

# Leo ORNSTEIN

PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME THREE

A MOMENT OF RETROSPECT

THE CATHEDRAL

NOCTURNE NO. 1

NINE VIGNETTES

THREE MOODS

BAGATELLE

Viktor Valkov

## LEO ORNSTEIN: PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME THREE

by Jonathan Powell

Few human stories can have been so extraordinary as that of Leo Ornstein, his journey taking him from the heart of the Pale of Settlement in present-day Ukraine, to Imperial St Petersburg, through the concert-halls of Europe, fame and notoriety in the USA, obscurity in a Texan trailer park and, finally, as a near-centenarian, rediscovery and recognition. He appears as a man not only *sui generis*, but as one whose life presents so many contradictions as to be uncategorisable. He was among the most prominent of many musicians who came from eastern Europe to the USA in the early years of the twentieth century, and one of many remarkable musicians born in what is now Ukraine during the years adjacent to the turn of that century. He had a notable career as a pianist, performing classic and Romantic repertoire (as did his fellow avant-gardist George Antheil) alongside contemporary works (his extant – piano-roll – recordings include music by Chopin, Liszt and Schumann, reflecting his preferred concert repertoire), only to become the figurehead of the emergent American avant-garde in the 1910s. But his modernist debut as a composer is at odds with the music he wrote from the mid-1920s onwards, which harked back to broader late-Romantic trends and chromatic tonality. Last but not least, he is one of only a handful of composers who composed over the course of nine decades and also lived over three centuries.

Leo (originally Lev) Ornstein was born in 1893, in Kremenchuk, then in the Russian Empire, now in the Poltava Province of eastern Ukraine, son of a Hazzan (cantor at a synagogue) and nephew of a violinist who encouraged the boy's interest in music. In 1902 one of the pre-eminent virtuosi pianists of the day – Josef Hofmann – visited Kremenchuk and declared Leo a prodigy, supplying him with a letter of recommendation to the St Petersburg Conservatoire. Leo's first serious

studies, though, were carried out in the Imperial Music School in Kyiv, but they were interrupted by a death in the family. Ornstein subsequently impressed another great of the keyboard – Osip Gabrilowitsch – who recommended him to the Moscow Conservatoire, although the boy (still aged merely eleven) ultimately settled on the St Petersburg Conservatoire, which he entered in 1904 and where he studied the piano with Anna Yesipova (often rendered as Esipova – the professor who also taught Prokofiev, Maria Yudina and, briefly, Artur Schnabel) and composition with Glazunov. Two years into his studies, though, he fled with his family to the USA, most probably in order to escape the latest wave of pogroms organised by the fascist Union of the Russian People.

Arriving in the Lower East Side of New York city, Ornstein restarted his studies in the predecessor establishment of the Juilliard School – the Institute of Musical Art – and in 1911 made an acclaimed US debut, playing standard repertoire. At the Institute he also met fellow pianist Pauline Mallet-Prévost, who in 1918 would become his wife and collaborator. This surprising marriage between a Jewish immigrant from the Lower East Side and a Park Avenue debutante lasted for 67 years, until her death in 1985. The 1910s also came with a radical broadening of Ornstein’s musical activities – his first acknowledged compositions date from early in the decade, and it was over a very short space of time that he made his name as a composer of the most radical tendencies. The uncredited author of a biography on [leornstein.net](http://leornstein.net) notes the change that took place in the still-teenage musician during these years:

his New York debut took place in 1911 with a completely conventional program. However, within a few years he was dazzling New York audiences with the works of Albeniz, Scott, Schoenberg, Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin, Franck, and Bartók, many of which he performed for the first time in the US. He also created a furor with his own radical compositions and soon came to be considered an equal of Stravinsky and Schoenberg.<sup>1</sup>

In 1914 he performed his own compositions in London alongside music by Schoenberg and Skryabin, with one critic describing Ornstein’s music as ‘the sum of Schoenberg

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<sup>1</sup> [leornstein.net](http://leornstein.net), accessed 29 August 2023.

and Scriabin squared.<sup>2</sup> From 1915 onwards, Ornstein was one of the most prominent figures on the US music scene: Michael Broyles and Denise Von Glahn, his biographers, state that his ‘draw was immense. He constantly performed before packed halls, often more than two thousand, in many places the “largest audience of the season”’.<sup>3</sup> Early works such as *Wild Men’s Dance*, *Suicide in an Airplane* and *Impressions of the Thames* (all 1913–18) feature tone-clusters (a technique Henry Cowell would exploit extensively during the following decade), driving repetitive rhythmic patterns and huge crashing chords with saturated chromatic harmonies, all of which combine to create a kind of pianistic violence never before encountered.

The huge reputation as an ultra-modernist, as the ‘the most salient musical phenomenon of our time’<sup>4</sup> (according to *The Musical Quarterly*) soon took its toll on Ornstein and in turn led to burn-out, and a retreat from public musical life. ‘What of Leo Ornstein, bright particular star of American composition a quarter of a century ago?’ Olin Downes asked in *The New York Times* in 1945. ‘We recently asked three of the composers of the rising generation about him. Two of them did not know his name. Twenty-five years ago his name was on the lips of every informed concertgoer.’<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, Ornstein all but abandoned his avant-garde style, and forged a Neo-Romantic one its place, redolent still of Skryabin, Szymanowski and others, but essentially melodic with rich, piquant harmonies. In short, within the space of a few years, he went from being identified ‘without contradiction as the single most important figure on the American modern music scene in the 1910s,’<sup>6</sup> to being an almost forgotten figure. Notwithstanding this dramatic withdrawal from public musical life, during the 1920s he produced two of his most important works – the Piano Concerto and Piano Quintet, of 1925 and 1927 respectively – and also accepted a position as head of piano

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Michael Broyles, *Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn./London, 2004, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Broyles and Denise Von Glahn, *Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Midgette, ‘Leo Ornstein, 108, pianist and avant-garde composer’ (obituary), *The New York Times*, 5 March 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from <https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/leo-ornstein>, accessed 29 August 2023.

at the Zeckwer Hahn Music Academy in Philadelphia. By the early 1930s he had given his last public performance; during this decade, along with his wife, he founded the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia, which later counted John Coltrane and Jimmy Smith among its alumni. The school functioned until 1953 when husband and wife retired and then effectively disappeared from view. In the mid-1970s they were tracked down to a Texas trailer park (they also owned a house in New Hampshire) by the musicologist Vivian Perlis; this rediscovery led to a new burst of creative activity. Pauline died in 1985, aged 93, and Leo continued to compose until 1990, the year of his Piano Sonata No. 8. The pianist Sarah Cahill visited Ornstein in December 2000 'at his nursing home in Wisconsin, where he revealed to her the secret of his longevity: Every morning for breakfast, he eats two or three pieces of toast, a bowl of oatmeal, another of dry cornflakes, a large bowl of strawberries, a large glass of orange juice, four cups of coffee, and a sticky bun.'<sup>7</sup> Ornstein died in Green Bay, Wisconsin, on 24 February 2002, probably aged 108.

The music on this album spans almost the entirety of Ornstein's life: *The Cathedral* and *Three Moods* date from the 1910s, the period of Ornstein's notoriety as the *enfant terrible* of the avant-garde (even if 'Grief', the second of the *Moods*, looks forward to the composer's less rebarbative music of the 1920s and beyond). The *Nocturne* No. 1 of 1922 still has much of the exploratory nature of the works of the previous decade, but witnesses Ornstein taking a step back from their excesses with more regular, periodic rhythms and more conventional textures. Two works from the 1950s (when he had retired from public life and was composing in obscurity) – *A Moment of Retrospect* and *Bagatelle* – demonstrate melodic invention which some commentators have referred to as a Hebraic element in Ornstein's style, one which had already been notably displayed in his *Hebraic Fantasy* for violin and piano of 1929. Finally, the recording presents one of the major achievements of the composer's final period, the *Nine Vignettes*.

The *Three Moods* date from 1914, right in the middle of Ornstein's most radical and iconoclastic period: for example, the notorious *Danse sauvage* was written

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-12-12/music/tri-century-man>, article by Kyle Gann, accessed 28 August 2023.

in 1913, and the equally groundbreaking *Impressions de Notre Dame* the following year. The first mood – ‘Anger’ [14] – prefigures the more famous *Suicide in an Airplane* (probably composed a few years later) with its relentless throbbing *ostinati* in the lower register of the piano, while the occasional chordal interjections from above show that extended tonality was never abandoned in even the most modernist pieces. A brief melodic figure appears periodically throughout the second mood, ‘Grief’ [15]; it is punctuated by bell-like sonorities, series of parallel chords built from varied intervals of a fourth and, near the end, perhaps a moment of catharsis with a passage marked *dolente* which almost suggests a hymn. ‘Joy’ [16], the third mood, is a hedonistic display of highly chromatic musical fireworks.

Ornstein’s wife drew attention to the precarious existence of some of his compositions, these pieces included:

Of course when he was playing the things himself he learned to make some kind of adjustment, but then many of the things were never written down. One complete Sonata which he played all over the country was never notated and he has forgotten it so it will never again be heard. The same fate might well have happened to the *Three Moods*. These were among the most known and striking works of the 1914 period. They were extensively played but never written down. Nearly forty years later there was a request to have them on a programme in memory of Paul Rosenfeld. Miraculously Mr. Ornstein still remembered them and he did then write them down. They would have been lost with many other things if this request had not been made.<sup>8</sup>

*The Cathedral* [12] was one of a few of Ornstein’s works published commercially at the time of its composition. It appeared as one of a series – rather stretching the imagination, one might add – of ‘Favourite Piano Solos of Favourite Artists’, published by *The Musical Observer* in 1915, in a limited edition signed by the composer. Ornstein, described in large font as the ‘Futurist of Futurists’, offers ‘personal suggestions [...] for the correct rendition of his sensationally revolutionary composition’. Though the piece

<sup>8</sup> Pauline Mallet-Prévost, *Reminiscences from Here, There and Everywhere*, at [poonhill.ipower.com/Pauline.html](http://poonhill.ipower.com/Pauline.html), accessed 31 August 2023.

is only nineteen bars in length, the performance directions stretch to several hundred words – in addition to which Ornstein prefaces the music with a poem, presumably his own.

The moon cast its rays upon the cathedral,  
Which stood in its majestic omnipotence, silently waiting.  
Sharp, black figures crawled over the walls,  
And long writhing figures, like green snakes,  
Tore at the hard, square stones, their white teeth bristling.  
Bells sounded, first loud and harsh, then soft and mournful.  
The fate of a universe seemed concentrated on its peal.  
Suddenly all was dark, and a sharp piercing wild shriek, came through the black night.  
Large, great blocks of stone crashed, falling, falling into an abyss, into the figures.  
A loud piercing wail – then all was silence.

*Nocturne* No. 1 of 1922 [13] is essentially a series of tableaux framed by sombre opening and closing sections. With its longer melodic shapes, it shows new tendencies in Ornstein's music: the slower *melos* of the opening (typically underpinned by a spare and dour *ostinato*) is soon contrasted with a dotted figure in half-time. A peal of bells follows – using variants of so-called octatonic harmony that would be explored at length in Ornstein's magisterial Piano Quintet, written a few years later – and then an almost danceable *sicilienne* in  $\frac{9}{8}$  metre. Subsequently a chorale with more bells evolves into a passage involving chords of fourths in parallel motion (a device much favoured by Ornstein), whence a recitative brings one back to the opening music. The bells then restart but, to finish, now move in a different direction.

The two works from the 1950s are quite different in nature and yet both epitomise in their varied ways the so-called Hebraic element in Ornstein's music. Some easily identified melodic components (and rhythmic ones in the dance-like *Bagatelle* [10]) bring to mind the music of the composers associated with St Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music – Joel Engel, Alexander and Grigory Krein, Mikhail Gnesin and others – which was founded in 1908, precisely when Ornstein was studying in the city. It is tantalising

to speculate as to whether the teenage Ornstein heard some of the pioneering work of these older composers – who were attempting to forge a distinctly Jewish school of composition, combining folksong and music of the synagogue with the language of their teachers, such as Glazunov, as well as that of the most advanced Russian composers, Skryabin in particular.

Alongside the *Three Tales* (1977), the last four piano sonatas (Nos. 5–8, from 1974, 1981, 1988 and 1990) and the Third String Quartet (1976), the *Nine Vignettes* (1977) are the most substantial creative endeavours of Ornstein's later years. Of this late music, the composer Kyle Gann notes that 'works written in his eighties, like *Solitude* and *Rendezvous at the Lake*, may have been couched in Debussyan ninth chords, but their melodies sprang through endlessly ornate curlicues that brought no other composer to mind.'<sup>9</sup> If the first *Vignette* [1] rereads ground already encountered in *A Moment of Retrospect* [11] from two decades before, then the second [2] deftly combines Ornstein's love of parallel fourths with a pianistically forgiving central section. The third [3] returns to Jewish Russia of the 1910s and '20s and the worlds of Grigory Krein and Co., whereas the outer sections of No. 4 [4] come close to the more amenable études of Szymanowski and Skryabin. The fifth [5] begins almost as a mazurka but soon branches out into more abstract territory before an assertive conclusion. The sixth [6] is another étude or caprice, the dense textures of the opening thinning towards its centre. No. 7 [7] is the most expansive of the set: initially march-like (all the other pieces in the set are in triple time), the metre is distorted until bar-lengths of three, four and five beats are used in alternation (later  $\frac{2}{8}$  and  $\frac{6}{16}$ ). The full range of the piano is used at climactic moments, as well as parallel quartal harmony in the left hand. Although the eighth piece [8] starts modestly, like its predecessor it explodes with peals of bells across the keyboard before subsiding towards a coda marked *calmato*. The so-called 'Hebraic element' reappears at the beginning of the final piece [9], whereupon a melody in parallel fifths propels the music towards a reprise of the opening material, after which the mood becomes conciliatory and valedictory.

<sup>9</sup> Kyle Gann: 'Tri-Century Man', *The Village Voice*, 12 December 2000, accessed at [www.villagevoice.com](http://www.villagevoice.com) on 30 August 2023.



*Jonathan Powell is a pianist, composer and writer on music. He was awarded a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge for his thesis After Scriabin: Six Composers and the Development of Russian Music. He continues to write about music, usually for his own recordings. His concert engagements have taken him around the globe. His recording of Sorabji's Sequentia cyclica was awarded the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritiken in 2020; Igor Levit invited him to perform the work in the 2021 edition of the Heidelberger Frühling. Recent and forthcoming orchestral engagements include concerts and recordings with the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, Poznań Philharmonic, Slovak State Philharmonic, Prague Philharmonia, Beethoven Philharmonia and Mainz Philharmonic.*

Winner of the 2015 Astral Artists National Auditions, and Gold medallist at the 2012 New Orleans International Piano Competition, **Viktor Valkov** has been heralded by the critics as a 'lion of the keyboard'. Among his numerous chamber-music and solo appearances during the last few concert seasons, he has performed with the San Antonio Symphony, Springfield Symphony, Louisiana Philharmonic, Baton Rouge Symphony, Acadiana Symphony and West Virginia Symphony Orchestras.

Since 2002 he has given recitals in the USA, China, Japan and in Europe: his native Bulgaria, England, Germany, Greece, Italy, Macedonia and Norway. In Bulgaria he has performed with most of the major orchestras and at the majority of the important music festivals. In 2003, he received an invitation from the New Symphony Orchestra and its conductor Rossen Milanov to perform Dimitar Nenov's Piano Concerto, thus becoming only the fifth pianist to perform the work and the first to do the uncult version. In 2007 he made his debut with the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra.

His concert activities reflect a deep interest in chamber music, as well as the less-well-known piano repertoire. He frequently performs in a duo with the Bulgarian cellist Lachezar Kostov. Both being deeply interested in broadening the repertoire for that medium, they often



include in their programmes composers like Kabalevsky, Roslavets, Schnittke, Saint-Saëns (the Second Cello Sonata) and others. Their close friendship and professional collaboration began in 2000. In 2008 they recorded the complete Roslavets music for cello and piano (Naxos), and in 2009 the Duo gave its Carnegie Hall debut in Zankel Hall. In 2011 the two musicians won the Liszt-Garissin International Competition, when they were awarded First Prize, the overall Liszt Prize and all the special prizes in the collaborative-artists category.

One of Viktor Valkov's latest projects as a solo performer featured Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* as the focal point of his concert programmes. Some years earlier, by way of contrast, he presented a programme of music from the 1600s, including composers like Buxtehude, Louis Couperin, Frescobaldi and Froberger, and with selections from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book.

He has made a number of recordings for the Bulgarian National Radio archive, many of which have been broadcast. He has also recorded for Bulgarian National Television and Macedonian Radio and Television. In 2013 he recorded the piano music of Dimitar Nenov (Naxos), and in 2015, again with the cellist Lachezar Kostov, their own transcriptions of virtuosic piano pieces by Liszt (Navona Records).

Viktor Valkov is currently an Assistant Professor of Piano at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

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Recorded on 28 September, 2 October and 3–4 December 2021 and 24 May  
and 9–10 October 2022 in the Libby Gardner Hall, University of Utah, Salt Lake City  
Piano: Steinway D  
Recording engineer and editor: Luke Dahn

With thanks to Eric J. Bruskin for help towards some of the costs of this release

Booklet text: Jonathan Powell  
Cover photograph courtesy of Charles Amirkhanian  
Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)  
Typesetting and lay-out: Kerrypress, St Albans

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

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## LEO ORNSTEIN Piano Music, Volume Three

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<b><i>Nine Vignettes, s380 (1977)</i></b>	<b>34:39</b>
1 No. 1 <i>Moderato</i>	4:49
2 No. 2 <i>Con moto</i>	3:08
3 No. 3 <i>Moderato</i>	3:21
4 No. 4 <i>Animato</i>	4:26
5 No. 5 <i>Moderato</i>	2:09
6 No. 6 <i>Allegro</i>	3:30
7 No. 7 <i>Animato</i>	4:15
8 No. 8 <i>Moderato</i>	3:15
9 No. 9 <i>Moderato con moto</i>	5:46
10 <b><i>Bagatelle, s100 (1952)</i></b>	<b>1:30</b>
11 <b><i>A Moment of Retrospect, s156 (?1950s)</i></b>	<b>4:45</b>
12 <b><i>The Cathedral, s73 (1916)</i></b>	<b>2:50</b>
13 <b><i>Nocturne No. 1, s153 (c. 1922)</i></b>	<b>8:47</b>
<b><i>Three Moods, s5 (c. 1914)*</i></b>	<b>11:13</b>
14 No. 1 <i>Anger. Agitato</i>	2:38
15 No. 2 <i>Grief (♩ = 88)</i>	5:32
16 No. 3 <i>Joy. Presto</i>	3:03

Viktor Valkov, piano

TT 63:48

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