

2010-04-26

# Leo Ornstein's Piano Sonatas No. 4 and No. 8

Maria Vassilev

*University of Miami*, [mia@miavassilev.com](mailto:mia@miavassilev.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa\\_dissertations](https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations)

---

## Recommended Citation

Vassilev, Maria, "Leo Ornstein's Piano Sonatas No. 4 and No. 8" (2010). *Open Access Dissertations*. 961.  
[https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa\\_dissertations/961](https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations/961)

This Open access is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [repository.library@miami.edu](mailto:repository.library@miami.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

LEO ORNSTEIN'S PIANO SONATAS NO. 4 AND NO. 8

A LECTURE RECITAL ESSAY

By

Maria Vassilev

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2010

©2010  
Maria Vassilev  
All Rights Reserved

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A lecture recital essay submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts

LEO ORNSTEIN'S PIANO SONATAS NO. 4 AND NO. 8

Maria Vassilev

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Paul Posnak, D.M.A.  
Professor of Accompanying  
and Keyboard Performance

\_\_\_\_\_  
Terri A. Scandura, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

\_\_\_\_\_  
Alan Johnson, M.M.  
Assistant Professor of Vocal Performance

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tian Ying, Ph.D.  
Professor of Keyboard  
Performance

\_\_\_\_\_  
J. Robert Floyd, D.M.  
Professor of Keyboard Performance

VASSILEV, MARIA

(D.M.A., Accompanying and Chamber Music)

Leo Ornstein's Piano Sonatas No. 4 and No. 8.

(May 2010)

Abstract of a lecture recital essay at the University of Miami.

Lecture recital essay supervised by Dr. Paul Posnak.

No. of pages in text. (26)

My lecture recital on Leo Ornstein focuses on his first and last notated piano sonatas. Piano Sonata No. 4 was composed in 1924 and Piano Sonata No. 8 in 1990. Biographical information is presented and followed by a study of the two sonatas discussing Ornstein's compositional process and the elements which are present in both sonatas. Information is included from conversations with Leo Ornstein's son, Severo Ornstein, as well as pianists Marc-Andre Hamelin and Janice Weber. A final chapter reviewing performance considerations addresses my approach in learning these two works. The performance segment includes excerpts from both sonatas which illustrate compositional traits, the first movements of both sonatas, and one of the four vignettes comprising the second movement of Sonata No. 8.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Paul Posnak, as well as committee members Dr. J. B. Floyd, Prof. Tian Ying, and Prof. Alan Johnson for their guidance and assistance with my lecture recital. I would also like to thank Dr. Dennis Kam and Dr. Paul Wilson for their wisdom in the process of dissecting the two sonatas of Leo Ornstein. With the perspectives of performers and Ornstein devotees Janice Weber, Daniel Stepner, and Marc-Andre Hamelin, the performance portion of my lecture/recital took on a new and more enlightened dimension.

I would also like to thank the University of Miami GAFAC (Graduate Activity Fee Allocation Committee) for their travel assistance for my performance of Leo Ornstein's Piano Sonata No. 4 at the Poonhill Recital Series in Palo Alto, California. With this concert, I was able to meet and discuss Leo Ornstein with the most important proponent of his music: his son, Severo Ornstein. I want to express my utmost appreciation to Severo and Laura Ornstein for their wonderful hospitality, invaluable information and interesting conversations regarding Leo Ornstein.

Finally, I would like to thank my unwavering support group: my mother and very first piano teacher, Judy, the reason I became and continue to be a pianist, my sister Joy who taught me that there is more than one way to make a gingerbread house, my brother-in-law Bill for his all-around excellence, my husband Ivo, who not only endures but encourages my obsessions, and last but not least, my newest love and inspiration who has the "music of Ornstein in her DNA," as eloquently stated by Dr. Floyd: my Veronika.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page    |
|---|---------|
| LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES.....                       | v       |
| LIST OF TABLES.....                                 | vii     |
|   | Chapter |
| 1 INTRODUCTION.....                                 | 1       |
| Purpose.....  | 1       |
| Biographical Overview of Leo Ornstein.....          | 2       |
| Review of the Literature.....                       | 4       |
| 2 AESTHETIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH.....         | 6       |
| Compositional Characteristics.....                  | 6       |
| Influences and Ornstein’s “Language”.....           | 8       |
| 3 ANALYSIS OF THE 4 <sup>TH</sup> PIANO SONATA..... | 10      |
| 4 ANALYSIS OF THE 8 <sup>TH</sup> PIANO SONATA..... | 14      |
| 5 PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS.....                   | 23      |
| Pedaling Technique.....                             | 23      |
| Voicing and Phrasing.....                           | 23      |
| Mental Challenges.....                              | 24      |
| Rapid Texture Changes.....                          | 24      |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....                                   | 25      |

## LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

|             | Page  |
|-------------|---|
| EXAMPLE 3.1 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 4</i> , mvt. 1, mm.1-3.....10       |
| EXAMPLE 3.2 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 4</i> , mvt. 1, mm.31-36.....11     |
| EXAMPLE 3.3 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 4</i> , mvt. 1, mm. 37.....11       |
| EXAMPLE 3.4 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 4</i> , mvt. 4, mm.65.....12        |
| EXAMPLE 3.5 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 4</i> , mvt. 4, mm.1-3.....13       |
| EXAMPLE 3.6 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 4</i> , mvt. 4, mm. 37-39.....13    |
| EXAMPLE 3.7 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 4</i> , mvt. , mm. 91-93.....13     |
| EXAMPLE 4.1 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 1, mm. 15-17.....16    |
| EXAMPLE 4.2 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt 1, mm.534-536.....17    |
| EXAMPLE 4.3 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 1, mm. 100-104.....18  |
| EXAMPLE 4.4 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 1 , mm. 340-343.....18 |
| EXAMPLE 4.5 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 1, mm.168-171.....19   |
| EXAMPLE 4.6 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 1, mm. 512-515.....19  |
| EXAMPLE 4.7 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 3, mm. 37-40.....20    |
| EXAMPLE 4.8 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 3, mm. 187-190.....20  |

|              |  |    |
|--------------|--|----|
| EXAMPLE 4.9  | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 3, mm. 211-214..... | 20 |
| EXAMPLE 4.10 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 3, mm. 219-222..... | 21 |
| EXAMPLE 4.11 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 3, mm. 239-242..... | 21 |
| EXAMPLE 4.12 | Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 3, mm. 390-391..... | 21 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| TABLE 4.1 Leo Ornstein, <i>Piano Sonata No. 8</i> , mvt. 1 ..... | 15   |

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Purpose**

Ornstein's music is still relatively unknown today, despite his phenomenal fame as a pianist and composer who dazzled and baffled audiences in the 1920s, and the burst of re-interest in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The purpose of this lecture/recital is to provide a platform to display two of Ornstein's major piano works, the 4<sup>th</sup> Piano Sonata (1924) and the 8<sup>th</sup> Piano Sonata (1990). The 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata is actually his first piano sonata, and the 8<sup>th</sup> is his last. Ornstein had composed three other sonatas before the 4<sup>th</sup>. However, he did not notate them and he was the sole performer. Eventually, they became lost in time. The sonatas were never renumbered. The 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> sonatas were written between 1974 and 1988. These works, while interesting and characteristic, (especially the 5<sup>th</sup> "autobiography sonata,") cannot compare to the 'endpoints' of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. These milestone works show the range of style and the path that Ornstein took in his compositional process.

These two works are rich in structural integrity, aesthetic beauty and virtuosity. Composed by a man who had the experience of vast longevity, he lived mostly secluded from the broad spectrum of change in America and world history that took place during his lifetime after his early phenomenal fame as a concert pianist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His style was developed almost exclusively through his own internal process.

I hope through this lecture/recital to rekindle awareness of Leo Ornstein, a major yet neglected figure in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> Century music.

## **Biographical Overview of Leo Ornstein**

Leo Ornstein is the only known composer whose life spanned three centuries. His longevity is only one of many unique phenomena in his life, and a major factor in his musical contributions. His youthful works created a significant stir in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but then lapsed quickly into self-sought obscurity until the 1970's when a surge of interest in his works, recorded for the first time in over 60 years, prompted interviews and publications by musicologist Vivian Perlis, Director of OHAM (Oral History of American Music) at Yale University; Terence J. O'Grady, professor of Communication and the Arts (Music) at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay; Denise Von Glahn, Associate Professor of Musicology and Director of the Center for Music of the Americas at Florida State University; and Michael Broyles, music historian and author at Pennsylvania State University in a re-exploration of Ornstein's work. Ornstein, who lived 108 years, was born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and died in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The piano prodigy was born in 1893 in Kremenchug, in the Ukrainian province of Poltava, which was under Russian Imperial Rule during that time. His father, a Jewish cantor, and his uncle, a violinist, encouraged his musical talent. His family emigrated in 1906 to the United States to escape the nationalist, anti-Semitic Union of Russian People (URP). Although still a child when coming to America, Russian and Jewish musical elements emerge prominently in his compositional style. He entered The Musical Institute in New York City, which would later become The Juilliard School, studying with Bertha Fiering Tapper, who became his mentor.

In his New York debut in 1911, he programmed conventional works but soon began to play contemporary works. He began to stir audiences with performances of his

own compositions, which were a radical departure from usual concert programming. These performances dazzled and confused audiences, and his image became one of an ultra-futurist in the eyes of critics and of the public.

When first hearing Ornstein's compositions, Tapper had to listen several times to understand that there was structure and substance embedded in the unusual, seemingly chaotic style. Besides writing in this radical manner, he also composed more conservatively, drawing a reaction of confusion from audiences who had already categorized him by his previous 'ultra-futurist' style. Coming to the conclusion that the public wanted only novelty, he continued in his own path, writing for what the 'music demanded,' rather than considering either the direction modern music was taking, or the desires of the listener.

In the mid-1920s, Ornstein accepted a post and moved to Philadelphia to teach at the Philadelphia Musical Academy. He continued composing, but turned away from the public eye and the concert stage. He performed for the last time in 1933, and several years later opened the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia with his wife, Pauline Mallet-Provost. Teaching provided a welcome change from the pressures he felt from his perfectionistic and nervous nature when concertizing.

Ornstein's compositions throughout the next two decades were sparse until the 1950's when he and his wife left their school in the hands of one of the faculty members in order to devote more time to his composing. He never promoted his work and stayed distant from the public eye. When the National Public Radio emerged with a series in the 1980s entitled *Elder Statesmen of American Music*, the Ornsteins were discovered in a trailer park in Texas by producer Charles Amirkhanian, who was traveling the country

producing audio portraits of composers such as Ornstein who embodied individualism in American music. Other composers included in the program were Ernst Bacon, Otto Luening, Dane Rudhyar, Nicholas Slonimsky, and Virgil Thomson. Each of them, at the time of the program in 1981, was still actively pursuing his craft and had contributed directly or indirectly, in shaping modern American music through the decades of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Until he was 101, Ornstein was in great health and lived alone after the death of his wife. At 107, he moved to a nursing home in Green Bay, Wisconsin. On Feb. 24, 2002, Leo Ornstein died, leaving a legacy of over eight decades of work.

### **Review of the Literature**

All articles and books written about Leo Ornstein have appeared either in the early 1920s, or scattered throughout the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and early 21<sup>st</sup>, when his work was rediscovered and he again granted interviews after decades of rejecting publicity. One of the earliest books written about him was in 1918 by Frederick Martens, and a version exists today as part of a series entitled *The Modern Jewish Experience*. This was written when Ornstein was only in his early twenties and on the rise to fame. It cites the critical reviews he had received thus far in his career, describes his style and technique, and touches on his childhood and studies. However, because Ornstein was only in his twenties when this book was published, it only serves as an introduction to the pianist/composer's early works.

Pauline Mallet-Prevost, Ornstein's wife, wrote a memoir recounting the days of his concert career, and of his strong avoidance of the public spotlight, despite his communicative nature in social circles.

Leo always has given too much of himself when in contact with people. They drain him, and as a reaction he blames himself for squandering so much energy on just talk when it could have been devoted to his work. Although he appears quite in his element under such circumstances, unlike most artists I have known, he gets little from such experiences and seems to gather strength from within himself rather than from the external stimulation of social contacts.<sup>1</sup>

Of the recordings of Ornstein's compositions today, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> piano sonatas exist only on the Naxos label, with pianist Janice Weber, and on the Hyperion label, with Marc-Andre Hamelin performing.

Articles about Ornstein from the last three decades appear in *Musical Quarterly*, *The Musical Times*, and the *Journal of the Society for American Music*. These publications concentrate primarily on biographical material and historical or stylistic context such as post-war influenced-composers, or the Futurist movement. However, the books and interviews of Vivian Perlis, Carol J. Oja, Libby Van Cleve, Denise Von Glahn and Michael Broyles provide an insightful look at his life and approach. *Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices*, proved especially useful in providing a comprehensive biographical background.

The most invaluable resources in my research have been my conversations with primary sources: his son Severo Ornstein; pianists Janice Weber, Marc-Andre Hamelin; and Ornstein devotee and violinist Daniel Stepner. Also helpful in terms of viewing complete works and retrieving the music of Leo Ornstein is the website created by his son Severo Ornstein and grandson David Ornstein: <http://poonhill.com>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Reminiscences From Here, There, Everywhere. Memoir of Pauline Ornstein, date unknown.  
<http://poonhill.ipower.com/Pauline.html>

## CHAPTER 2

### AESTHETIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Ornstein's compositional style was influenced by his philosophies of music and aesthetics.

Today each composer is not only involved in aesthetics, but he's actually trying to create his own language. We have the paradox of each one making up his own language. The danger of that--and there's a grave danger that I, myself, have to be very aware of--is that you become so involved and intrigued in the language that sometimes you lose track that that is only a means to an aesthetic experience that the listener has to get. And since each one invents his own language today, the poor listener is really in quite a stew because how can he make any evaluation? How can he even understand what the aesthetic value of the piece is, when he still is floundering around trying to understand and learn the language first of all? So that one can't blame many listeners who rebel because...they don't understand.<sup>2</sup>

#### Compositional Characteristics

Creating a recognizable 'language' requires distinctive characteristics, unique to the composer. The most relevant elements that contribute to Ornstein's language are the textural weaving of melody, bitonality, and the continuous process of variational development.

Texture is perhaps the most important feature in both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Sonatas. All of his works contain dramatic and abrupt textural changes, creating a sense that the motifs are pouring one into another from thin delicate filigree to thick multi-voiced symphonic textures. Despite the seemingly chaotic motion, there is always a strong melodic line embedded within multiple layers.

---

<sup>2</sup> Leo Ornstein, *The Last of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mavericks*: Leo and Paula Ornstein speak with Vivian Perlis, from the archives of OHAM at Yale University, 1977.

Many types of tonal and atonal chordal structures are found in both sonatas. In 1924, at the time the 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata was written, cluster chords and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century harmonies attracted mixed critical commentary written about his style of composition. Is it a ‘primitive impressionism’ or ‘a keener degree of perception than our sophisticated senses attain to?’ or ‘mere disorganized and uncorrelated sensory system?’ as questioned in the 1918 *The Musical Quarterly* article by Charles Buchanan entitled “Ornstein and Modern Music.” Through the decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, audiences and music critics have become more accepting of nonstandard classical harmonic sonorities. Almost 100 years ago when Buchanan’s article was written, however, a system of ‘logical’ order was still in place.

We mean that a certain sequence of notes arranged with a certain sense of inevitability represents in music something of the same degree of intellectual effort and capacity that an arrangement of words represents in literature.<sup>3</sup>

Today, coherency is as important as it was 100 years ago, but many works lacking an obvious audible logical order, no matter how critically acclaimed, simply escape audience comprehension. The cluster chords written in Ornstein’s compositions are not random, but carefully built and voiced. However, in some of the extremely fast passages of these two sonatas, the effect is perceived as more a flash of color rather than a conscious harmonic experience. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata, massed sonorities, tonal yet complex, permeate all movements, whereas tone clusters, combining both consonant and dissonant non-traditional chord structures, are found more prevalently in the 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata. Over time, Ornstein expanded his tonal palette to include and even favor the more dissonant sounds. These ‘blotches’ of color do not impede a clear melodic line, but rather create a thicker effect.

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Buchanan, “Ornstein and Modern Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 4 (April 1918): 174-183.

Sequence and repetition in the 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata are structured within standard forms: sonata-allegro, ABA, and Rondo. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata, however, an astounding number of motifs and themes are fragmented, transposed, and truncated.

Although living mostly in seclusion, there are some unmistakable cultural influences in Ornstein's music: harmonic minor and modal melismatic passages reminiscent of emotionally expressive Hebraic cantorial music and Russian modal folk music. Severo Ornstein comments,

My own feeling is that his music shows more Hebraic influence than purely Russian. His father was a cantor and the sounds he absorbed from his youth couldn't help but affect him. It certainly shows in much of his music although he tended to deny all influences and thought that the ideas simply 'came to him' (whence he didn't know - he was an unregenerate atheist.)”<sup>4</sup>

Ornstein's early works contain standard structures that can be more easily placed in a traditional 'mold' than the later works, in which he progressed into soundscapes and large sections rather than using strict compositional (traditional) forms. Sonata No. 8 is more a topographical mapping process, noting texture changes and gestural reoccurrences as major elements in locating the different sections. Because of the complexity, there is often an impression of multiple developments.

### **Influences and Ornstein's "Language"**

In his early compositions from the late Teens and 1920's, a label emerged for Ornstein's compositions, prompted by a newspaper reporter in Paris: Futurist. Ornstein abhorred labels and the categorization of styles of music, and denied that he was indeed a part of this movement. The Futurist style is defined by rhythmic movement and cacophony, with a lack of tonal constraint and no formal structure. Many of Ornstein's works contain these elements, particularly the piano work from the later Teens, *Suicide In*

---

<sup>4</sup> Ornstein, Severo. E-mail interview by Maria Vassilev, December 16, 2008.

*an Airplane*, but nonetheless he avoided the Futurist label. Mechanistic sounds were only a small part of his compositional vocabulary. Ornstein's departure from artistic traditions and the past in general combined with a deeply romantic quality which, although infused with the more modern elements, did not contain the angularity of some of his 'industrial' and jazz-inspired contemporaries such as George Antheil.

Leo Ornstein's son, Severo Ornstein, commented,

It's difficult to identify real 'periods' in his output. He certainly turned away from some of his early radical, experimental works, but those who think that he retreated into neo-romanticism need to explore his later works more thoroughly. I think he was very much (determinedly) his own man as far as influences go. He couldn't altogether escape the influences of people like Debussy, Stravinsky and Schoenberg (and I'd add Scriabin, Ravel, Bloch, and Caesar Franck), but despite these influences, he developed a clearly identifiable idiom of his own.<sup>5</sup>

Marc-Andre Hamelin, who has recorded many of his works, including the 8<sup>th</sup>

Sonata, defined Ornstein's compositional style as:

..a little bit of everything. His language ran the gamut from extremely conventional tonality to the harshest dissonances, and he explored all variations within these extremes according to what he wanted to express, and how. In the early works one detects shades of Debussy, Bartok, Hebraic motifs, and popular melodies. The latter works are less 'kind' to the performer and audience, plus they are generally longer, more diffuse, and perhaps less disciplined. The musical connections and structure are more difficult to hear.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to write about a composer who avoids labels and categorization.

However, Ornstein's voluntary seclusion from society and his inward, unobstructed process of composition resulted in a body of work that is personal, powerful and uniquely pure.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ornstein, Severo. E-mail interview by Maria Vassilev, December 16, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Hamelin, Marc-Andre. E-mail interview by Mia Vassilev, March 7, 2009.

## CHAPTER 3

### ANALYSIS OF THE 4<sup>TH</sup> PIANO SONATA

With 66 years between the two works, there are many differences between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Sonatas. In both sonatas, one can hear how Ornstein weaves and embeds the melody within multi-voiced textures, and how he layers textures to create a symphonic effect (a trait that is further developed in the 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata).

There are two themes in the 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata. In the first theme, the melody floats on top of a running texture of groups of seven. The second theme is a prime example of how the melody is embedded in the lower register.

Example 3.1 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 1, mm. 1-3. (First Theme)

The musical score is for the first theme of the first movement of Leo Ornstein's Piano Sonata No. 4, measures 1-3. It is written for piano in 2/4 time, marked "Moderato con moto" with a tempo of 76 beats per minute. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a melody of eighth notes, marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The bass staff features a continuous texture of groups of seven notes, indicated by a "7" above the notes. The texture is composed of eighth notes and quarter notes, with some notes beamed together. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Example 3.2 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 1, mm. 31-36. (Second Theme)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked "Sostenuto" and "mf con melancolia". It features a right-hand melody with triplets and a left-hand accompaniment. The second system includes dynamics "cresc.", "dim.", and "p", and shows a change in meter to 3/4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Although Ornstein's writing is otherwise free from direct influence, there is a special reference in this movement to Debussy's *Clair de Lune* as follows:

Example 3.3 Leo Ornstein's *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 1, mm. 37.

The image shows a single system of musical notation. It is marked "Con moto e passione" and "poco a poco cresc.". The notation includes a right-hand melody with a triplet and a left-hand accompaniment. The score features various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 3.4 Leo Ornstein's *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 1, mm. 65.

The musical score for Example 3.4, Leo Ornstein's *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 1, mm. 65, is presented in three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, marked *passionato* and *ff*. The middle staff is also in treble clef, marked *f*. The bottom staff is in bass clef, marked *ff* and *r.h.*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The bottom staff features a prominent sixteenth-note figure with a slur and a '6' above it, and a triplet of eighth notes marked '3'.

The second movement is in clear ABA form. The *Semplice* and *Con Fuoco* sections provide a stark contrast, making a distinct delineation where the sections of a languid waltz to a bitonal storm abruptly begin and end. The main elements to listen for in this movement are jazz chords, Hebraic melodies and modal harmonies.

The third movement is the only movement in the sonata that is entirely calm throughout, providing a respite before the most dramatic movement. The texture remains consistent and a near-static persistence of nature-inspired ornamentation of bird-calls does not stray far from pedal points of harmonic interest.

The explosive fourth movement is a lengthy Rondo, with thematic ideas constantly returning in increasingly complicated forms. The arrangement of the form is: A B A' C A'' B' D A''' B'' A'''. Each A is varied and embedded in different textures. The theme (A) in its original presentation is triadic throughout but the weight of the texture does not stop the constant drive forward around a Db center. The theme also contains a Hebraic cantorial quality with the presence of modal G naturals rather than Gbs. The following examples illustrate how several of the themes return.

Example 3.5 Leo Ornstein's *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 4, mm. 1-3.

Vivo ♩ = 112

*f* molto ritmico e marcato

Example 3.6 Leo Ornstein's *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 4, mm. 37-39.

Furioso

ritmico

Example 3.7 Leo Ornstein's *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mvt. 4, mm. 91-93.

Tempo 1°

*p* calmato

The key areas in the fourth movement of the 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata go in and out of standard key signatures and modal configurations, with generic tonal centers in place of scalar structure. This trait foreshadows many elements that he develops and uses in later works.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS OF THE 8<sup>TH</sup> SONATA

In 1990, Ornstein wrote his 8<sup>th</sup> Piano Sonata. At 95 years of age, it is drastically different than the early sonata, yet retains recognizable elements of his previous work, such as the embedding and weaving of melody inside textural layering. Bitonality is also more prevalent in Sonata No. 8, and Ornstein's process of variational development attains a new complexity in this sonata. The entire sonata is stylistically diverse.

I have a theory about the 8th sonata as follows. All his life he fought people's inclination to try to peg him - to pin a label of some sort on him. He said to me that you can't shoehorn ideas into a particular style - that each idea demands its own setting. And this is what naturally produced the diversity of styles in his writing.<sup>7</sup>

There are many elements within the six themes to listen for in the first movement of the 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata. Each theme has its own characteristics, but they are loosely tied together by rhythmic gestures, such as beginning phrases with an eighth rest in the right hand, and tonal similarities. These features permeate the entire movement. Ornstein develops, transposes, fragments, and truncates material in the different themes and even in the connecting material. The organization of the themes and subsidiary sections can be seen in the table below.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ornstein, Severo. E-mail interview by Maria Vassilev, December 16, 2008

Table 4.1 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 1.

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <b>INTRO</b>                            | <b>mm. 1-15</b>    |
| <b>THEME I</b>                          | <b>mm. 16-33</b>   |
| <b>THEME II</b>                         | <b>mm. 34-52</b>   |
| <b>BRIDGE (with <i>Barbaro</i>)</b>     | <b>mm. 53-73</b>   |
| <b>THEME III</b>                        | <b>mm. 74-100</b>  |
| <b>THEME IV</b>                         | <b>mm. 101-137</b> |
| <b>THEME V</b>                          | <b>mm. 138-168</b> |
| <b>THEME VI</b>                         | <b>mm. 169-190</b> |
| <b>RETURN: THEME I</b>                  | <b>mm. 191-216</b> |
| <b>RETURN: THEME II (prime version)</b> | <b>mm. 217-232</b> |
| <b>BRIDGE (prime)</b>                   | <b>mm. 233-242</b> |
| <b>BRIDGE DEVELOPMENT</b>               | <b>mm. 243-261</b> |
| <b>RETURN: THEME III</b>                | <b>mm. 262-288</b> |
| <b>RETURN: THEME I</b>                  | <b>mm. 289-328</b> |

|                                 |                    |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>RETURN: THEME IV (prime)</b> | <b>mm. 329-350</b> |
| <b>“BURLESCA”</b>               | <b>mm. 351-481</b> |
| <b>RETURN: THEME V</b>          | <b>mm. 482-512</b> |
| <b>RETURN: THEME VI</b>         | <b>mm. 513-534</b> |
| <b>CODA</b>                     | <b>mm. 535-end</b> |
| <b>RETURN: THEME I</b>          |                    |
| <b>FRAGMENTS</b>                |                    |

The following musical examples illustrate characteristics of selected themes and their returns. Note the rhythmic ‘trademark’ of the eighth rest beginning the phrase.

Example 4.1 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 1, mm. 15-17. (1<sup>st</sup> Theme)

The final return of this theme as the Coda is a Lisztian- inspired version with an embedded countermelody.

Example 4.2 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 1, mm. 534-536. (1<sup>st</sup> Theme Final Return)

Coda ♩ = 63 - 66  $\flat$

The 4<sup>th</sup> Theme has a visceral savagery, with alternating time signatures and dissonant clusters. In the preface of the score, Ornstein wrote:

A rhythmic pattern, page 16 line 2, occurred to me and triggered the image of young dancers facing each other and improvising, whether consciously or unconsciously, some choreography of seemingly primitive origins. The nervous gyrations seemed incredible. The faces, glazed and showing almost no response to what they were doing, made me want to make some musical comment on the scene. The persistent bass is its own comment on the breathless scraps in the treble clef.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ornstein, Leo. *Sonata No. 8 for Piano*. Poon Hill Press, 1990.

The unifying rhythmic gesture of beginning short phrases with the eighth rest adds to the restlessness of this theme.

Example 4.3 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 1 mm. 100-104. (4<sup>th</sup> Theme)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system is in 3/8 time, marked 'con moto' and 'f'. It consists of four measures. The right hand plays a melodic line starting with an eighth rest followed by a quarter note. The left hand plays a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with many beamed eighth notes. The second system is in 2/4 time and also consists of four measures, continuing the melodic and accompanimental patterns from the first system.

Example 4.4 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 1, mm. 340-343. (Partial return of the 4<sup>th</sup> Theme)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano in 2/4 time. It consists of four measures. The right hand plays a melodic line starting with an eighth rest followed by a quarter note. The left hand plays a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with many beamed eighth notes. The notation is similar to Example 4.3, representing a partial return of the 4th theme.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Theme is reminiscent of the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement of the 4<sup>th</sup> Sonata in which the delicate passagework is nature-inspired. The rhythmic gesture of the eighth rest is again present.

Example 4.5 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 1, mm. 168-171. (6<sup>th</sup> Theme)

The musical score for Example 4.5 consists of four measures. The right hand (treble clef) plays a complex rhythmic pattern with 7th and 3rd notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#).

Example 4.6 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 1, mm. 512-515. (6<sup>th</sup> Theme Return)

The musical score for Example 4.6 consists of four measures. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with 7th notes and a 16th-note pattern, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The key signature is two flats (Bb and Eb).

The second movement is very straightforward in comparison with the first. It is programmatic and employs simple harmonies and key areas. It is a departure from the tumultuous 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> movements, a programmatic ‘intermission,’ that provides a relief from the chaotic nature of the other two movements. The movement is titled “A Trip to the Attic- a Tear or Two for a Childhood Forever Gone,” and each section within the movement is also titled. The first (A) is called The Bugler, (B) is A Lament For A Lost Toy, (C) is A Half Mutilated Cradle-Berceuse, and (D) is First Carousel Ride and Sounds of a Hurdy Gurdy. (A) and (B) are both in simple classic sonata form, with defined key signatures. (C) appears to have an A and A’, however the A’ is incomplete and ends with a short coda. (D) is in an ABA form and creates beautiful harmonic changes all within running 16<sup>th</sup> note patterns in the As. The B section creates a carousel effect impeccably, breaking up the motion as if suddenly thrown into the middle of a carnival. This piece contains qualities of Russian folk songs.

The third movement, entitled “Disciplines and Improvisations,” contains two cohesive elements: one motive, stated early in the movement, comes back six times in different forms; and the rhythmic eighth (or sixteenth as in the final example) rest which propels the theme.

Example 4.7 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 3, mm. 37-40. (Original theme)

Example 4.7 shows the original theme in 4/4 time, marked *Vivo* and *f*. The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a whole rest followed by a series of eighth notes and quarter notes. The bass staff features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes, with a dynamic marking of *f*.

Example 4.8 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 3, mm. 187-190. (2<sup>nd</sup> appearance of the theme, transposed.)

Example 4.8 shows the second appearance of the theme, transposed. The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a quarter note followed by eighth notes and quarter notes. The bass staff features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes. A tempo marking  $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$  is present above the treble staff.

Example 4.9 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 3, mm. 211-214. (3<sup>rd</sup> appearance of the theme, in a different form.)

Example 4.9 shows the third appearance of the theme in a different form. The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a quarter note followed by eighth notes and quarter notes. The bass staff features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes, with a dynamic marking of *f*.

Example 4.10 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 3, mm. 219-222. (4<sup>th</sup> appearance)

Example 4.11 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 3, mm. 239-242. (5<sup>th</sup> and most tonal appearance.)

This is the only section in the movement with a key signature.

Example 4.12 Leo Ornstein, *Piano Sonata No. 8*, mvt. 3, mm. 390-391.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata is a kaleidoscope of sound, overwhelming and exhilarating with its multiple layers, its collage of compositional techniques, its unrelenting and insistent drive

of motoric movement, and multiple patterns with variation. Marc-Andre Hamelin comments,

It (the 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata) comes after a period of many, many decades in the composer's life, with a little bit of everything thrown in; this is especially obvious in the second movement, which is a series of vignettes from the author's childhood. I wouldn't go as far as saying that the sonata is purely autobiographical—Ornstein had already achieved this in his 5<sup>th</sup> sonata—but still, the whole work is colored by a lifetime's worth of experience.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Hamelin, Marc-Andre. E-mail interview by Maria Vassilev, March 7, 2009

## CHAPTER 5

### PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS

There are many challenges to face in the process of learning the two contrasting sonatas.

#### **Pedaling Technique**

Ornstein was struck by Leschetizky's remark "Half a pianist's technique lies in the pedals." He experimented with Impressionistic music of Debussy and Ravel until he found a system that was conducive to pedal-work and finger-work together.

By delicate manipulation of the pedals I found I could melt shade into shade in infinite variation of the dynamic tone-palette. I found that by using half and even a quarter of my pedal I could produce the most delicate tonal tinge.<sup>10</sup>

Ornstein suggests using the half- and quarter- pedal for more nuance and subtlety of color change to achieve a different and uniquely characteristic sound. Maintaining a clear line on top, so the melody does not wallow in the thick texture, is imperative.

#### **Voicing and Phrasing**

The second challenge is to maintain the clarity of the line, whether on top, or within multiple layers so the melody is not enveloped in the thickness of the texture.

Maintaining a flow for an overall arc to the movements is also important in creating a successful interpretation, especially in the movements that contain relentless passages of consistently full volume.

---

<sup>10</sup> Leo Ornstein: The Man-His Ideas, His Work by Frederick H. Martens, NY 1975 Arno Press.

### **Mental Challenges**

There are multiple accidental indications without key signatures throughout Ornstein's 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata. I came to find this system to be very natural, and have even become so visually accustomed to this notation that I find myself 'defaulting' to it in other repertoire.

### **Rapid Texture Changes**

The shift in technique required between movements and sections of movements is another issue. The rapid changes in texture requires a physical as well as mental shift. The flow of the outer movements of the 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata is difficult to maintain, with its constant fragmentations and new ideas bursting forth. However, Marc-Andre Hamelin states,

..the pianistic language is roughly the same (between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> piano sonatas), in that the sonorous resources of the instrument are grandly and fully exploited.<sup>11</sup>

Keeping an organic flow to such complex music such as the 8<sup>th</sup> Sonata is difficult to achieve. Navigating the length alone makes a successful interpretation challenging.

Overall, both sonatas, after proper study and practice of the extensive passagework, are idiomatically pianistic and fit the hands naturally, which is to be expected of a composer who was also a superb pianist.

---

<sup>11</sup> Hamelin, Marc-Andre. E-mail interview by Maria Vassilev, March 7, 2009

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Broyles, Michael and Von-Glan, Denise. 2007. Musical Modernism Before It Began: Leo Ornstein and a Case for Revisionist History. *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, no. 1: 29-55, February. In RILM [Abstracts of Music Literature]
- Broyles, Michael and Denise Von Glahn. *Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984
- Buchanan, Charles L. 1918. Ornstein and Modern Music. *The Musical Quarterly* 4, no. 2: 174-183, April. In JSTOR Full Text [database online]; available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/896806>
- Crimp, Bryan. 1989. A Golden Age of Pianists. *The Musical Times* 130, no. 1760: 605-609, October. In JSTOR Full Text [database online] available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/965580>
- Gojowy,-Detlef. 1987. The Birth of the Avant-Garde from the Spirit of the Belle Epoque: Jozef Koffler, Arthur Lourie, Nikolaj Roslavec, Leo Ornstein, and Domenico Alaleona *Glasba in druzba* 20: 111-118. In RILM [Abstracts of Music Literature]
- Hamelin, Marc-Andre. [hammahklavier@gmail.com](mailto:hammahklavier@gmail.com). "Interview Regarding Works of Leo Ornstein." E-mail to Maria Vassilev ([mia@miavassilev.com](mailto:mia@miavassilev.com)) 16 March 2009.
- O'Grady, Terence J. 1984. A Conversation with Leo Ornstein. *The Musical Quarterly* 23, no. 1:126-133 Autumn-Winter. In JSTOR Full Text [database online]; available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/832908>
- Ornstein, L. (2001). Leo Ornstein Piano Sonatas No. 4 (1924) and No. 7 (1988) [Recorded by Janice Weber, pianist]. Naxos Records CD #8559104. Toronto, Canada: Naxos American Classics.
- Ornstein, L. (2002). Piano Music by Leo Ornstein. [Recorded by Marc-Andre Hamelin, pianist]. Hyperion Records CDA #67320. London, United Kingdom: Hyperion Records.
- Ornstein, Severo. (2006). *Leo Ornstein*. Retrieved December 16, 2008, from <http://www.poonhill.com>
- Ornstein, Severo. [severo@poonhill.com](mailto:severo@poonhill.com) "Interview Questions." E-mail to Maria Vassilev ([mia@miavassilev.com](mailto:mia@miavassilev.com)) 16 December 2009.

- Perlis, Vivian. 1995. The Futurist Music of Leo Ornstein. *Notes* 31., no. 4: 735-750, June. In JSTOR Full Text [database online]; available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/896806>
- Perlis, V. "Leo Ornstein: The Last of the Original 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mavericks." *New Musicbox: The Web Magazine from the American Music Center*, 36, no. 1: 1-50,
- Piccinini, Mauro. 2007. Goodbye Mr. Ornstein! Remembering a Little Known 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Avant-Gardist. *Neue-Zeitschrift für Musik Das Magazin für neue Töne* 168, no. 5: 73-77, September/October. In RILM [Abstracts of Music Literature]
- Ringer, Alexander. 1999. Leo Ornstein: An American Futurist? *Der musikalische Futurismus* 235-242. In RILM [Abstracts of Music Literature]
- Stepner, Daniel. [stepner@brandeis.edu](mailto:stepner@brandeis.edu) "Ornstein Questions." E-mail to Maria Vassilev ([mia@miavassilev.com](mailto:mia@miavassilev.com)) 4 April 2009.
- Wallace, Elizabeth Ann, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, 1990. *The Effect of War on the Lives and Work of Piano Composers and the Evolution of Compositional Technique in War-Related Piano Pieces from 1849 Through the Second World War*.
- Weber, Janice. [jw@janiceweber.com](mailto:jw@janiceweber.com). "Interview Regarding Works of Leo Ornstein." E-mail to Maria Vassilev ([mia@miavassilev.com](mailto:mia@miavassilev.com)) 30 March 2009.
- Whiting, Peggy, M.A., Central Missouri State University, 2005. *A Biography and Stylistic Analysis of Leo Ornstein and his Works*.