

Essay

Leningrad Contemporary Music Club: An Early Bird of Soviet Musical Underground

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Abstract: This essay discusses the genesis, evolution, and impact of the Leningrad Contemporary Music Club (CMC), a pivotal hub for avant-garde and experimental music in the late Soviet Union. Founded amidst the socio-political constraints of the late 1970s, the CMC emerged as a sanctuary for jazz, classical avant-garde, and progressive rock enthusiasts. This paper chronicles the CMC's unique ability to foster creative expression within the repressive Soviet cultural framework, driven by a coalition of visionaries including such musicians as Sergey Kuryokhin and jazz theoreticians like Efim Barban. The narrative highlights the club's seminal role in introducing Western avant-garde music to Soviet audiences, hosting groundbreaking performances, and cultivating a vibrant community of musicians, critics, and fans. Through an exploration of the CMC's organisational strategies, cultural exchanges, and its ultimate closure following state intervention, the paper examines how the Club bridged underground and mainstream music while navigating ideological constraints. The research underscores the CMC's legacy as a microcosm of resistance and innovation, situating its contributions within broader discussions of Soviet countercultural movements and global avant-garde practices. This work contributes to the historiography of Soviet underground culture, shedding light on the interplay between art, politics, and social transformation in late 20th-century Leningrad.

Keywords: soviet avant-garde; Leningrad Contemporary Music Club; cultural underground; Sergey Kuryokhin; Soviet jazz; countercultural movements; Free Jazz; Alexander Kan



Academic Editor: Dennis Ioffe

Received: 5 November 2024

Revised: 27 December 2024

Accepted: 29 December 2024

Published: 5 February 2025

Citation: Kan, Alexander. 2025. Leningrad Contemporary Music Club: An Early Bird of Soviet Musical Underground. *Arts* 14: 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts14010013>

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1. Whence the Avant-Garde: Genesis

In the summer of 1978, at the age of 24, I moved to Leningrad from two Soviet provincial cities: Kherson in southern Ukraine, where I was born and grew up, and Tula near Moscow, where I studied at a local Pedagogical Institute (now Leo Tolstoy University). Like many, if not most of my contemporaries whose childhood, adolescence, and youth happily coincided with rock's golden era of the 1960s, I was an ardent, dedicated, and passionate music fan. Unlike many, my musical interests went far beyond the ubiquitous standard set of the Beatles, Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Queen, and even beyond the more advanced and ambitious prog rock of Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Yes, Genesis, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, and the like. Around 1973–1975, I arrived at a presumptuous and arrogant conclusion: with magnum opuses like Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* and *The Wall*, ELP's *Tarkus*, Yes's *Close to the Edge* and *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, Jethro Tull's *Thick As A Brick* and *Passion Play*, Genesis's *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*, King Crimson's *Starless and Bible Black*, and some others rock music as an art form reached its apogee, its peak. Its only further movement, I thought, could be downward, and every progressive-looking serious musician and listener should inevitably convert to more advanced music forms, namely the avant-garde, jazz, as well as "classical". With

the unwavering self-confidence of a self-appointed connoisseur (I was by far the most knowledgeable in my immediate social circle), I preached my newly acquired beliefs to friends. Rock's evolution of the late 1970s only confirmed my convictions: prog rock "dinosaurs"—as they by then had been contemptuously labelled by the new punk rock generation as well as the British music press—quickly degraded. As an acute observer of the wider cultural scene (inasmuch as it was possible from behind the Iron Curtain), I was thrilled by the explosion of punk; it did indeed bring in relentless energy and drive most other rock music had by then irretrievably lost. But my interest in punk was purely social and/or political: I loved and admired its rebellious spirit but could by no means be satisfied and even less so excited by punk's narrow and ostentatiously primitive musical content.¹

Whence, However, the Avant-Garde?

My interest in jazz was ignited by extended improvised cadences in the music of rock avant-garde iconoclasts Henry Cow, as well as King Crimson's 1970s albums and Robert Wyatt's seminal 1974 *Rock Bottom*, with the involvement of crème de la crème of British free jazz scene: Keith Tippett, Fred Frith, Chris Cutler, Lindsay Cooper, Marc Charig, Mongezi Feza, and daring sojourns into free improvisation by Frank Zappa and his musicians. It coincided with the spread of jazz-rock or, as it was then called, "fusion". The albums of Weather Report, Chick Corea's *Return to Forever*, and John McLaughlin's *Mahavishnu Orchestra* even found their way into the backwater provinces where I still lived. Ever eager for the new sounds, I scrounged radio waves desperately looking for less and less conventional and more and more ambitious, daring, and bold, in other words, avant-garde music. The legendary host of the Voice of America's Jazz Hour, Willis Conover, with his inimitable deep baritone, dedicated his daily shows exclusively to classic, mainstream jazz: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and the like. And even though this staple could not quench my thirst for new music, I nevertheless, every night, religiously clung to the radio, and I am forever grateful to Willis; he gave me a solid background in jazz history, which turned out to be so useful in my future life. Then, around 1974, I accidentally stumbled on radio waves across a music source that was much more gratifying: the third programme of the Polish Radio, miraculously available on middle waves and, therefore, in much better sound quality; a major step forward. Not only did they play familiar and not-so-familiar examples of the beloved jazz rock, but they significantly expanded my musical horizons. Along with advanced Polish free jazz (Krzysztof Komeda, Tomasz Stanko, and Zbigniew Namysłowski), they featured artists whose music was balancing on a fine line between prog rock and free improvisation (Czesław Niemen, Michał Urbaniak, SBB, and Laboratorium), and probably most importantly, the albums of the then-still-new (founded just a few years earlier, in 1969) Munich-based German label ECM. Norwegians Jan Garbarek, Terje Rypdal, and Arild Andersen; Swedes Palle Danielsson and Bobo Stenson; Americans Keith Jarrett, Pat Metheny, and John Abercrombie, as well as European emigres to the US Dave Holland, Miroslav Vitous, were all firmly rooted in jazz but ventured far outside both mainstream and jazz-rock. In other words, they played exactly the music I was looking for.

At the same time, before moving to Leningrad, I found a circle of classical avant-garde enthusiasts and, through them, discovered the music of the Second Viennese School: Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern, and even assorted fragments from the works of their post-war disciples: Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Krzysztof Penderecki. This music was even scarcer and less available, but the idea and the attraction of the avant-garde that these composers professed and practised was ever deeper and firmer being rooted in my consciousness.

Ironically, even with the hardly penetrable Iron Curtain, music from the West was infinitely easier to find than the music and the news about it from your own country. If you lived outside major capitals (as I did) and did not have any personal connections among jazz people in Moscow, Leningrad, or the Baltics (I did not), there was no way for you to know what was going on in the Soviet jazz life. To obtain scraps of information about Western music, I was subscribed to a number of Eastern European music periodicals: “Melodie und Rhythmus” from the GDR, and “Melodie” from Czechoslovakia. It was from a tiny (a square inch, no more) news item in “Melodie” that I learned about the existence of a Kvadrat Jazz Club in Leningrad where saxophonist Anatoly Vapirov (equally tiny photo attached) played free jazz. In November 1976, upon graduation from University, I was drafted into the Soviet Army and spent a year behind the Polar Circle, on the island of Novaya Zemlya, totally cut off from any music, let alone avant-garde and any news about it. Except that one day, I received a letter from a friend in Kherson, almost as crazy about new music as I was. He nonchalantly informed me that our hopelessly dull, boring, and conservative Melodia record label released an album “compared to which King Crimson sounded like “nursery rhyme”. The words shocked me like a bolt of lightning. I could hardly wait to get out of the army. When I did a year later, I was shown an LP which a friend brought from another city. The “blind” jacket had only some silly flowers on it and no information whatsoever. On the apple of the disc, it said, “Vilnius Contemporary Jazz Trio: Vyacheslav Ganelin, Vladimir Tarasov, Vladimir Chekasin”. The names meant nothing to me. The title of the album, “Con Anima”, as I would discover, was an Italian musical term meaning “animatedly, with spirit”. The music was what I was craving for and more: jazz-rooted but liberated from any mainstream constraints; free-spirited ample improvisations. With all its seemingly unbounded freedom, this music nevertheless had a complex but clearly delineated compositional structure, which in its strive for the avant-garde, went far ahead of anything I had heard before.

It turned out that upon my return from the army, there was another musical surprise waiting for me. While I was freezing my butt off in the Arctic, another friend, a hippy to the core, and a member of the so-called “Sistema”, a loose community of like-minded hippy travellers who hitchhiked all across the vast USSR from the Baltics to the Pamir mountains on the Chinese border, stumbled, in Lithuanian capital Vilnius, upon a group of music enthusiasts who had access to much more advanced Western records. He had brought back a bunch of reel-to-reel tapes (this was still a pre-cassette era) largely with the music of the already somewhat familiar ECM but—importantly—also African American free jazz of Anthony Braxton and the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

With this wildly assorted, random, if not chaotic, musical baggage, I arrived in August 1978 in Leningrad, where the only living soul I knew was my new wife who was as far removed as possible from my musical interests. I was nevertheless fully determined to plunge ahead into the still well-hidden, mysterious but tantalisingly alluring jazz realm of a cultural capital.

2. Kvadrat the Club and Sergey Kuryokhin

The realm was indeed well hidden. Not that it deliberately hid itself in some secret closet of the underground. But in the official media and the official, open concert life, it was all but invisible and virtually impenetrable without any personal contacts. For a few months, I did not get to know it any more than I had known before moving to Leningrad. Fortunately, I did not have to wait long. In October, the city was plastered with billboards of a jazz festival. Among the mostly unfamiliar names, there were those whose music I was eager to hear: The Ganelin Trio and the Anatoly Vapirov Quartet. Needless to say, I bought tickets to virtually every concert of the three-day event.

The festival was organised by Lenkontsert, the city's official concert agency, but in fact, it was a brainchild of Vladimir Feiertag, a then 47-year-old jazz connoisseur and relentless enthusiast who, as I later found out, had been proselytising jazz in the USSR since the 1950s.² In 1960, he, along with a fellow jazz enthusiast, Valery Mysovsky, co-authored and officially published "Jazz. A Brief History" the first Soviet jazz book. Through his age and cultural background, Feiertag was undoubtedly an adherent of classic, mainstream jazz, but unlike many others in his generation, he was open to new daring experimentation and; therefore, was prepared to let avant-garde mavericks like the Ganelin Trio and Vapirov onto his festival's stage. Technically, it was possible: both groups were officially registered as professional musicians and, therefore, allowed to perform at a Lenkontsert event.

The Ganelin Trio on stage proved even stronger and more exciting than on record. The energy and the vibe of the live performance were overwhelming: Ganelin doubled his piano with a small keyboard that provided bass harmonies in the absence of a bass player; Chekasin alternated thoughtful melodic solos with hysterical shrieks of his two saxophones, which he often played simultaneously and dashed across the stage like a wild wounded animal; Tarasov, not content with keeping the rhythm, through a myriad of assorted percussion, the likes of which I had never seen or heard before, wove a sonic aura which enveloped his other two partners and lent to the music a spatial, almost cosmic dimension.³

Totally unexpected and; therefore, even more mind-blowing, was a set by Arkhangelsk⁴. I had never heard of them and could never suspect that a group from a provincial Northern city on the Arctic coast could produce this bold, totally fresh mix of peculiar sounds, wild rhythms, and unbounded free spirit. They seemed like an unlikely combination of what I liked and valued most: King Crimson and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. I was enchanted; I fell in love and straight away became a lifelong fan.

However, the biggest revelation was the Vapirov Quartet. I had known of his Melodia record, a decent jazz-rock fusion album with an Eastern flavour, mostly of Bulgarian origin. (Vapirov, as I soon found out, was half-Bulgarian, and in the late 1980s, he moved to Varna, where he has produced a jazz festival and has been recognised as a serious composer). However, this set was radically different from the record I had known and owned, both in the personnel and, most importantly, in music. Most energetic, hard-blowing free jazz with obvious allusions to Ornette Coleman. The leader, as befits the saxophonist in a jazz band, was domineering both physically with his stocky, massive bear-like stature and musically with his powerful, thick, juicy sound and long yet flexible and agile phrasing. But very soon, I realised that I could not tear my eyes off the pianist. His slender, boyish figure with a long mane of raven-black hair was hardly visible behind the equally raven-black heap of the piano with the open lid. I had never heard anything like that, not only live but even on record. He was the main source of energy; his technique seemed phenomenal: long, thin fingers fluttered across the keyboard with incredible, inhuman speed. He leapt in his chair, threw himself into the piano's womb and knocked on its strings with fingers and drummer's sticks. As soon as the set finished, I rushed backstage, found Vapirov and asked him for an autograph on the LP that I had forethoughtfully brought along—the first and last time in my life that I ever asked for an artist's autograph. All the while, during our short conversation, I frantically glanced around, trying to find the pianist who impressed me so much. "And where is your pianist?" I asked. "Must have run away", Vapirov retorted with a condescending fatherly smile. "What's his name at least?", I asked and heard back a name which then meant nothing to me: Sergey Kuryokhin.

For me, the festival turned out to be the gateway not only to the new music but to the jazz community, which I had been so eager to discover and join. During an intermission roaming through the vast foyer of the grand Stalin-era Gorky Palace of Culture, I stumbled across a tiny desk with rota-printed leaflets and booklets and an unassuming man behind

it. All the printed matter carried a jazz-theme logo with the words “Jazz Club KVADRAT”. There! I found it! I immediately bought a season ticket for all the lectures and concerts listed, and through a brief conversation with the man, I learned that apart from public events, the club members had weekly meetings that I was welcome to join.

Next Tuesday, having completed my teaching duties at a school where I taught English and German, and after a long and arduous bus, metro, and tram journey across the city, I found myself on the fifth floor of another grand Stalin-era Palace of Culture—this one was named after Kirov and was located at the other end of the huge city, in the distant part of the Vasilevskiy Island. With some trepidation, I opened the door into a small room full of men, mostly in their forties and fifties. None of them would stand out in the city crowd, and none looked like a “jazz person” (God knows what I meant by this vague definition; I myself certainly did not look like one), the room was full of cigarette smoke and incessant blabber, in which no matter how I tried, I could not catch even the slightest trace of a jazz conversation. Finally, the chair—a short, bald-headed man in his fifties with round glasses named Nathan Leites—commanded “Comrade Boyars! Hush! Time to begin”. What began was to my utter disappointment quite boring and far removed from what I was eager to hear: mundane organisational routine about future events. Nevertheless, with the enthusiasm of a just converted neophyte, I was ready to do whatever chores I was assigned: plastering posters on the city’s walls and fences, spreading leaflets at schools and colleges, carrying heavy amps and speakers across the vast building into the concert hall, and so on and so forth.

One day, on the wall of the Club’s office, I saw a few typewritten sheets of paper with—wait for it!—a review of the Ganelin Trio’s “Con Anima”. I was thrilled. My favourite record was analysed eloquently and profoundly, with understanding and erudition I could only dream of, as well as ample references to Western music, philosophy, aesthetic theories, history, semiotics, and literary criticism. The review was signed “Efim Barban”, and I was told that it was from the Club’s eponymous magazine “Kvadrat”; that Barban was its editor-in-chief and de facto the sole publisher, as well as the country’s greatest connoisseur and main proponent of the jazz avant-garde, so dear to my heart.⁵ Needless to say, at the next Barban’s lecture titled “Contemporary European Jazz”, I was in the front row, eager to hear “the word” from the horse’s mouth. Barban, a refined Western-looking intellectual in his mid-forties, was a striking contrast to the Kvadrat posse; his speech was polished, and his ideas were sophisticated. His first words shocked me no less than his article. “There are, he said, three main schools in contemporary European jazz: British, Dutch and German”. To my horror, I realised that I knew nothing of either. Where are my beloved Scandinavians and Poles whose music I so much cherished through the tapes my friend brought from Vilnius and from Polish radio’s broadcasts? He played several music fragments, one more thrilling than the other, and in about an hour and a half, opened an entirely new world for me. I listened in awe and was immediately convinced that I had found my role model, and only repeated to myself a stanza from Mayakovsky’s poem: “here’s someone to make your life after”, not even bothered by the fact that the poet’s words related to the founder of Cheka and therefore the embodiment of the Soviet terror Felix Dzerzhinsky. I did not even dare to approach Barban, but I left determined to make his acquaintance sooner or later.

Among the Kvadrat’s predominantly mainstream crowd there was, however, a tiny group of younger men who, as much as myself, were more into modern and advanced, i.e., the avant-garde variety of jazz. Talking to one, I shared my admiration for Sergey Kuryokhin, and he nonchalantly suggested: “Ah, Seriozhka, of course I know, do you want to meet him?” Of course, I did. It turned out that Kuryokhin did not have a phone. I offered mine, and the friend promised, “He’ll call you”.

Indeed, he called very soon, within a day or two. We met on the short stretch of Liteyny prospect, right off Nevsky, outside the cluster of second-hand bookstores, which, as Kuryokhin told me, was, in those days, his principal habitat. He confided that he had seriously gotten into the turn-of-the-century Russian philosophy, had sold his record collection—he did not own a record player anyway—and used the money to buy prohibitively expensive pre-revolutionary editions of books by Nikolay Berdyaev, Lev Shestov, Vladimir Solovyev, Pavel Florensky and others of the kind. I sensed that there was quite a bit of showing off in this confession and could feel his glee when, with some embarrassment, I had to admit that even if I had heard the names, I had read none of their works. Nevertheless, within minutes, we found that we shared enough things for us to become friends.

We were of the same age, born within a month apart from each other in the summer of 1954; we both grew up in Southern Soviet Union—he spent most of his childhood in the Crimean city of Evpatoria, just a couple of hundred kilometres from my Kherson. Our musical genealogy and evolution were strikingly similar.⁶ We both moved from an initial infatuation with the Beatles and the Stones to prog rock—as a pianist, he idolised Keith Emerson from Emerson, Lake, and Palmer—and then to jazz. He said that his initiation with jazz happened through Voice of America broadcasts when he heard John Coltrane and, especially, the saxophonist’s pianist McCoy Tyner. We shared the same conviction that our once beloved rock, no matter how “prog” it had been, had pretty much exhausted its ideas and drive for further development, and the avant-garde jazz, with its unbounded freedom of improvisation coupled with the structural complexity of the academic avant-garde, was the main if not the only road for any forward-looking musician and fan to pursue. Although he liked playing with Vapirov, he was as much as myself, an admirer of the Ganelin Trio, and as a musician, he dreamed of playing one day with some or all of them. We showered each other with the names of groups and musicians we liked, the Western record labels that published their music, and radio stations we managed to find on short waves that fed us with the sounds we craved. The real revelation came when the name of Anthony Braxton sprang up in the conversation. Braxton was an Afro-American saxophonist and composer whose music so organically combined the freedom of improvisation and intellectual compositional complexity that he borrowed from “classical” avant-garde. Equally for both of us, Braxton was the epitome of the new music. I must have been the first jazz fan—outside Barban of course—that Kuryokhin met who heard of Braxton and knew his music. The shared admiration for this musician must have been a secret password that finally convinced him that we were on the same musical wavelength and that from then on, we should stick together.

3. Efim Barban and Kvadrat the Magazine

Yes, he knew Barban and every now and then, he was a guest at the critic’s house for a cup of tea and intense conversations about music. He did not hesitate to ask Barban’s permission to bring along a newly acquired friend, and within the next week or two, I found myself in Barban’s small but cosy and comfortable sitting room replenished with hundreds if not thousands of Western records, Western jazz books, and magazines, and complete with a fluffy fat black cat Behemoth, obviously named after one of his kin featured in Mikhail Bulgakov’s “Master and Margaret”, one of the bibles of non-conformist Soviet intelligentsia.

Barban was nearly 20 years older than we were. He belonged to the 1950s “thaw” generation and had mingled with Joseph Brodsky before the poet’s emigration in 1969. Along with Vladimir Feiertag, he had been one of the co-founders of “Jazz-58”, the Soviet Union’s first jazz club, founded in the wake of the music’s allowed existence after the 1957

Festival of Youth in Moscow. Barban, of course, went there, and met and befriended Michel Legrand, who visited with his jazz big band.

His route to the avant-garde was, of course, very different from ours. His attitude to rock was at best condescending, and he came to the new music through the advanced jazz of Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, George Russel, and classical avant-garde composers. Most of his contemporaries in the Leningrad jazz community did not share his tastes; many of his friends had emigrated, and he lived very much in intellectual isolation. As a Jew he was also allowed to emigrate and, obviously, was eager to, but he could not because his wife worked at an academic institution, which among other things, was involved in military research; therefore, she was prohibited from ever leaving the country. He called himself “an inner emigree”.

Widely educated and well-read in theories of semiotics, structural linguistics, and literary criticism, he employed this knowledge in the analysis of the emergence and evolution of new jazz in the book called “Black Music, White Freedom”.⁷ The book was, of course, self-published—a few dozen rota-printed copies. By the time of our acquaintance, he had run out of copies, and I could obtain one only by trading it for a Western jazz record with a Kvadrat club member. The guy was happy—not only he could not care less for the book’s ideas, but he did not even bother to force his way through its overcomplicated academic language.

The “Kvadrat” magazine, which Barban had started in the 1960s as the eponymous club’s bulletin, had since lost the connection with the Club. Kvadrat, the club, had been strongly advised by the authorities to discontinue its association with the samizdat publication, and Barban received complete control over the production (a dozen or so of typewritten copies), distribution (he gave or sent it to like-minded new jazz enthusiasts both in Leningrad and in other cities) and, most importantly, editorially. Even though he kept the name, having cast away the shackles of the mainstream-oriented Club, he turned the magazine into the mouthpiece of his own dedication to the idea of new jazz.

“New jazz”—his own term—in his understanding, was an amalgam of free improvisation and contemporary avant-garde classical composition. Since the late 1960s and 1970s, the two forms were moving ever closer to each other, both in the USA and in Europe, inseminating one another with ideas, principles, philosophy, and techniques. Barban was convinced that eventually they would coalesce into one single whole; he even published an article in “Kvadrat” called “Will Jazz Survive till the Year 2000?”. His answer to the question was unequivocal: jazz in its “mainstream” form will be preserved as a museum piece in repertory groups and orchestras, while its creative form, i.e., new jazz, enhanced and enriched with European academic innovations, would become a “serious” music, finally and irretrievably detached from its previous role as sheer brainless entertainment for dance halls and night clubs.

The exchange of ideas and arguments on this subject was the main content of our get-togethers in Barban’s living room. However, soon our conversations from pure theory turned to a burning practical issue: where should we play this new, emerging jazz and how should we proselytise its aesthetics in our specific Soviet conditions.

Kvadrat (the club) was obviously not the place. Even if only occasionally, Vapirov and Kuryokhin were reluctantly allowed to perform on its stage; the general attitude of the Club’s stalwarts to the new music was resolutely negative. They even came up with a derogatory, contemptuous term for it: “sobaka”, which literally means “dog”, and which must have implied that this incomprehensible free jazz was not any more musical than dog’s barking. In Kuryokhin and myself, Barban suddenly saw a way out of his many years of isolation; he saw two young men, dedicated to his ideas as much as himself,

filled with young enthusiasm and vigour, and prepared to plunge head and toes into their implementation.

4. Contemporary Music Club

A new club! That was the way to go! Through some intriguing and manoeuvring, by using the perennial Soviet “blat”, i.e., the power of personal connections, a route was found into the Lensovieta Palace of Culture, yet another grand Stalin-era building. In May 1979, we convened an “inaugural assembly” of about 30 men (again, as far as I remember, exclusively men (Figure 1)). Barban announced the new organisation’s aesthetic and ideological platform—the music of new jazz and “classical” or academic avant-garde, including minimalism. Since quite a few of those present, as much as myself and Kuryokhin, were from the rock background, there were a few concessions made to rock: the post-minimalist experimentation of Brian Eno as well as rock-oriented music of originally jazz artists such as Carla Bley and Michael Mantler. And even though there was talk of including authentic early music into the programme (there was an obvious connection between early music and the avant-garde; several prominent musicians, like pianist Alexei Liubiumov and violinist Tatyana Grindenko, were passionate advocates and proponents of both), the name of the new organisation chosen after some deliberation was unambiguous: Contemporary Music Club. We especially liked the English acronym CMC with its allusion to two Western institutions especially close to our hearts: the Munich-based label ECM and the Chicago-based Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), which united the new school of Afro-American free jazz and included our beloved Anthony Braxton, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and many others. Barban, in spite of his obvious ideological and personal leadership, preferred the role of a behind-the-scene “grey cardinal”, and to my utter surprise and obvious pride and satisfaction, I was elected the CMC President.



Figure 1. The Lensovieta Palace of Culture, the early 1970s.

Barban saw CMC as a union of like-minded intellectuals, and from the very outset, our weekly Monday gatherings were radically different from those of Kvadrat. Instead of Leites’s peculiar, old Russian-cum-Soviet mix, “Comrade Boyars!” Barban addressed our gatherings with the refined Western “Gentlemen!”.

True, there was some inevitable organisational routine of preparation for lectures and concerts, but the meetings were intended to be and turned into an intellectual debate on various aspects of new music. On each Monday, a member was assigned with the task of preparing a talk: a profile of a musician or a composer, an analysis of a piece or an album, or a more general topic like “Jazz and Poetry”, “The Roots and Sources of Minimalism”, “Philosophy of Zen in John Cage’s Music” and the like. Several members of the new club came from a strictly academic background. One, I remember, admired Karl-Heinz Stockhausen’s “totalitarian” approach to composition and was, therefore, a fierce opponent of jazz and improvisation, which he considered beneath the lofty ideal of serious music. This, of course, was a cause of heated debate—much to Barban’s delight. This was precisely what he had aspired for in the new club.

In terms of public events, we could not do better than to follow the formula invented and successfully tried out by Kvadrat: bi-weekly lectures with a subsequent short live performance at a small, 200-seat venue and a monthly concert at a bigger auditorium of about 400 seats. Like every Palace of Culture, the Lensoveta had a multitude of spaces, and we were allowed to use them all, except, of course, the grand concert hall of about 2,000 seats, which we never claimed—none of the groups or musicians at our disposal could ever fill such a huge venue.

The choice of speakers at lectures was not very wide: ubiquitous Barban, Feiertag who could draw connections between new jazz and its roots in the mainstream; academic musicologist Sergey Sigitov with his predilection for the still relatively new minimalism; ethnomusicologist Abram Yusfin who could put the new music into the wider context of the global culture.

The post-lecture concerts were a modest affair: a recital of a classical pianist who played unacceptable for the “official” scene pieces by Webern, Cage or Messiaen; a solo set by the drummer Sasha Kondrashkin who shared his newly acquired love of new jazz drumming of Andrew Cyrille and Sunny Murray with old passion to rock. With the creation of Leningrad Rock Club, he became its most-in-demand percussionist and had to tear himself apart between gigs with Aquarium, Strange Games, Object of Ridicule and a couple of other groups. However, he never abandoned his love of the avant-garde, which he continued to play with saxophonist Sergey Letov⁸, cellist Vlad Makarov, guitarist Valery Dudkin and others all the way until his untimely death in 1999. But the primary musical force was, of course, the ubiquitous Kuryokhin. He was always at hand, and whenever there was a shortage of performers, he jumped onto the stage and played his solo improvised set. It happened so often that I came up with the title of “musician-in-residence” for him. His sets were not necessarily as fiercely and aggressively “free jazzy” as the very first time I had heard him with Vapirov. There would be melodic romanticism which betrayed his youthful fascination with Rachmaninov, or impressionistic jazz that must have been borrowed from Keith Jarrett or Chick Corea, or even humour-ridden allusions to tango, waltzes, polkas, or pop hits that became so common for him later. But whatever he played, I could never cease to be amazed by the ease and genuine spontaneity of his music. I defined his music as “Playing like breathing”.

The monthly concerts in the bigger 400-seat hall were on a grander scale. The composer, Vladimir Sapozhnikov, though a member of the official Composers Union, brought along daring avant-garde compositions which were strongly disapproved of and, therefore, not permitted for public performance by the Union. Alexander Titov, an officially recognised conductor, performed with his chamber orchestra an explosive avant-garde repertoire that would not be allowed at the Philharmonia: Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel, and even John Cage. The Vapirov–Kuryokhin collaboration turned into a trio, with bassoonist Alexander Alexandrov nicknamed Fagot. Fagot, apart from being another ominous character from

“Master and Margaret”, was the Russian and German name for his instrument, extremely rare not only on the Russian but on the European and American non-classical scene, which was much more advanced in instrumental emancipation. A modest-looking bespectacled conservatoire student had, however, begun his “unofficial” music career in several rock groups, including the still burgeoning Aquarium where Kuryokhin noticed him, and from where he dragged the 20-year-old classical musician into his free jazz experimentation. Vyacheslav Gayvoronsky had studied trumpet and composition at the Leningrad Conservatoire, and upon graduation, was dispatched to work in a circus orchestra in the remote Siberian city of Kemerovo. There, bored to death by the lack of creative options, he enrolled into a medical school, and upon return to Leningrad, which coincided with the opening of CMC, combined his day job of a surgeon with the realisation of his long-cherished avant-garde musical ambitions in a duet with the 19-year-old conservatoire student, double-bass player, Vladimir Volkov. Volkov caught his eye a year earlier when he debuted on the stage of the Kvadrat Club in the quintet of his fellow students at the Mussorgsky Music College led by the saxophonist Igor Butman. The Gayvoronsky–Volkov duo played the trumpeter’s thoughtful, introspective compositions with a strong element of free improvisation. Unlike Volkov, Butman was in no way inclined to the avant-garde but nevertheless yielded to Kuryokhin’s relentless pressure and semi-reluctantly joined the pianist’s avant-garde extravaganzas and, consequently, even recorded with rock groups Aquarium and Kino.

5. Unstoppable Kuryokhin and the Seeds of Popular Mechanics

Kuryokhin, even at this early stage, was insatiable and unstoppable. Like a sponge, or rather like a suction sweeper, he sucked into his orbit every musical style and every art form: from rock to classical, jazz to cabaret, poetry to performance art, Indian music to Gypsy singing, Russian folk to the paintings of the “Noviye Khudozhniki” (New Artists) group. Members of as yet barely known Aquarium: singer and guitarist Boris Grebenshchikov, flautist Andrey “Diusha” Romanov, cellist Seva Gakkel, and guitarist Sasha Liapin frequently played in Kuryokhin’s shows. There were still a good few years before he would form his multimedia Popular Mechanics so for each show, he came up with new names for his band: Crazy Music Orchestra, Creative Music Orchestra, Western-Eastern Divan, and The Flight of the Fawn Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, with their obvious various cultural references and allusions. But the Popular Mechanics concept, albeit in a modest form with limited means, was already there.⁹ He even incorporated poetry into his performances: Arkady Dragomoshchenko, our good friend and one of the leading figures in Leningrad literary underground, would be sat up in the middle of the stage to recite his avant-garde poetry. Complex and difficult to grasp even when read on a page, its meaning was almost totally incomprehensible in the noise and chaos of Kuryokhin’s bands. However, this did not bother Kuryokhin in the slightest, nor the audience or Dragomoshchenko himself. “Serious” poetry, albeit recited with an obvious tongue in cheek, imbued the performance with additional literary gravitas, and the spoken word was just another colouring in the overall sound texture.

Then, Kuryokhin stepped even further. He invited on the CMC’s stage an “orchestra” of about fifteen underground poets, writers, and literary critics. Each was given a musical instrument which none of them knew how to play. Kuryokhin conducted this sound chaos to the sheer amusement and delight of both the participants and the audience. A genuine dada event!

6. Expansion and “Spring Concerts”

The news about an unorthodox artistic venue with obvious, even conspicuous avant-garde countercultural content quickly spread around the city. The entire non-conformist

artistic community, artists, writers, and rock musicians, along with the growing number of progressively-minded intelligentsia, flocked to the Lensoveta. Very soon—inevitably—the news reached other cities. Cellist from Smolensk Vladislav Makarov, saxophonist from Moscow Sergey Letov, in their own cities, were quite lonesome in their avant-garde aspiration. Even the capital had no resemblance to the new jazz scene: hardly any musicians, and certainly no place to play. Makarov and Letov joined efforts with percussionist Kondrashkin and formed an ambitious, free-improvising trio. Encouraged by the growing interest, I suggested we hold a festival. Leningrad had, of course, “Autumn Rhythms”. The festival that opened my eyes to new music in October 1978 had by then, through the efforts of indefatigable Vladimir Feiertag, become annual and turned into the largest and most important jazz event in the entire USSR. But it was too official and too mainstream, and even though Feiertag did not block out the Ganelin Trio and the Vapirov Ensemble for more experimental and not officially recognised musicians, “Autumn Rhythms” remained out of bounds.

My inspiration was the great Charles Mingus, a revolutionary not only in music but in spirit, who in 1960, dismayed by the conservative and commercial nature of the long-established Newport Jazz Festival, organised an “alternative Newport” and released the album “Newport Rebels”. As an alternative to “Autumn Rhythms”, I suggested the name “Spring Concerts of New Jazz”, and in April 1980, the Lensoveta stage welcomed not only a wide assortment of new music but a host of jazz, rock and new music critics and fans from other cities.¹⁰ Our biggest and most important coup was the arrival of Vladimir Chekasin from Vilnius. The Ganelin Trio where he played was an undisputed flagship of Soviet new jazz. However, the saxophonist was increasingly dissatisfied with his work there. He was bursting with his own ideas, many of which shifted emphasis from pure music to theatrical absurdist performances, which Ganelin strongly disapproved of. Chekasin, who was teaching at Lithuanian State Conservatory, had by that time brought up and assembled a cohort of disciples: saxophonists Petras Vishnyauskas and Vitas Labutis, pianist Oleg Molokoedov, drummer Gediminas Lauriniavicus, bass player Leonid Shinkarenko. Chekasin’s flamboyant performances strongly influenced Kuryokhin who invariably took part in them and to no little extent shaped the ideas of future Popular Mechanics.

The festival firmly established the Contemporary Music Club on the national scene and turned Leningrad into an undisputed centre and focal point of new jazz in the USSR.

7. Mimicry and Scheming

Technically, CMC had been founded as an “amateur club”, one of the many similar amateur groups (from knitting and macrame to photographers and bird-watching), which were based in one of Leningrad’s biggest Trade Union cultural centres: Lensoveta Palace of Culture. This was a loophole that allowed us to squeeze our activities into a Soviet structure but as such we were obliged to comply with the indispensable norms and rules of the Soviet bureaucracy.¹¹ Like every other organisation before the start of a new season, we had to submit a “plan” for the next period, and upon its completion, submit a “report” that would sum up our activities. This daunting task fell upon my shoulders—who else? After all, I was the Club Chairman. The task was not only daunting and but very delicate and sensitive. It is worth remembering that at the time, every document of the kind, be it minutes of a working meeting or an academic paper (no matter the subject—animal breeding, astrophysics or linguistics), had to start and finish with quotations from Marx, Lenin and/or Brezhnev and in one way or another it had to link its contents with the decisions of the recent Communist Party Congress. Well, I did not go that far, but the entries in my reports sounded like this: “The Music of Soviet Baltic Republics” (that was the cover-up for the lecture on Estonian religious post-minimalist composer Arvo Pärt or

the concert of Chekasin) or “Composers of Brotherly Socialist People’s Republic of Poland” (that was about Polish avant-garde composers Krzysztof Penderecki or Witold Lutoslawski). I called this tactic “mimicry” and had absolutely no qualms about doing it. On the one hand, I did not lie; on the other, up to a point, it allowed us to keep ideological wolves off our door.

The other big problem that had to be resolved one way or another was money. Obviously, the Lensoveta did not charge us for using their space; even more, they printed posters, leaflets and booklets for our events. But that was the limit of their generosity, and with time, our appetites and our needs grew exponentially. There was a dire need for cash, without which any further functioning was becoming impossible. Cash was needed for all sorts of things, from hiring a truck to bring a bulky and heavy harp for a concert to paying train fare for musicians arriving from other cities.¹² The question of paying for their accommodation never ever came up—hotel rooms were expensive and almost never available. So, everybody stayed with friends: I remember Chekasin sleeping on the sofa in our small apartment. Makarov and Letov, coming from Smolensk and Moscow, also stayed with friends. For the rare opportunity to play they were happy to pay for their train tickets themselves, but the more established and respectable Chekasin expected us to provide him with travel expenses.

We introduced membership fees, but they were certainly not enough. The concerts were not free; people had to buy tickets, but with the CMC as a part of an official Soviet structure, all the money stayed with the Lensoveta. The scheme that we devised for earning cash was ingenious. The Palace printed tickets for our events, which would be sold not only at its “official” box office, but at a desk installed in the foyer outside our hall. Tickets had to be checked, and their stubs torn away at the entrance to the hall. Both the desk and the entrance were manned by CMC members, the money was received but the stubs were not torn away, the “unsold” tickets were returned to the box office, and we kept the money. Even though this entire activity was strictly speaking illegal, we did not have even slightest qualms about going into it. The whole functioning of the Club was based on tireless efforts and infinite time we invested into its operation. None of the money went into our pockets, it was all redirected into the Club’s activities, so morally we felt totally justified. Fortunately, we were never caught. But the amounts thus “earned” were literally peanuts; at the best of times, our “budget” hardly ever exceeded a couple of hundred roubles, so even if we were caught, the risks were not that significant, although prone with some troubles.

The funds accrued through this dubious but efficient scheming made it possible for the CMC to organise one of the most notable events in the Club’s history. Edison Denisov was one member of the legendary triad of Soviet avant-garde composers. Along with Alfred Schnittke and Sofia Gubaidullina, he was at the forefront of musical experimentation; all three in spite of being members of the official Composers’ Union were shunned by the establishment—their compositions were not performed in official concert halls or released by the Melodia label; their work was harshly criticised for Western influences and “bourgeois decadence”. We decided to hold a profile concert of the much-admired but embattled composer. Edison Vasilievich was thrilled by the rare opportunity to feature a whole set of his compositions in a public performance and not only gladly arrived from Moscow for the event but brought along a number of prominent musicians: cellist Natalia Gutman, saxophonist Margarita Shaposhnikova and a few others. The concert was a huge success and a major milestone in establishing the CMC’s reputation in the world of academic avant-garde.

8. Window to the West

Our ambition was certainly not limited by domestic Soviet contacts. Difficult, if not next to impossible, as it was from behind the impenetrable Iron Curtain, we tried to expand into the coveted world of Western new music. In early 1980 through the cultural exchange programme organised by the Norwegian Consulate Jan Garbarek, a prominent jazz saxophonist and composer who we knew very well through his ECM albums, came in Leningrad to perform and conduct a workshop at the Leningrad Conservatoire. Along with Kuryokhin we went there and unexpectedly quite easily managed to persuade Garbarek to come to the Lensoveta the following day for an improvised set with our musicians. That was not the day when we had our scheduled weekly meetings so there was no hall at our disposal. Nevertheless, the Palace of Culture administration allowed us to set up a spontaneous concert on the little stage in the foyer. The word of mouth quickly spread the news, and the space was filled with several dozens of excited audiences eagerly listening to the jamming between the Norwegian star with Kuryokhin, Vapirov, Alexandrov and Volkov. Everyone, including Garbarek, was happy. We were proud—the CMC made its first foray onto the international scene.

This sudden sojourn gave me an idea to write about it for Jazz Forum, Warsaw-based English language magazine of International Jazz Federation. Garbarek was well known in Europe, and I thought the event was worth covering for international jazz audiences. Rightly so—my little piece along with the photograph that I sent was promptly published. Encouraged by the success I started regularly writing for Jazz Forum, not only about the CMC activities but providing a wider coverage of the jazz scene in Leningrad and other cities of the USSR: Riga, Odessa, Yaroslavl, Krasnoyarsk where I was travelling regularly for jazz and jazz-related events. My name along with my contact details was listed on the magazine's second page as Leningrad correspondent next to the older colleague from Moscow, Alexei Batashev, a pioneer of Soviet jazz movement. Soon every jazz person from outside the country—be it a musician, a critic or just a fan—coming to Leningrad would call me and I would be their guide and chaperone into the city's jazz life. One of the first, in the autumn of 1980, was Hans Kumpf, free jazz clarinetist, jazz journalist and photographer from a small West German town outside Stuttgart.¹³ I brought him into one of the regular CMC Monday meetings and we all, enchanted, listened to his stories of meeting and working with Alexander von Schlippenbach, Peter Brötzmann, Peter Kowald and other stalwarts of German avant-garde—all our heroes. Even omniscient and usually quite condescending Barban was impressed. That very night Kumpf who had forethoughtfully brought along his clarinet played on stage with Kuryokhin. But neither of us, including Kumpf, could be content with a fleeting and transient live performance. A meeting like this we felt should be preserved for posterity. Ever resourceful Kuryokhin had a friend who worked as a recording engineer at the studio of the Mussorgsky Music College. The session was set up late at night, when there would be next to no one at the school. Nevertheless, when the five of us—Kumpf, Kuryokhin, Vapirov, Alexandrov and myself—made our way through the spacious building Kumpf was sternly told to keep his mouth shut lest, God forbid, someone hears a foreign speech. My role was that of an interpreter, but interpreting was hardly needed. Musicians spoke the common musical language of free improvisation—unrehearsed, without any pre-agreed patterns, uninhibited flow of musical communication between like-minded artists. Everybody was excited.

A few days after Kumpf's departure I received in the post a clip from a German newspaper with our friend's article enthusiastically describing his extraordinary jazz experience behind the Iron Curtain with kudos to his unexpected discovery, Contemporary Music Club with its forward-thinking musicians and dedicated audiences. And a few weeks later came another, much more exciting postal delivery: "Jam Session Leningrad", a real

LP with the recording of the improvised session and my liner notes about CMC and short bios of all the musicians. The record was released by a small German independent label, but it was positively reviewed in a number of jazz magazines and even general German press. We were on the international scene! In subsequent years Kumpf was coming again and again, both on his own and along with the renown American free jazz pianist John Fischer. We never dared to publicise Western musicians in advance, but the word of mouth was failure-proof: our hall was invariably full of enthusiastic audience. Several of these recordings were released, and Kumpf who was duly photographing everything he saw became the most prolific photographic chronicler of the era. Modest as these endeavours were, we were nevertheless proud of them. With negligible resources we managed to breach the seemingly inviolable monopoly of the state Goskontsert on all the performances of foreign leave alone Western artists.

However, that was only the first step. In 1973, long before I came to the city, Leonid Feigin, a jazz enthusiast from Leningrad, emigrated and through Israel settled down in the UK where he acquired an anglicised name of Leo Feigin and worked for BBC Russian Service. In the mid-1970s he went to Italy to see his mother and brother who as was then common lingered in a refugee camp outside Rome awaiting permission to emigrate to the US. In that very camp he stumbled across his old jazz friend from Leningrad, the saxophonist Seva Levinstein. Feigin convinced Seva to drop the idea of the US and instead apply for a job at the BBC. Soon the two friends were hosting musical programmes: Seva with the on-air pseudonym of Seva Novgorodtsev on rock and Leo as Alexei Leonidov on jazz. Feigin was of the same generation as Barban, they had known each other well in Leningrad and Barban was sending his friend in London news and recordings. Whether on Barban's suggestion or on his own volition Leo decided in 1979 to start an independent label with the idea of promoting Soviet new jazz in the West. One of the first Leo Records (that was the name of the label) releases the 1980 Ganelin Trio's *Live in East Germany* became a sensation. Shortly afterwards it was followed by Kuryokhin's solo piano album *The Ways of Freedom*, equally enthusiastically received by the international press, including such giants as The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The New York Times. Even before *The Ways of Freedom* Kuryokhin had been well known and respected within the city's cultural underground community but this release turned him into a real hero—the lack of official recognition by the establishment was fully compensated by the recognition in the West, always much more valued in Russia. Encouraged by the success and media attention Feigin worked non-stop expanding the scope of new jazz releases from the USSR.¹⁴ Soon I became his primary Russian contact, responsible for smuggling tapes to him through contacts with Western diplomats and journalists and writing liner notes for the albums, each invariably accompanied with the disclaimer: "Musicians do not bear responsibility for publishing these tapes" which was meant to somehow safeguard them from possible repercussions. With all the naivety of the disclaimer, musicians never, as far as I know, had any problems with these releases, with all their high visibility and coverage in Western media.

9. Cultural Reservations, Diplomatic Relations and Inquisition

We became dear and ever welcomed guests in the small but important circle of Western diplomatic community: Vapirov, Kuryokhin and Volkov played home concerts in the house of the US cultural attaché, we were invited to art exhibitions, film screenings and private soirees at the official residencies and houses of American, West German, French and Swedish diplomats. Along with musicians among the invited guests were artists, poets and writers. This even further strengthened the unity of the underground cultural community.

In 1980 the authorities realised that the growing pressure of the countercultural underground was becoming increasingly difficult to rein in. Rock musicians, under the guise

of birthday parties or weddings, rented cafes and staged underground concerts many of which were raided and dispersed by the militia; artists organised apartment or outdoor exhibitions, often with the same outcome; writers and poets published their works in the literary samizdat and sent them for publishing in the Western “tamizdat”. In Leningrad alone there was about a dozen of regular typewritten journals and magazines: from jazz “Kvadrat” to rock’n’roll “Roxy”, from general literary “Chasy” to religious-philosophical “37”. We lived and functioned in our own self-created cultural environment, totally detached from and independent of the officialdom. However, “The Second Culture”, as we called ourselves, played an increasingly growing role, if not for the wider public mostly oblivious of its existence, but for the intelligentsia whose vision and understanding were clearly oppositional to the regime at least culturally and quite often by extension outwardly political. The authorities, especially omniscient and more flexible (compared to the rusty party and Soviet nomenklatura) KGB, were well aware of that and were looking for a compromise strategy which would give the cultural underground certain very limited freedoms and at the same keep them under control.

As a result, in 1981 at the initiative and under the direct supervision of the KGB three new institutions were established: Leningrad Rock Club, literary “Club-81” and Association of Experimental Visual Arts (TEII).¹⁵ The artists were allowed to hold exhibitions at the city’s various Palaces of Culture; the writers were provided with a dedicated space for their readings in the small but very cosy hall in the basement of the prestigious Dostoevsky Museum; rock musicians were given a base at the trade unions House for Amateur Creative Work with its ill-equipped but relatively spacious hall of 500 seats. KGB supervision was discreet but very palpable: officers were ascribed to every new institution for the ideological control of the content, either direct or through appointed “curators”. We called the new system “artistic reservations”: with no access to mass media, publishing industry, recording studios or official releases, and with no possibility to publicise events or sell tickets the social impact of this relaxation was minimal: the whole scene was strictly limited to the already initiated. But at the same time, it was enormous: events of the cultural underground albeit censored were no longer persecuted, raided, or dispersed, there was a new, never felt before sense of freedom, and the “Second Culture” received an unprecedented boost for a future development.

Contemporary Music Club, a precursor and forerunner of all these new formations, was an indispensable part of the new integrated countercultural movement: along with chairing CMC and guiding its activities I was “appointed” the head of the “Club 81” musical criticism section, organised musical “accompaniment” to art exhibitions and literary readings. With my fluent English and growing network of Western contacts I was the Rock Club’s and TEII’s unofficial “foreign minister” bringing Western journalists and diplomats to their concerts and exhibitions and providing musicians and artists with invitations to diplomatic receptions and private soirees. Most people were happy to accept; some, however, were wary: there was a militia post at the door of most diplomatic residencies and to get in you had to show your passport.

These increased and ever more and more intense contacts with the West inevitably attracted attention to my persona from the ever-vigilant KGB. A polite phone call invited me to an “informal” meeting at a local children’s community centre near the Art College where I worked at the time as a teacher of English and German. The two men with inconspicuous faces and in equally inconspicuous suits introduced themselves as KGB officers and started politely enquiring about the activities of the CMC, my Western contacts including diplomats, and whether I knew Alexei Leonidov and Seva Novgorodtsev. I told them that all my contacts were purely cultural and artistic, and had nothing to do with politics, that of course I knew and listened to Leonidov’s and Novgorodtsev’s radio

programmes but no personal connection whatsoever—after all my correspondence was with Leo Feigin, not Alexei Leonidiov and I rightly presumed they did not make the connection. Stressing the fact that as teacher I worked on an “ideological front” and had therefore to be wary of and withstand the subversive activities of the USSR’s political adversaries, they tried to persuade me to report to them about my meetings and contacts, i.e., recruit me as their informer. To which I bluntly refused, saying that I would rather quit my job at a prestigious Art College where I taught English and join many of my friends, a “generation of night watchmen and street cleaners”, ingeniously and accurately described as such by Boris Grebenshchikov in his eponymous song. Anyway, I added, as a teacher in a prestigious art school, I sensed myself as a “black sheep” amongst my friends: virtually all of them had menial jobs. At a next meeting, however, their pressure on me got significantly stronger: they had intercepted my letter to a university friend in which I foolishly shared my impressions of Solzhentsyn’s “Gulag Archipelago” and the outspokenly anti-Soviet Paris-based émigré literary magazine “Kontinent”. Reading this kind of literature in itself was not a crime, but circulating it was. When I bluntly refused to tell them who had given me these books, they said that I was covering criminal activity and could therefore be subjected to persecution. Things were becoming much more serious: prepared as I was to abandon my good job and shift down in social hierarchy, by no means was I eager to go to jail. In near desperation I came up with a solution: I called the KGB curator of “Club 81” who knew me quite well with the following well-prepared speech. “Why on earth, I said, politely addressing him with the full name and patronymic, do they keep pestering me? You know very well that in our circle these books are widely spread, it is an open secret, hardly worth of your organisation’s special attention”. Miraculously it worked, the officers who had pestered me, obviously outranked by our curator, once and for all disappeared from my horizon.

However, the story had a follow-up. A month or so later, my Art College director convened a special staff meeting with a guest speaker from the KGB. The plain clothed officer rambled for about an hour about increased activities of Western diplomats in the city and sternly warned how vigilant we, “the workers of the ideological front”, should be. I was amused—it was obvious to me that no other than myself was here the target audience. With amusement came a sudden realisation: risky and potentially dangerous as our Western contacts were, they at the same provided us with a certain degree of protection. Had we, as some of our friends, been involved in outright political dissident activities, the KGB would not stop at serious persecution. But they realised that in case of our arrest our limited as it was Western notoriety would cause a media and possibly even a diplomatic scandal and wisely calculated that persecution of our exclusively cultural activities was hardly worth a potential scandal.

10. Culmination and Closure

CMC in the meantime was going from strength to strength. Rock movement boosted by the opening of the Rock Club now included groups whose music was shifting away from the straightforward rock idiom and approaching daring experimentation that we always professed. Most advanced and most prominent of them was of course Aquarium, especially after Kuryokhin, who had featured as an invited “guest star” on a couple of their earlier albums, in early 1982 joined the group as a full-time member. A string of their 1980-81 albums especially the seminal *Triangle* shattered my presumptuous conviction of rock music’s demise. Not only was rock alive and kicking, it was in my own language—bold, daring, ingenious, musically fresh and inventive, lyrically brimming with literary, biblical, historical and philosophical allusions as well as cool and gutsy streetwise slang. I was enchanted and in March 1982 we staged an Aquarium concert, one of the most striking

and musically gratifying in their long and illustrious career. Grebenshchikov was barefoot in a white kimono, guitarist Sasha Liapin was sparkling with his Hendrix-like solos and Kuryokhin embellished rock texture with wild, free flowing jazzy piano cadenzas. The high point of the concert was the magnificent 20-minute epic “We Will Never Get Older” sadly never recorded in a studio, and never included into an album. Even now it sends shivers down my spine when I hear the live recording. As an opening act we invited a brand-new group, Strange Games, with their ska-influenced pouncing rhythms set upon the French and Spanish surrealist poetry. Later of course Strange Games became one of the most important groups in the history of Soviet rock but to this day I am proud that I led them on stage in their inaugural debut concert.

A month later, in April 1982, we had another, third, edition of our annual “Spring Concerts of New Jazz” festival. The Club’s reputation and attractiveness had by then sufficiently grown and the list of bands and musicians eager to perform had outgrown our usual three-day weekend format, so we decided to extend the event onto the following Monday, the hall was anyway ours for our weekly meetings. This probably turned out to be a fatal decision. For the festival’s crowning finale Kuryokhin was preparing a major full-blown extravaganza that was supposed to overshadow everything he had done before. It would of course have been safer to schedule it for the weekend when the Lensoveta administration were happily resting at their dachas but I knew that any modest free jazz concert after his flamboyant show would be an anti-climax for the festival. However, I felt uneasy. A secretary in the Lensoveta administration who could not care less about new music but sympathised with us on the personal level told me that the tension around us was growing and that someone might come to check on us on Monday. But we nevertheless decided to stick with the decision.

On Monday night our 400-seat hall was packed with about 600 eager and excited audience. In the foyer we had an exhibition of Russian fairy tale surrealist paintings by Nikolay Sazhin, the backdrop of the stage was adorned with flashy glary Roy Lichtenstein-style canvases of Yuri Dyshlenko. And indeed, as the secretary had warned, a few seats in the front row were taken by men in suits, strikingly different from our long-haired jeans-clad audience. “Look, I said to Kuryokhin, as we were standing at the side of the stage a few minutes before it all was supposed to start,—We have two options. One: you tame your show, take out a few most radical moments and we have a chance to preserve the Club. Two: you go full swing and most probably we will be closed”. We did not hesitate long. “After all, I told him, why did we start it all in the first place? If we start censoring yourselves, what’s the point of going on?”. It did of course go on full swing: shamanistic rituals, wailing saxophones, roaring guitars, Kuryokhin on top and inside the piano, Dragomoshchenko with his incomprehensible poetry, Grebenshchikov crashing his guitar against the floor and so on and so forth. . . Nobody stopped this orgiastic mayhem which was greeted with the delighted storm of applause. We were all happy.

The next morning, however, I received a phone call which demanded I come to the director’s office. There, along with the grey-faced director, I was awaited by two inconspicuous men in grey suits—very much like the ones who had tried to recruit me. This time the conversation was quite stern. They demanded to know who the artists were, what their works meant, who permitted the exhibition and if nobody did how could we dare exhibit such dubious art without permission. They enquired about every single gesture and movement on stage including of course smashing the guitar. But to my utter surprise their greatest indignation was aimed at a gesture which to me seemed quite innocuous. Grebenshchikov had a red balloon tied up to the neck of his guitar and at an especially explosive moment he popped the balloon with a needle pin hidden in his pocket to create an additional sound and visual effect. Turned out—of which we had been totally

oblivious—that the ill-fated concert happened on the 12th of April, an anniversary of Yuri Gagarin historic first space flight and therefore celebrated in the USSR as the National Day of Cosmonautics. Popped red balloon was therefore interpreted as nothing other than the mockery of the glorious achievements of Soviet space programme. Whatever I said in our defence—that we had no idea of the day’s importance, that all that was happening might have been, okay, naughty but totally harmless, that there was not a single political or subversive meaning in anything done, shown, or said—was falling on deaf ears. Our fate had been forejudged. I was told that the Contemporary Music Club would be banned. CMC was no more. Poor director, at no fault of his whatsoever, was fired from the job for “overlooking an ideological subversion” and as a party member received stern reprimand.

I naively believed that having been banned from one Palace of Culture we would be able to find refuge in another. In vain. The scandal shocked the entire city’s cultural establishment and all of them viewed any approach from us as a threat of a deadly plague.

There might be a logical question. How come the Rock-Club, Club 81 and TEII with their events much more openly provocative and subversive were tolerated while we were banned? The answer is simple: all of them from the outset were understood to be subversive and this kind of attitude from them was expected. Whereas we with our skilful mastery of mimicry for a long time drew the wool over the eyes of the authorities; in other words, we simply deceived them, and this deception could not be forgiven.

Fortunately, the very existence of this alternative cultural reality provided us with other outlets for our avant-garde musical experimentation. For large-scale Popular Mechanics performances Kuryokhin had the stage of the Rock-Club. For less ambitious projects we could use the Club-81 premises: along with the hall of the Dostoevsky Museum they were given two smaller spaces: a shabby dilapidated basement in Petra Lavrova street, and equally shabby and dilapidated attic in Chernyshevsky Prospect. Conditions and facilities in both were scarce but we could not care less; both were fortunately centrally located and were widely and actively used without any control and restriction. We thus acquired full, hitherto unheard-of artistic freedom.

11. ROVA

The CMC closure had, however, a negative effect which I, at the time, could not yet foresee. While the CMC was still alive, I actively wrote to various Western musicians, telling them of our existence and saying that if for whatever reason they found themselves in Leningrad they would be warmly welcomed by enthusiastic audiences. One such letter went to San Francisco-based ROVA Saxophone Quartet. The name was an acronym of the four musicians: John Raskin, Larry Ochs, Andrew Voigt, and Bruce Ackley. The music they played—organic blend of free improvisation and contemporary composition—ideally fitted our vision. Ochs, who handled the group’s affairs, responded immediately and enthusiastically. He was brought up on the 1968 ideals, and had been a member of the leftist SDS (Students for Democratic Society) and was genuinely eager to see first-hand life in the “socialist” world. Several titles of their compositions that we knew from records showed obvious knowledge and predilection to the early 20th Century Russian and Soviet avant-garde: *Cinema Rovate* was a pun on Dziga Vertov’s *cinema verite*, *Zaum* was a direct reference to Russian futurists’ linguistic and poetic experimentation. Ochs wrote that they would try to raise money for the trip but needed some sort of “formal” invitation. Of course, asking the Lensoveta administration for such a letter would be a sheer folly. I wrote an invitation letter that went to San Francisco on a DIY letterhead with our logo. I said in the letter that even though we cannot provide any funding for the musicians’ travel and expenses, and their fees, they would be greeted by most enthusiastic audiences and their visit would be as important for the Soviet jazz as the historic 1971 tour of the Duke Ellington

Orchestra—a phrase I was particularly proud of. It took ROVA more than a year to raise funds and to organise the tour through Sputnik, a youth branch of the Intourist. By the time the tour was scheduled—late May, early June 1983—the CMC had been closed. Apart from Leningrad, the tour included Moscow and Riga where it coincided with the annual Vasaras Ritmi (Summer Rhythms) jazz festival. In Moscow and in Riga things went smoothly, but in Leningrad, contrary to what I had promised in the letter that had initiated the whole thing, we found ourselves without a venue to host our long-awaited guests. All my attempts to approach different concert halls and/or Palaces of Culture were pointless—the memories of the scandalous closure of the CMC a year earlier were still fresh and nobody wanted to take risk, especially with the band from the Soviet Union’s main ideological and political adversary, the US. We had to settle for a tiny 100-seat room at the Dostoyevsky Museum, Club-81’s venue. ROVA arrived with a large group of friends, which included Larry’s wife, distinguished poet Lyn Hejinian, his sister documentary filmmaker Jacki Ochs, a number of poets, writers, journalists as well as a film crew that were filming the tour for a subsequent documentary. On the morning of the day of the concert I received a panicked phone call from Larry who was calling from his hotel room. Their Sputnik minders had told him that if they played the concert their instruments and the equipment of the film crew would be confiscated and their Russian friends who had organised the concert, i.e., myself—would be arrested. The news was far from pleasant but unlike Larry I refused to succumb to panic. I told him he shouldn’t believe a word of this scaremongering. Nevertheless, I realised that I had to one way or another safeguard the event and everyone’s safety. My mind frantically worked in search of a solution. Club-81, as I said earlier, had KGB curators, one of them had already helped me. I called and managed to get an urgent meeting. For about an hour we strolled with the curator along the boulevard next to the KGB headquarters. I assured him that musicians were extremely friendly towards the USSR, that there was nothing whatsoever political in the whole enterprise, that it was all for the sake of art, music, peace and friendship. He listened very carefully and rather benevolently and finally said: “OK, play your concert, nobody will touch you. But afterwards write a report for us”. Emboldened, I retorted politely but firmly: “Dear sir, that’s not how we work. You know that I’m not going to write you anything”. Miraculously he didn’t insist: “To hell with you, let it be your way”.

The excitement, both on stage and among the audience, was overpowering. After ROVA played their set, they were joined on stage by Kuryokhin, Grebenshchikov, and Valentina Ponomareva, an established and popular Gypsy singer who was at the time performing regularly with Kuryokhin and Aquarium and came from Moscow specifically for the event. Our writer friends probably did not care that much for the unorthodox music, but the spirit was overwhelming. Apart from the concert, there were tons of informal meetings, discussions, and parties. Longtime friendships and collaborations, including a very productive one between Arcady Dragomoshchenko and Lyn Hejinian, lasted for decades: one of the many legacies of Contemporary Music Club. I am proud of them all.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In more details I describe this period in (Kan 2008).
- ² History of Soviet jazz including the Leningrad scene can be found in (Feiertag 2004, 2010).
- ³ Tarasov tells the history of the Ganelin Trio in (Tarasov 1998, 2009, 2021).
- ⁴ More detailed articles about Arkhangelsk in (Kan 2008; Noglik 1985).

- 5 See selected articles from Kvadrat in (Barban 2015).
- 6 More about Kuryokhin see in my monograph (Kan 2021).
- 7 The original samizdat book was published in 2007 (Barban 2007).
- 8 Letov describes his experience in (Letov 2014).
- 9 See more about Popular Mechanics in (Kan 2014).
- 10 Sergey Belichenko describes the Siberian scene in (Belichenko 2005).
- 11 See more detailed analysis of written and unwritten rules of governing culture in late USSR in (Kan 2019).
- 12 See more about money in late Soviet musical underground in (Kan 2017).
- 13 Hans Kumpf describes his musical experience with CMC in (Kumpf 1985).
- 14 Leo Feigin gives his account of Leo Records in (Feigin 2009). Leo Feigin compiled and published the first comprehensive collection of articles and essays on Soviet free jazz scene in (Feigin 1985).
- 15 See detailed history of Club 81 in (Ivanov 2015), Ostanin (2009).

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