Farewell Prometheus Readings: Light-Music in the Former Soviet Union
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tual reality and interface design. Intu-
ively, we know there is a lot more than
just a linear reading of words to get in-
formation. We don’t understand it and
don’t have languages for it yet. It’s sur-
prising how little research has focused
on the language of the body, which can
convey so much more than any words.

**BB:** One of our UCLA graduate stu-
dents took a camera and started off
across the street from a bus stop. When
one student came to wait for the bus,
he stood right there in the center; an-
other student came and they almost di-
vided the space equally. The more
people came—every time someone
came to this bus stop, they were equally
spacings themselves. And from a bird’s-
eye view, the people who came would
always automatically space themselves.
He did a visual essay on different places
where people put themselves like that,
where he could document it . . . and it
was like how Fred Astaire has this little
tap . . . It was a graphic pattern.

**RA:** And then you find that in different
cultures people space themselves differ-
ently . . .

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**Farewell Prometheus Readings:**

**Light-Music in the Former Soviet Union**

**Bulat M. Galeyev**

For 25 years, seminars, conferences and
festivals centering around “light-mu-
sic”—an art form that integrates musi-
cal composition and the creative use of
light—were held in Kazan, drawing par-
ticipants from the entire former Soviet
Union. In the 1980s, these conferences
were named “Prometheus Readings” af-
ter Scriabin’s *Prometheus*, an influential
score that united light and music.

The jubilee tenth anniversary of the
Prometheus Readings convened in April
1992, with “Light-Music in the Theater”
as its theme. As usual, representatives
from the entire Soviet Union planned to
attend, so when the Union disintegrated
the convention became an international
one. Several early syntheses of light and
music in onstage performance—Rimsky-
Korsakov’s *Mlada*, Kandinsky’s *Yellow
Light* and Schoenberg’s *Lucky Hand—
were discussed. Reports were given on
Barranov-Rossine’s experiments with
optophony (a term he coined to refer to
light-music), which he performed in the
1920s in the Bolshoi Theater and in V.
Meyerhold’s theater. The use of music
scenography in the chamber theater of
A. Tairov was discussed. Among the re-
ports on modern experiments were dis-
cussions of “laseriums”—modern
light-musical performances held under
the “sky” of planetariums—and of a new
theater company called “Lanterna
Magica.”

A concert program featured light-
musicians from Kharkov, laser exper-
iments conducted by Kazaners and
audiovisual compositions based on inves-
tigations that originated in the
former electronic music studio at the
Scriabin Museum in Moscow. There was
also a video presentation featuring the
work of foreign colleagues active in the
arts, sciences and technology.

The Prometheus studio in Kazan, or-
ganizer of the Readings, announced
that it would no longer be possible to
hold the conventions on a free-of-
charge basis; thus, the 1992 convention
was both a jubilee and a farewell.

During the final years of the
Prometheus Readings, the scope of the
conferences had expanded beyond
light music to include other forms of
experimental art. Artists, producers,
cinematographers and engineers from
many towns in the former USSR took
part in conferences. Academic special-
ists in aesthetics and the psychology of
art presented papers, while artists pre-

tected light-musical works including
films, electronic music, kinetic art,
computer animation, light architecture,
laser art, holography and spatial mu-

sin—short, any modern genre involv-
ing art, science and technology fell
within the range of the Readings.

Perhaps the end of the Prometheus
Readings also marks the end of a fierce
and desperate 30-year process of estab-
lishing a postwar Soviet school of mod-
ern art. Beginning with the “thaw” after
Stalin’s death, this process was initiated
in hopes of continuing and developing
the creativity of the pre- and early post-
revolutionary years, reviving the work
of artists such as Scriabin, Ciurlionis,
Kandinsky, Tatlin, Theremin and
Eisenstein. In the 1960s, a number of
creative groups with “synthetic” agenda
swung in on the wave of social reform,
such as the Color-Music group at the
Scientific Research Institute of Auto-

cmatics and Telemechanics of the USSR
Academy of Science, the Prometheus
studio in Kazan, the Moscow *Dvainiye
(Movement) group, the SRBs (student
research bureaus) at Moscow Aircraft
Institute and at Ural University, the
Kharkov studio of dynamic painting,
the electronic music studio at the
Scriabin Museum in Moscow, the *Poisk
(Search) SRB* at Valdimir Polytechnical
Institute, the group associated with the
light-music hall at Moscow University,
the Ciurlionis Club in Odessa, the
group involved with a laser theater in
Uzhgorod and light-music studios in
Chkalovsk, Alma-Ata and Minsk.

Because not all of these groups could
endure Brezhnev’s epoch of stagnation.
Nevertheless, Scriabin’s ideas have
slowly filtered through the artistic life
of this country.

Having survived intact, the
Prometheus studio can state that the
seminars, conferences and festivals it
sponsored in Kazan—as well as the
studio’s involvement in the develop-
ment of space art—have played a role
in modern art, science and culture as a
whole. During a period of notorious
hostility to abstract art in the Soviet
Union, our studio was probably the
only place in the country where one
could discuss the work of the various
above-mentioned artists, as well as fig-
ures such as Xenakis and Schoeffler.
Respon-ding to the many who lived in
constant anticipation of future festivi-

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**Art/Science Forum** 351
ties was also a business in itself. A total of 25,000 questionnaires were sent to members of every creative union in the country, and the thousands of letters sent in response were answered by members of the Prometheus studio. This kind of activity promoted the creation of an invisible college united by common interests and aims.

Collections of materials from these meetings in Kazan have been compiled to document this incomprehensible but excellent time—a time when intelligent approaches to an art of the future were realized in conditions of pervasive apathy. Even now, the Prometheus studio continues to encourage experimentation in the midst of unfavorable new thinking conditions. It appears that the advent of long-awaited freedoms in our country has resulted in the celebration of a kind of pornography of the spirit, a capitalism for which world harmony is no more than an annoying obstacle blocking the way to the warm shelter of a cave whose only light is the flicker of a videocassette recorder. This obliviousness has become a symbol of cultural well-being for the average person. It seems that we have overcome any sense of shame at our own ignorance and are now proud of our lack of interest in conquering the sky. It is hard to imagine the fate of new art in this country. One thing is clear: its objective inevitability. No matter what the conditions, new art will demonstrate its worth through whatever forms and means it can find.

Light-music is burdened by heavy and expensive technology, and will probably not survive as a viable genre in a free-market economy. A unique light-music hall in the Kazan Youth Center has already been voted out of existence by young businessmen from the former Comsomol (Young Communist League). The musical light-painting studio in Kharkov is dying. Members of the Uzhgorod laser theater have yielded to pressure and their hall has been converted into a video archive. But life has not stopped on the planet and the art of lighting sounds will continue to develop. We are now looking to what those who succeed us will do as they proceed along a different path—that of capitalism.