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ENTERTAINMENT

Alexey Steele, Classical Underground impresario

Once a month, the painter transforms his Carson loft into a makeshift concert hall.



PASSIONATE: Artist Alexey Steele started the Classical Underground chamber music series, which takes place in his Carson loft. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

By Scott Timberg

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There are no tuxedos, no ushers, no raised stage here -- just a few thrift-store couches, some beach chairs, a table covered with half-eaten pies and bottles of wine and a dozen nudes and seascapes leaning against the walls. A few hundred people, gathered between the table and a piano, sip drinks and try not to bump into the sculpture of a goose: Russian models in strapless dresses mingle with elderly couples, and a baby, 4 months old, sits on her mother's lap at a wooden bar.

The intense and mustachioed Alexey Steele looks out over this motley crowd gathered in his Carson loft -- a high-ceilinged, concrete floor box squeezed between a cargo mover and a church -- and can't contain his excitement. "I am practicing art as an extreme sport!" he shouts, followed with a honking laugh that sounds like a throttled sea bird. Then he is off -- shouting exhortations at friends, hugging others, kissing still others on both cheeks -- before the concert starts.

Meeting Alexey Steele, 42, a passionate Soviet-born painter whose cavernous industrial space becomes an underground concert hall once a month, feels like being part of an elaborate performance art piece that could become a joke at any moment.

You half-expect the wild-haired Steele -- a cross between a classic Hollywood "mad Russian" and

Borat in a fedora -- to drop the accent and turn out to be a guy from Des Moines. But he is very much for real, as is his Classical Underground chamber music series, which is developing a below-the-radar international following. The concerts offer chamber pieces -- piano sonatas, cello suites and so on -- in a very unfussy space full of true believers; it's part of the growing appearance of classical music in alternative spaces such as coffee shops, warehouses and clubs, as well as a reminder of L.A.'s long tradition of under-the-radar classical music.

The son of Socialist Realist painter Leonid Steele, he paints in an outsized Renaissance scale and burns brightly with the primal place of art. He grew up in the Soviet Union, and likens himself to a citizen of Atlantis, a nation that's sunken beneath the seas.

The place, though gone, profoundly shaped him. "In the West," he says, using a rusty knife to flip the cap off a beer bottle a few weeks before the concert, "art is a luxury. In Russia, it is a means of survival -- collective survival for everyone. Going back to the Middle Ages and the Tatars. Art carries the torch -- something that will not let the wind blow it down!"

He sees his series' roots in Paris' Belle Epoch as well as the artistic Happenings of the '60s and contemporary performance art. In some ways, though, they are as much throwbacks as Steele's paintings. The golden age of chamber music was in the late 18th and 19th centuries, when aristocrats would host private salons in their homes and invite guests to see four or five musicians address a Mozart or Schubert quartet. Steele is a kind of aristocrat in exile, and his gatherings even have the candles in common.

What's different, though, is that instead of being framed as an elite activity, Steele is using the language of bohemia: It's hard to imagine the host of a Haydn recital in a count's drawing room shouting out, as Steele does at the intermission: "Art is alive! It's heart and soul of life! Everything that is alive is underground!"

Art is his life

Immigrants have come to America to improve their material well-being for centuries now. But Steele credits his adopted home with something other than material prosperity. "The greatest thing America gave me," he says, "it showed me what absolute zero was."

That's in strong contrast to his early years, where he was the privileged son of a famous man. Born in Kiev in 1967, Steele attended the prestigious Surikov Art Institute of the Soviet Academy of Arts in Moscow.

Pianist Sviatoslav Richter once played in his living room. Sometimes, the family's prominence, and his father's stubbornness, led to less pleasant events: "At some point we had the local KGB office starting new investigation on my dad every six months. So that life of privilege was certainly of a very demanding kind."

Soon after graduating from the Surikov, he left Moscow on a trip with his parents to visit some cousins in California and Canada. Leonid was wearying of the tensions between his own individualism and his role as one of his homeland's official artists; 1990 was a tumultuous time in his native land, and both Alexey and his folks remained in the Southland.

Settling in America allowed the young man to step out from under his father's shadow, which he'd come to find oppressive. Here, he said, his surname gave him no head start. "The world I grew in, knew, loved, fought with was crumbling down right behind me. Now, that's an adventure, that's the ultimate test of what you're really made of." Soon after hitting bottom -- when he became disoriented and broke -- he realized that art was what mattered to him.

He's brushed up against the entertainment industry a bit -- he's painted work for Sylvester Stallone and Mick Fleetwood, and painted a nude album jacket of actress Milla Jovovich for her recording

debut -- but is emphatic about the superiority of the traditional arts. "In the commercial world of ours," he says, "art is the ultimate act of defiance." His website is called highartforever.com, and he insists that entertainment -- no matter how popular at present -- will all blow over.

Steele has exhibited work -- his style combines Soviet Socialist Realism with Italian Renaissance themes -- at a number of small California museums, including the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University. Much of his work is done for private collectors. While he sells through the Pasadena gallery American Legacy Fine Arts, much of his work, he says, is so large it needs "intense believers" rather than buyers who stumble upon it at a gallery show.

Steele is fascinated with the idea of art's place in society -- a conversation with him involves endless theories on the subject, including the importance of Russian painter Kazimir Malevich (not an artist, he says, "but a visionary!"), the need to return the Acropolis marbles to Greece, and his interest in having artistic values replace mercantile ones in Western society.

But unlike many who enjoy theorizing about aesthetic experience -- and who are fascinated with integrity and artistic purity -- Steele is able to really make something happen.

Classical is alive

The Classical Underground series was inspired by Steele repeatedly being told that classical music was dead. "Whenever I get to this point," he exclaims, wheeling back on his chair as he pours more beer, "my ears would pop!"

Certainly, at the Classical Underground concerts, art and music seem vital indeed. Not only for the audience, but for the players. The August concert included an austere, resonant Bach Cello Suite, a Prokofiev piano sonata rendered with sterling clarity by a pianist raising money for her CD release, and several melodic pieces by lesser-known composers. Afterward, many of the musicians came back and played; the cellist improvised on Bach. (Some nights, these after parties go until dawn.)

"I don't play it! I don't know notes!" Steele exclaims. "I didn't get one music lesson in my life! And I *need* it. I'm proof that people need it. I'm living proof that classical music lives!"

The series started as the Chamber Music at the Studio Series in December 2007. "This was intended as a get-together for friends -- a party," says Serge Oskotsky, a St. Petersburg-born cellist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and one of the loft's earliest performers. That first session involved three straight hours of cello duets without pausing for breath. "We were so taken by music making on the spot," he says, "people were too polite to tell us to stop."

"They survived," says Maksim Velichkin, who played the other cello that night and now programs the series, "and we continued our concerts." Musicians hoping to perform solo or chamber recitals often have trouble finding venues, and audiences, he says. "I've performed solo recitals for five people in the audience, and it isn't much fun."

While some things have changed -- the audience has swelled from a few friends to a group so large Steele cannot fit them all in his loft, and he's begun to hire security and request a \$10 donation to defray costs -- they've remained unstructured, informal events always scheduled on a Monday. The food and drink comes from audience members, potluck style. Though the audience is quiet during performances, he wants them to feel like participants in the concerts.

As word has gotten out, the series has attracted touring musicians to drop by. The players have included organist Christopher Bull and, in March, two members of the Vienna Philharmonic who sat in. At the August concert, Siberian violinist Vadim Repin was in the audience but didn't perform. Often the musicians are up-and-comers, like pianist Yana Reznik, who performed Prokofiev and will soon self-release a CD.

While many of these players have regular venues, they play for free at Steele's loft for love of the sport. "Here," says Oskotsky, "you can try out different interpretations of a piece, which you wouldn't do in a formal hall."

Julie Resh is a television producer and longtime friend of Steele's who videotapes the concerts and offers them to the musicians. She's drawn by the informal setting and what she calls "incredible" acoustics as well as the quality of the musicians Steele and Velichkin attract. "He has such a wide range of contacts and friends," Resh says of Steele. "He puts the word out that something's happening and people show up. . . . It's people who really want to be there."

In the next few months, Steele plans to keep the series rolling as best he can, with audience demand already much larger than he can squeeze into his loft. He's excited about a new Classical Underground label, which will allow him to get the music out to a larger audience. He's also mulling the idea of offering poetry readings, tapping into people's unsatisfied hunger for expressive language.

Steele's main concern right now is keeping its spontaneous and bohemian flavor as the audience and profile grow. He's trying to figure how to balance longtime fans with newcomers in a space that can't support much more than 300. What will he do if 1,000 people show up to the next concert?

Steele has the same operating style whether the issue is painting or showmanship. "Napoleon was famous for having a meticulous battle plan," he says. "But he's famous for saying, 'No plan survives the first shot.' You throw it all out of the window."

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