

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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Phoenix, Arizona

LIFE & LEISURE

The goat couldn't get a visa

Soviet musician shares riffs, wit in Tucson jam

By Andrew Means
The Arizona Republic

For a man who saws pianos in half and performs with animals, it was not a spectacular event.

Indeed, Sergey Kuryokhin looked impassive as he sat at his keyboard Saturday trading chords with the impromptu group of musicians at Tucson's Tenth Street Dance Works.

But this was more than an exchange of notes. Kuryokhin was doing what few of his Soviet peers have done. In a striking example of *glasnost* at work, the 34-year-old performer is playing music in the United States.

Tucson is on his itinerary because local flute player Dean Evenson and his wife, Dudley, recorded with Kuryokhin for their label Soundings of the Planet when they visited the U.S.S.R. last year. Kuryokhin will perform at Tucson's Unitarian Universalist Church today.

While travel is not new for Soviet classical musicians, the chance to see someone of Kuryokhin's ilk in the U.S. is rare.

What exactly is that ilk?

To start with, it's contemporary. Improvisation is a key. And the emphasis is on ensemble playing.

At Saturday's jam session, Kuryokhin's playing had much that would be familiar to rock and modern jazz listeners. Rapid, staccato chords gave a minimalist feel to some passages, while others built on light, lingering melodies. Occasionally, when others seemed to flag in creativity, he would throw in a bold, dissonant chord.

School of 'idiotism'

Through interpreter Richard McNabb, a teacher of Russian at

University High School in Tucson, Kuryokhin said his music mixes folklore, classical music, animal voices (of which more later) and a phrase Kuryokhin repeated in English: "total idiotism."

It was hard to pinpoint exactly what he meant. Was the idea to suggest clowning? *Nyet* was the reply.

And then, speaking through McNabb, "The clown is theater, idiot is life."

Kuryokhin's answer evoked the ideas of the surrealists of the '20s. "Idiotism," it seems, is an artistic rallying call for freedom.

As for his style, Kuryokhin called it "pop mechanics."

Musicians in his home city, Leningrad, started developing it about eight years ago in what we would probably call jam sessions.

Despite — or perhaps because of — fatigue, Kuryokhin sprinkled the interview with lighthearted replies. He had just played for three hours, after all.

A question about musical influences elicited a grin and "Lenin."

More seriously, he mentioned John Coltrane and McCoy Tyner.

Classics met jazz

Born in the northern seaport of Murmansk, he started his musical training at age 4.

Later, pinned to his father's military career, the family moved to Moscow, the Crimea and then Leningrad. Formal training was in the classical repertoire. But at the age of 14, Kuryokhin was exposed to jazz through a school band he had joined.

Apparently only with *glasnost* has Kuryokhin's radical juxtaposition of ideas been accepted by Soviet authorities. Apart from technical handicaps — Soviet musicians are still restricted to rudimentary analog synthesizers — Kuryokhin said he has complete freedom to develop his ideas.

A married man with two daughters, he now leads the life of a professional musician.

Asked to describe a typical day, Kuryokhin once again gave his humor full vent. A typical day, McNabb duly translated, begins with playing the balalaika, followed by drinking a bottle of vodka and then a walk around Red Square.

Apparently, the content of a typical Kuryokhin performance isn't sketched out until hours beforehand. Much depends on who's available, but certain parameters have developed.

Sawing pianos in half, for instance, is rare. Far more common is the participation of animals in his shows. Pigs and goats are preferred.

"One of the pigs writes songs," a poker-faced Kuryokhin said in English.

Sharing the planet

An exaggeration, perhaps. But Kuryokhin did seem sincere when he said that as we share the planet with animals, we should try to develop a better empathy with them.

Though Kuryokhin's current tour is fairly limited, there are plans for a more extensive itinerary next year. Visas are easier to obtain now, he said, although there are so many visa applications that it may cause a delay.

In any case, translated McNabb, "You have to hurry and do it now, because tomorrow may be different."

As in so much of U.S.-Soviet relations, though, things could never be put back exactly as they were. Once again, people of different tongues have found the truth in an old cliché: Music is a common language.

If you go

Performance: 8 p.m. today.
Where: Unitarian Universalist Church, 4831 E. 22nd St., Tucson.
Tickets: \$8 at the door; \$7 in advance from Soundscapes, Cosmic Connections or Rainbow Moods in Tucson.

October 21, 1988