

Leo Ornstein was born in Kremenchug, in southwest Russia, in 1892. His father was a cantor, and as a child Ornstein absorbed not only Jewish liturgical music but Greek and Armenian chant, and Russian folk music as well. These influences are featured and blended in his music, together with a highly personal language of dissonant tonality. As a boy, he was a prodigious pianist, and at the age of ten, entered the Petrograd Conservatory. When he was fifteen he emigrated with his family to New York City, where he entered the Institute of Musical Art (now the Juilliard School) and studied with Bertha Fiering Tapper, whom he credits with being the strongest single influence in his musical development.

Ornstein developed into a pianist of formidable reputation, and between 1910 and 1933 was in the front rank of concertizing pianists here and abroad. His technique was likened to that of Rachmaninoff. Besides performing the standard repertory—notably Liszt and Chopin—he presented the new music of his day, which included works by Bartók, Kodaly, Schoenberg, and the first American performances of Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*. He also began performing his own daring, dissonant works, with arresting titles such as *Wild Man's Dance*, and *Suicide in an Airplane*, both from 1913. He became quite controversial among listeners and critics, exciting either admiration and enthusiasm, or repulsion.

Composition became increasingly important to him, and some of his music was published. The noted violinist Louis Krasner, a New England Conservatory student in the 1920s, told of being expelled from a chamber music class for bringing in Ornstein's Violin and Piano Sonata of 1918.

In 1933 Ornstein played his last public concert and disappeared from view. One of his last performances was of his *Piano Quintet*, with the Stradivari String Quartet. First violinist Wolfe Wolfensohn related to me that Ornstein directed rehearsals in a shy but gracious manner.

Ornstein and his wife Pauline (also a pianist) lived and raised a family in Philadelphia (where he founded the Ornstein School of Music), with a summer home in New Hampshire. Later the couple lived in Texas. His later works (with titles like *Some New York Scenes* and *Biography in Sonata Form*) are less overtly dissonant than some of his more notorious early works, though many are large-scale. Ornstein composed steadily until his wife's death in 1985, and two large piano sonatas were produced since. As of this writing, the 104-year-old Ornstein is living in Green Bay, Wisconsin. His output includes works for piano solo, chamber music, and orchestral and vocal music.

The recent public notice and availability of Ornstein's works owe a great debt to the music historian Vivian Perlis, who sought him out and persuaded him to deposit his manuscripts at Yale, where she administers an important history project dealing with American composers and performers.

The *Piano Quintet* is always tonal, though not in a traditionally "functional" manner. Dissonance is used in a highly individual way. Asymmetrical rhythms and phrase lengths abound. Long buildups of gradually piled-up dissonance arrive at forceful climaxes with panoramic scope and power. Sweeping melodies float beatlessly over strongly marked metric supports. In the outer movements, the mood is often epic; one is reminded of the movies of Eisenstein and the great Russian

landscapes, marauding bands of Cossacks, affecting cantorial wails—the irresistible momentum of history. The slow movement is an eloquent expression of human sadness.

In the String Quartet No. 3 (1976), the tonality is much more oblique. There is constant tonal reference, but Ornstein seldom alights squarely in a clearly defined key. The listener is often oriented towards a tonal center, but there are unexpected deflections and pivotings that open new horizons. The dissonance is less harsh than in the quintet, yet more textured and varied.

Ornstein has never sought publicity for his thoughts and works, but his interviews and letters reveal a searching intelligence about music and its importance in human life. In the 1980s he wrote:

"I have never been interested in devising a personal system in which to compose. That would at once create its own limitations. I have no reason to believe that I would write any better music than when allowing ideas to come into my head freely without the regimentation of some preconceived formula. This does not mean that I accept random motion as a criterion. If you follow a random procedure, then the music becomes directionless. It is then like the man in space where there is no up nor down, nor any point of reference. I do not believe the arts are destined to haphazardness but I do not pretend to understand the origin of ideas. When things do occur to me, the only thing that I can do is to use my best judgment as to what seems to me worth putting down on paper. My judgment may be faulty, or it may be especially keen, but we all have to live with our own perceptions and limitations. Most modern theorists can be in their own way as limiting as classical dogmas. They all have, for me, the pedantic impotence of uselessness.

"I have been for a lifetime trying to understand what it is that we respond to in music. I am still thoroughly puzzled. I know only that I react to certain sequences and relationships and others leave me totally unmoved. This apparently happens at various levels of sophistication to almost everyone. So far, no one has been able to explain the universality of the response to music. When one realizes that even the most concrete Chopin *Nocturne* cannot be held in the hand, and that the whole thing is nothing but a highly complex disturbance of the air, the mystery and wonder only deepen. Why should air pulsating against our eardrums cause us to feel a variety of emotions? Nothing would be more strange, yet this has been experienced by every culture from the most primitive to the most avant-garde.

"There is, without doubt, some deep relationship between the laws of musical sound and the reactions of the human nervous system. I feel only that systems that I have seen do not either explain or deal with this as well as does the unaided musical sense. This, in my opinion, is more to be trusted than all the ingenious structures designed to guide the composer."

—*Liner notes by Daniel Stepner*

Born in New Jersey, pianist **Janice Weber** began her studies with Lucy Boyan Balakian and made her orchestral debut at the age of twelve in New York's Town Hall. A summa cum laude graduate of the Eastman School of Music (where she studied with José Echaniz, Walter Hendl, and Eugene

List), she presented from memory the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1, during her sophomore year in a series of three recitals in three days. Following graduation, she continued her studies in New York with Nadia Reisenberg and in Zurich with Cecile Genhart.

Miss Weber has performed with the New York Philharmonic, the American Composers Orchestra, the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, the Boston Pops, and at the Newport Festival. She has toured Yugoslavia, Turkey, and the Baltic States under the auspices of the U.S. Information Service.

Miss Weber is a member of the piano faculty at the Boston Conservatory and performs frequently on its chamber music series. She is a contributor to the *Musical Times* in London as well as to American publications.

Her recordings include an album of little-known Rachmaninoff transcriptions and the flute and piano works of Sigfrid Karg-Elert. She recorded Liszt's last Hungarian Rhapsody, one of only two living pianists to be included in a compendium of historic performances by nineteen legendary artists. The recording subsequently won the International Liszt Prize.

Since its formation in 1980, the **Lydian String Quartet** has inspired critical acclaim worldwide. The quartet's interpretive mastery of such traditional repertory as Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven, and Ravel, along with its special flair for contemporary music, has won the ensemble prizes at international competitions in Canada, France, and England, as well as the prestigious Naumburg Award for Chamber Music. Essential to the spirit of the Lydian is the commissioning and recording of new works. Their project "American Originals: 20th Century Classics of Today and Tomorrow" defines and celebrates the rich repertory of contemporary American classical music through the unique voice of the string quartet. Begun in 1995, the project continues into the twenty-first century, and will include lectures by distinguished composers, music critics, and music historians as well as newly commissioned works.

The Lydian String Quartet has concertized extensively throughout the United States at venues including Lincoln Center, the Library of Congress, and the Kennedy Center. Internationally, the quartet has been presented in a series at Wigmore Hall in London as well as appearing in France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, and Armenia. With education an integral part of the quartet's mission, the Lydians conduct mini-residencies in communities and universities throughout the United States.

Winner of two Chamber Music America/ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming, the quartet has also received grants from the Meet the Composer/Rockefeller Foundation/AT&T Jazz Program in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts, and numerous awards from the Aaron Copland Fund for Music. The Lydian String Quartet is on the faculty of Brandeis University.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

A Biography in Sonata Form; Three Preludes. Michael Sellers, piano. Orion 78285.

Nocturne and Dance of the Fates. Louisville Orchestra, Jorge Mester conducting. Louisville LS-754.

Piano Music. Michael Sellers, piano. Orion 75194.

Piano Music of Leo Ornstein. Martha Ann Verbit, piano. Genesis GS-1066.

Six Preludes for Cello and Piano. Aldo Parisot, cello; Victor Babini, piano. Seraphim 12090.

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

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LEO ORNSTEIN (b. 1892) 80509-2

Piano Quintet (1927)

(Published by Poon Hill Press)

1 I Allegro barbaro (13:48)

2 II Andante lamentoso (10:25)

3 III Allegro agitato (14:50)

Lydian String Quartet: Daniel Stepner and Judith Eissenberg, violins; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello; Janice Weber, piano

String Quartet No. 3 (1976)

(Unpublished manuscript)

4 I Moderato con moto (13:39)

5 II Moderato quasi improvisato (13:07)

6 III Allegro con moto (8:11)

Lydian String Quartet: Daniel Stepner and Judith Eissenberg, violins; Mary Ruth Ray, viola; Rhonda Rider, cello

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