THE COMPOSITIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND MUSICAL REBIRTH OF LEO ORNSTEIN

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This study focuses on the transformation of Leo Ornstein’s (1893-2002) musical language of his early years into the strikingly different approach found in his later years. Ornstein’s initial radical compositions from the mid-1910s were no doubt representative of the direction in which modern music was moving. Despite the intense fame and notoriety of his early works, Ornstein did not feel connected to the trends of modern music development, and by the end of the 1930s he withdrew from the public scene and turned to teaching. By the 1950s Ornstein had been almost forgotten, and in later life he became a very private person. He worked in almost total isolation composing a substantial amount of music well into his nineties, and died at the age of 109. The music of Ornstein’s “second life” is very different from the initial works of his early years, and most of it is unknown to the public and should be brought into scholarly light, especially since Ornstein has been considered by historians as a pivotal figure in twentieth-century music.

This study examines selected music from different stages of Ornstein’s career: Wild Men’s Dance (1913), Suicide in an Airplane (1913), Arabesques (1918), A Long Remembered Sorrow (1964), Piano Sonata No. 7 (1988). A discussion of the selected compositions will provide an understanding of Ornstein’s compositional transformation, and will familiarize musicians and scholars with this widely unknown music.
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Severo Ornstein has provided valuable information, as well as the opportunity to download his father’s scores at his Web site http://www.poonhill.com.

Sincere gratitude to Severo Ornstein for his permission to reproduce and incorporate the musical examples of his father’s music referenced in this study.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Leo Ornstein: Background and Significance

Leo Ornstein (1893–2002) was a Russian American pianist–composer who gained immense notoriety and recognition on the concert stage while introducing American audiences to the music of composers such as Schoenberg, Scriabin, Ravel, as well as his own compositions. “Until the end of the 1910s, Ornstein remained the touchstone of modernist musical expression in the [New York] city....”¹ His concerts not only exposed Americans to new music, but also “marked the beginning of musical modernism in the United States.”² Ornstein’s early works, such as *Wild Men’s Dance*, *Impressions of the Thames*, and *Suicide in an Airplane*, feature characteristics of his early style, such as tone clusters, atonality, programmatic titles, and a post-impressionist approach to harmony.³ “His music was truly revolutionary, thoroughly disorienting, radical in the extreme—a complete break with tradition.”⁴ By his early twenties Ornstein’s reputation was firmly established among many prominent musical figures. In an article from 1915, Percy Grainger grouped him with Debussy, Ravel, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky.⁵ “He earned the respect, if not endorsement, of musicians such as Theodore Leschetitzky and Ferruccio Busoni.”⁶

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Ornstein’s initial compositions immediately attracted the attention of audiences and critics. “His style, indeed, was now unlike anything else in music. He employed the piano as a percussion instrument, pounding out savage rhythms and ferocious cluster-chords with a primal energy that appalled the timid. The titles of his pieces—among them *Wild Men’s Dance* and *Suicide in an Airplane*—reflected the extremist brutality of the music and rapidly gained him notoriety.”⁷ “Piling dissonance upon dissonance and making use of strikingly barbaric and complex rhythms, Ornstein’s music stunned its [listeners].”⁸ Ornstein gradually began to feel detached from the direction modern music was moving, and felt that “listeners were more interested in novelty and sensation than in what he considered musical substance.”⁹ At the height of a successful career, Ornstein voluntarily turned away from the mainstream of musical life and retreated into increasing obscurity. He never abandoned composing, and by his nineties he had produced well over seventy works for the piano.

The music of Ornstein’s “second life” is widely unknown, and should not escape the attention of both scholars and musicians. It not only reveals a strikingly different style than his initial works of fame, but is highly interesting music that should be exposed and performed more often. Two interviews conducted late in Ornstein’s life offer evidence of a change in attitude toward composing. In 1984, while discussing his music of the 1910s, Ornstein admitted that he had pushed his highly chromatic, atonal, and dissonant music “just to the very edge…I just simply drew back and said, beyond that lies complete chaos.”¹⁰ In a 1998 interview he

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8. See note 6.
again referred to some of his early music as chaotic and “decided to pull back, to turn from a more ‘experimental’ to a more ‘expressive’ style.”

In many ways Ornstein’s later music resembles a neo-romantic style, and is often distinguished by its simplicity and highly expressive lyrical qualities. During the 1960s and 1970s, Ornstein composed several compositions reflective of this style; it is no doubt indicative of a significant change in comparison to the initial language of his early years, and remains an integral feature of his late music. The last two piano sonatas were written near the end of Ornstein’s career, and reveal a highly individual language that exemplifies a culmination and refinement of the various compositional methods reflected in his many years of composing. The Canadian composer–pianist and scholar Gordon Rumson wrote in an article in 2001 that Ornstein’s musical language “organized itself into a shimmering, luminous gradation between simplicity and harshness...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.”

Salient Literature of Subject

Ornstein’s work as a performer and composer was documented as early as 1918 when he was 26. *Leo Ornstein: The Man, His Ideas, His Work*, by Frederick Martens, a well-acquainted friend, provides information about Ornstein’s initial career as well as a discussion of some of his compositions. This early account of Ornstein and his music offers a unique perspective written during the height of his career.

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In the 1970s there was a renewed interest in the American music of the early twentieth century. Vivian Perlis, historian and faculty member at the Yale School of Music, founded Oral History, American Music (OHAM) at Yale University in 1969, which is dedicated to recordings of testimonies from significant figures in American music. Her article “The Futurist Music of Leo Ornstein” provides a biography of Ornstein and discusses some of his compositions, but is only the beginning of what developed into a significant contribution to the study of Ornstein. In 2002 Perlis wrote:

I was doing interviewing in the ’70s and people like Goddard Lieberson at CBS and Oliver Daniel at BMI would say to me: “Whatever happened to Leo Ornstein, the great futurist composer? You really ought to do something about finding him. He’s alive, but no one seems to know where he is.” He had disappeared from the music world, so it was a challenge, which is one thing about oral history: it’s partly fun and partly nerve-racking detective work to track someone down to get an interview.16

In 1977 Perlis discovered Ornstein alive and well, living with his wife in a trailer park in Brownsville, Texas. Leo and Pauline Ornstein speak with Vivian Perlis is an interview conducted by Perlis that took place in 1977 with Ornstein and his wife Pauline. In the interview Ornstein discusses many aspects of his life as a composer, and offers incredible insight into his personal attitude about his own music. Composers’ Voices from Ives to Ellington,17 written by Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleve, dedicates a chapter to Leo Ornstein including excerpts from Perlis’s interview with Ornstein from the 1970s, and an audio recording containing comments by the composer himself. Perlis provides some of the most valuable sources for this study because her interviews offer insight into Ornstein’s life with first hand comments by the composer.

17. Perlis and Van Cleve, Composers’ Voices from Ives to Ellington.
“A Conversation with Leo Ornstein,”¹⁸ by Terence O’Grady and Leo Ornstein, is an interview with Ornstein conducted by Terence O’Grady in 1984. In this interview, Ornstein discusses his view as a composer in his early years and why he withdrew from the public scene. He analyzes his compositional style and discusses his contrasting use of a radical and conservative approach to composing. Ornstein also discusses how his harmonic language changed over time, and how it changed his music.

“A Biography and Stylistic Analysis of Leo Ornstein and His Works,” a master’s thesis by Peggy Whiting, discusses Ornstein with analysis and commentary on stylistic characteristics of selected works. Whiting divides Ornstein’s output into three periods representing work written as a student, works written during the height of his career, and his later mature style which often combines characteristics from the first two periods.¹⁹

In Making Music Modern,²⁰ Carol Oja offers a contemporary perspective on Ornstein and discusses his place in American music history. Oja provides biographical information and commentary on selected works written during Ornstein’s early career. Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices²¹ is a comprehensive biography by Michael Broyles and Denise Von Glahn. It provides extensive information about Ornstein and his rise to fame in the 1920s, his withdrawal from the public scene, and how a rather short revival of his music developed in the 1970s.

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18. O’Grady and Ornstein, “A Conversation with Leo Ornstein.”
Leo Ornstein’s son Severo created a Web site dedicated to his father which contains information on Ornstein’s life, his personality, his attitude and approach toward composing, special notes regarding the notation of selected works, and a memoir by Pauline, Ornstein’s wife. Although there is no formal musical analysis, Ornstein’s son provides valuable information about the composer. In recent years more recordings of Ornstein’s music have been produced, yet most of his compositions are unknown and have never been heard in public.
CHAPTER 2
EARLY COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

The music of Leo Ornstein’s early years is a reflection of the radical compositional language that immediately attracted the attention of audiences and critics, and firmly established his reputation as a formidable force in modern music in America. *Wild Men’s Dance* (1913), *Suicide in an Airplane* (1913), and the *Arabesques* (1918), are representative of Ornstein’s early style distinguished by his use of programmatic titles, tone clusters, highly dissonant harmonic language, varying meters, complex rhythmic language, and extreme musical indications. Ornstein personally felt his music should communicate directly to the listener and “should be spontaneous and thoroughly uninhibited,” even if it meant abandoning certain principles including “uniformity of style.”¹ Ornstein presented the compositional method of his early years to Frank Martens, who wrote about the composer in 1918 describing Ornstein’s process of composing as having “several key components...the pieces were written at one sitting and inspired by a subtle musical intuition rather than a mathematical design, they were never compose[d] at the piano, they were developed in his mind and in some cases not notated for years.”²

Wild Men’s Dance

*Wild Men’s Dance* was composed in 1913, and published in 1915 by Schott. Approximately three minutes in length, it includes roughly seventeen tempo indications and thirty-three meter changes, and exemplifies the highly dissonant sounds and striking rhythmic

language of Ornstein’s early music. Although there is no formal structure dictated by a tonal scheme, there is organization through unity and integration of thematic and rhythmic ideas. The first theme (Example 2) is derived from the introductory material (Example 1), and is restated (Examples 3 and 4) before the second theme (Example 5). The second theme is repeated and presented in a modified form before the return of the main theme (Example 6), following a final statement of the second theme (Example 7).

Example 1. Ornstein, *Wild Men’s Dance*, mm. 1–6. *Wild Men’s Dance, Suicide in an Airplane,* and the *Arabesques* use a notation system in which accidentals apply only to the note in which they precede. This procedure is used by Ornstein in many of his early dissonant works.

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Frederick Martens wrote that Ornstein himself referred to the *Wild Men’s Dance* as a “study in concrete rhythms...what I tried to do was to write a dance so intense in expression that, though physically impossible of execution as a dance, it would call up to the listener on the wings of imagination the limitless strength and abandon of the nature dance in primal times!”

Suicide in an Airplane

*Suicide in an Airplane* was composed in 1913 and not published until 1990 by Poonhill Press. The piece “is said to have been inspired by a newspaper article in which an aviator took his own life by crashing his plane into the ground.” The article’s headline “Russian Army Officer Shuts Off the Motor and Drops 600 Feet” appeared in the *New York Times* on April 2, 1913. *Suicide in an Airplane* is similar to the compositional language of *Wild Men’s Dance*—full of highly dissonant language and complex rhythmic structures. The recurring material throughout the piece provides a sense of organization and unity, even though there is no specific form. The main material is found at the opening in the bass (Example 8) which imitates the sound of a plane’s motor. It is the main foundation of material used throughout the piece, and is often accompanied by various rhythmic patterns, such as occur in Examples 9 and 10.

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Example 8. Ornstein, *Suicide in an Airplane*, mm. 1–4.\(^7\)


\(^7\) See note 3.

**Arabesques**

The *Arabesques*, composed in 1918 and published by Breitkopf and Härtel in 1921, is a set of nine pieces each given separate titles; although Ornstein’s titles “seem to at best offer allusion rather than specific reference.”

Frederick Martens noted in his book published the same year the *Arabesques* were composed, that “they are among the most interesting things [Ornstein] has done, and their fantastic interweaving of musical lines is carried out with a fine sense of effect. Their individual titles give wide latitude to the imagination of the player.”

The *Arabesques* reveal early signs of a shift in Ornstein’s compositional language, though they still reflect many of the elements that had distinguished other works composed around the same time. A few qualities that may strike the listener upon hearing the *Arabesques* include the use

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of formal structures, a more expressive lyrical treatment of musical content, and the frequent use of ostinato figures. Although the music is quite dissonant at times, there are moments of melodic material as well. A brief discussion of each piece will reveal these various characteristics. No. 1, “The Isle of Elephants,” features a continuous ostinato treble figure accompanied by a melody in the bass (Example 11.) This material forms an ‘A’ section, and leads to a ‘B’ section marked $ff$ before a restatement of the ‘A’ section, which indicates ABA form.


The main thematic material in “Primal Echo” is based on a rhythmic pattern of descending ninths over an ostinato bass chordal pattern (Example 12), and is subsequently developed over two different ostinato bass patterns (Example 13) before reaching a climax (Example 14) shortly before the end of the piece.

10. See note 3.

“Chant of the Hindoo Priests” features a melody in the treble, accompanied by a triplet pattern in the bass (Example 15). This style of writing is representative of Ornstein's more lyrical and expressive style of writing.

“Shadowed Waters” is characterized by its rapid figurations, and ends with a glissando (Example 16), another tool that is frequently used in Ornstein’s music.
Example 16. Ornstein, *Arabesques*, “Shadowed Waters,” mm. 1–6, mm. 18–19.

“A Melancholy Landscape” features multiple changing meters—in only fifteen measures of music, there are twelve meter changes. It is also in ABA form where the opening statement (Example 17) returns at the end of the piece.

“Pompeian Fresco” is constructed in ABA form, and is distinguished by its triplet figurations and irregular rhythmic patterns (Example 18).


“Passion,” although very brief, illustrates Ornstein’s use of tone clusters and highly energetic rhythm. The first two measures (‘A’ material) are repeated and slightly modified (Example 19) before the ‘B’ section, followed by a restatement of the ‘A’ material, again in a slightly modified version (Example 20).

“Les Basoches” is characterized by its rhythmic language and dissonant harmony.

“Ornstein admitted that it contained ‘a touch of irony, a commentary on empty solemnity.’”\textsuperscript{11}

The opening rhythmic motive (Example 21) forms the basis for the subsequent material that drives the rest of the piece to the end. The combination of fifths and fourths contribute to its sharp and dissonant harmonic language. Compared to many of the other pieces in the set, it is through-composed and does not resemble a formal layout.


“The Wailing and Raging Wind” is an appropriate finale in the Arabesques as it incorporates various stylistic elements of Ornstein’s early compositional language. Although the opening statement (Example 22) is restated at the end, the overall form does not resemble any particular formal construction.


\textsuperscript{11} Anderson, Leo Ornstein: Piano Music, Liner Notes, 8.
Irregular rhythmic groupings and rhythmic sequences (Examples 23 and 24) are other features that remain a part of Ornstein’s compositional language.


The use of different ostinato patterns accompanied by a motive in the treble is restated and developed near the end of the piece, and is followed by a restatement of a slightly modified version of the opening material (Example 25).
The music in this chapter essentially provides an understanding of Ornstein’s early compositional language, and highlights many aspects representative of his early style of writing.
Ornstein frequently translated events into sound, often dictated by a specific setting such as a wild dance, a suicide in an airplane, or merely an impression of a place, as alluded to in some of the nine *Arabesques*. It was in the 1920s that Ornstein decided to turn away from a highly successful performing career, and devote his time to composing music he liked instead of what promoters and audiences expected of him. Ornstein composed a substantial amount of music in his later years that is widely unknown, and it reveals a significant transformation in his own style of writing. “Ornstein’s later style (he detested that word) leaned more toward the neo-romantic late-nineteenth masterworks than did the modernist explosions of his early years.”

The next chapter provides an understanding of Ornstein’s “second life” as reflected in his late compositional language.

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13. Perlis and Van Cleve, *Composers’ Voices from Ives to Ellington*, 78.
CHAPTER 3

COMPOSITIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND LATE MUSICAL STYLE

The compositional language of Ornstein’s later years is strikingly different than his early years, and the present study reveals a highly cultivated form of expression that developed in Ornstein’s late music. In an interview conducted in 1984, Ornstein admitted that by a certain time he had brought his music to the very edge and decided to draw back, and turn to a different style of writing. “The thing you should hear is a recording of my Violin and Piano Sonata, Op. 31 (1917). I had read The Marriage of Heaven and Hell by Blake and became very much involved in metaphysics and things of that sort, and I wrote this piece and it’s safe to say that here I probably brought music to the brink.”

Although many elements of Ornstein’s early compositional language are present in his late music, other factors, such as a preference for larger formal structures and a clearer organization and development of thematic material, contribute to his late compositional style. The present chapter provides a better understanding of the kind of writing indicative of the lesser known music of Ornstein’s later years. The combination of dissonant and tonal harmony, ostinato patterns, more relaxed rhythm, thematic unity and development, and cyclical features are essential components of Ornstein’s late compositional language. When asked in 1984 about the style of his late music, Ornstein said “[I] now demand a very strong outline...I’m not satisfied any longer with blotches of color...it doesn’t matter how vivid and exciting they may be. I now demand that there is a real outline because, in the last analysis, that is really what

holds music together. That is the rational thought that lies behind all art.” Incidentally the preference for formal outlines is very much evident in Ornstein’s later works.

A Long Remembered Sorrow

_A Long Remembered Sorrow_ was composed in 1964 and published in 1990 by Poonhill Press. In contrast to the often radical compositional language of his early years, it reflects a more conservative style. Ornstein’s use of expressive melodic content, relaxed rhythm, and organized formal structures are some elements that indicate a shift in Ornstein’s compositional language. There is a clear organization of thematic material in _A Long Remembered Sorrow_, indicating a preference for formal structures. The main theme (Example 26) is restated (Example 27) after the middle section, before it is presented in a developed form near the conclusion of the piece (Example 28).

Example 26. Ornstein, _A Long Remembered Sorrow_, mm. 1–3.

Example 27. Ornstein, _A Long Remembered Sorrow_, mm. 89–91.


The second theme (Example 29) is restated near the end of the piece (Example 30).


The insertion of tonal harmony before or after atonal passages is used by Ornstein to indicate a new section in the music, and is sometimes marked by a meter change, and often
follows a brief passage that functions as a transition (Example 31). This tool is used by Ornstein in larger forms, such as sonatas, to separate major sections in the music. Example 31 also illustrates the flexible use of irregular rhythmic language and polyrhythms—an important part of Ornstein’s late compositional language.

Example 31. Ornstein, *A Long Remembered Sorrow*, mm. 35–43. In many later works, Ornstein uses conventional notation in tonal sections, such as this example; thus accidentals apply to the entire measure.

An example of thematic unity occurs in the middle section, where the main theme is developed extensively. It is presented in the treble voice, and is marked by a section that returns to atonal material (Example 32).

Ostinatos

Ostinato patterns are used in Ornstein’s early music, and are used more frequently in his later compositions. Because they often appear in a similar form throughout different works, they somehow become a stylistic trademark of Ornstein’s compositional language. The following example compares a rhythmic ostinato in *Solitude* (1978) to the opening of the Piano Sonata No. 7 (1988).
Example 33. Ornstein, *Solitude*, mm. 25–30; Piano Sonata No. 7, I, mm. 1–2.\(^4\)

The following examples illustrate various forms of ostinato patterns in the Piano Sonata No. 7.

Example 34. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, I, mm. 26–28.

\(^4\) Ibid.
Example 35. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, I, mm. 47–58.

Example 36. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, II, mm. 52–55.

Harmonic Language

The placement of tonal and atonal harmonic material together is a device that is especially used in larger forms, such as the Piano Sonata No. 7, to indicate a new section or to signal the return of thematic material (Examples 38 and 39).

Example 38. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, I, mm. 249–257.
The three movements of the Piano Sonata No. 7 are unified by the use of cyclicism. The main theme of the first movement (Example 40) is recalled in the other movements (Examples 41 and 42).

Example 40. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, I, mm. 1–5.
Example 41. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, II, mm. 1–4.

Example 42. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, III, mm. 106–109.

Rhythmic motives are another source of unification in the sonata—the following examples (Examples 43–46) compare two separate passages from different movements, closely resembling each other.

Example 43. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, I, mm. 9–10.
Example 44. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, II, mm. 66–68.

Example 45. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, III, m. 1; mm. 14–16.

Example 46. Ornstein, Piano Sonata No. 7, II, mm. 31–33.
Leo Ornstein’s compositional career spanned nearly eighty years and includes well over seventy works for the piano. The present study is primarily intended to provide an understanding of Ornstein’s compositional transformation from the initial works of his early years to that of his later years. Ornstein’s son Severo notes that “it is nearly impossible to characterize Ornstein’s music because it spans such a wide spectrum of style. He resisted the notion that one should shoehorn ideas into a single mold and instead felt each new idea demanded its own setting.” Ornstein’s *Wild Men’s Dance* and *Suicide in an Airplane* are a direct reflection of the radical musical language first produced by the young Ornstein. The *Arabesques* contain similar elements, although they are also more indicative of an early shift in musical language that reflect more sensitive qualities. *A Long Remembered Sorrow* reveals a strikingly different compositional language due to its relaxed rhythm and unique simultaneous placement of atonal and tonal language. The Piano Sonata No. 7, written near the end of Ornstein’s career, represents a culmination of various compositional features and the use of cyclicism as a unifying device.

This study hopefully provides a foundation for the understanding and awareness of a widely unknown figure in American music, as well as it contributes to further studies of Leo Ornstein’s music.


