

## MIKHAIL CHEKALIN. A Biography

Mikhail Chekalin (born in Moscow at 1959) "certainly, is one of the most radical and innovative synthesists around, not only in Russia but globally" (Audion, 6/93, UK); "Chekalin is now considered one of the top maverick modern composers in Russia" (Zoltan's Progressive Rock Webpage, USA). A composer of symphony and chamber music, keyboardist, artist, he follows along many different lines. Early in his career he made his presence known by becoming as dedicated as they came to the notion of synth keyboard music composer-performer. His taking-up a synthesist-keyboardist profession and his further steps along this line of work concure with the end of the 70s and thus fall at the same time with the burgeoning and growth period of synth music at the worldwide scene. Mikhail Chekalin is known as the only one from among solid craft composers in the USSR, who in his creative pursuance follows the opposite path than the cultural officialdom's way of thinking. One need political immunity to do that; in his case, it was rather political indifference. Besides he is still a man unpardonably young and also way too much of an unorthodox and avant-gardist to flow smoothly into a rigorously conservative mainstream of Soviet contemporary serious music. Still this led to all kinds of public and ideological consequences as the beginnings of his career coincided with Brezhshnev's epoch which tended to be a repressive one, even though in a concealed sort of way. During the Soviet times M. Chekalin having been deprived of a status of officially recognized artist, lacked opportunities and advantages available for those publicly engaged to carry out commissions. The circumstance of Mikhail Chekalin having created fundamental musical forms within strictures of underground (the point being not only official censure but lack of technical facilities as well) was unprecedented. The composer has been ignored by this particular branch of Soviet cultural establishment as is personified by the USSR Composers' Union functionaries. He became a subject of unwelcome interest of KGB instead.

Toward the end of the 80s M. Chekalin turns out to be one of the most productive, genre-versatile, multifaceted electronic music composers not only in Russia but also abroad. In terms of his creative activities the end of the 70s – the early 80s has been marked by the release of some of his works of the period at sound-recording firm "Melodiya" as LP albums Vocalise in Rapide (1987, recordings from the years 1983-'84) and Post-Pop - Non-Pop (1989, recordings from the years 1984-'87). Later on, during 1990-'91 12 LP albums more or less fully embracing the works from 80s have been released at "Melodiya", the Modern Art Gallery "M'Ars" having had contributed to the issue. "M'Ars" key figures (artists: K. Khudyakov, S. Sharov, Yu. Mironov) have acquired their unofficial renown way back in 80s, as "The Twenty Moscow Artists" Group participants. "The Twenty" Group's activities were the most popular of those representing the unofficial Soviet art. The Group's exhibitions were a spectacular event which used to take place each Spring at Malaya Gruzinskaya ulitsa in Moscow downtown within the exhibition spaces of a cluster of graphic artists' studios situated there and have been frequented by quite a roomful of art aficcionados, from 70 up to 90 thousands as an average. Alongside with "The Twenty"s works (painting in oil, other techniques) displayed, the exposition space's unfailling feature were M. Chekalin's "soundscapes". His "absolute of a phonogram", as the composer puts it, constituted an integral part of that genuine Moscow unofficial artistic underground which stood for the artistically valid and professionally competent. "Their joint expositions have been entitled to become the first event in the 20th century's second half national art practice where, side by side with the peinture, the music claimed the ear"

(A. Florkovskaya. "Poruganiye Patsifika, or The Polygenre Forms from the Malaya Gruzinskaya").

On authority of "Audion", via his "Melodiyan" 12 LP albums series M. Chekalin has "taken the art of synth music way beyond it's generic form" (6/93, UK) "He has startled many with his bizarre sonic creations. <...> "From 1979-99 Chekalin has produced a series of albums that are extraordinary to say the least." (Eurorock on the Web, USA).

It'd be no exaggeration to point out that this 12 "Melodiyan" LP albums series seems to be unique as a vivid evidence of a live experiment spanning a whole decade: both judging by its scope and by the synth sound's diversity of the genre attempts, as well as from the point of view of a composer-performer's ways and means of artistic expression within the synth music frame of reference. A whole range of genres: from an inornate rock-piece to major symphony forms, with diversified acoustic sound imitations by which listener's electronic expectations are to be disturbed – to an electronic sound itself as a product of electronic esthetics proper – all of it co-exists as in some kind of an independent keyboard conservatory of a new era Mikhail Chekalin's "Vynil Series" is second to none in the USSR and Russia. It seems appropriate to add that musical compositions out of this Collected Works are renderings by the composer himself, without participation of any other musicians. It was this ability to perform as "a man-orchestra" that has defined his career; it's also typical of M.Chekalin to hold fast to his live manual real time performing ways. There seems to be not that many synth keyboardist from all over the world who could claim for themselves an experience of such a multidimensional richness in the field of synth music. If one were in earnest to try and verify the route taken by electronic music within the scope of music culture of the USSR and Russia of the last three decades, this trend being practically conspicuous by its absence and also constituting a blank in the national musicology up to the current moment, then one is about to discover that this gap is possibly spanned by a body of M. Chekalin's discography comprising more the 30 albums; which evidently makes one safe to assume the composer to be a synth electronic music key figure in the USSR and Russia beginning from way back in the 80s.

In 2000 a project dedicated to the first reprint of some works from the 80s, in complete, original and unabridged version, the legendary "Melodiya" 12 LP Series of Mikhail Chekalin's got under way. In 2001 were released Concerto Grosso # 1 & Concerto Grosso # 2, ( Boheme Music).

"Orchestral, symphonic and modern classical in style, with much use of piano, classical and folk voices, quirky percussion instruments, a lot of echo and effects, and some electronic and musique concrete textures. This all dates from 1989, while the bonus pieces comprise a contemporary fragment of film music using analog synthesizer and water sounds, plus from 1990 the 28-minute 'Dream to Accompaniment with Voice and Symphonic Transformation', a rather serious piece combining elements of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Arvo Pärt, the soundtrack for '2001' and modern classical piano music. Overall this is ['Concerto Grosso # 2'] a challenging and quite demanding release, with much of it sounding like a Klaus Schulze album in his classical operatic mode, though coming from a very, very different direction." - as Mark Jenkins puts it.

"Then he turns towards an even higher plain of weirdness when he begins to ramble formlessly, adding percussives, and more voices, to what comes across as an avant band improvisation. Credit him certainly for destroying your expectations! Subsequently he shifts the mood towards a droning gothic vibe, with aleatoric rumbling and grumbling noises that may induce the listener to want to turn the lights back on <...>. (He) adds vocals in what is a near copy of Pink Floyd 's 'Great Gig in the Sky'. Finally his singing

integrates well with the instrumentation! The effect is stunning and makes perfect musical sense. Then he goes microtonal for an interlude; and at last returns to his favorite mode which is experimental, dissonant, and quick to elicit impatience." (Mike Ezzo, Exposé). "People who are tired of redundant cliches and want to discover something truly unique and special musically must give a listen." (Eurock, 2002, USA, about 'Concerto Grosso 1' & 'Concerto Grosso 2'). This phrase might be extended, as a matter of fact, to each newly released Chekalin's album.

In autumn 2003 2CD set Meditative Music for Prepared Organ (recorded 1979, 1982-83) Vol.1 & 2 (Citadel Records, 2003) followed. This music was characterized as "...an incredible long-lost gem not to be missed!" (New Gibraltar Encyclopedia of Progressive Rock). "Chekalin's fusion of earlier styles and new musical tendencies has to be heard to be appreciated." (Eurock, 2002, USA).

"It is the kind of piece that headphones were made for, as a casual listening doesn't capture every nuance... Chekalin paints his musical landscapes, starscapes, with various textures. For those seeking music that is constantly intriguing, that seems to push the envelope out a little bit further, then explore 'Concerto Grosso # 2.'" (Stephanie Sollow, ProgressiveWorld.net, February 2003, USA).

In 2004 the next 4 CD were released: The Symphony-Phonogram (recorded in 1988) with additional tracks: 'Ritual-Night for Choir and Drums' 1984; 'Lost Psychedelic' 1979 and 'Democracy of Noise' 1989; Green Symphony 1987 with 'Borderline State' 1988 and bonus track 'Psychedelic Vocalize' 1980; Between Spring and Autumn by Stealth 1986 with 'Concerto for Piano, Synthesizer and Voice' 1993. The fourth CD presents A Pagan Suite, recorded at later date in 1990 and previously unreleased.

"Mikhail Chekalin is frequently compared with Klaus Schulze, and on the surface it's not a bad comparison. <...> This music really lies in between Schulze or early Tangerine Dream and the more Classical Electronic realms of Morton Subotnik or the non-melodic early works of Wendy Carlos." (Fred Trafton, New Gibraltar Encyclopedia of Progressive Rock, Updated 7/12/02).

In 1993 some of this Chekalin's works were issued by Erdenklang Musikverlag (Germany) as solo album Night Pulsation. "This is space music steeped in orchestral grandeur, electronic eclecticism and vocal sensuality. Chekalin is a sonic sorcerer who summons forth the spirits of his Russian heritage and impregnates them with cosmic emotion. Classical influences of Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Rachmaninov, as well as folk melodies and eastern orthodox choral passages, give this music an appealing aura of epic drama without slipping into pretension. The interplay between electronics and percussion is filled with excitement and originality. Chekalin's voice is sometimes reminiscent of Peter Gabriel's vocal work on the 'Passion' soundtrack." (Heartbeats, Summer 1993, USA).

"The synth music of 'Night Pulsation' teems with such excitement, vitality and imagination that it invites no comparisons to either the Berlin School, the US scene or any other tactical movement that currently exists. The album is, in short, a highly charismatic and original work... Indeed, Chekalin's situation is peculiarly ironic – although having to work in an environment long uncondusive to experimentation and the searching for new methods, it is that very insulation that has kept him an entity unto himself, unblemished by what has come before, undamaged by any pre-conceived ideas. Frought with aural drama,

cataclysmic in spots and cathartic in others, 'Night Pulsation' is a true work of art." (Darren Bergstein, i/e, Summer 1993, USA). "Chekalin is perhaps the leading artist from Russia in terms of cosmic synthesizer sound." (Eurock, 5/93, USA).

In 1991 a compilation of East European electronic music Looking East - Electronic East ("Erdenklang", Germany) featuring two compositions by M. Chekalin has been issued. It was also Chekalin acting as an assistant producer to Ulrich Rützel of "Erdenklang", who had recommended his craft-brothers and compatriots (Edward Artemiev, Sven Grünberg, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Lepo Sumera, Vladimir Martynov, Peeter Vähi, Anton Batagov) for this foreign world-wide edition. (In the meantime Estonia has acquired a State organization of it's own. For the first time in the world's history of sound-recording this document putting forth Russian electronic music at an international electronic music scene has been entered into it's annals. (Prior to that edition there wasn't any foreign one featuring whosesoever electronic works from Russia.)

In 90s Chekalin doesn't occupy himself solely with electronic music composing; as for instance he produces Probability Symphony in the Style of Jazz, recorded with jazz trio in 1994, issued later at Leo Records, UK (Golden Years of the New Jazz series) where according to Barry Witherden there is "...much gripping improv and post-modern chamber music" (Jazz Review, 2002, UK).

"To describe the reclusive Mikhail Chekalin as Russia's Jean-Michel Jarre would be doing him (Chekalin) a disservice, but with a discography of over forty solo albums of cosmic synth music to his name, Chekalin's fame has managed to spread far beyond Moscow, where he chooses to work alone... 'Probability Symphony in the Style of Jazz' was apparently cut live without any prior rehearsal or discussion, and is an amazing (if at time exasperating) sixty-five minute journey into the no-man's land between musical genres. In short, it sounds like nothing else you've ever heard - too odd and disjointed to space out to, but far too scattered and blurred to appeal to those expecting a Russian Return to Forever, yet fascinating enough to make this listener at least want to search out more work by this obscure keyboard wizard." (Dan Warburton, Signal to Noise, March 2002, USA).

"It's a labyrinth lasting 65 minutes, anchored by the elaborate sonic landscapes Chekalin weaves from his synthesizer. The feeling of infinite space and Chekalin's scorched textures are challenged by a rhythmic bumpiness and constant asides." (Philip Clark, The Wire, 2002, UK). "This music is what we used to call 'progressive' before the name got misappropriated by Yes, Pink Floyd <...> this is music to stir the blood." (Duncan Heining, Jazzwise, May 2002, UK).

Chekalin also composes for symphony orchestra. 'Black Square' (performed by Grand Symphony Orchestra of St. Petersburg's Philharmonic Society, May 2,1997) and chamber music cycle Last Seasons (CCn'C Records, 2001, Germany) "...timeless avant-garde striving for the essence of life and music <...> a powerful stream proceeding from Prokofiev, say, to Pärt, in the mystical tradition of Scriabin, Stravinsky, Shostakovich..." (Christopher Salvesen, CCn'C Records Webpage, 2001, Germany).

"Dedicating this work to Malevich, I refer myself to the beginning of the century, and I sought to catch an image of my own end of the century. The focal point is born of tension between the two poles: beginning - end, past - present, history - personal story, modern -

post-modern." – in Mikhail Chekalin's phrasing as concerns the 'Black Square' composition. "Have I heard anything else like this? Never. This music could have come out of Shostakovich or Ives, if they had lived long enough to get hold of an orchestra, a few samplers and a computer." (Zoltans Progressive Rock WebPage, USA).

For Russian scene M. Chekalin was the founder of ambient. He had created sound ambience of 'Twenty Moscow Artists' famous expositions at Malaya Grouzinskaya in the 80s.

"...the postmodern defined its grounds as the liberty of up-and-down sliding along the time axis, having disposed of an hierarchy of "high" and "low", proclaiming a free unattached hovering over and about art languages – genre, aspectual, stylistic. During the 70s – the beginning of the 80s in the USSR artists most intensely engaged in the explorings of this kind were those belonging to Malaya Gruzinskaya circle. With them there was present a component essential for an art work of postmodern epoch to exist – which was audience. Every one of the unofficial artists' exhibitions has been attended by 70 – 90 thousands of spectators in the course of three weeks. The public has been enormously taken with the event. <...>

[M. Chekalin's] attitude towards a musical composition as a texture canvas: a polystylistic, heteromorphic, eclectic entity, both elitist and popular, was in many respects identical with a comprehension of art with artists-"men of the seventies".

M. Chekalin's polygenre music "which blends within itself classic music, jazz, free jazz, rock- and psychedelic music", "with its many-layered texture sound and its elaborated structure, quasi-architectural from its well-ordered proportion's point of view", "which combines classic symphony music, jazz, progressive rock and art-rock [his music] represented an equivalent in sound to the artists-men of the 70s' polystylism, to their associativity expansion, their metaphorism coming across as a plastic metamorphosis" (A. Florkovskaya. "Poruganiye Patsifika, or...")

There was a great clash between the level of avant-garde music-making, the very scope of it, to match an emergent complexity of a second (alternative) conservatoire and those subterranean ways of underground existence, by no means as desirable as this tends to be described in retrospect, where an art of new music of Russia's has been pursued through the last two decades of the 20th century.

In the early 80s, after his prior artistic explorations of so called serious music both classic and modern, as well as new music originating within the bosom of rock culture or free jazz improvisational scene, having interpreted music languages in a variety of aspects, the composer had his own syntax articulated as eclectic philharmonic style (according to the "Erdenklang" Catalogue learned expertise). In this way Mikhail Chekalin laid foundations for "philharmonic new age", having redefined the very notion of electronic music-making as a mode of mentation, a way of mastering the whole multi-layer complexity of a score along its "vertical axis". Thus also the divorce of electronic music notion from the vulnerable position of a technically based art (in case of electronic music as a separately defined genre) has been achieved.

M. Chekalin created the main body of his discography in the circumstances when any sound recording activities unsanctioned from above have been considered illegal hence punishable by law and besides such activities were rendered virtually impossible in view of the State 'Melodiya Records' Firm monopolistic dominion. Thanks to his "absolut of a

phonogram" maverick concept the composer succeeded in originating an entire epoch and bridging a genre gap in national sound-recording history. While making his appearance upon an worldwide musical scene M. Chekalin proved to be as "undamaged by pre-conceived ideas" and "an entity unto himself" "that it invites no comparisons to either the Berlin School, the US scene or any other tactical movement that currently exists", as D. Bergstein puts it (Eurock, '93); thus making up for Russia's absence within the international electronic music frame of reference.

While styling "Melodiyan" LP Series art-covers some reproductions of 'Twenty Moscow Artists' have been made use of. That original design has been partly remade while preparing the reprint edition in CD format. The renewed art design included genuine slides featuring some fragments of audio-visual performances held on the basis of "Electronic Music and Light Graphic Dynamics Experimental Studio" (with M. Chekalin as its founding director), "the immediate successor to the Scriabin studio" (Keyboard, June 1988) created by Mikhail & Dmitry Chekalin and S. Dorokhin in 1978; the Studio survived up till 1992. That basement of no mean renown at number 5 Moskvín street used to be haunted by intellectuals of every walk of life: from students to theatre producers, artists and psychotherapists. Physicist Dmitry Chekalin and industrial artist Sergei Dorokhin built unique colour organ of their own design which gives Mikhail's music "a Kandinsky-style line and colour arrangement". This period proved to be of much account in Mikhail Chekalin's creative field: his Electronic Music and Light Graphic Dynamics Experimental Studio actually anticipated a futuristic art form of Laserium (laser show).

Making use of Light Graphics Studio's specially produced unique projection equipment M. Chekalin with his associates puts forth audiovisual performances upon many a stage of Moscow. He gets his full share of difficulties and absurdities of the epoch: beginning with a basement-style existence of metropolitan artistic underground with militiamen's calls and further interrogations at KGB even to hitting the scene at a most prestigious places, great concert halls or recitals held at Craft-Unions' Houses (Artists' House or Scientists' House) or Moscow Planetarium. During the late 70s – early 80s The Moscow Youth's Palace (MDM), The Art Workers' Central House, The Architects' House, to name but a few, featured as a scene of M. Chekalin's Audio-Vision performance.

This same paradoxicality seems to account for the curious fact that his semiunderground existence notwithstanding, every now and then, M. Chekalin is offered commissions to create music for TV, cinema and theatre productions realized by well-known producers and film-makers of Moscow (and not only of Moscow, though).

Coming back to Chekalin's biography, the fact, that he started to compose in 1973, should be mentioned. He began his education traditionally – at 10 years he entered music school, then music college and after graduating from it, he entered the Institute named after the Gnesins. During all this period Mikhail was occupied with playing the piano, chorus conducting and composing as well; he acquired an extensive experience in chorus singing as he had to master a chorus repertoire of a wide variety: from Renaissance music to contemporary composers. He also had to perform all kinds of piano music and to compose for other performers. Mikhail Chekalin was a regular concert performer, in unofficially arranged concerts, first of all, playing his own piano music or improvising in various styles from avant-garde to rock-opera.

However, towards the end of the 70s, a smooth enough progress of his career has been

interrupted by "art experts in plain clothes"; he has been cast out of the academic precincts "for political indifference and propaganda of alien musical culture", that is to say, because of Mikhail Chekalin being much taken with Ives, Bartok, Stravinsky, Lutoslavsky... not to mention other trends of new music, burgeoning within the bosom of rock culture or free jazz improvisational scene. From now on being all on his own with his creative search M. Chekalin makes the professional scene. Having been stripped of any career opportunity along the formal lines of so called serious music, he perseveres at his artistic explorations within the informal milieu (by which fact M. Chekalin sets a paradoxical precedent for academic underground ). At the same time he is engaged as keyboardist and arranger in many pop- or rock-bands of different kinds, "The Samotsvety" Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble is the best-known among them at Soviet popular music scene of the period (1978). As for his own sound-recordings he is forced by the circumstances to manage it in semiclandestine.

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And at last in 1982 "having made it his aesthetic, social and political concept not to conform, mix or collaborate with anyone else" (The Wire, 2002, UK) M. Chekalin is now completely immersed in his independent electronic experiment "bricking himself up in his studio" (Improjazz, Avril 2002). As Keyboard, a review sacred to keyboarders, states as early as 1991, "Melodia Records and Mikhail Chekalin don't get along. The 32-year old synthesist never bought the Soviet version of the corporate line; though the monopolistic lable produced his first two albums, 'Vocalise in Rapido' and 'Post-Pop – Non-Pop', he refused to record in their state-owned facilities. Now he has taken a further step toward artistic self-sufficiency by arranging with Moscow's avant-garde M'Arts Art Gallery to release a set of 12 albums of original music..."

The whole point being that it's a Soviet underground seen by a Westerner's eyes and complying with the Western notion of a self-made man. And though Soviet version of the same implied also refusals of another and harsher sort, the fact remains: M. Chekalin has, indeed, made himself his own man. His independent electronic experiment which coincided with the burgeoning of electronic music in the West, as has been mentioned above, established the composer's reputation for being "one of the most radical and innovative synthesists around, not only in Russia but globally" (Audion, 1993, Great Britain) "whose pioneering work breaking new musical ground" (Billboard, 1990) has, in particular, laid foundations for philharmonic new age. Thus the experiment, some 25 years later, is safe to establish artistically as a fait accompli.

Overall, the body of M. Chekalin creative work being largely accomplished towards the end of the 90s, his whole discography stock of more than 30 albums constitutes a presence apart in the national repertory. Along with released works an amount of experimentative recordings, quite unique by their nature, there exists in store, as well as a dozen or so of unreleased albums of splendid music recently created and heard only by the few of the inner circle.

In the 80s Mikhail Chekalin creates music for play production and film-making. "The Little One" (a dramatization of a SF novel by cult-figures of Russia's SF Boris and Arkady Strugatskys at Central Children's Theatre, Moscow, 1984) is not only the first stage production of a Science Fiction piece at a Soviet scene, but as regards the mounting it's the first demonstration of an audiovisual laser scenic design approach authored by the composer himself.

It seems fit to mention "The Archaeology" by famous A. Shepenko, MKhAT production (1990) which was entitled to acquire a status of a significant for the generation of the 80s. "The Stone Age Detective Story" by A. Volodin was staged by A. Efros (1985) at Teatr Na Maloy Bronnoy ("The Theatre at M. Bronnaya Street"). "Before the Third Cock's Crow Comes" at The Moscow Theatre of Mimance one of the very first play productions after V. Shukshin was realized as early as 1982.

There were also soundtracks for feature films ("Mosfilm" Studio, "Belorusfilm" Studio, "Central TV" Studio), for animation films and TV documentaries, popular science films and educational programs. During the 90s M. Chekalin's music features as all but constant background to the TV "burning points" newsreels.

M. Chekalin also writes electronic music for absolutely unpredicted occasions, as for example, music for moving-for-health exercises' sets for children (issued in "The Kolobok" Magazine ["A Little Dough-Ball", a Russian fairy-tale's personage, notorious for its agility] in flexible disc format); break dance music for the degree work at the MKhAT School; he contributed music part to the music psychotherapy program designed at the Neurosis Clinic of Z.P. Soloviev, etc.

Among all these applied forms of music-making "upon occasion" there were some commissions of real interest engaging quality, as for instance his occupying himself with choreographic productions. There were few attempts at stage-producing a ballet, in company with Leningrad ballet-master B. Eifman in particular. Their combined efforts blossomed out in the first Soviet ice-ballet Faust XX Century (under the directorship of I. Bobrin at his "Ice Theatre"). The ice-ballet has toured all over the world as Ice Theatre went on their numerous tours and was a serious success.

The composer M. Chekalin is featured in several documentaries (the late 80s – the early 90s) as for instance "An Absolute Solo" (Documentary Central Studio) or "An Introduction into Intuition" (Central TV of Russia) as well as in quite a few TV projects: "A Music Not For All and Sundry", "Under the Pi Sign", to name but a few.

With all this variety of participation in different areas of artistic life, the creative image of the author, his true genuine significance in musical culture of 80s and 90s still remains behind the huge part of his compositions that couldn't get in touch with external traditional forms of life (performances, rock or academic concerts).

The point is that Chekalin's music - are phonograms i.e. the records, which exist as the only form of composing and performing by the author. And like the writer's way to the reader is only through the book, that kind of composing style is addressed to recording companies, by means of which Chekalin's music only could get in touch with the listeners.