



LEO ORNSTEIN
FANTASY AND METAPHOR

Sarah Cahill, Piano

Until the age of about 101, Leo Ornstein was in exceptionally good health, and lived in his own apartment. But by the time he reached 107 he had moved into the Santa Maria Nursing Home in Green Bay, Wisconsin. To what did he attribute his longevity? Lots of sleep ("Up with the chickens, to bed with the chickens" was his motto) and big breakfasts. On November 25, 2000, the morning I came to see him at the nursing home, he had had a typical breakfast: a glass of orange juice, four cups of coffee, oatmeal with half and half, a bowl of fifteen strawberries, a sticky bun, dry corn flakes, and three pieces of toast.

I was about to perform Ornstein's music the following week on his birthday, December 2, at the Miller Theater in New York (it was the Miller's director George Steel who had recommended Ornstein's music to me). I brought Leo Ornstein a dozen red roses. As he lay in bed, it was possible to see traces of the preternaturally handsome young man who introduced Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* and Schoenberg's op. 11 to America. His eyes sparkled.

I had my scores and pointed to a series of chord clusters in *Impressions of the Thames* from about 1913. "Did you play these with your fists?" I asked. "Yes," he answered, extending his bony fingers, "my fists or the palms of my hands." But otherwise he only wanted to tell two stories, over and over. The first was about his cello sonata from 1915, which he read through with Hans Kindler, principal cellist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. "He was absolutely livid," Ornstein told me. "He was immense, three times my size. He just picked me up and held me like a doll, and said 'Do you realize you've written one of the greatest pieces of music for the cello that I've

ever heard?' Suddenly I began to realize that I had some value within myself."

The other story was about meeting Pauline Mallet-Prevost, who was his wife for 67 years, as well as his lifelong amanuensis. "She was a Park Avenue debutante with three maids, and I was the typical penniless Lower East Side boy. But we fell totally and completely in love, that's all there is to it. Now that she's gone, I beg the Lord to release me. But it's not that easy to die."

Leo Ornstein lived for another year and a half after that meeting, until February 24, 2002, leaving us with a stupendous range of music composed over eight decades, including 1800 pages of solo piano music. What you hear on this CD represents only a tiny fraction of his stylistic breadth and scope.

He was born in Kremenchug in Ukraine in 1893. When he was ten, he played for the legendary pianist Josef Hofmann, who recommended him to the St. Petersburg Conservatory. But political upheaval in Russia forced his family to emigrate to New York in 1907, where fifteen-year-old Ornstein enrolled in what would later become the Juilliard School of Music, studying with Bertha Fiering Tapper. In 1910 he made his New York debut. His formidable technique and onstage charisma dazzled American audiences, and he began introducing his own "ultra-futurist" compositions which, until the 21st century, terrified other pianists. His concerts attracted crowds of thousands. A report from 1919 describes how, in New York, the audience "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."

In Ms. Tapper's classes, he met his future wife, Pauline Mallet-Prevost.

Many of Ornstein's scores are in her handwriting. When, at the height of his fame, he suddenly retired from the concert stage, it was she who persuaded him to keep composing, and she would write down the vast amounts of music he heard flooding his head, by dictation, as he spun them out on the piano.

Over the next several decades, Ornstein retreated more and more from his public. He and Pauline started the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia (where John Coltrane was a student). He continued to compose, almost exclusively for the piano, and his greatest burst of activity occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when he wrote several large-scale piano sonatas. His final work, his Eighth Piano Sonata, was completed in 1990 when he was in his late 90s. He never promoted himself, or sent his music out to performers or publishers. When Charles Amirkhanian went looking for him in the late 1970s for an NPR series called *Elder Statesmen of American Music*, he discovered the Ornsteins living in a trailer park in Texas.

Over the last few years, many of Ornstein's early radical pieces - *A La Chinoise*, *Suicide in an Airplane*, *Wild Men's Dance* - have been performed and recorded, as his music is rediscovered. His late sonatas, his piano quintet, and piano concerto have also been championed. But there remains a vast number of scores, especially from the 1960s to the 1990s, which have never been played. Of the fifteen compositions on this CD, only two of them, **Morning in the Woods** and **To a Grecian Urn**, have ever been performed in public by other pianists.

You might wonder if these pieces should be judged more harshly because they were composed in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than in the 1900s, when their

romantic lyricism may have been more current. But therein lies the enigma of Ornstein: throughout his life, he bucked any compositional trends. If he felt like writing expressive, tonal music, he did so, without considering whether it was in style at the time. It took some courage, and a certain amount of conviction, to keep composing without a receptive public, especially after early years of attention and adulation. Frankly, considering much of the abstract and analytical piano music written in the 60s and 70s, I for one am grateful for Ornstein's direct emotional expressiveness.

The trajectory of Ornstein's career runs parallel, in many ways, to those of two of his acquaintances, Henry Cowell and George Antheil. All three began as daring young iconoclasts; all three were touted as revolutionary innovators when they were barely in their twenties; and all three baffled admirers by "regressing" towards the comforts of conventional harmony and tunefulness. How Ornstein differs from Cowell and Antheil, however, is through the remarkable range of his later work as he kept composing through his nineties: complex polyrhythms, ferocious dissonance, and even atonality often coexist with breathtaking lyricism. He was unpredictable to the end.

Once Ornstein had composed his thousands of pages, his son Severo undertook the gargantuan task of organizing and editing them and putting them into print, which occupied him for more than ten years. They are now all available as free PDF files at www.LeoOrnstein.net. Most of the scores are devoid of metronome markings, dynamic markings, and tempo indications. In an era when modernist composers were crowding the page with hyperexplicit notation, Ornstein left all these

choices up to the pianist. A good example is **A Morning in the Woods**, composed in a cottage in the White Mountains in New Hampshire, which has no dynamic markings whatsoever. The composer felt strongly that the pianist should be able to shape his pieces based on musical development rather than whatever “f” or “p” appeared on the page. Some pedal notations, however, are explicit: one of his favorite devices involves sustaining the pedal in the final measures of a piece, creating atmospheric layers which gradually evaporate.

Of the pieces on this album, the **Three Tales** are the most virtuosic and harmonically adventurous. Their phantasmagorical aura recalls Ravel’s *Gaspard de la Nuit*, which Ornstein knew intimately. The **Three Fantasy Pieces** were culled from three separate manuscripts at the Yale Library. **To a Grecian Urn** was apparently Pauline’s favorite of her husband’s piano works. In the songlike gestures of **Solitude**, one idea flows naturally and organically into the next, with flexible rhythms and harmonic freedom.

Severo tells a story of laying out many of his father’s miscellaneous piano scores which didn’t fit together anywhere else, and deciding to collect them all in one volume. “What should I call them?” he asked his father, who replied, after a moment’s thought, “Call them ‘Metaphors.’” Some of the **Metaphors** are in A B A form; others wander through improvisatory excursions, which replicate Ornstein’s own improvisations at the piano, notated carefully by Pauline. Only six of the sixteen *Metaphors* are here, and the other ten await discovery and performance.

– Sarah Cahill

Recorded July 2006
at SUNY Purchase Recital Hall

Produced by Foster Reed and Joel Gordon
Recording engineer: Joel Gordon
Edited by Joel Gordon

Thanks to: Severo Ornstein, Foster and Tricia Reed, Joel Gordon,
John and Miranda Sanborn, and Jerry Kuderna



LEO ORNSTEIN FANTASY AND METAPHOR

Sarah Cahill, Piano

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 1 | Fantasy Piece #1 (1960-61) | 3:05 |
| 2 | Fantasy Piece #2 (1960-61) | 4:28 |
| 3 | Fantasy Piece #3 (1960-61) | 3:42 |
| 4 | A Morning in the Woods (1971) | 6:27 |
| 5 | Three Tales:Rendezvous at the Lake (1977) | 5:27 |
| 6 | Three Tales: A Fantasy (1977) | 8:32 |
| 7 | Three Tales: Midnight Waltz (1977) | 5:37 |
| 8 | Metaphor #1 (1959) | 3:30 |
| 9 | Metaphor #3 (1964) | 5:10 |
| 10 | Metaphor #8 | 2:20 |
| 11 | Metaphor #9 | 4:10 |
| 12 | Metaphor #11 | 2:26 |
| 13 | Metaphor #16 | 4:31 |
| 14 | Solitude (1978) | 4:33 |
| 15 | To a Grecian Urn | 3:47 |

