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Eclectic Gala Held for Soviet Leader

By Kevin O'Flynn

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The London Symphony Orchestra playing at the concert in honor of Gorbachev. **Toby Melville**

It was a bizarre evening in the Royal Albert Hall.

If you had ever been asked who would attend the 80th birthday celebration for the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, it is unlikely that you would have answered Shirley Bassey, the Scorpions and one of the Spice Girls.

But they and many more stars were in attendance for a birthday party late Wednesday — a concert and an awards ceremony with the grand, almost James Bond title of "Mikhail Gorbachev: The Man Who Changed the World."

Arnold Schwarzenegger, conductor Valery Gergiyev, former Polish President Lech Walesa and Israeli President Shimon Peres were among those who joined Gorbachev as well as Mel C — formerly Sporty Spice — as the night moved from cheesy and over-the-top to touching and back again in the blink of an eye.

"I never expected to live until 80, but now I take on the responsibility of living until I am 90," Gorbachev joked in a short speech at the start of the evening.

The nigh-on four-hour event was hosted by — again, who would have guessed it — actors Sharon Stone and Kevin Spacey, who spoke in front of a neo-classical column decorated with pink curtains.

They tried but failed to do an impression of Academy Awards ceremony hosts, Spacey the joker doing impressions of Bill Clinton and Jack Nicholson but sadly no voices relevant to Gorbachev's time in office, and Stone the ditzy co-host with a number of dress changes. Hearing both of them continuously mangle various Russian names and concepts added a level of surreality to the event, which was attended by numerous Russians.

Announcing that Andrei Arshavin and Roman Pavlyuchenko — football forwards from Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspurs, respectively — were in the audience, Spacey mangled their names to unrecognizability and then tried to get laughs with the hoary joke about a "perestroikas" [pair of strikers] being present.

The evening began with a film showing world figures such as Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa with schmaltzy quotes about changing the world before moving on to Gorbachev drawing applause from the black-tie crowd who had paid up to £100,000 ($160,000) to be at the event.

Aging German rock band the Scorpions sang their song "Wind of Change" about the political changes in Eastern Europe and brought tears to at least one audience member. No tears came when they followed that up with their song "Rock You Like a Hurricane."

But the fact that the night was taking place in London rather than anywhere in the former Soviet Union underlined the fact that Gorbachev remains a divisive figure in his homeland, where many fault him for changing their world. Not that many at the show appeared to realize that.

There were many tributes to Gorbachev, but the hosts in particular seemed to be bent on just saying the phrase "the man who changed the world" or talking of how Gorbachev had allowed to Russia to become "free and democratic" over and over again.

Some in the audience, and surely Gorbachev himself, who recently chastised Vladimir Putin for backtracking on democracy, may have felt the huge gap between rhetoric and reality on the night.

The total Hollywoodization of Gorbachev's role came when Russian pop group Khor Turetskogo (the Turetsky Choir) sang the African-American spiritual song, "Go Down, Moses," only to change the lyrics to "Gorbachev, Let My People Go."

This was followed by Mel C singing the famous Nina Simone song "Ain't Got No/I Got Life." The singer tweeted before the show that she would be singing the word "boobies" before lots of dignitaries that night.

Outside Albert Hall, a small group of protesters held up a banner saying "Gorby, help us reload perestroika!" Meanwhile, Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky's lawsuit to have Gorbachev

arrested for his crimes as Soviet leader was rejected by a London court.

A few weeks before, at a reception at the British Embassy, he noted, with false modesty perhaps, that he would have preferred to have just "sat in a corner" for his birthday, and that it was his family who was behind the event.

That may explain the eclectic line-up on the night.

One of the few poignant moments came in a short film showing musician Andrei Makarevich playing the guitar as Gorbachev sang the words to a love song from the 1940s, accompanied by photos of him and his late wife Raisa.

Actress Milla Jovovich, who was born in the then-Soviet republic of Ukraine, also gave a more heartfelt speech to Gorbachev that brought her to tears. "When I left the Soviet Union in 1980, we were sure that we would never return to be able to see our loved ones again, and now we are able to reunite with friends, so thank you," she said.

Each of the prizes at the awards ceremony was meant to correspond with the three buzzwords of Gorbachev's time in office: "perestroika," "glasnost" and "uskoreniye," or restructuring, openness and acceleration.

The prizes went to, respectively, CNN founder Ted Turner; 25-year-old Kenyan engineer Evans Wadongo, who developed a solar lamp for poor Kenyans; and Sir Tim Berners Lee, the British scientist credited with inventing the Internet. Lee's award was accepted by his brother.

Proceeds from the event are set to go to a cancer charity named after Gorbachev's wife and to Britain's Macmillan Cancer Support.

Veteran singer Paul Anka finished the show off with a swagger and nimbleness that belied the fact that he is not much more than a decade younger than Gorbachev.

After singing "You Are My Destiny," his 1957 hit, which the Gorbachev family had personally asked for, he sang his most famous song, "My Way."

"I originally wrote this song for Frank Sinatra, but it's indigenous to you," Anka said rather awkwardly before blasting out the song.

And then fake snow fluttered down on to the crowd at the end as Anka and Makarevich sang a song they had jointly written about Gorbachev and about changing the world.

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