

FIRST RECORDING OF MUSIC OF LEO ORNSTEIN

THREE MOODS

William Westney, piano

QUINTETTE for Piano and Strings, Op. 92

Daniel Stepner, Michael Strauss, violins; Peter John Sacco, viola; Thomas Mansbacher, cello; William Westney, piano

This is the first recording of the music of Leo Ornstein, who became famous — indeed, notorious — as a leading “futurist” composer between the beginning of World War I and the early twenties. Ornstein was barely out of his teens before he was internationally recognized as a composer of daring, experimental music, as well as a brilliant pianist. Critics were astounded and compared Ornstein with Schoenberg and Stravinsky; Henry Cowell wanted to study with him; audiences were intrigued and frightened; all were impressed. Then, mysteriously, he dropped out of earshot.

Leo Ornstein is now in his eighty-fourth year, living in Texas, and still composing steadily. He has recently completed a piano sonata and a string quartet. What happened to this man during the intervening half century when he went from world-wide recognition as one of the most innovative composers of the avant-garde to obscurity and a life of quiet seclusion?

Born in Russia in 1892, Ornstein went as a young prodigy from his hometown of Kremenchug to study at the Petrograd Conservatory. When the Russian Revolution threatened them, the Ornstein family moved to the lower East side of New York City. Leo studied at the Institute of Musical Art with Bertha Fiering Tapper, a fine pianist who became a strong influence on Ornstein's life and music. In 1911 Ornstein gave a debut recital at which he played traditional concert pieces; meanwhile, he was composing in a style that was as daring as — though quite different from — Charles Ives's. When, in 1913, he began to include his own “modern” music on his programs, the critics doubted his sanity. Several of these early piano works became known as the most experimental pieces of the period. Among them were *Suicide in An Airplane*, *Wild Men's Dance* (1913) and the **THREE MOODS** (1914).

The Three Moods are *Anger*, *Grief* and *Joy*. This is personal, uninhibited music which captures the essences and the extremes of the emotions. Ornstein conceived the piece in 1914 and performed it often, but it was not written out until thirty years later! This unusual procedure was due to the rigorous demands of Ornstein's concert schedule; he simply did not have time. Because of his unusual compositional process, however, it was not necessary. He hears entire works in his head in a complete and finished state and when he was younger, he could remember them intact for long periods of time.

The use of tone clusters, secundal harmonies, metrical irregularities and other unusual effects in the **MOODS** was extraordinary at such an early time and from a man of Ornstein's conventional background and education. Ornstein said in a recent interview: “I still wonder at the age of eighty what the dickens, suddenly, why should I have thought of that? Why 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, because it was so completely removed from any experience I had with music.”

Ornstein's first concert tours took him to England, Scandinavia and Paris. When he returned to this country, he brought with him works by Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin, Schoenberg, and others. In 1915 he introduced works by these composers along with several of his own works to the American public at a series of four recitals at the Band Box theater in New York. The conservative critics called Ornstein's music wildly anarchical while the liberals looked to him as the prophet of “modern” American music.

It was Ornstein's followers who labeled him futurist and demanded more and further experimental music from him. But it was difficult for him to limit himself to one type of music. Ornstein needed the opportunity to create each individual work in its own style. For this reason, and because of the fatiguing demands of public life, Ornstein retired from the concert stage at the peak of his career in about 1920. He took a position as head of the piano department of the Philadelphia Academy of Music. After a few years, Ornstein and his wife established the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia which ran successfully until Ornstein's retirement in 1953.

Ornstein made several appearances after the decision to end his concert career. In 1925 he performed his *Piano Concerto* with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski at Carnegie Hall. Olin Downes, in the *New York Times*, February 18, 1925, wrote a long and admiring review. The final sentence read: "This concerto should be heard soon again." It has not been performed since. In 1927, 1928, 1930, and 1937, Ornstein performed the *QUINTETTE* with the Pro Arte and Stradivarius Quartets.

The *QUINTETTE*, composed in 1927, is one of Ornstein's major works. It was sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and is dedicated to her. The work shows Ornstein in a less abstract, more romantic style than he had displayed in his earlier, experimental pieces. It is charged with vitality, spontaneity, and passion while retaining not only an inner logic, but extraordinarily complicated harmonic and rhythmic structures. There are long, sweeping melodies, tunes reminiscent of Russian and Cossack songs, and driving rhythmic patterns. All of these are transformed throughout the three movements of the work. There is no key center, but the piece might be described as multi-tonal rather than atonal; the harmonic structure is complex and the textures are thick. There is a quality of integrity here, as there is in each of Ornstein's works, which derives from his determination to express his own life and feelings with utmost honesty.

An exclusive recording contract with Ampico prevented Ornstein from recording anything more than piano rolls of the works of other composers. Until now, no commercial recordings have been made of Ornstein's works. But Leo Ornstein has continued to compose through the years and, although he has not sought recognition of any kind, there is re-newed interest in his music. In May, 1975 he received the Marjorie Peabody Waite Award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Since 1973 the Ornstein music manuscripts have been at the Music Library of Yale University where performers (including those on this recording) are showing increasing enthusiasm for performance of the music of Leo Ornstein.

Notes by Vivian Perlis

The young performers on this record are all located in and around Yale University, appropriately enough, since the Ornstein manuscripts are on deposit at the University library. Vivian Perlis, a noted Ives scholar also associated with Yale, is co-producer of this record. WILLIAM WESTNEY teaches advanced piano at Yale and is pianist-in-residence at the Ethel Walker School. ("What a fistful of competent fingers" wrote Ornstein after hearing a tape of this recording.) DANIEL STEPNER is concertmaster of the New Haven Symphony, where THOMAS MANSBACHER is co-principal cellist. PETER SACCO teaches at the Hartford Conservatory and MICHAEL STRAUSS is a member of the New Haven and New Jersey Symphonies.

Every third year, the National Institute of Arts and Letters presents the Marjorie Peabody Waite Award to an established composer for distinguished contribution over the years. In 1975, Leo Ornstein won the award. This recording came about as a result, with assistance from the Mark Rothko Foundation.

Produced by Carter Harman, co-produced by Vivian Perlis

(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)