

Soviet Renegade Pianist Holds Recital

By Peter R. Landsdowne

When you're voting today, try to imagine a country in which the government attempts to control the kind of music you can play. That is precisely the plight faced by Sergei Kuriokhin, generally regarded as the finest contemporary keyboardist in the U.S.S.R.

Until the Soviet Union ushered in perestroika (rebuilding) and glasnost (openness), Kuriokhin, who performed a solo piano recital last night at Tuckerman Hall under the auspices of WCUW-FM (91.3) and the Wang Center Consortium, functioned as a musical renegade who adamantly refused to play the "officially approved" music.

Soviet music critic Alex Kan, who is accompanying Kuriokhin on his first U.S. tour, gave a brief lecture about the pianist and his iconoclastic music prior to the performance. In a nutshell, Kuriokhin, who is now 34, started classical piano lessons at the age of 4. He eschewed a career as a classical pianist, however, in order to participate in the Soviet Union's burgeoning rock scene in the 1970s.

An interest in the music of American jazz musicians like Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, and Sun

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Ra sent Kuriokhin in another direction, one that was not officially sanctioned by the Soviet government. The pianist's penchant for using his music to challenge traditional Soviet authority figures got him into gallons of hot water with the very officials that he chose to challenge.

Smuggled Recordings

Gradually, perestroika and glasnost allowed Kuriokhin, who at one time had to smuggle his recordings out of the Soviet Union so that they could be released in the West, to enter his country's cultural mainstream. Today, "unofficial art" can be performed in public in the Soviet Union, and Kuriokhin is a certifiable superstar who regularly fills Soviet sports arenas with thousands of fans.

There were hardly that many people in attendance at Tuckerman Hall last night, but the several dozen musical curiosity seekers who came to hear Kuriokhin play were not disappointed. Clad in a red-and-blue striped polo shirt, faded jeans, and black sneakers, Kuriokhin, who appeared to be about

10 years younger than his stated age, took the stage after critic Kan emphasized that the performance would be totally improvised.

From the outset, it was evident that the pianist is gifted with a prodigious technique. The concert, Kuriokhin's first New England appearance on his U.S. tour, began with some romantic meanderings that sounded as if they were borrowed from the George Winston songbook. A series of repeated figures led to some cascading arpeggios and percussive right-hand flourishes in the upper register.

Ignored the Blues

Initially, Kuriokhin ignored the blues and the standard song forms that form the underpinning of American jazz. Instead, he concentrated on bits and pieces of music that reflected the Russian modernist harmonies used by composers like Scriabin and Shostakovich.

Kuriokhin gradually introduced snippets of blues, barrelhouse and stride piano licks, circus marches, and other disparate musical elements. Any musician who performs an improvised solo recital attempts the musical

equivalent of walking a high wire without a net. The greatest danger is that the musician will somehow trip over his own ego and either bore or alienate the audience.

Kuriokhin did neither last night. He improvised for close to an hour, and the audience was with him all the way. Stylistically, Kuriokhin fell somewhere in between Cecil Taylor's percussive atonality and Keith Jarrett's rhapsodic romanticism. He brought enough of his own musical personality to the extended improvisation, however, to avoid any copycat charges.

For his efforts, Kuriokhin was rewarded with a resounding standing ovation. He responded with a two-minute encore that sounded like a piano student struggling through a practice piece, except for the technically adroit flourish that ended the short solo.

After the concert, the audience was invited to a reception for Kuriokhin at Worcester Artists Group, 38 Harlow St. There were hints that the pianist might play with some of the local musicians who attended the concert. A Soviet pianist jamming with Worcester musicians? Maybe there's hope for us all yet.

Peter R. Landsdowne is a free-lance reviewer.