

## Jazz scene

# Soviet pianist exudes an animal magnetism

By John Litweiler

**P**ianist-composer Sergey Kuryokhin, touring America for the first time, this fall, tells about the ensemble he conducts back home in Leningrad:

"Popular Mechanics is a very strange union. When we play in big concert halls, we place maybe 200 people onstage. Russian folk music plays with free jazz solos; if the background is heavy metal rock, be-bop soloist plays. We have many parts: classical part, jazz part, ethnic part, animals, dancers, opera singers. Animals are very important. Animals are goats, chickens, pigs, horses, singing, playing guitars.

"Me and my friends teach animals to play instruments. We want to make the first Russian animal rock group—I think maybe in the spring is the first concert of this group. We teach one goat and three chickens to sing be-bop like Manhattan Transfer. A month ago, we had a very famous female opera singer sing Verdi with many geese—very, very good."

Sergey's musical attitudes are definitely radical: "It is a good idea to shock the public," he says. The composer of "A Day in the Life of a Sexually Obsessed Dinosaur," in which he writhed on the stage in orgasmic frenzy, he once created a Soviet scandal when he sawed a piano in half during a concert. Indeed, his music and his theatrics have made him famous among the underground of poets, writers, musicians and actors on the fringes of Soviet society.

There were no theatrics during his recent Chicago concert at Southend Musicworks. Instead, he opened with a long piano solo, a fast-moving selection of Russian folk-like and Romantic pseudo-classical music that kept slipping into clashing chords or boogie woogie. The rest of his concert was a suite of eight themes, from pastoral, New Age noodlings to more classical music parodies, which a mischievous quartet of fine Chicago musicians—tenor saxophonist Mars Williams, drummer Paul Wertico, guitarist Pete Cosey and bassist Brian Sandstrom—helped him turn into wild, wailing, rocking blowouts.

It was a concert that could not have happened a year ago. For Soviet censors would not approve his compositions for performance or recording, even if they couldn't prevent albums of his music from appearing in the West. This was particularly the case considering that the album bore the phrases: "Sergey Kuryokhin does not bear any responsibility for publishing this tape" and "Leo Records is grateful to all those people who

had the courage to preserve and deliver the tape."

When authorities denied an American television crew permission to interview Kuryokhin, the crew taped him on a home video recorder, then sneaked the tapes past the censors. First shown in 1986 as part of the PBS series "Comrades," the Sergey Kuryokhin special (titled "All That Jazz") presented him conducting Popular Mechanics by kicking and jumping, while guitarists, violinists and a saxophonist with two horns in his mouth play and a soprano screams on every fourth beat.

Last January, *perestroika* (economic restructuring) changed his career. From solo piano improvisations to symphony compositions, Kuryokhin's music is now heard freely in Russia. In September, he and 10 Popular Mechanics soloists played in Sweden and in West Berlin. Chicago was the third stop on his American tour.

Here he met singer Rita Warford and her group, including saxophonist Edward Wilkerson, both of whom he had heard on records. "I knew Pete Cosey, too, from Santana records," Kuryokhin says. "No, American records are in shops in Russia. But we have a black market with very many old and new records."



Photo copyright 1988 by James F. Quinn  
Pianist Sergey Kuryokhin.

Born 34 years ago, Kuryokhin began playing piano when he was 4. He soon became an accomplished musician, but his attempts at a higher education were thwarted by his boredom with the classical repertoire: He was booted out of the Leningrad Conservatory and the Institute of Soviet Culture for refusing to conform to the curriculums. By the 1970s, he was discovering modern jazz, especially pianist McCoy Tyner. He became one of the Leningrad underground intelligentsia, none of whom could have their work published or performed, at least officially.