



Leon Theremin, from his KGB file, 1939

### Sound In Z

Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France

There are revolutions still to be discovered. While visiting Jeremy Deller's exhibition *From One Revolution To Another* at the Palais De Tokyo, I was not expecting to find a whole area dedicated to early 20th century sound experiments of the Russian avant garde. Yet *Sound In Z*, the section curated by Matt Price and Andreï Smirnov upon invitation by Deller, sheds new light on a period when the Soviet state sought to establish a close relationship between its political agenda and the creative process. Prokofiev fled the country after the People's Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, told him, "You are revolutionary in music as we are revolutionaries in life – we should work together." But for others such proclamations were a call to arms. Revolutionary composer and theorist Arsenij Avraamov provocatively proposed to burn all pianos, an act that would have paved the way for his own experiments in microtonality and ultrachromatic music.

Avraamov was one of the key figures of this period. The little that we know of him is due primarily to the celebrated (but only recently rediscovered) *Symphony Of Sirens*. This performance, held in the port city of Baku in 1922, used a number of different choirs located around the city (which spectators could join with), as well as foghorns from the Soviet Caspian flotilla, pistols and artillery guns, hydroplanes and all the area's factory sirens. Avraamov conducted this expanded orchestra from the top of a tower built for the occasion, replacing the conductor's baton with flags and pistols. Not satisfied, he dreamt of blanketing entire areas with sound by installing electroacoustic systems in aeroplanes, in order to conduct an 'air symphony' from the skies of Moscow. Yet his topographical acoustics projects remained unrealised, perhaps because they were more

in tune with the utopias of constructivist architects like Ivan Leonidov and Georgy Krutikov, rather than the more academic studies of his colleagues.

The material on display in *Sound In Z* comes from the archive of the Theremin Centre in Moscow, and the intriguing story of Leon Theremin further demonstrates the strong tie between scientific ingenuity and artistic vision in this period. In addition to inventing instruments capable of materialising the synaesthetic and tactile vision of music, Theremin also developed listening devices for the KGB. *Sound In Z* brings together documentation on instruments like the terpsitone, the theremin, the rythmicon and the microtonal harmonium, as well as featuring his wireless device mounted under the pedals of pianos in concert halls, which required the collaboration of some of the best known pianists of the era.

The so-called Generation Z (the letter Z emblematic of the era and the symbol of energy), represented here with documents, photographs, musical scores, drawings and videos, also included the first sound films of Mikhail Tsekhanovsky; the graphical and ornamental sound of the group Multzvuk; the performer-less music of Evgeny Sholpo; the meticulous work of Nikolai Voinov based on the codification of paper cut-outs into sound. And, finally, the syntones of the inventor and acoustician Boris Yankovsky, who wanted to create a table of sounds inspired by Mendeleev's periodic table of elements. Yankovsky carried out some of the most innovative research of the era, introducing the techniques of spectral analysis and synthesis of sound, similar to today's digital processes of cross-synthesis and phase vocoder.

*Sound In Z* recovers a culturally rich historical period from the oblivion into which it had been condemned in later years, when the Soviet state turned out the lights.

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