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At a Tribute, a Composer, 70, Explains Heaven and Earth

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Sofia Gubaidulina is 70 this year, and eternally a child. At the Kosciuszko Foundation on Tuesday evening for the Lyric Chamber Music Society's tribute to her, she looked at once determined and vulnerable. Over her compact face, with eyes staring warily or piercingly or gleefully out of deep shadow, the Muscovite crown of her hair is still black, an inheritance from her Tatar ancestry. She smiles openly and easily, with a child's delight. When the musicians played Mozart, she sat back and listened, intently. When they performed her works, she leaned forward to watch, intently.

Her music is child's play: very simple, deeply engrossed, quite unself-conscious and rather remote from adult concerns. Speaking before the concert about her Second Quartet, she described how it represented earthly things in expressive playing, with full vibrato, and heaven in harmonics. Nothing could be simpler or more immediate. And it worked.

The Moscow String Quartet, performing strongly and with total conviction, had reached at least another planet by the time it got to the melody in harmonics at the close, having come from an earthbound unison.

The String Trio, written for this group, starts in a similar way -- not with a seamless single note, though, but an abrupt chord passed to and fro. The effect is slightly funny: a quarrel in which three people are disagreeing by saying the same thing.

Though humor is surely intended, there is no warm collusion with the audience here. Ms. Gubaidulina stays alone with the universe, conveying the divine foolishness that is part of the universe. She may be unaware of what her music means, being so absorbed in what it is.

Like the Second Quartet in its progress as well, the trio ends with the particularized ineffable: tragic slow, low melody in the cello under mechanical reiterations in the other instruments. It was another moment powerfully achieved in this performance.