Profundis*” (element A’ - portamento)

A melodic motif, with one voice, started in the low range is then expanded and developed towards a high range, the chromatic movement being relevant. This is the presentation of **element C**, which describes a long journey towards the light, in legato articulation, in a crescendo of dynamics up to *fff* and an opening of tessitura.



Fig. 21. Sofia Gubaidulina, “*De Profundis*”
(element C - melodic motif starting in the lower range)

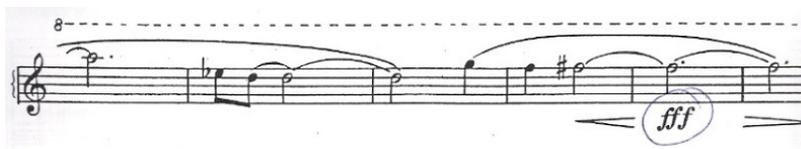


Fig. 22. Sofia Gubaidulina, “*De Profundis*”
(element C – conclusion of the melodic motif)

The material that follows begins with a major chord (right-hand keyboard) and successive chords performed in tremolo, in counterpoint with a glissando cluster that will expand upwards in the left hand. Then, the consonant chord progression alternated with clusters expands in range and concludes with a major chord (E-GI#-H). This contrast culminates in an acute register, the change in sound being intensified by a game of registers (master, musette). This section corresponds to **element C'** and transmits the ultimate chromatic rise to the light, with rest at the top.

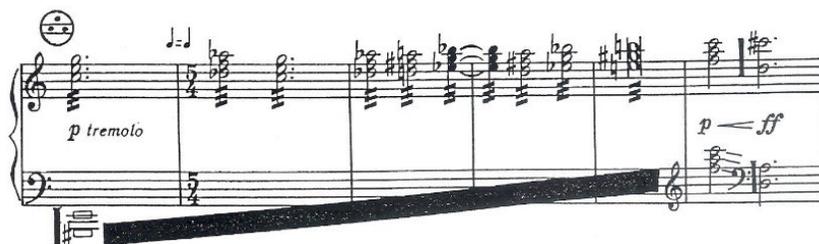


Fig. 23. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (element C' - chromatic expansion in counterpoint with cluster)

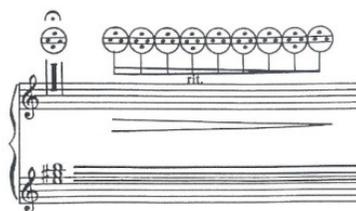


Fig. 24. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (C' element - game of timbres by the action of registers)

Then, a re-exposure of the choir is presented, which takes up the previous E major chord. This approaching **final** picks up elements from section B1 and hits the highest pitches on the right-hand keyboard. Give us the image of light.

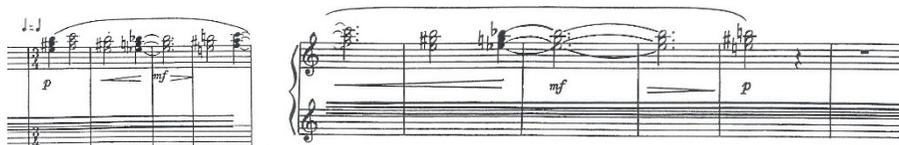


Fig. 25. Sofia Gubaidulina, "De Profundis" (final - re-exposure of the choral)

The piece ends in ppp, with the e-major chord in the lower voice as a pedal, performed simultaneously with bright motifs in the upper voice that descend, rise and conclude in tremors with the notes F#8 and G8.



Fig. 26. Sofia Gubaidulina, “*De Profundis*” (final - final exposure and rest in the acute tessitura)

3. Conclusions - The Interpreter's point of view

From the standpoint of the interpreter and the use of the accordion with converter, it should be noted that Sofia Gubaidulina writes only for free basses and portrays the left-hand keyboard in a similar way, in terms of importance, to the right-hand keyboard. The notation used for the left hand is the notation used in Russian writing for bayan.

B – designation for free basses

B – designation for two fixed rows of basses

Sofia Gubaidulina's writing was originally conceived for a button accordion with converter. A characteristic that portrays this point is the fact that in *De Profundis* some chords and textures that appear cannot be performed in accordion with a piano keyboard.

With regard to the use of registers, the composer seeks to use a large part of the available palette. In this particular piece, the bassoon register (bass), the musette register for high voices (using the piccollo) and the master register when it is necessary to create strong sonorities in more intense moments appears with great frequency.

In terms of effects, Sofia Gubaidulina emerges as an innovative composer for her time. In this piece, various possibilities of effects were explored to the limit (vibratos, clusters, glissandos, bellow shake, portamentos, and effects with the air button). All these effects are intended to be intentional, symbolically portraying feelings, behaviours or emotions of the human soul in a religious context.

Regarding the dynamics used, the composer effectively took advantage of the sensitivity of the bellows to achieve ppp, ffff, crescendos, decrescendo and sforzandos sounds, often combined in a sudden way.

Despite the importance of a trustworthy interpretation of the score in the work *De Profundis* by Sofia Gubaidulina, the aspect of performance becomes essential to achieve an in-depth execution. Gesture, mime, contrast in dynamics and symbiosis between instrumentalist and instrument contribute to a greater impact on musical reproduction.

“Do you know why I love this monster [Accordion] so much? - It breathes!”

This aspect of the instrument has been used in all of Sofia Gubaidulina's works for accordion.⁶

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