

Leo Ornstein burst onto the American musical scene in early 1915 with a series of four concerts of all modern music at the Bandbox Theatre in New York. Performing the latest works by Ravel, Schoenberg, Cyril Scott, and other European modernists, he stunned an American musical world that was used to hearing nothing newer than César Franck and early Richard Strauss. Ornstein also performed several compositions of his own “futurist” works, all of which he had composed within the previous two years.

For the next five years Ornstein set the American musical world on its edge, and became the most notorious musician in the United States. In 1918, at age twenty-five, he had already become the subject of a full-length biography.<sup>1</sup> Chapters about him appeared in books by the critics Paul Rosenfeld and Carl Van Vechten; *The Musical Quarterly* and several literary magazines carried major essays.<sup>2</sup> Literally hundreds of newspaper articles discussed him. In 1916 Waldo Frank had prophesized that of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Ornstein, “Ornstein, the youngest of these, gives promise to be the greatest.” A year earlier, Herbert F. Peyser had observed that “the world has indeed moved between the epoch of Beethoven and of Leo Ornstein.” That same year Charles Buchanan claimed that “potentially, he [Ornstein] is the most significant figure in today’s music.” Two years later the “potentially” was gone: Ornstein was “the most salient musical phenomenon of our time.” James Huneker, who found Ornstein the only “true-blue, genuine, futurist” composer alive, commented “I never thought I should live to hear Arnold Schoenberg sound tame; yet tame he is, almost timid and halting after Ornstein.” And in London, an anonymous critic for the *London Observer* dubbed Ornstein “the sum of Schoenberg and Scriabin squared.”<sup>3</sup>

Ornstein’s own discovery of his modernist idiom was itself dramatic. Born in Kremenchug in Ukraine in 1893, he was admitted to the Petrograd Conservatory when he was ten years old. Pogroms against the Jews following the 1905 revolt in Russia forced the family to flee, and they arrived in America in February, 1906. Ornstein was almost immediately admitted to the new Institute of Musical Art, which Frank Damrosch had just founded, and which later became Juilliard. Under the watchful eye of his teacher, Bertha Feiring Tapper, Ornstein gradually became the star piano student there. By 1911 he was ready to launch a concert career, and was steadily moving toward that goal, when suddenly in 1913, Ornstein later recalled, he heard strange chords and then entire pieces in his head. These works were jarring, dissonant, and unlike anything Ornstein had composed before. Many years later Ornstein described his epiphany, although he got the precise piece confused; *Danse Sauvage* was an early work, but not the first:

*Danse Sauvage* was written by a young person with no experience whatever with modern music. . . . I still wonder at the age of eighty, why should I have thought of that? A boy that had been sitting at the piano practicing the *Twelfth Rhapsody* to try to astonish the ladies with the speed and accuracy of the passages, and blind the audience with the terrific glissandos and whatnot. Why suddenly that thing came into my head—I’ll be blessed if I know. And as a matter of fact, I really doubted my sanity at first. I simply said, what is that? It was so completely removed from any experience I had ever had.<sup>4</sup>

Audiences wondered much the same, but they were also mesmerized. Ornstein premiered his new style in London in 1914, where he almost caused a riot: “At my second concert, devoted to my own compositions, I might have played anything. I couldn’t hear the piano myself. The crowd whistled and howled and even threw handy missiles on the stage.” According to the interviewer, Ornstein concluded with a smile, “but that concert made me famous.”<sup>5</sup>

After 1915 Ornstein’s draw was immense. He constantly performed before packed halls, often more than two thousand, in many places the “largest audience of the season.” At the Hippodrome in New York a

\$6,000 house was guaranteed, an extraordinary sum for 1919. One week later at Aeolian Hall in New York the audience “early mobbed the lobbies, marched at intervals to the stage, and long clung there to walls, to organ pipes, pedal base, stairs, or any niche offering a view.”

Yet beginning around 1920 Ornstein began to withdraw from public life; the reasons are many and complex. In 1925, with the encouragement of his wife, Pauline Mallet-Prevost, he accepted a teaching position at the Philadelphia Musical Academy, now part of the University of the Arts, and ten years later he and Pauline founded the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia, where they remained until they retired in 1953. After that Ornstein withdrew even further; the two lived in various places, eventually settling in a working-class trailer park in Brownsville, Texas. By the 1970s Ornstein had been totally forgotten.

About that time, however, the tide began to turn for Ornstein. Spurred by Pauline, a nephew, Peter Ornstein, and later Ornstein’s son Severo, as well as Vivian Perlis at Yale, an Ornstein revival began. Concerts and recordings soon followed, and on May 21, 1975, Ornstein received the Marjorie Peabody Waite Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. The award is given every three years to a composer for significant lifetime achievement. There were thirty-nine music honorees at the time, including Milton Babbitt, Leonard Bernstein, John Cage, Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, Richard Rodgers, and Ornstein’s former student Andrew Imbrie.

Beginning in the 1970s, after a long period when he hardly composed at all, Ornstein once again began to compose. He lived to age 108 and created some of his largest works when he was in his late nineties. His cello compositions date from an earlier time, but they occupy an important place in his oeuvre. Ornstein’s two closest friends, Hans Kindler and Waldo Frank, were cellists, and he seems to have had a special affinity for the instrument. Kindler, principal cellist with the Philadelphia Orchestra and later founding conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra, commented that Ornstein must have been born with a cello between his knees.

In 1915 Ornstein had just completed his Violin Sonata, Op. 31, his most radical composition, a chromatic, atonal, highly dissonant, and unrelenting foray into modernism. Ornstein acknowledged that the Sonata had pushed his dissonant style, which he termed “abstract music,” “to the brink” of disorder. “I would say that Op. 31 had brought music just to the very edge. . . . I just simply drew back and said, ‘beyond that lies complete chaos.’” He feared for the direction he and other composers were taking: “After I have lain down on the piano keyboard and sounded all the notes at once—what then?” He wondered, “Have we destroyed more than we have added? That may be the real question.”

Ornstein answered the question of “what then” with his *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, Op. 52, which he wrote later that year for Hans Kindler. The two would perform it several times together. Ornstein himself described the fever pitch that surrounded its composition: “The *Sonata* was written in less than a week under a compulsion that was not to be resisted. Why I should have heard this romantic piece at the same period that I was tumultuously involved in the primitivism of (other works) is beyond my understanding, but the same contrast of exteriors has continued throughout my life.”

Op. 52 is a lyrical, passionate, tonal work. Many features of Ornstein’s ultramodern style are still present, including chromaticism, dissonance, and the use of harmony as color. But the dissonance is more restrained and placed more clearly within a tonal context. A consistent meter is maintained for long stretches. As in Op. 31, Ornstein maintains a high level of intensity, but the unrelenting tension that built up in Op. 31 was never released. On one level, Op. 52 may be that much-delayed release. In the cello sonata the climaxes are prepared but then when they are reached, they are allowed to resonate.

Except for the *Andante sostenuto* all the movements are in a large ABA form. Particularly noticeable is the lyricism of the cello lines. The A section of the first movement resembles an exposition and recapitulation with all the characteristics of traditional sonata form, including the division into two contrasting thematic groups, and a clear moment of return as the recapitulation begins. The middle section, however, particularly in the *alla marcato*, is more episodic than developmental, undermining the movement's sonata form characteristics in favor of ABA.

Throughout his life Ornstein was torn by questions of identity. Born into a Jewish family in the Pale where his father was a cantor, he was sent to the Imperial Russian capital in Petrograd when he was ten years old. Later in life he rejected all religion. Like many second-generation immigrants he may have suppressed his heritage but he did not forget. Some of Ornstein's most effective writing occurs when his Russian-Jewish roots resurface. In the second movement, another ABA built around a modal scale (Phrygian), the melody, even with hints of Russian elements, represents, as Gdal Selesky observed of Ornstein's music, the cry and wail of the young Jew in the New World.

The most moving part of the scherzo is the middle section, which with its slow tempo, dark color, and psalm-tone recitative, provides a stark contrast to the passionate outer section. The finale is an extended rhapsody, which exploits the wide melodic range of the cello, with soaring lyrical lines that again recall the sounds of Eastern Europe. Numerous tempo changes precede the final *Andante* coda, where in a gesture reminiscent of Brahms the climax occurs with block chords in the piano.

Ornstein's second Cello Sonata was written in 1920, and the first movement was given a private performance with Hans Kindler. In the 1970s Pauline, Ornstein's wife, described the sonata as "one long glorious melody line." One critic referred to its Hebraic or East European manner, a sentiment suggested by Pauline also. Pauline also indicated that at least parts of two other movements existed, but that the piece was put aside in the fall when Ornstein had to resume the concert circuit, and it was never finished. At some point the first movement was referred to as a Rhapsody, which describes it accurately, but Pauline's 1976 letter suggests Ornstein preferred sonata, as she emended "Rhapsody" in favor of "2nd sonata."

Virtually nothing is known about the history or provenance of Composition 1, sometimes referred to as Composition 36. It is a relatively brief but extremely moving lament; here, too, Jewish elements seem to cry out. At the same time Ornstein's harmonies are reminiscent of Debussy. With most composers the simplicity of the piece might suggest an early work, but with Ornstein there is no distinctive stylistic progression. Throughout his life Ornstein wrote in a variety of styles simultaneously, often juxtaposing highly divergent works. This piece may have been the slow movement to the second Cello Sonata that Pauline refers to above.

Little more is known about the two Pieces, Op. 33. They may be transcriptions or arrangements of two of Ornstein's *Drei Lieder*, which share the same opus number. Only the first of the *Lieder* has survived, making comparison difficult. If so, they were probably written before 1914, and according to Ornstein's 1918 biographer Frederick Martens, were composed with Richard Strauss in mind, who had set the same text.

The Cello Preludes were written in 1929–30 and premiered in 1931. They rank among Ornstein's best compositions. Consisting of six short pieces, they depend less on development than on the presentation of intense, smaller sections, which often build to imposing climaxes. As with so many of Ornstein's works for cello, these pieces drip with emotional intensity. They project Ornstein at his most introspective and

moody and then surprise a listener with moments of jauntiness. Even more than the Cello Sonata, Op. 52, these pieces demonstrate Ornstein's instinctive affinity for the cello.

Unlike Op. 52, in which the cello part carries the bulk of the melodic material against an active virtuoso piano part, which provides color, harmony, and rhythm, in the Preludes the two instruments interact in a more intimate and tightly integrated way. There is little real counterpoint in a traditional sense, but one line often shadows the other, and there are many moments of dialogue between the cello and piano. The two seem organically tied together; even when the piano acts primarily as accompaniment, it also plays an essential role. In the last prelude, the piano's rhythmic figure undergoes its own development. The result resembles a set of variations whose increasing activity propels the emotional intensification of the composite piece.

Typical of Ornstein are the wide emotional contrasts and ranges of the Preludes. This is especially apparent in No. 2, which begins softly, increases in intensity in every parameter— texture, dynamics, rhythm, and range—then closes with a Dolente coda. Ornstein's harmony, which is tonal, chromatic, and spiked with dissonance, has an almost blues-like quality in the final Dolente, where the texture thins and the two instruments exchange eighth-note motives. Ornstein had discovered jazz in New Orleans in 1916 and was enthralled by it. Jazz joined Russian and Jewish musical influences to inform Ornstein's thinking.

Hints of an incipient sonata can be found in the Preludes: No. 2 in its seriousness and scope, with the shorter No. 1 serving as Introduction, together suggest the opening movement of a sonata. No. 3 is a scherzo in the vein of Prokofiev or Bartók, and Nos. 4 and 5 together are comparable to one long slow movement, No. 4 being essentially a recitative. No. 6 in its Bacchanalian fury could easily function as a sonata finale.

As a pianist of extraordinary skill, the compositions Ornstein wrote for his own instrument are unquestionably idiosyncratic and effective. His works for cello, however, reveal a sensitivity and affinity for this second instrument that is unusual among those who are not themselves cellists. How Ornstein came by this insight is unknown. Together, they as well as a number of his keyboard and chamber works argue eloquently for Ornstein's place in twentieth-century music history.

—*Michael Broyles and Denise Von Glahn*

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### **Performance note**

An early bit of digging around as a music student at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts led me to Leo Ornstein's Six Preludes for Cello and Piano. At the time I was intrigued but didn't pursue the piece, yet his name stayed with me. Years later, the experience of performing Ornstein's epic and electrifying Piano Quintet and the knowledge that his son Severo Ornstein had recently reprinted or made new editions of nearly all of the cello-piano works (along with most of his father's music) convinced me that this body of repertory needed to be explored.

In preparing this music, Randall Hodgkinson and I ran into a tricky musicological and performance problem. While the First Cello Sonata and the Preludes were published commercially presumably under

the composer's supervision, the Second Cello Sonata and Composition 1 exist only because Ornstein's tremendously dedicated wife Pauline was willing to copy them out. Ornstein added very little in the way of articulation, dynamics, or expressive indications. He was capable of detailed and complex notation; the autographed manuscripts for the two short Opus 33 pieces are clearly his impatient work and not the clean handwriting of Pauline, vividly conveying the abrupt turns of phrasing, dynamics, and wildly gestural writing for both cello and piano. More often, Ornstein composed in his head and performed his solo piano works from memory rather than writing them out, thereby tragically losing three early piano sonatas. He dictated the remaining works to Pauline only after much cajoling.

Even Pauline's careful copying shows discrepancies between the piano score and the cello part, while the piano part has its own inconsistencies in chord or arpeggio spellings. For example, the Second Sonata is marked *moderato* in the cello part but has no tempo marking in the piano score and no dynamics marked in the first 78 bars. At measure 137 one might assume the trill from G-sharp is to the upper neighbor of A-sharp given the key signature of G-sharp minor, but the piano right hand goes to A-natural, implying Phrygian mode here. Severo Ornstein told me his father was not the most careful and organized composer with regard to archiving and proofreading; these and other examples made his copyist's work quite a challenge. So it was reassuring that in a recorded interview, Leo Ornstein made it clear that he felt performers should have much leeway regarding interpretation. As performers, we had to experiment and make many decisions, not only about expression, phrasing, articulation, tempi, and dynamics, but in some cases even about chord spellings and the notes themselves. Hopefully, we made choices of which Ornstein himself would have approved.

—Joshua Gordon

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Martens, *Leo Ornstein: The Man, His Ideas, His Work* (New York: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1918). Martens was known at the time for several books on music, most of them on opera, and for his operatic libretti and translations of libretti. He and Ornstein later collaborated on some songs, Martens providing the text.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, *Musical Portraits: Interpretations of Twenty Modern American Composers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920), 267–280; Carl Van Vechten, *Music and Bad Manners* (New York: Knopf, 1916), 229–43; Charles L. Buchanan, “Ornstein and Modern Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (April 1918), 174–83; Frederick Corder, “On the Cult of Wrong Notes,” *The Musical Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (July 1915), 381–86; Margaret Anderson, “Leo Ornstein,” *The Little Review* 3, no. 3 (May 1915), 13–15; Paul Rosenfeld, “Ornstein,” *New Republic* 7, no. 82 (May 27, 1916), 83–85. Lawrence Gilman discussed Ornstein at length twice in his column, “Drama and Music: Significant Happenings of the Month,” *North American Review* 201, no. 713 (April 1915), 593–97, and *North American Review* 203, no. 722 (January 1916), 129–36.

<sup>3</sup> Waldo Frank, typescript for an article “Leo Ornstein and the Emancipated Music,” to appear in *The Onlooker* (1916), in Ornstein Collection, Yale Music Library, quoted in Vivian Perlis, “The Futurist Music of Leo Ornstein,” *Notes* 31, no. 4 (June 1975), 741; Charles L. Buchanan, “Futurist Music,” *The Independent*, July 31, 1916, 160; “Ornstein and Modern Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (April, 1918), 176; Herbert F. Peyser, “Inverted Philistinism of Futurism's Defenders,” *Musical America* 24, no. 24 (May 16, 1916), 22; James Huneker, *Columbus Sunday Dispatch*, Jan. 7, 1917, magazine section, p. 3; James Grenville, “The Musical Futurist and His Sophisticated Discords,” *NY Tribune*, March 5, 1916, p. 7; London *Observer*, quoted in Frederick Martens, *Leo Ornstein: The Man, His Ideas, His Work* (New York: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1918), 24–25.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Ornstein, interview by Vivian Perlis, Yale University Oral History America Project, December 8, 1972, Waban, MA. Quoted in Perlis, “The Futurist Music of Leo Ornstein,” 737.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Van Vechten, *Music and Bad Manners*, New York: Knopf, 1916, 238.

**Joshua Gordon** joined the Naumburg Award-winning Lydian String Quartet and the faculty of Brandeis University in 2002. Critically acclaimed for his work in concerts and recordings, he has performed across

the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe, Japan, and South America. He was a member of the New York Chamber Soloists, the Group For Contemporary Music, and the New Millennium Ensemble, and has been a guest of the Cassatt and Ying Quartets, the Chameleon Arts Ensemble, Emmanuel Music, Fromm Players, the New York Festival of Song, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and Speculum Musicae. He is principal cellist of the New England String Ensemble, co-principal cellist of the New Hampshire Symphony, and resident cellist at the Wellesley Composers Conference. An alumnus of Juilliard and the Tanglewood Music Center, he studied with Harvey Shapiro, Joel Krosnick, the Juilliard Quartet, and more recently with George Neikrug. He has recorded for Albany, CRI, Cala, Koch International Classics, Naxos, and Tzadik; as a Lydian he has recorded the four quartets of Vincent Persichetti for Centaur.

**Randall Hodgkinson**, grand prize winner of the International American Music Competition sponsored by Carnegie Hall and the Rockefeller Foundation, has performed with orchestras in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Boston, and Cleveland, and abroad in Italy and Iceland. His concerto repertoire ranges from Mozart to Busoni and includes several world premieres, including the Gardner Read and Bernard Hoffer concertos. He has performed numerous recital programs spanning the repertoire from J.S. Bach to Donald Martino. He is an artist member of the Boston Chamber Music Society and the Gramercy Trio, and performs the four-hand and two-piano repertoire with his wife, Leslie Amper. Festival appearances include Blue Hill, Bargemusic, the Seattle Chamber Music Festival, Chamber Music Northwest, and Mainly Mozart in San Diego. A CD of solo piano music on the Ongaku label, *Petrouchka and other Prophecies*, has recently been released to critical acclaim. Other recordings include a live world premiere of the Gardner Read concerto for Albany records. Mr. Hodgkinson is on the faculties of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston and the Longy School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Piano Music by Leo Ornstein*. Includes Piano Sonata No. 8. Marc-André Hamelin. Hyperion Records CDA 67320.

Piano Quintet, String Quartet No. 3. Lydian String Quartet; Janice Weber, piano. New World Records 80509-2.

Piano Sonatas Nos. 4 and 7. Janice Weber. Naxos Records 8559104.

Piano Sonata No. 4, *Arabesques*. Martha Anne Verbit. Albany Records Troy 070.

Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op 31. Gregory Fulkerson, violin; Alan Feinberg, piano. New World Records 80313-2.

*Suicide in an Airplane, Two Impressions of Notre Dame, Wild Men's Dance*. Steffen Schleiermacher, piano. Hat ART CD 6144.

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LEO ORNSTEIN (1893–2002)

COMPLETE WORKS FOR CELLO AND PIANO

JOSHUA GORDON, CELLO; RANDALL HODGKINSON, PIANO  
80655-2

*Six Preludes for cello and piano* (1929–30)

- |                                   |      |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| 1. Moderato sostenuto             | 1:15 |
| 2. Con moto                       | 4:33 |
| 3. Presto                         | 3:24 |
| 4. Andante non troppo             | 5:03 |
| 5. Non troppo (quasi improvisato) | 4:29 |
| 6. Allegro agitato                | 3:51 |

7. *Composition 1 for cello and piano*\* (date unknown) 7:10

*Sonata No. 1 for cello and piano*, Op. 52 (1915)

8. Allegro appassionato 7:15  
9. Andante sostenuto 6:24  
10. Scherzo (Vivo, ma non troppo) 4:38  
11. Moderato (con moto) 6:52

*Two Pieces for cello and piano*, Op. 33 nos. 1 and 2\* (date unknown)

12. Andante 1:40  
13. Allegro ma non troppo :46  
  
14. *Sonata No. 2 for cello and piano*\* (ca. 1920) 15:17  
In one movement, Moderato

\* world-premiere recording

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