



MILEN KIROV

Biography

If anyone was born to improvise, it was **Milen Kirov**. Part of a distinguished musical family in his native Bulgaria, he learned to think fast as a child pianist when accompanying his father, a master of the *gadulka* (an upright fiddle), and friends in his home.

“Soloists in traditional Bulgarian music change tempos and keys suddenly and in unpredictable ways,” says Kirov. “They love odd meters and virtuosic melodies. You have to be able to follow them.”

He doesn’t have to deal with group pressure playing solo piano, as he does on his dazzling new album, *Spatium*. But there is no falling off in intensity in his efforts to blend different styles of music into one unified whole.

“My goal is to find the meeting point of three traditions—Western classical music, American jazz and blues, and Bulgarian traditional music,” says Kirov. “There is no higher compliment for me than to be told these sounds merge together seamlessly in my playing.”

Based in Los Angeles, where he is Associate Professor of Piano, Composition and Theory at Los Angeles City College, Kirov recorded *Spatium* in the relatively new, acoustically pristine Penderecki Hall in Radom, Poland. (Named after the famous Polish conductor and composer, Krzysztof Penderecki, it opened in 2010.)

The idea to record the album there came from Kirov’s producer, **Ivo Varbanov**, co-founder and co-artistic director of the London-based Independent Creative Sound and Music (ICSM) label. A prominent concert pianist himself, he was impressed by two pieces Kirov had recorded and was determined to capture his charismatic, resounding playing in the most ideal setting.

“He wanted to do the recording not in a conventional jazz way, but in a big hall with natural acoustics,” says Kirov. “That appealed to me.” And why wouldn’t it? One of Kirov’s heroes, **Keith Jarrett**, recorded his groundbreaking solo piano classic, *The Köln Concert*, in an opera house.

“Hearing Jarrett improvise at the piano, playing whatever came to mind, for an entire performance, had a big impact on me,” he says. “I had been improvising at home ever since I could remember, but Keith showed me that it is okay to present this type of spur-of-the-moment playing for an entire concert.”

While the music on his two solo piano EPs, *Broken* (2005) and *Bulgarian Suite No. 1* (2012), employs jazz structures with written and improvised sections, and through-composed classical form and contrapuntal writing, Milen’s latest solo album is his first official recording to include completely improvised tracks.

Spatium, an album of propulsive power and tender lyricism, is an experiment with form. Three original compositions, including an intermezzo inspired by Brahms, are through-written. Two pieces are entirely improvised. There are ear-catching modal turns and staggered rhythms.

“**Bulgarian Stride**” harks back to James P. Johnson and Erroll Garner. More recent role models include Brad Mehldau, a master of counterpoint with “the best left hand in the business.”

“Rhythm is a big driving force for me,” Milen says. “I love the groove, playing in the pocket or on top of the beat or the back of the beat. Most of the tracks on the album are based on traditional Bulgarian dance rhythms with meters such as 5/8, 7/8, 9/8, and 11/8, while only one is in 4/4.”

And then there are the remarkable final two tunes, “**Thracian Blues**” and “**Time**,” which are performed in thrilling fashion on a pair of grand pianos—one of them prepared—simultaneously. “Playing multiple keyboards is nothing new,” says Kirov, who has done just that in such bands as the synth-rock trio Ai. But doing that on two grand pianos, a Steingraeber and a Yamaha, while toying with contrapuntal melodies and shimmering overtones, was “really something for me.”

Milen Kirov was born on February 6, 1977 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, about 80 miles from the capital city of Sofia. His esteemed father, Todor Kirov, created curriculums for teaching *gadulka* at the Academy of Music, Dance, and Fine Arts in Plovdiv, where he was the Dean of the Department of Musical Folklore and Choreography, and was a founding member of the famed folklore Trakia Ensemble. “But his true passion are musicology and research,” says Milen.

Milen’s mother, Velichka Ivanova, plays the tambura, a string instrument, and was a featured vocalist with the Academic Folk Choir at the Academy of Music, Dance, and Fine Arts in his hometown.

Milen began taking piano and ear-training lessons at the age of four. At eight, he was accompanying his father and friends, all of whom were musicians, in living room jam sessions featuring his father’s students.

“My parents never forced me into traditional Bulgarian music,” says Milen, who attended the High School of Music and the Academy of Music, Dance, and Fine Arts, where he got a solid foundation in Western classical music, taking lessons based on the Russian school (Bulgaria being under Soviet control until 1989).

His act of “rebellion” following the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall was to start playing American blues (Buddy Guy and John Lee Hooker were favorites) and jazz (mainly jazz-rock fusion by Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock), which he learned off of tapes.

He also got into rock, learning guitar licks on the small Yamaha keyboard his father got him and transcribing solos by Little Richard and Deep Purple keyboardist Jon Lord. In his mid-teens, he began performing in bands in music clubs, which blossomed in Bulgaria in the post-Soviet era. Other pop acts he liked were Michael Jackson and Queen.

When he decided to get closer to American forms by studying music in the United States, he was unable to apply to schools in the now-required way online, lacking a computer and internet access. He opened an American college guide, randomly selected four schools, and sent tapes of his playing and written letters to those schools, arguing his case. A piano professor at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas was so impressed by the music that she arranged for Milen to get a full ride to the school.

Kirov, who began his studies there in 1998, says he learned a lot at the University of Nevada, which provided strong fundamental training and opportunities to play. But its music department

was too small to offer what he needed. He transferred to the California Institute of the Arts (*aka* CalArts) outside of Los Angeles, which proved to be a great fit. He studied contemporary classical music and jazz, wrote for film, dance, and animation, and experimented with avant-garde music. “I just wanted to learn,” says the pianist, who acquired a B.F.A. in Piano Performance and a D.M.A. as a Performer-Composer from CalArts and a Master’s degree in Composition from Cal State, Northridge.

“I always thought I would end up on one of the two coasts, either in Los Angeles or New York,” he says. He won a number of prizes in competitions as a classical pianist and composer, including the Bulgarian National Radio Composition Competition, the Bulgarian National Music Competition, the MTNA Performance Competition in Nevada, the Reno Chamber Orchestra Concerto Competition, and the Liberace Scholarship Competition. But that was not the path he wanted to take as an artist.

His encounters in California with the likes of **Charlie Haden**, **Wadada Leo Smith**, and noted electronic composer **David Rosenboom**, his mentor, boosted his efforts outside of classical music. So did his association with noted Serbian guitarist **Miroslav Tadic**, with whom he played a Balkan-influenced style of blues and jazz. “It was a fun environment to be in,” he says.

And then there was his strong connection to **Milcho Leviev**, a jazz great from his hometown of Plovdiv. The Bulgarian-born piano virtuoso had paved the way from Eastern Europe to Los Angeles, where he became a celebrated accompanist for the likes of Art Pepper, Roy Haynes, and Don Ellis (composing and arranging for Ellis’s ensembles) and a crowd-pleasing and critically acclaimed artist in his own right.

“I feel a strong kinship with Milcho,” says Kirov, who knew him from an early age but didn’t see him perform until Leviev returned to Bulgaria in the early 1990s. “It was as though he was speaking to me, validating what I was doing. It was through his playing that I recognized that jazz combined with Bulgarian folk and other traditional sounds could be good music and legitimate. The difference is that for Milcho, jazz came first. Only after he became a jazz artist did he rediscover his Bulgarian roots.”

Kirov’s output has been prolific and wide-ranging. He has recorded four albums and several singles on his own Ruino Vino Records label. In addition to ***Broken***, performed on Fender Rhodes, and ***Bulgarian Suite No. 1***, his albums include ***Bulgarian Moonshine Co.*** (2012) by his Balkan-jazz trio of the same name, featuring his younger brother Plamen on drums, and a pair of recordings by his 11-piece Balkan funk ensemble Orkestar MÉZÉ, ***Peasant Funk*** (2011) and ***Orkestar MÉZÉ*** (2015), whose six-man horn section is inspired by Tower of Power and Earth, Wind & Fire.

The second MEZE album features Kirov’s father, Bulgarian kaval (open flute) ace Theodosii Spassov, and Ellis Hall, Tower of Power’s “Ambassador of Soul,” on vocals and keyboards. The band boasts vocals by Kirov, who at times has also played gadulka, accordion, and drums— instruments he says he was “fascinated by” for a period of time.

Among his recent classical efforts are “Gorgon,” a concert etude for two pianos featuring Neema Pazargad; “Mano a Mano,” written for Yamaha Disklavier and featuring prerecorded MIDI parts; and original music for ***Bechnya***, a play by Saviana Stanescu about an adoption from a fictitious Eastern European country.

Kirov also has written and recorded music for several films including Robert M. Young's *Human Error*, an official selection of the Sundance Film Festival, and Emmy-winning director Robert Weide's *Woody Allen: A Documentary*, part of PBS's American Masters series. •

Milen Kirov: *Spatium*

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