

## SERGEY KURYOKHIN

### A CONTROVERSIAL IMPROVISER THRIVES DESPITE SOVIET BUREAUCRACY



COURTESY LEO RECORDS

Sergey Kuryokhin, *enfant terrible* of the Soviet music underground, onstage with Sequential Prophet-2000 and grand piano.

By Bob Doerschuk

**J**UST WHO IS SERGEY KURYOKHIN? It depends on whom you ask. In official Soviet circles, the answers can be elliptical. A well-known critic who met us backstage in a Leningrad concert hall replied by asserting that "most musicians do not like him." We got an even more cryptic response from an official at the Leningrad bureau of Novosti Press, who told us that "Kuryokhin is the kind of guy who likes to hang around the American consulate."

Whatever that means, it is clearly not a compliment, and can only confuse those not yet versed in Soviet bureaucratise. Why wouldn't other musicians "like" Kuryokhin? Is he unfriendly? Is he so wildly successful that his colleagues are jealous? Is he musically incompetent?

In fact, he is none of the above. Kuryokhin is friendly in the traditional sense of Russian hospitality, and more candid than malicious. Practically no one in the Soviet musical hierarchy enjoys the kind of luxurious lifestyle that Western rock stars expect as their due, so jealousy seems unlikely. And as a pianist, Kuryokhin moved beyond mere competence a long time ago. Western listeners got a taste of his work in 1981, when *The Ways Of Freedom*, a collection of solo piano performances smuggled out of the Soviet Union, was released on the Leo label, followed last May by another solo piano LP, *Popular Zoological Elements*. Judging by these albums, Kuryokhin's ideas and command of the keyboard are so astounding that several critics could only compare

his playing to the superhuman playing on Conlon Nancarrow's piano rolls.

So the problem is not the pianist, but the milieu in which he performs. Soviet bureaucrats are at best ambivalent about Kuryokhin because he is an underground musician. His playing is too idiosyncratic for any pigeonhole in the edifice of official Soviet music. Though he can perform in public, he must set up his own concerts, with little or no help from Lenkontsert, the state concert agency in Leningrad. He cannot record for Melodiya, the Soviet Union's one and only label, so he has never released any records in his homeland.

Yet Sergey Kuryokhin is a major figure in Soviet music. He is a one-man crossroads where alternative musicians in jazz, rock, and classical music meet—in person as well as in spirit. Periodically Kuryokhin assembles a group to perform under the collective name of Pop Mechanics. Participants usually range from Boris Grebenshchikov, leader of the popular underground rock band Aquarium, through saxophonist Vladimir Chekasin of the officially accepted avant-garde Ganelin Trio, to local players seeking escape from humdrum hotel gigs. As many as 60 musicians at a time have been involved, not to mention goats and other animals.

Whenever you toss these sorts of ingredients together, you're bound to create a spicy recipe, especially when Kuryokhin is the chef. Last year a Pop Mechanics concert was shown as part of the PBS series *Comrades*. Filmed at the Leningrad Palace Of Culture, it showed Kuryokhin, dressed in black with white facial makeup and one black painted tear, leading the group through a cacophony of classical themes, bits of jazz, and noise.

Many Western viewers may have been startled by this episode of *Comrades*, and not just because of the theatrical intensity of the concert. Beyond that, the idea that a Russian avant-garde exists at all may seem surprising. We don't usually think of the Soviets as capable of startling artistic innovation. Yet Kuryokhin reminds us that the Russian Futurists were staging spectacular "happenings" long before Warhol. What's more, today's Russian musicians create within a society so different from ours that we may be unable to see beyond whatever qualities we and they may superficially appear to have in common.

The main difference is that, to many underground artists in the U.S., American life is a study in infinite but meaningless choices, which eventually erode the creative instinct into listlessness and ennui.

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Soviet artists, on the other hand, confront fewer choices. Just how meaningful those choices seem to you determines whether you cast your lot with the official or the unofficial camp. And rather than affect boredom, such artists as Kuryokhin draw anger, passion, and furious creative energy from the limitations placed on their options.

Some of the energy of Pop Mechanics is apparent on this month's Soundpage, which captures an unaccompanied Kuryokhin onstage at the beginning of a concert in Leningrad last October. The opening piano segment offers a taste of his startling technical precision: Few pianists can approach the clarity and definition he maintains at high tempos. We can also hear his theory of contrasts in action, as he complements his jagged piano lines with soft sustaining chords from his Sequential Prophet-2000. Soon the piano is gone, and Kuryokhin wraps the audience in a billowing cloud of vocal samples. At the very end of this segment, though, we hear a new contrast—Kuryokhin unleashes a squealing synth solo, which slashes through the choir like the cold knife of reality dismembering a dream.

Kuryokhin's actions onstage imply a choice beyond those offered by the system. He has, in the past, sawed a piano in half, a gesture not easily categorized and therefore suspect in the eyes of the state. No matter how dramatic or artistically valid it might be, the ritualistic dissection of a piano challenges accepted views of how the instrument should be used. The state music schools train students to sit at the piano and practice. Not only does Kuryokhin symbolically ridicule this attitude; he has specifically ridiculed it as well, ever since his expulsion from the Leningrad Conservatory for refusing to conform to their curriculum.

Yet Kuryokhin is not a dissident, in the narrow Western perception of the word. He understands that it's a short step from art to political metaphor, and that such devices as destruction and rebellion should be handled with care, even in the presence of Gorbachev's recent loosening of many artistic restrictions. After all, it wasn't so long ago that Shostakovich was forced to recant his experiments with twelve-tone writing. As a result, Kuryokhin has learned to exist symbiotically with his world. In a peculiar way, the inhospitable political climate has toughened him, making him a survivor.

Kuryokhin was born in Murmansk, in the cold northwest fringes of Russia, in 1954. Three years later his father, an Army officer, was transferred to Moscow, where Sergey was raised until 1971, when he moved to Leningrad. In addition to being expelled from the Leningrad Conservatory, he was thrown out of the Institute of

Soviet Culture, for similar reasons.

We met Kuryokhin at a cafe in Leningrad one frigid day last January. He was easy to spot: shaggy hair, casual denim jacket, and something in his attitude that demanded attention. He was animated as he spoke, springing to his feet, gesturing dramatically, breaking into song or sequence.

In two days he was scheduled to give a performance in Leningrad, a "boogie woogie" duo concert with another pianist. We had no clue that it would be cancelled—not for political reasons, but because Kuryokhin would break his leg in an accident the day after our interview. Still, never having seen him play, we were curious about how he approaches his recitals. How, we asked, does a typical Sergey Kuryokhin solo gig unfold onstage?

Kuryokhin grinned. "My words are not adequate," he began. "The audience might see it entirely differently, so I'll try to describe the psychology of the musical material, as I understand it. First, I try the instrument. I start with one or two notes. Although I usually have the opportunity to familiarize myself with the piano before the concert, I try to create the impression that I'm playing it for the first time, so I play very sparsely. Then I play tighter, though still atonally. At this point, my music is very contemplative; I never start with hard percussive music. I want the atonal harmonies to evolve into more traditional harmonies, sometimes Bill Evans types of chords, but without rhythm. From that point the voicings may shift to fourths and fifths, like McCoy Tyner, but more percussive, and still without rhythm. I spend a lot of time psychologically preparing the audience for when the rhythm begins, so that when that happens, there's usually a lot of applause. Somehow this moment predetermines the flow of the whole concert.

"Anyway, for five minutes or more I develop this feeling, then there's a very sharp turn to another quality. This turn should be completely unexpected by the audience. I might get inside the piano and use some kind of a toy to produce sound—a shaker, or perhaps a toy bird that sings. Then I'll reach out to the keyboard and use it to make more sounds. I might start singing some famous songs, then take off into some atonal improvised singing." To illustrate, Kuryokhin breaks into wordless song, yodelling in and out of a comic falsetto as nearby customers glance our way curiously.

"Then I like the music to become very beautiful," he continues, "with orchestral or choir sounds played in beautiful harmonies. The melodies are similar to those of church music. From there I go into a collage of styles. I like the accompaniment to follow an entirely different musical tradition than the solo. With the left hand I

might be playing a church choir, while doing some ragtime with my right. One hand will be on the Prophet, and the other on the piano. I just rely on the Prophet presets, however, since reloading takes twenty seconds, which is quite a long time. After a while, I'll also turn on the Yamaha DX100 for some electronic sound effects, turn on the [Prophet] arpeggiator, and leave the stage."

Bleeping and squeaking like an amphetamine-crazed arpeggiator, Kuryokhin leaps away from the table, then stalks back, carrying an invisible prop under his arm. "With the arpeggiator still going, I'll come back in with a ladder, climb it with the Yamaha, then fall to the floor." He collapses in a heap, then rises, still grinning, and eases back into his chair. "From that point, dozens of things could happen. I follow a different set of directions for each concert. The most important thing is to make sure that the flow from one section to the next is logical."

What is logical, of course, depends on which side of the looking glass you call home. Kuryokhin's words and music prove that there is sense in nonsense, profundity in silliness, and room for inspired brilliance in the Soviet musical world.

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**WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THAT YOU** were going to be playing avant-garde music?

I started playing rock just as it was beginning to be heard, at school in the mid-'60s. I realized that this was my favorite kind of music, and decided that it was all I was going to play. But then I heard jazz—to be specific, contemporary jazz, mainly McCoy Tyner with John Coltrane. I realized then what real piano skill was.

Were you ever interested in a career as a classical pianist?

The curriculum in our schools is based on classical music exclusively, so I had to play classical repertoire, but I never really wanted to do that extensively. Now, however, after hearing Horowitz play here last year, I've started to think again about the importance of classical music and pianistic virtuosity. I used to believe that classical music was too preconceived, and therefore a little bit false. In those days I made a very sharp distinction between creativity and interpretation, and I always wanted to create or compose my own music.

Did you do this through improvisation, or did you actually write down original pieces?

It was mostly improvising.

How did you learn to improvise?

I'm not sure. Mainly from listening to a lot of music, mainly British and American music. I tried to play the way the musicians I listened to were playing. That doesn't mean I was trying to imitate; I was trying to understand, or get into the essence, of what they were playing.