

## About Leo Ornstein

### Overview

In his comparatively brief heyday - from about 1910 to 1925 - Leo Ornstein was the five foot four giant of modern music in America. As a young pianist of international repute, he not only introduced American audiences to the works of modern composers from Debussy to Schoenberg, but also captivated (and sometimes appalled) them with his own, often fearsome compositions. Carol Oja, in her recent book *Making Music Modern*, describes him as "the single most important figure on the American modern-music scene in the 1910s."

But in the late 1920s, as abruptly as he had skyrocketed from humble Russian origins to prominence, he disappeared from public view. Thereafter he taught and composed in utmost privacy until his death in 2002. Within a few years after he stopped performing, most of the music world forgot about him. But history can be surprisingly fickle. Thanks in part to a paper by Vivian Perlis of Yale University and to the first modern recordings of his music, in the 1970s - almost half a century after his disappearance - there began to be a resurgence of interest in this long-forgotten figure.

Born in Russia around 1893 (the exact year and day are uncertain), Leo Ornstein was recognized as a prodigy at an early age. He studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory under Alexander Glazounov but in 1907 was forced to flee with his family to America where he entered what would one day become the Juilliard School of Music. There he studied with Bertha Fiering Tapper in whose classes he met the influential Claire Reis. More significantly, he met Pauline Mallet-Prevost, herself a fine pianist, whom he would marry in 1918; she would become his lifelong collaborator, and musical scribe.

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Leo, in 1918

In 1910 Mrs. Tapper accompanied him on his first foreign tour and introduced him to important musical figures throughout Europe. His New York debut took place in 1911 with a completely conventional program. However, within a few years he was dazzling New York audiences with the works of Albeniz, Scott, Schoenberg, Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin, Franck, and Bartok, many of which he performed for the first time in the U.S. He also created a furor with his own radical compositions and soon came to be considered an equal of Stravinsky and Schoenberg.

But along with more radical, atonal works he also composed relatively conservative music, and this confounded his audiences. Having learned to accept him as something of a musical freak, people found such works a retreat. When some of his more lyrical compositions produced accusations of "backsliding," he concluded that listeners were more interested in novelty and sensation than in what he considered musical substance. He began to feel increasingly remote from the direction modern music was taking, in particular the search for novelty for its own sake. Ironically, having been irrevocably labeled as a radical, he was now unwilling to bend to the demands of his own image. Instead he insisted on writing in whatever style seemed demanded by the music itself.

Toward the end of the 1920s, at the height of a successful concert career, he stopped performing in order to devote himself more fully to composing in whatever manner he saw fit. He gave a few more sporadic concerts until about 1933, after which he never again performed in public. Struggling with a small hand and a compulsive perfectionism, he had always been an

extremely nervous performer. Thus it was with considerable relief that he turned to teaching. He and his wife Pauline established a music school in Philadelphia that grew to substantial size during the second world war. Teaching occupied most of his time and relatively few compositions date from this period. Finally, in the mid 1950s, the Ornsteins turned their school over to one of the other teachers, and thereafter he was able to devote his time entirely to composing.

Although in his early career he had been an ardent advocate of modern music, including his own, he now refused to put any effort whatsoever into promoting his own work. He had lost interest in public recognition, and argued instead that it was his business to produce music whose merit would likely be recognized, if at all, only after he was dead and musical tastes had regained what he considered a better balance. With such an attitude it's hardly surprising that the music world ignored him, and as time passed most people forgot about him, and those who remembered him assumed that he had died.

Without any question, the person who had the largest impact on Leo Ornstein was his wife, Pauline. She came from a family with a long and distinguished heritage and had had a very protected upbringing in New York. By contrast, Leo, an immigrant Jew (although a confirmed atheist), knew nothing of any antecedents prior to his cantor father. Given the enormous differences in their backgrounds, it was predicted that their marriage wouldn't last, but this proved seriously mistaken. During their 67 years together they were virtually never apart. She worshipped both him and his music and did everything she possibly could to keep him writing. After he retired from teaching in the mid-1950s they traveled for a year or two, but then she saw to it that they settled down and that he got back to work composing.



Leo, at about age 40



Leo and Pauline, about 1940

The couple, feeling no need of outside social stimulation, worked quietly together for nearly two decades in almost total isolation. Then in the 1970s, during a revival of interest in American music of the early part of the twentieth century, he was re-discovered, alive and well, and living in a trailer park in Texas. There followed a renewed burst of interest in his music and nearly a dozen LP discs were made. Since then there have been celebratory concerts from time to time and today musicians increasingly perform his music both in the U.S. and elsewhere. New CDs have appeared and more are on the way. Despite this, many of his compositions have never been heard in public.

After the death of Pauline in 1985, Ornstein ceased composing altogether for a time. He had depended on her not only as a companion but also as a scribe, critic, and motivator. In time he began keeping a daily musical Journal of short piano works. Gradually some of these began to increase in size and eventually one grew into the fierce *7th Piano Sonata*. In 1990 he produced his last major work, the powerful *8th Sonata* into which he poured not only his usual tremendous energy but also nearly every style in his repertoire.

It is nearly impossible to characterize Ornstein's music because it spans such a wide spectrum of styles. He resisted the notion that one should shoehorn ideas into a single mold and instead felt that each new idea

demanded its own setting. It is far too simplistic to believe, as some have suggested, that after an early burst of radical creativity, he retreated to a much more conservative, "neo-romantic" style. Indeed some of his later music fits that description, but throughout his long career he veered in first one direction and then another, sometimes even working simultaneously on pieces of dramatically different character. One nearly omnipresent feature of his music is its enormous energy. Some of it is deeply romantic and strikes one today as totally straightforward. There are moments of great peace and beauty, but often these are only interludes between violently energetic passages. Many of the early piano works still sound strikingly modern, and in later years Ornstein developed a personal idiom featuring multiple simultaneous keys or ambiguous "almost" keys. In some of his late works - for example the third quartet and the last two piano sonatas - he combined divergent styles within a single piece. These may well represent a deliberate effort to thwart those who would try to pigeonhole him.

Although some of the piano pieces are simple to play, in general his extraordinary pianistic ability is manifested in the difficulty of much of his piano music. Thanks to this same pianism, however, the music often lies happily under the hand and is a pleasure to play. Looking at some of his works it is difficult to believe that Ornstein himself had an unusually small hand. In later life he felt that it had been madness for someone with a hand of that size to attempt to play the piano professionally.

A good many web sites contain short bios of Ornstein. Among these are the following (each of which contains articles about Ornstein by Canadian pianist and composer Gordon Rumson):

- <http://www.mvdaily.com/articles/1999/12/ornstein.htm>
- [http://www.wiscomposers.org/news/1998\\_06/feature.html](http://www.wiscomposers.org/news/1998_06/feature.html)

<http://webtext.library.yale.edu/xml2html/music/orn-col.htm> contains a brief description of the Ornstein archive at Yale University Music Library as well as a short bio.

An early book about Ornstein, *Leo Ornstein: The Man, His Ideas, His Work*, was written by Frederick Martens in 1918 when Ornstein, was only 26. He had, however, already achieved sufficient fame to warrant such attention. The original edition is no longer available but it has been reissued in facsimile as one of the series *The Modern Jewish Experience*. Although a number of the works discussed therein have been lost, the book is an invaluable resource for those interested in Ornstein's early years and his music. It is available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0405067321/002-1644282-0852068>.

The initial chapter of *Making Music Modern*, by Carol Oja [Oxford University Press, 2000], is devoted to Ornstein, setting him in a historic context from a contemporary perspective.

*Composers' Voices from Ives to Ellington, An Oral History of American Music* (Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleve, Yale University Press, 2005), contains a chapter on Ornstein and includes a CD containing some of his comments.

A complete biography by the musicologists Michael Broyles and Denise von Glahn is available either from the publisher at [http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/catalog/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=41666](http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=41666) or from Amazon.com at [http://www.amazon.com/Leo-Ornstein-Modernist-Dilemmas-Personal/dp/0253348943/ref=sr\\_1\\_2/002-6160892-1410413?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1192126900&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.com/Leo-Ornstein-Modernist-Dilemmas-Personal/dp/0253348943/ref=sr_1_2/002-6160892-1410413?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1192126900&sr=1-2)



Leo, at age 107

