

At Charity Gala, Putin Croons 'Blueberry Hill'

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Putin performing at a children's charity event in St. Petersburg on Friday. **Alexei Nikolsky**

ST. PETERSBURG — Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, known for his off-color jokes and macho posturing, took on a different role Friday night by singing "Blueberry Hill" at a children's charity event.

"Like an overwhelming majority of people, I can neither sing nor play but I very much like doing it," Putin said after being prodded by the event's host, who reminded him that he had sung before a group before.

Putin sang last summer at a secret meeting with a team of Russian undercover agents who were expelled from the United States. His audience on Friday included Sharon Stone, Monica Bellucci, Kevin Costner and Gerard Depardieu.

Wearing a black suit and a white shirt, Putin went on stage and played the opening notes to "Blueberry Hill" on the piano, then stepped behind the microphone and sang, backed by several musicians and singers.

Putin, 58, described as an "alpha-dog" in U.S. diplomatic cables released by the WikiLeaks web site, has a black belt in judo, and undertakes testosterone-fueled feats such as flying a fighter jet or shooting stun darts at a Siberian tiger.

He has thus far shown little interest in musical pursuits, but his piano performance suggested he has been able to squeeze in some music lessons.

The prime minister's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told Reuters that Putin indeed takes lessons "but very rarely, when he has time." He said Putin learned the lyrics to "Blueberry Hill" as part of his English-language studies.

Putin also attempted to play the Soviet-era spy movie song "From Where the Motherland Begins," which he said he had sung with the Russian agents, but hit a wrong key and stopped, promising to rehearse it better for the next performance.

Putin, a former KGB agent, remains Russia's most popular politician and is seen as a senior partner in tandem with President Dmitry Medvedev. Both have said they do not rule out taking part in the 2012 presidential election.

"Medvedev will now have to learn to play saxophone," said a participant at Friday's event who declined to be identified.

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