

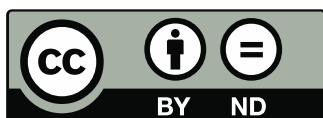
Schriftenreihe des DFG-Graduiertenkollegs „Das Wissen der Künste“  
herausgegeben von Barbara Gronau und Kathrin Peters

## **Das Wissen der Arbeit und das Wissen der Künste**

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# ARBEIT UND KÜNSTLERISCHES WISSEN

SERGEY LETOV

## SCIENTIFIC WORK AND FREE JAZZ IN THE LATE SOVIET ERA: AN AUTO-BIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION

The tradition of combining scientific-technical education, scientific practice, on the one side, and engagement with art, literature, music, on the other, can be traced back in Russia to the pre-revolutionary times. Perhaps the first figure to unite science, arts and humanities in Russia was the physicist, chemist and *littérateur* Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov (1711–1765), author of a molecular-kinetic theory of thermal energy. Another figure was the prominent chemist and microbiologist Alexander Porfiryevich Borodin (1833–1877), who was the author of more than 40 books on chemistry, a professor and academic. He is also well known as a composer of the very important Russian opera *Prince Igor* (premiered in 1890) as well as of the first string quartets and symphonies in Russian music. He also created a multitude of chamber and symphonic works which had a tremendous impact on the development of music. A serious engagement with culture and art by people who were initially trained as chemists was not an exception in the Soviet Union, but was, in fact, rather widespread. Amongst the contemporary cultural practitioners who received an education in chemistry are the composer Vladimir Dashkevich (Moscow Institute of Fine Chemical Technologies)<sup>1</sup>, the film director Vadim Abdrashitov (Moscow Chemical-Technological Institute)<sup>2</sup>, the film director Oscar Nikich (Moscow State University), the poet Bahyt Kinzheev (Moscow State University), the children's book writer Jacob Akim, the dramaturge and screenwriter Valentin Azernikov (Moscow Institute of Fine Chemical Technologies), and the Moscow Conceptualist artist Yuri Leiderman (Moscow Chemical-Technological Institute). The actors Alexander Filippenko and Andrei Myagkov (Leningrad Chemistry-Technology Institute)<sup>3</sup>, the poet Vladimir Kostrov and the writer Vasily Grossman also worked in chemical production.

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1 Editor's note: Moskovskij Institut Tonkoj Khimicheskoy Tekhnologii (MITKhT). In this article the transliteration of Russian follows BSI (British Standards Institution). Exceptions are names of individuals.

2 Editor's note: Moskovskij Khimiko-Tekhnologicheskij Institut imeni D. I. Mendeleeva (MKhTI). Current name: D. Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia (Rossijskij Khimiko-Tekhnologicheskij Institut imeni D. I. Mendeleeva).

3 Editor's note: Current name is Saint Petersburg State Institute of Technology, Technical University (Sankt-Peterburgskij Gosudarstvennyj Tekhnologicheskij Institut).

## Science in the Morning, Humanities in the Afternoon, Arts in the Evening

In Soviet times, higher education was an entry not only to an array of defined forms of knowledge in a narrowly specialised area and to professional skills, but also provided a remarkably wide outlook – a systemic map of the world. For example, the degree programmes offered by the Moscow Institute of Fine Chemical Technologies or the Moscow Chemical-Technological Institute lasted six years, in the course of which the students did not just learn chemistry, physics and mathematics, but invariably also philosophy, history, economics, foreign languages, and the basics of sociology and organisation studies as well. It was for these reasons that there were so many technically educated people in the USSR who were able to combine their occupations in the scientific and technological arena with an activity in art, literature, theatre or music. This supplement was considered not to be a professional but an amateur<sup>4</sup> pursuit. Taking part in amateur artistic activities while studying at the institute, and also later in your career, was encouraged in various ways. The encouragement shown to my colleagues at the All-Soviet Institute of Aviation Materials<sup>5</sup> in Moscow where I worked from 1980 to 1989 can serve as an example. Apart from the fixed salaries paid in the USSR, there were also quarterly bonuses. The amount of the bonus depended on the ‘Socialist Competition’, which was a scoring system for workplace, and, as I would like to emphasise, non-workplace achievements. Instead, these scores were achieved through social activities, including the participation in concerts and other amateur artistic pursuits, such as publishing in the press. The competition was not between individuals, but between collectives. However, the final score took individual accomplishments into account. The amount of the bonus could comprise 30 percent of the salary and more.

Often this scientific and technical education, and the practical work it entailed, provided an escape from some of the limitations posed by specialising in the humanities, which in Soviet times were extremely ideological and politicised. Conversely, ideological control was much weaker in the institutes of higher technical education and in the faculties of natural sciences, and there was less conformism and adaptation required. Young people who chose an education in mathematics, physics or chemistry were informally excused from taking the oath of permanent loyalty to the Communist Party and its Youth League (Komsomol)<sup>6</sup>. Instead of blind adherence to dogma, they were required to show

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4 Editor’s note: From the Russian *samodeyatel’nost’*, which can also be translated as ‘self-activity’.

5 Editor’s note: Vsesoyuznyj Institut Aviatsionnykh Materialov. Current name: Vserossijskij Nauchno-Issledovatel’skij Institut Aviatsionnykh Materialov.

6 Editor’s note: Komsomol is an abbreviation from *Kommunisticheskij Soyuz Molodezhi* (Communist Youth Union).

practical results (for the future). They were given a lot of leeway. You could say that the ‘technicians’ in the USSR had the most freedom and autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to jazz, to a large extent it was received as the music of the ideological foe from the second half of the 1940s onwards. It was considered a form of American cultural imperialism. That is the reason why the interest in jazz was minimal among the professional musicians who graduated from the conservatory with hopes for a career in Soviet culture. However, in the sphere of non-professional musicians, of amateurs, whose professions were engineers, scientists or doctors, the reception of jazz was very different. For many of them jazz started out as a hobby, and became a way of life. In the 1950s jazz was relegated to the marginal world of restaurant life. Those who played jazz in restaurants usually had an intermediary musical training. Restaurant jazz was formally disapproved of in the USSR, but the authorities took no actual measures against it. Therefore, there was a convergence of two social strata in Soviet jazz, two groups of musicians came together: people for whom jazz was a source of easy money and entertainment, and those for whom it was something much bigger than light music. For the latter – the amateur musicians – jazz was a manifestation of a certain liberty, a sense of personal dignity, a breath of fresh air in the monotonous culture of reality, but above all the possibility of free creativity.

The significant aspects of jazz are improvisation and its sensuous, erotic, rhythmic nature, which brings it close to popular musical traditions. At the same time, the fact that it was consigned to restaurants, a trivial, demeaning setting given over solely to amusement, caused some dismay for its Soviet adepts. The emergence of free jazz in some of the countries of the Soviet bloc was bound to remove some of these contradictions. Soviet, as well as Polish and, most excitingly, East German free jazz immediately raised itself above the restaurant-bar aesthetics of ‘what would you like?’ This was a serious, expressive music that was exempt from ideological control. Besides that, free jazz was aesthetically totally incompatible with the comfortable music of the restaurants. In the USSR, irreconcilable contradictions swiftly arose between ‘traditional’ jazz (also referred to as ‘trad jazz’) as mainstream and entertainment-oriented, conformist music, and the free jazz revolutionaries. It could be argued that their freedom was also secured by the fact that they were non-professional musicians, who had another, non-musical source of income (working at the factory or the institute, etc.). As a consequence, they were not materially dependent on the public and its taste. It was with regard to the free jazz avant-garde musicians that trad-jazz players coined the phrases “play away from the cash register”, “play past the money”, referring to the supposed mistakes, or false notes that they heard in free jazz.

At that time, while official composers produced cantatas and oratorios about the Party, Lenin and the Komsomol, and getting prestigious apartments, dachas

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7 Interestingly, even the Soviet Minister of Culture, Ekaterina Alekseevna Furzeva, was a graduate of the Moscow Institute of Fine Chemical Technologies.

and foreign travel in return, the semi-official free jazz musicians in the Soviet bloc countries gradually started to get large audiences.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, the free jazz culture in the Soviet Union and in the West was quite similar. Its main feature was a protest against totalitarian control by those in power. But in the West, this kind of music was marginalised, while in late-Soviet society (or in East Germany) it quickly got a lot of attention. Sergey Kuryokhin's collective Pop-Mechanic was filling halls with audiences of 4,000 to 10,000 people in Leningrad in 1988–1990. The Ganelin Trio (Vyacheslav Ganelin, Vladimir Tarasov and Vladimir Rezitsky; later Vladimir Chekasin) drew full houses in Moscow and Leningrad.

If you take a look at the occupational composition of the musicians and promoters in the free jazz scene in the 1980s in the Soviet Union, this is the picture you get: Vladislav Makarov was trained as an artist and designer; Mikhail Yudenich, Sergei Belichenko and Vyacheslav Gaivoronsky were medics; Efim Barban and Alexander Kan were English teachers; Alexander Kondrashkin was a cinema technician, etc. In other words, they were not musicians and musicologists, preparing all their lives for the role of producing socialist culture – they were no 'ideological warriors'.

My own interest in jazz began in the mid-1970s, when I was still a student at the Moscow Institute of Fine Chemical Technologies (fig. 1). I started going to concerts and listening to records, to the broadcasts of the Voice of America and Polish radio. In 1980, after I finished my course at the Institute, I went to work at the Institute of Aviation Materials as an engineer. That same year I got my first saxophone and learned to play. But I was not starting from scratch. I already had a certain amount of musical training, as I had taken piano lessons in a music school as a child (1965–1971). My music studies were interrupted by my departure for the physics-mathematics boarding school in Novosibirsk (1972–1974). There, scientists were trained to become physicists, mathematicians, chemists, and biologists. But in order to ensure an all-round development of the individuals, the Club of Art Appreciation was organised, in which students would mainly listen to academic music from Johann Sebastian Bach to Gustav Mahler and Dmitri Shostakovich. It was there that I experienced the desire to become a musician, or more precisely, an *amateur musician*, that is to combine work as a chemist with amateur musicianship. As a student at the Moscow Institute of Fine Chemical Technologies, me and some other fellow students got hold of a second-hand German piano, and later on I tried to teach myself various musical instruments, including the saxophone, which I would borrow from the House of Culture located near the factory.

My time at the Institute of Aviation Materials was quite successful. Throughout the time of my employment, from 1980 to January 1989, I authored 15 patents and was even recognised as Best Inventor and Rationaliser in Moscow. Given

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8 Possibly, one of the main preconditions for the great success of free jazz in the late Soviet epoch was that it is primarily an instrumental genre. The state institutions preferred abstract jazz to songs played on guitar, which would frequently have subversive lyrics.



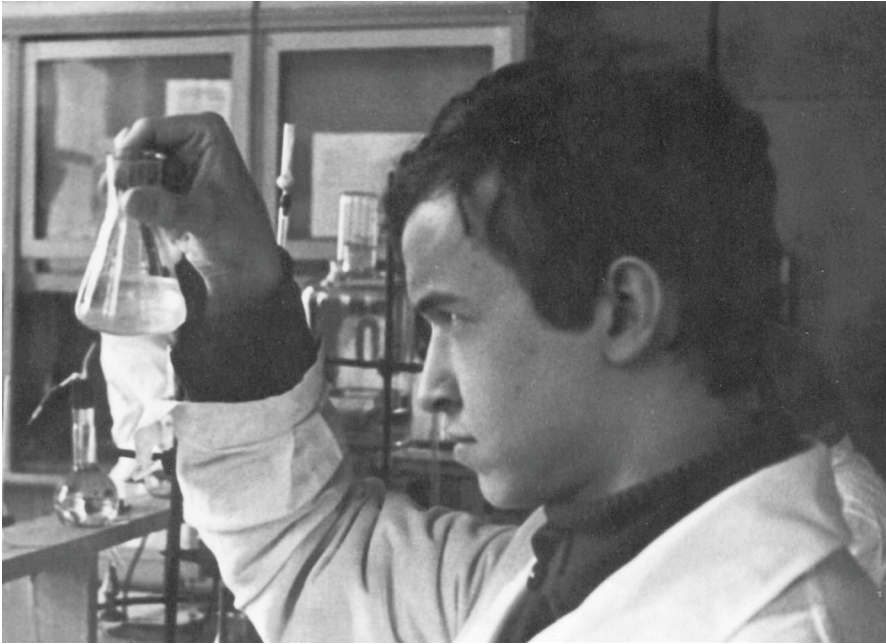


fig. 1: Sergey Letov as a chemistry student, 1975, b/w photograph.  
Source: private archive of the author.

this, I swiftly ascended the career ladder, first being promoted to Senior Engineer, and after that to Managing Engineer. My inventions had a great economic impact, which could be calculated in millions of roubles, which was a considerable quantity in Soviet times. However, the directors of the lab could not raise my salary any higher as I did not have a PhD. The head of the lab where I worked urged me to write and defend a dissertation in chemical technology, in order to employ me as a scientific research fellow. They suggested I enrol in a postgraduate correspondence course.

From 1982, I started to perform at various concerts as an improvisation saxophonist in my free time. My first performance was in the Central Artist's House in Moscow.<sup>9</sup> This concert included pieces from John Cage and the Soviet composers Viktor Yekimovsky and Alexander Raskatov, in a percussion ensemble led by Mark Pekarsky. One of the ensemble participants had written a play, which contained a passage of improvisation on a baritone saxophone. However, the piece was not permitted to be performed in an academic context like this, because the author was not a member of the Composers' Union and the work had not been registered. So the piece was performed unannounced, at the very end of the concert. (The well-known Soviet composer Sofia Gubaidulina was at that concert too.)

<sup>9</sup> Editor's note: Tsentral'nyj Dom Khudozhnika.



fig. 2: Sergey Letov (r.) with Sergey Kuryokhin (l.), 1982, b/w photograph.  
Source: private archive of the author.

Thanks to my employment at the Institute, I had access to scientific libraries, with international literature and microfilms. Also I had lots of free time, which I dedicated not only to science, but also to studying music theory. I was reading books about jazz improvisation and Western contemporary music. The management of the lab knew about my musical activities, and they supported them in any way they could. They organised many research trips for me to Leningrad, where I met the excellent free jazz musicians Sergey Kuryokhin (fig. 2), Vyacheslav Gaivoronsky, Vladimir Volkov, Alexander Kondrashkin, and also the local promoters and critics Efim Barban and Alexander Kan. Furthermore, the heads of partner institutes also supported my concert performances, offering to send me on 'equipment test trips' on days when I had concerts scheduled, for example, to Novosibirsk. In 1984, I enrolled in a postgraduate correspondence course, and was officially offered additional time off for research purposes. Since 1980 I had also been eligible for extra time off to encourage my participation in the neighbourhood-watch team. I took advantage of this additional leave to enrol in a music-training course in Tambov, which I completed with distinction in 1987. I received a diploma as leader of a wind ensemble.

## Sounds for the Actions of the Collective Actions Group

In 1983, I began to take part in the performances of the Moscow Conceptualists. For me, the first action of the Collective Actions group was “*M*” (1983), which took place in Moscow’s countryside on a field near a forest (figs. 3 and 4).<sup>10</sup> I was instructed to remain on a forest clearing and, after hearing a whistle produced by a wooden recorder, to play on one of the instruments that I brought with me from Moscow: oboe, saxophone, cornet, French horn, and, I think, alto saxophone. I had to play until one of the other viewers-participants of the action had found me in the forest, following the sound. When I was meeting the next viewer-participant (they kept coming one after the other), I greeted him or her and offered to go further following another sound, the so-called ‘music on the edges’, which was only audible from the point where I was standing, but not from the field, from where the viewers-participants departed to find me. Almost none of the viewers-participants had seen me before, and my appearance at the action was a surprise for them. The action had the subtitle “General sight and individual view of Collective Actions”. The viewers-participants of the action grouped up on a clearing nearby the ‘silver ball’ and ‘golden wings’ (two large objects made out of foil) and exchanged their impressions. One was saying that he or she saw a musician playing French horn, the other one was saying that the musician played oboe, the third hornet etc. For me as a musician this was an unusual experience – making music for this action was not about music, but first of all about a playful signalling activity, withdrawn from the traditional concert space, of artistic status, and of musical expression; it did not presuppose completeness or perfection.

A very important experience for me was another action by Collective Actions, *Music Within and Outside* (1984).<sup>11</sup> Unlike the action “*M*”, *Music Within and Outside* took place in the streets of Moscow. I took part in the production of a sound to go with the action, which was recorded on a phonogram.<sup>12</sup> My task in the production was to accompany the sounds of the passing trams with musical sounds. To the sound of the tram I added very low sounds, which I was producing on a French horn, with a saxophone mouthpiece. As a result, the recording of the phonogram consisted of environmental sounds and city noises combined

10 Cf. Monastyrski, Andrei (ed.): *Kollektivnye Dejstviya. Pоеzdki za Gorod*, Moscow 1998. Also published and translated online, as *Kollektivnye Dejstviya (Collective Actions): The Descriptions, Photo, Video and Audio of All the Actions*, in: *conceptualism.letov.ru*, Sergey Letov’s online archive, URL: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-29.html> (last access: 12 April 2016).

11 Cf. Monastyrski 1998 (as fn. 10), URL: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-31.html> (last access: 12 April 2016).

12 The phonogram produced for this action can be listened to in: Monastyrski 1998 (as fn. 10) It was also republished recently in: *Sounding The Body Electric: Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957–1984*, exhibition catalogue (Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź), ed. by David Crowley and Daniel Muzyczuk, Łódź 2012.



fig. 3: Collective Actions  
(Igor Makarevich): *Sergey Letov  
at the action "M"*, 1983, colour  
photograph. Source for this and the  
following images: private archive of  
Andrei Monastyrski.



fig. 4: Collective Actions  
(Igor Makarevich): *Group Photograph  
of the Viewers-Participants at the action  
"M"*, 1983, colour photograph.

with a minimal amount of artificial co-sounds. The actual action took place on the following day. Sergei Romashko, a member of Collective Actions, was offered to put on some headphones, to switch on the cassette walkman, and to take a walk around the same place, where we had recorded the phonogram. The action was conceived in a way that for Romashko there would be an ambiguity between the barely perceivable artificial and the environmental sounds – a kind of sound hallucination. At the time, in the mid-1980s, I was not aware of the term Sound Art, but perhaps those were in fact the first Sound Art works made in the USSR. I found it important that this work of Collective Actions was intended only for one listener. The one-off character of this work took itself beyond the traditional, theatrical art and even beyond magic and ritual, insofar as those are oriented towards repetition.

Another particular experience I had in the context of Collective Actions was during the action *Shot* (also in 1984).<sup>13</sup> This action was meant to continue the production of some sound illusions or pseudo-hallucinations. On a freshly ploughed field, long before the audience arrived, two lateral pits were dug out,

<sup>13</sup> Cf. fn. 10, URL: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-32.html> (last access: 12 April 2016).



fig. 5: Collective Actions (photographer unknown): *Group of Viewers at the action Shot*, 1984, colour photograph.

in which two organisers-participants of the action would fit in. As one of the participants, I hid in one pit before the audience arrived, so that they did not see me. One of the organisers, Georgi Kiesewalter, lay down in the pit after the audience's arrival. The audience could not see the pits themselves, because they were situated behind a trench of the ploughed field (fig. 5). Between me and the other organiser, Andrei Monastyrski, a musical dialogue evolved: I responded to his whistles on the recorder by musical phrases of a hornet or tuba, cut out of gigantic dried hogweed. The audience, however, thought that it was Kiesewalter who was producing these sounds. They were seeing an empty ploughed field with the forest in the far, and the responses to the signals were reaching them much faster than they would in reality, coming from the other side of the field. The sound was, as it were, produced above the field.

The audience, however, was late because they had missed a train departing from Moscow and arrived on the field with a delay of two hours. The organisers-participants of the action did not know this. Given that I did not know that the action was delayed, I was expecting signals and was intensely listening to the *silence* for two hours. As a consequence of this mistake (by the way, such and other mistakes are not unusual for the actions of Collective Actions), my percep-



fig. 6: Collective Actions (photographer unknown): *Sergey Letov, Vika Motschalova, Ilya Kabakov, Vladimir Sorokin* (from l. to r.) at the action *Score*, 1985, b/w photograph.



fig. 7: Collective Actions (photographer unknown): *Sergey Letov and Igor Aleynikov* at the action *Jupiter. 4.33.*, 1985, b/w photograph.

tion of time in this situation changed fundamentally.<sup>14</sup> Possibly, my experiences were the main result of the action, just as in the action *Music Within and Outside* was made for one person's experience, but only this time this was unintended.

The experience of Sound Art also had its place in the actions *Score* and *Jupiter. 4.33* (both 1985).<sup>15</sup> In the action *Score* I used electronics, a DIY Ring Modulator for the post-production of the phonogram, which was made for this action (fig. 6). In the action *Jupiter. 4.33* I performed bass clarinet with other participants performing flute and piano, which was accompanied by a recording of music making (fig. 7). Essentially, the musical sounds in *Jupiter. 4.33*, lasting four hours and 33 minutes,<sup>16</sup> were also a kind of Sound Art. In the mid 1980s the possibilities for free jazz concerts within the Moscow artistic life were very limited, and such unusual artistic practices, as Collective Actions' actions, were very attractive for me as a musician. Traditional jazz and academic musicians disapproved of my experiments, whereas the Conceptualist artists offered me their indispensable support.

### Free Jazz after 1984

In 1984 I had my first performance at the Riga Jazz Festival. I was not interested in the Soviet trad jazz, which imitated American entertainment music, and moreover, I was completely ignored by its functionaries. Therefore, most of the possibilities to realise my musical interests were in the in-between spaces of culture: exhibitions of unofficial art, contemporary poetry readings, performances of Conceptualists. The odd concerts outside of this Conceptualist circle took place exclusively in houses of culture, red corners, student accommodations and apartments.

In 1985, I was co-founder of the improvisation trio Tri O, which consisted of the Bolshoi Theatre's French hornist Arkady Shilkloper and the tuba player Arkady Kirichenko. In 1986, our trio caught the eye of the famous theatre and film actor Alexander Filippenko, who undertook legalisation efforts, organising the registration of the band and its musicians who were not certified – Kirichenko and me. It was also around this time I started to make money playing concerts. Until then, most of my performances had been unpaid. We kept getting invited

14 Editor's note: The author described his experience in a report, the commissioning and publishing of which is part of Collective Actions' practice. Cf. Letov, Sergey: "Ob aktsii 'Vystrel'", in: *Monastyrski 1998* (as fn. 10), URL: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Letov-o-Vystrele.html> (last access: 11 May 2016).

15 Cf. Letov 1998 (as fn 14) URL: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-41.html> and <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-37.html> (last access: 12 April 2016). Cf. *Sounds like Silence. John Cage – 4'33" – Silence Today. 1912 – 1952 – 2013*, exhibition catalogue (HMKV Dortmund), ed. by Dieter Daniels and Inke Arns, Leipzig 2012.

16 Editor's note: The title *Jupiter. 4.33* refers to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Symphony no. 41, K. 551 (1788) and John Cage's *4'33"* (1952).

to perform outside of Moscow, and it got harder for me to coordinate these events with my schedule at the Institute. Thus, I had to refuse the participation in several projects: I could not take part in Elem Klimov's film *Come and See* (1985) because the film shoot required a two-month trip to Belarus. I also had to turn down the participation in Bako Sadykov's film in Tajikistan *Smertch* (1988), for which I had recorded the music of Sofia Gubaidulina. Also in 1988, I had to turn down a tour in Sakhalin and Kamchatka with the rock group DDT for the same reason. After my cancellation, they invited another saxophonist to play with them and our collaboration was suspended. In the same year, I was invited to a festival of the Soviet avant-garde in Finland together with Kuryokhin. There were people like German Vinogradov, members of the Moscow Conceptualist group Mukhomor, the Mironenko brothers, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Sven Gundlach, and others. When I tried to get permission for international travel, I was confronted with quite severe problems due to the secretive nature of my scientific work at the Institute. Only after the intervention of Valentina Tereshkova, who was the director of the House of Friendship with the People of Foreign Nations<sup>17</sup> at that time, I was able to get an international passport and travel to a capitalist country to take part in the festival.

### After 1989

The story of the combination of scientific work with the performance practice of a musician could have gone on past 1989 – although probably not for long. The problem was that as a consequence of Perestroika, the development of the project I had been working on over the past eight years was stopped. In 1991, the electricity was cut off at the Institute, because it had not been able to pay the bills. After that, it made no sense to talk about developing any serious projects there. In any case, the combination of science and music was doomed by the 1990s, for me anyway. Actually, my partners in the ensemble Tri O had already confronted me with an ultimatum on New Year's Eve in 1989, "Either it's music with us, or the scientific research", because the ensemble had been forced to cancel tours due to my work at the Institute. I submitted to this blackmail and chose music. I wrote my resignation letter and handed my uncompleted dissertation over to the Head of the Institute. However, the ultimatum turned out to be a bluff. Shilkloper left the ensemble only five months later, in late May 1989. Kirichenko defected while we were on tour in the U. S. at the beginning of May 1991. Fourteen years later, he returned from the U. S. to Russia, not to the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the Institute of Aviation Materials continued to pay fees for my inventions for one year after I had left.

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<sup>17</sup> Editor's note: Dom Druzhby s Narodami Zarubezhnykh Stran refers to the name of a building in Moscow, which housed the organisation Union of Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.



The practice of combining scientific work with an artistic activity, as in my case, was far from unique. But, would it be possible today and/or in other countries? Yes, it would. I would like to mention a contemporary Russian example of a Doctor of Chemistry, Alexei Yuryevich Bobrovsky, who is a lecturer of the Department of Macromolecular Compounds at Moscow State University and a Laureate of the Presidential Award and other government prizes. Bobrovsky plays drums, and he is one of the best young free jazz drummers in Russia. Is such a situation possible abroad? The Japanese free jazz saxophonist Akira Sakata, whose records I used to listen to in the late 1970s and which prompted me to pick up the saxophone myself, is a renowned biologist and the president of the Scientific Society for Research into a specific type of water plankton.<sup>18</sup>

Since 1985 in the United States, and from the 1990s onwards in the rest of the world, it has not been the best time for free jazz and free improvisation music. In line with the drastic reductions in state cultural subsidies everywhere, there has been a certain marginalisation of these genres. Generally, players cannot count on sustaining themselves from the performance of this music. Due to this fact free jazz and free improvisation are mostly practiced as a hobby, a pastime, although now in a different context. Maybe today, electronic music, which does not demand daily rehearsal or cause problems with the neighbours, has to a large extent taken over the function of self-expression in music. On the other hand, people in sedentary jobs need to stretch and move; here, the saxophone or the drums have the advantage over the laptop.

Why did musical improvisation become so widespread among scientists and engineers, people in the technical occupations? Perhaps this is connected to a concept of music and art as free expression rather than craft. In the second half of the 20th century, there were revolutionary approaches to music (and to art more broadly) like those of John Cage, who could be considered a real inventor of music rather than a composer. Cage's aesthetics was a landmark for me, for the Leningrad pianist Kuryokhin, and for the Moscow Conceptualists.

I suppose that the reason why chemists tend to engage in playing music is related to the fact that like music, chemistry is a combination of a finite set of elements. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz already noted that music was the unconscious exercise of the soul in arithmetic.<sup>19</sup> After Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev organised the elements into a periodic system, chemistry acquired a significant congruence with music. Improvisation is nothing but an instantaneous composition. In free improvisation, a person realises sides of their personality different from those of a researcher at a scientific institute: spontaneity, ability to take risks, exhibitionism, and the impulse to behave irrationally. By means of improvisation he or she liberates him- or herself from the excessive over-organisa-

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18 More specifically, the research revolves around the water flea *Mijinko*.

19 Editor's note: The author refers here to a famous quote from Leibniz' letter to Christian Goldbach from 27 April 1712. (Cf. Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm: *Opera Omnia*, vol. 3, Geneva 1768, pp. 437–438.)

tion and alienation of today's society. To a certain extent we can speak of the role of the spontaneous improviser as akin to that of the yogi in Indian culture or the holy fool in Russian Orthodoxy. And this need is not only experienced by the improviser; the 'yogi-holy fool' is a necessity for the whole society.

Musicians who are economically independent can afford to experiment, to follow their desires, to realise their visions of the ideal. For free improvisation and free jazz this is perhaps the only way remaining, given the erosion of the music's currency, prestige and audience. In the late Soviet epoch the conditions for combining non-artistic activity (working in production or a scientific research institute) and an engagement with music, theatre, literature or art in your free time was very beneficial. In retrospect, we can say that in Soviet times work was not as exhausting and intensive, as it became in the post-Soviet times, where work leaves little or no energy for creative pursuits.

In the late Soviet era, the encounter between the free jazz improvisers and a public interested in musical experimentation took place in numerous houses of culture, red corners, and higher education institutions. In the post-Soviet period improvised music found itself shunted almost exclusively to nightclubs, where a recreational, entertainment ambience reigns. Distinct from academic or folkloristic music, which still receives a measure of government support, improvised music has practically lost its habitat and thus a chance to find an audience. In order to have the opportunity to perform, the musician is forced to compromise with pop aesthetics and to combine elements of artistically significant music with pop music, particularly electronic dance music, but also punk and rock. The contemporary free jazz musicians end up spending their time performing soundtracks for silent films and providing the musical accompaniment to theatre plays. The mechanisms of economic coercion in the post-Soviet era have turned out to be more deadly for improvisational music than the ideological coercion of Soviet times.

*Translated by Marina Vishmidt and Marina Gerber.*