

= Leo Ornstein =

Leo Ornstein (born Lev Ornshteyn ; Russian : Лев Орнштейн ; c . December 11 , 1895 ? February 24 , 2002) was an American composer and pianist of the early twentieth century . His performances of works by avant @-@ garde composers and his own innovative and even shocking pieces made him a cause célèbre on both sides of the Atlantic .

Ornstein was the first important composer to make extensive use of the tone cluster . As a pianist , he was considered a world @-@ class talent . By the mid @-@ 1920s , he had walked away from his fame and soon disappeared from popular memory . Though he gave his last public concert before the age of forty , he continued writing music for another half @-@ century and beyond . Largely forgotten for decades , he was rediscovered in the mid @-@ 1970s . Ornstein completed his eighth and final piano sonata in September 1990 at the age of ninety @-@ four , making him the oldest published composer in history (a mark since passed by Elliott Carter) .

= = Early life = =

Ornstein was born in Kremenchuk , a large town in the Ukrainian province of Poltava , then under Imperial Russian rule . He grew up in a musical environment ? his father was a Jewish cantor , while a violinist uncle encouraged the young boy 's studies . Ornstein was recognized early on as a prodigy on the piano ; in 1902 , when the celebrated Polish pianist Josef Hofmann visited Kremenchug , he heard the six @-@ year @-@ old Ornstein perform . Hofmann gave him a letter of recommendation to the highly regarded St. Petersburg Conservatory . Soon after , Ornstein was accepted as a pupil at the Imperial School of Music in Kiev , then headed by Vladimir Puchalsky . A death in the family forced Ornstein 's return home . In 1903 , Osip Gabrilovich heard him play and recommended him to the Moscow Conservatory . In 1904 , the eight @-@ year @-@ old Ornstein auditioned for and was accepted by the St. Petersburg school . There he studied composition with Alexander Glazunov and piano with Anna Yesipova . By the age of eleven , Ornstein was earning his way by coaching opera singers . To escape the pogroms incited by the nationalist and antisemitic organisation Union of the Russian People , the family emigrated to the United States in February 1906 . They settled in New York 's Lower East Side , and Ornstein enrolled in the Institute of Musical Art ? predecessor to the Juilliard School ? where he studied piano with Bertha Feiring Tapper . In 1911 , he made a well @-@ received New York debut with pieces by Bach , Beethoven , Chopin , and Schumann . Recordings two years later of works by Chopin , Grieg , and Poldini demonstrate , according to music historian Michael Broyles , " a pianist of sensitivity , prodigious technical ability , and artistic maturity . "

= = Fame and " futurism " = =

Ornstein soon moved in a very different direction . He began imagining and then writing works with new sounds , dissonant and startling . Ornstein himself was unsettled by the earliest of these compositions : " I really doubted my sanity at first . I simply said , what is that ? It was so completely removed from any experience I ever had . " On March 27 , 1914 , in London , he gave his first public performance of works then called " futurist " , now known as modernist . In addition to a Busoni arrangement of three Bach choral preludes and several pieces by Schoenberg , Ornstein played a number of his own compositions . The concert caused a major stir . One newspaper described Ornstein 's work as " the sum of Schoenberg and Scriabine [sic] squared . " Others were less analytical : " We have never suffered from such insufferable hideousness , expressed in terms of so @-@ called music . "

Ornstein 's follow @-@ up performance provoked a near @-@ 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 . " The reaction , however , was by no means universally negative ? the Musical Standard called him " one of the most remarkable composers of the day ... [with] that germ of realism and humanity which is

indicative of genius . " By the next year , he was the talk of the American music scene for his performances of cutting @-@ edge works by Schoenberg , Scriabin , Bartók , Debussy , Kodály , Ravel , and Stravinsky (many of them U.S. premieres) , as well as his own , even more radical compositions .

Between 1915 and the early 1920s , when he virtually ceased performing in public , Ornstein was one of the best known (by some lights , notorious) figures in American classical music . In the description of Broyles and Denise Von Glahn , his " draw was immense . He constantly performed before packed halls , often more than two thousand , in many places the ' largest audience of the season . ' " His solo piano pieces such as Wild Men 's Dance (aka Danse Sauvage ; c . 1913 ? 14) and Impressions of the Thames (c . 1913 ? 14) pioneered the integrated use of the tone cluster in classical music composition , which Henry Cowell , three years Ornstein 's junior , would do even more to popularize . In the description of scholar Gordon Rumson , Wild Men 's Dance is a " work of vehement , unruly rhythm , compounded of dense chord clusters ... and brutal accents . Complex rhythms and gigantic crashing chords traverse the whole range of the piano . This remains a work for a great virtuoso able to imbue it with a burning , ferocious energy . " Aaron Copland recalled a performance of it as the most controversial moment of his later teen years . In 2002 , a New York Times reviewer declared that it " remains a shocker . " According to critic Kyle Gann , Impressions of the Thames , " if Debussyan in its textures , used more prickly chords than Debussy ever dared , and also clusters in the treble range and a low pounding that foreshadowed Charlemagne Palestine , yet modulated ... with a compelling sense of unity . "

As an example of what Ornstein described as " abstract music " , his Sonata for Violin and Piano (1915 ; not 1913 as is often erroneously given) went even further ; " to the brink " , as he put it : " I would say that [the sonata] had brought music just to the very edge I just simply drew back and said , ' beyond that lies complete chaos . ' " In 1916 , critic Herbert F. Peyser declared that " the world has indeed moved between the epoch of Beethoven and of Leo Ornstein . " That spring , Ornstein gave a series of recitals in the New York home of one of his advocates ; these concerts were crucial precedents for the composer societies around which the modern music scene would thrive in the 1920s . Ornstein also traveled to New Orleans in 1916 , where he discovered jazz . The following year , critic James Huneker wrote ,

I never thought I should live to hear Arnold Schoenberg sound tame , yet tame he sounds ? almost timid and halting ? after Ornstein who is , most emphatically , the only true @-@ blue , genuine , Futurist composer alive . "

In addition to " futurist " , Ornstein was also sometimes labeled ? along with Cowell and others in their circle ? an " ultra @-@ modernist . " An article in the Baltimore Evening Sun referred to him as " the intransigent pianist , who has set the entire musical world by the ears and who is probably the most discussed figure on the concert stage . " In The Musical Quarterly he was described as " the most salient musical phenomenon of our time . " Swiss @-@ born composer Ernest Bloch declared him " the single composer in America who displays positive signs of genius . "

By 1918 , Ornstein was sufficiently renowned that a full @-@ length biography of him was published . The book , by Frederick H. Martens , suggests not only the level of Ornstein 's fame at age twenty @-@ four , but also his divisive effect on the cultural scene :

Leo Ornstein to many represents an evil musical genius wandering without the utmost pale of tonal orthodoxy , in a weird No @-@ Man 's Land haunted with tortuous sound , with wails of futuristic despair , with cubist shrieks and post @-@ impressionist cries and crashes . He is the great anarchy , the iconoclast .

Cowell , who had encountered Ornstein while studying in New York , would pursue a similarly radical style as part of a grand intellectual and cultural mission , which also involved ambitious writings on music theory and publishing and promotional efforts in support of the avant @-@ garde . Ornstein , the vanguard iconoclast of American classical music , followed a much more idiosyncratic muse : " I 'm guided entirely by just my musical instinct as to what I feel is consequential or inconsequential . " Evidence of that is the fact that , even at the height of his ultra @-@ modernist notoriety , he also wrote several lyrical , tonal works , such as the First Sonata for Cello and Piano : " [It] was written in less than a week under a compulsion that was not to be resisted " , Ornstein

later said . " 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 . " Commenting on the piece after Ornstein 's death approximately three @-@ quarters of a century later , critic Martin Anderson wrote that it " rivals Rachmaninov 's [cello sonata] in gorgeous tunes . "

Before the turn of the decade ? probably in 1918 or 1919 ? Ornstein produced one of his most distinctive works involving tone clusters , Suicide in an Airplane . Its score calls for a high @-@ speed bass ostinato pattern meant to simulate the sound of engines and capture the sensation of flight . The piece would serve as an inspiration for the Airplane Sonata (1923) of George Antheil , who reflected Ornstein 's influence in other works such as Sonata Sauvage (1923) . Writing in 2000 , pianist and historian Joseph Smith cited Suicide in an Airplane among those pieces of Ornstein 's that " represented (and may still represent) the ne plus ultra of pianistic violence . "

= = Transition in the 1920s = =

Ornstein , burned out , effectively gave up his celebrated performance career in the early 1920s . His " music was soon forgotten " , writes scholar Erik Levi , leaving him " an essentially peripheral figure in American musical life . " As described by Broyles , " Ornstein had mostly retired by the time the new music organizations of the 1920s appeared . Too early and too independent , Ornstein had little desire to participate in the modernist movement by the time it caught hold in the United States [He] seemed little bothered by the publicity or the lack of it . He listened only to his own voice . "

Ornstein 's primary compositional style was changing as well . As described by latter @-@ day critic Gordon Rumson , his

musical language organised itself into a shimmering , luminous gradation between simplicity and harshness . The melodies have a Hebraic tint , and Ornstein does not shy from placing dissonant and tonal music side by side . This shifting of style is just one of Ornstein 's creative tools . More importantly , there is a directness of emotion that makes the music genuinely appealing . It should also be noted that his music is ideally written for the piano and is clearly the work of a master pianist .

This transformation contributed to Ornstein 's fade into obscurity . Those whom he had inspired now rejected him , almost as vehemently as the critics he had shocked a decade earlier . " [H] e had been radical modernism 's poster boy throughout the 1910s , and when he abandoned that style for one more expressive the ultramoderns reacted as a lover scorned " , according to Broyles . " Not even Cowell , known for his accepting temperament , could forgive Ornstein . "

Having abandoned not only the concert stage , but also the income that went with it , Ornstein signed an exclusive contract with the Ampico label to make piano rolls . He made over two dozen rolls for Ampico , mostly of a nonmodernist repertoire ; the composers he performed most often were Chopin , Schumann , and Liszt . Two rolls contained his own compositions : Berceuse (Cradle Song) (c . 1920 ? 21) and Prélude tragique (1924) . Ornstein never recorded , in any format , even a single example of his futurist pieces which had brought him fame .

In the mid @-@ 1920s , Ornstein left New York to accept a teaching post at the Philadelphia Musical Academy , later part of the University of the Arts . During this period , he wrote some of his most important work , including the Piano Concerto , commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1925 . Two years later , he produced his Piano Quintet . An epic tonal work marked by an adventurous use of dissonance and complex rhythmic arrangements , it is recognized as a masterpiece of the genre .

= = Later life = =

In the early 1930s , Ornstein gave his last public performance . A few years later , he and his wife ? the former Pauline Cosio Mallet @-@ Prévost (1892 ? 1985) , also a pianist ? founded the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia . Among the students there , John Coltrane and Jimmy Smith would go on to major careers in jazz . The Ornsteins directed and taught at the school until it closed with their retirement in 1953 . They essentially disappeared from public view until the mid

@-@ 1970s , when they were tracked down by music historian Vivian Perlis : the couple was spending the winter in a Texas trailer park (they also had a home in New Hampshire) . Ornstein had continued to compose music ; equipped with a powerful memory , he was not diligent about writing it all down and had not sought to publicize it for decades . Though his style had tempered greatly since the 1910s , it retained its unique character , and with his rediscovery came a new burst of productivity . In Gann 's description , piano works composed by Ornstein in his eighties , such as Solitude and Rendezvous at the Lake , featured melodies that " sprang through endless ornate curlicues that brought no other composer to mind . "

In 1988 , the ninety @-@ two @-@ year @-@ old Ornstein wrote his Seventh Piano Sonata . With this composition Ornstein became , by a couple of years , the oldest published composer ever to produce a substantial new work . In September 1990 , at the age of ninety @-@ four , Ornstein 's final work , the Eighth Piano Sonata , was completed and given its world premiere . The names of the sonata 's movements reflect not only the passage of a remarkable span of time , but an undimmed sense of humor and exploratory spirit : I. " Life 's Turmoil and a Few Bits of Satire " / II . " A Trip to the Attic ? A Tear or Two for a Childhood Forever Gone " (a . " The Bugler " / b . " A Lament for a Lost Toy " / c . " A Half @-@ Mutilated Cradle ? Berceuse " / d . " First Carousel Ride and Sounds of a Hurdy @-@ Gurdy ") / III . " Disciplines and Improvisations " . Reviewing the work 's New York debut , critic Anthony Tommasini wrote , " Between the roaring craziness of the first and third movements , the middle movement is a suite of four short musical musings on childhood mementos discovered in an attic . Though completely incongruous , the shift in tone is audacious and the music disarming . The audience listened raptly , then erupted in applause . "

In February 2002 , Ornstein died peacefully in his home in Green Bay , Wisconsin . He is survived by his daughter Edith Valentine of De Pere , Wisconsin , his son , Severo Ornstein of Woodside , California , five grandchildren , and four great @-@ grandchildren . At the age of 108 , he was among the longest @-@ lived of composers .

= = Popular Culture = =

Leo Ornstein is referenced in the 2012 dark @-@ fantasy hit game Dark Souls . One of the most challenging fights in the game is Dragonslayer Ornstein , whose armor and crest bear a lion motif , and drops the Leo ring upon defeat .

= = = Listening = = =

Leo Ornstein Centenary Program , December 1 , 1992 the composer , on the occasion of his 100th birthday , visits with Charles Amirkhanian

Leo Ornstein : The Last of the Original 20th Century Mavericks Ornstein and his wife interviewed by Vivian Perlis

Ornstein Piano Music Marc @-@ André Hamelin 's performance of Suicide in an Airplane from the Hyperion Leo Ornstein : Piano Music

Sarah Cahill Plays Ornstein video of 2002 performance of A Morning in the Woods (Sep 28 , 1971) for solo piano