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# The Anarchist At the Keyboard

## Pianist Sergey Kuryokhin, Defying Jazz Traditions

By Howard Mandel  
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Most jazz pianists lean toward either the facile classicism of Art Tatum or the blunt eccentricity of Thelonious Monk, whose motto was "wrong is right." Soviet improvisationist Sergey Kuryokhin synthesizes these two approaches, treating 19th-century romantic repertoire as raw material for deconstructionist satire in the vein of the late, great,



SERGEY KURYOKHIN

underrated American keyboard artist Chico Marx. Kuryokhin is a contestant in the Beethoven Society's second annual Thelonious Monk Jazz Competition, which opens Thursday at the Smithsonian's Baird Auditorium with preliminary recitals leading toward a \$10,000 first prize. The 34-year-old, Leningrad-based musical gadfly, whose professional profile at home has risen considerably under *glasnost*, also performs at d.c. space Saturday night.

To date, his whirlwind first tour of the

See KURYOKHIN, G5, Col. 1

United States has included: a day in the recording studio with Frank Zappa; a session in the Arizona desert with new age musicians; concerts in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston; a trip to MIT's state-of-the-art Wang Media Center; and a week's residence with a student band at Oberlin College. Kuryokhin concludes his visit by attending the New Music America festival in Miami in early December.

A lithe man who flashes an engaging, mock-naive smile and dark, doe-like eyes, Kuryokhin has been known in the West as an iconoclast since his solo debut "Ways of Freedom" was released in 1981 on Leo Records, a London label founded by a dissident Soviet émigré. Though celebrated in underground music journals and the subject of the half-hour BBC documentary "All That Jazz," which has aired on PBS, Kuryokhin had little hope of international travel until six months ago. Before then, permission for provocative young artists to leave Russia was inconceivable. But since late July he's appeared with his free-form ensemble Pop Mechanics in Finland, Stockholm and Berlin, and has been seen internationally as part of video artist Nam June Paik's satellite telecast "Wrap Around the World."

Kuryokhin is insecure about his command of English. Coaxed to speak on a live radio program in New York he would only say, in stilted self-parody, "Hello. My name is Sergey." But he's accompanied by his longtime Leningrad associate, English-fluent critic Alexander Kan, just as Soviet jazz mainstream pianist Igor Bril has been traveling the United States with Moscow jazz activist Alexei Batashev.

Batashev and Bril represent the Russian jazz establishment, having fought hard for 30 years to secure respect for music derived from American swing and bebop. Bril spins intricate right-hand variations on jazz standards, never breaking the rhythm or the traditional structure of chorus-solo-chorus. Kuryokhin and Kan, the most knowledgeable Soviet commentator on international experimental music this writer has encountered, represent the avant-garde.

Kuryokhin typically introduces

themes from Chopin or Liszt études, then destroys them with syncopated stride, two-fisted rock 'n' roll à la Jerry Lee Lewis, furious swipes at the keyboard and dissonant clusters. He's quite capable of shocking usually blasé audiences. At the Knitting Factory, a Manhattan nightclub that books the rudest of the new, Kuryokhin crawled under the grand piano to lie on his back and lift it with his legs. The crowd gasped when he dropped the piano abruptly, and its open case board slammed shut.

"Sergey's concept is of multimedia performance without definition of style or genre," Kan explains. "Anything is possible, musically, visually, and the wilder the better."

This description applies to Kuryokhin at the piano, where he'll come out of a furious passage lightening his touch so much his hands move inches above the ivories, playing silently. He also sings along with himself in wordless falsetto or faux-European imitation. But Kuryokhin's concerts with Pop Mechanics are even wilder, resembling the happenings of the '60's.

"Pop Mechanics has never stabilized its personnel, and indeed, it would be impossible to do so," Kan contends. Kuryokhin aims to be all-embracing and unpredictable—post-modern, to use the '80s term. "Sergey's appearance and behavior on stage affects the whole show, which he conducts, though he may not, and often doesn't, actually play," Kan says.

Last June in Leningrad, Kuryokhin removed the legs from a grand piano to play it flat on the floor. Also within his reach was an electronic synthesizer; he sometimes fingered both at once. Pop Mechanics' core instrumentalists put aside their horns and guitars in favor of folkish wood flutes, and a troupe of local Hari Krishnas chanted as a deadpan choir. Soon Kuryokhin abandoned his seat to writhe over the lip of the stage. A friend in a pink wig upturned a water-filled vase to drench them both. Meanwhile, an oddly costumed trio struck poses from patriotic Soviet sculpture.

Spectacle, not music, was the essence of the event, and although Kuryokhin has recently been composing scores for Soviet films, it often seems that social commentary rather than pure sonic art are his ambition. He denies this.

"No, he doesn't try to make fun of everybody," Kan translates as Kuryokhin protests, tongue firmly in cheek. "Sergey says he's the most serious artist in the whole Soviet culture. Probably the most serious man in the whole world—after Lenin."

What's certainly serious is Kuryokhin's position as an artistic hero of the Soviet Union's youth culture after years of stubborn struggles. Born in Crimea, the son of a military officer, Kuryokhin studied classical piano throughout his childhood and developed an interest in Western pop in his teens. Attending music high school and the college-level Rimsky-Korsakov Institute of Culture, he became prominent in the underground Leningrad rock scene in the early '70s. Says Kan, "Sergey was very young then, but the whole scene was young."

Kuryokhin was welcomed by the most advanced players of the Soviet Union's progressive jazz wing, who furthered his education in the music of American avant-gardies, including John Coltrane, Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor. Working with members of the Ganelin Trio, tenor saxophonist Anatoly Vapirov, gypsy vocalist Valentina Ponomareva—all of whom have issued records on the Leo label—and the folk-rock guitarist Boris Grebenshnikov, Kuryokhin gradually began his own projects.

"Each time he presented a program he had a new name for his band," Kan remembers. "Crazy Music Orchestra was one. And he had long, elaborate, funny titles for his compositions." On his double album "Subway Culture: The Third Russian Opera," Kuryokhin included a synopsis of a whimsical libretto full of pre-Soviet Russian references that defy political analysis.

By 1982, Kuryokhin was scandalizing official artistic circles by presenting musicians who smashed their guitars and indulged in theatrics and orgiastic dancing—"nothing very offensive by today's standards, even at home," according to Kan. His audiences averaged 500 in the LenSoviet Palace of Culture. Today, he's much more widely accepted, having led Pop Mechanics on the popular television show "Musical Ring," in Leningrad's prestigious 4,000-seat October concert hall and in 10,000-seat arenas.

Asked Kuryokhin's reaction to the United States, Kan replies, "He can't

help laughing." However, that's Kuryokhin's response to almost any question. Inquiries about his esthetic are met with disquisitions on the principles of "idiotism," or statements such as, "Humanity has chosen the wrong way to search, outwards, into space. I'm more interested in life in the center of the earth. So my whole orchestra is digging." Or: "I've found my place in Soviet culture. It's 15 meters to the left of the Kremlin, and a little above."

Such deadpans wouldn't be worth anyone's attention if Kuryokhin wasn't really the talented, visionary musician that his best efforts, such as "Pop Mechanics No. 17," prove he is. Performing across the United States with guitarists Pat Metheny and Henry Kaiser and demon reedman John Zorn, with very little rehearsal time, Kuryokhin has won rave reviews from his peers, the press and at least one record company executive, with whom he's begun negotiating a contract.

It remains to be seen how master jazz pianists Walter Davis Jr., Barry Harris, Sir Roland Hanna, Hank Jones and Roger Kellaway, judges of the Thelonious Monk competition, will take to Kuryokhin's brazen originality. His task is to interpret a Monk selection—"Eronel," "Ask Me Now," "Hackensack" or "Round Midnight"—and one of his own compositions. Does Kuryokhin know Monk?

"He likes the saints," Kan translates, trying for a cross-cultural pun.

Will Kuryokhin practice?

"Of course not. Well, maybe the week before."

Does he take the competition seriously? How does he think he'll do?

"Sergey takes the competition very seriously. He's going to win."