

## CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN

Nikolai Girshevich Kapustin was born in 1937 in Gorlovka in the Ukraine. He graduated in 1961 from the Moscow Conservatory, where he was a student of the famed pianist Alexander Goldenweiser (1875-1961). At the same time that he was immersed in classical literature, he began experimenting with jazz, making his debut at the Sixth International Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957 with his Concerto for piano and jazz orchestra, which is deemed his Opus One. After completing his studies, he served as pianist and arranger with Oleg Lundstrem's Symphony Orchestra of Light Music (1961–1972), the Television and Radio Light Orchestra of Vadim Lyudvikovsky (1972–1977), and The State Cinematography Symphony Orchestra (1977–1984).<sup>1</sup>

Kapustin's focus as a composer has always been a combination of jazz style fused with classical form, putting his work firmly in what was deemed "Third Stream" music by Gunther Schuller in 1957. He has composed works for large ensembles, including many concertos—for orchestra, for wind and string instruments, and six for piano. Chamber music includes duos, trios and larger ensembles of strings and winds with piano. Because he is an accomplished pianist, it is perhaps not surprising that Kapustin's output for solo piano is large, including seventeen sonatas, the set of *Twenty-Four Preludes*, a set of *Preludes and Fugues* in all 24 keys, and many other collections including suites, etudes, and impromptus. His opus numbers now top 130.

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<sup>1</sup> A performance video of the *Toccata*, Op. 8 featuring Mr. Kapustin with Oleg Lundstrem is available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUYiD7VGBXY>>. Please note that this spelling is used in some references, including YouTube; others use the alternate spelling Lundstrom.

One might well ask how a young man living in the Soviet Union of the 1950s absorbed the influences of contemporary jazz performers so authentically. Though the Soviet regime took an antagonistic view of jazz in the early 1950s, Khrushchev's reforms created a considerably more comfortable climate for jazz by the end of the decade. Willis Conover's Radio Free Europe programs gave Russian jazz enthusiasts an opportunity to hear contemporary trends.<sup>2</sup>

While Kapustin's interests were certainly not the norm for the Moscow Conservatory, the fact that his music contains no improvisation and blends classical and jazz influences seems to have kept it safe from censure. As Kapustin explains, "I was entirely free; no problems. My music wasn't avant-garde."<sup>3</sup> Both Kapustin and his experience with the Lundstrem group exemplify the hybrid nature of their endeavors. Judging from the video clips available on YouTube, Lundstrem's music was presented in a manner suited to its pedigree; though there were sections of hard-swinging jazz, they looked and acted more like a classical orchestra than a jazz band. Black tie and tails and a classical manner of conducting created a familiar presentation that was both non-confrontational and sophisticated.

Though Kapustin studied with Goldenweiser, apparently the association was more cordial than constructive. Speaking of Goldenweiser, Kapustin said "He was a very interesting person—he remembered Rachmaninov and Medtner, so it was very interesting to speak with him. But as a teacher he gave me nothing, because he was very old—he

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Logan, "The Development of Jazz in the Former Soviet Union: An Interview with Victor Lebev," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (Autumn, 1992): 229-230.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Anderson, "Nikolai Kapustin, Russian Composer of Classical Jazz," *Fanfare* Sep-Oct 2000: 96.

was already 81.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, it was Kapustin’s previous teacher whom he credits with advancing his skills. “I had another teacher, a great teacher, but nobody knows about him—Avrelian Rubakh. He was a student of Blumenfeld.”<sup>5</sup>

There is also an interesting link between Rubakh and the man who is considered Russia’s first jazz pianist, Alexander Tsfasman (1906-1971). Both Rubakh and Tsfasman studied with Felix Blumenfeld (1863-1931), and in the 1960s Tsfasman became a mentor to Kapustin. “We pianists liked Tsfasman for his elegance and easy-going style and his perfect finger technique...”<sup>6</sup> Also, Blumenfeld, Tsfasman, and Kapustin are all Ukrainian.

Though his early experiences seemed to indicate a career as a virtuoso classical pianist, his path changed in his early twenties. “... at 20, 21, 22, I understood that jazz was very important. And I didn’t like performing; composing was more interesting.”<sup>7</sup> A reserved and apprehensive interviewee, Kapustin’s rare interviews have supplied only limited information about his background. When asked in 2000 about his influences, he mentioned just one: Oscar Peterson, “He’s No. 1 for me.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson, 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>6</sup> Mann, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Smith, “Bridging the Divide,” *International Piano Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 13, (Autumn, 2000), 55.