

# ORNSTEIN AND FUTURIST MUSIC

*A Twenty-Year Old Exponent of the New Harmony*

BY CHARLES L. BUCHANAN

**A** FRAIL, dextral, boyish figure shuffles timidly upon the stage, for all the world like the poet *Marchbanks* in Shaw's "Candida." He goes to a piano before which he sits, or rather crouches. Then he proceeds to give us a music which some people call futurist music and other people call nonsense. When he arrives at a group devoted to his own compositions, he seems possessed by a kind of demoniacal energy—a degree of nervous energy difficult to reconcile with so delicate, so sensitive a being. His compositions are literal batterings of the piano; rhythmical frenzies.

The figure is Leo Ornstein's! He was born, twenty years ago, near Odessa, Russia. He was a musical prodigy at the age of four. He is now making his home in New York.

He is the latest word in contemporary music. Ornstein has carried the theory and the practice of dissonance even further than Schonberg and Stravinsky. It would be physically impossible to strike more notes upon the piano at the same time. Ornstein's notorious "Wild Man's Dance" (perhaps the most difficult piano piece in existence) is a chaos of sound relying for its effect upon a sheer percussive vividness. Chords consisting of eleven notes are flung at you; and no ear could tell whether Ornstein played such a combination of notes twice the same way.

Now there is no denying the fact that there is something a little grotesque about the whole affair. It appears a downright affectation. To see a young man of fragile, fantastic appearance huddled over a keyboard, to hear him bring sounds out of a piano which superficially suggest the thumpings of a child in a display of temper is conducive to nothing so much as to laughter.

**O**N the other hand, do not forget that it is easy to ridicule any artistic effort. It requires no effort whatever to dismiss a master, to call his work negligible. One does not have to renounce Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Wagner in order to derive a very precious degree of pleasure from Schonberg, Scott, Stravinsky, and even Ornstein himself. There is no denying it—these men are creators of a new kind of music that, as sheer sound, is beautiful. Furthermore, what we are hearing to-day is an inevitable development of what we have heard in the past. From the *Meistersinger* Overture where

the main theme is restated amid a blare of conflicting tonalities; from the "Thus Spake Zarathustra" of Richard Strauss with its simultaneous use of the keys of B major and C major, it is but a step to Schonberg, who piles half tone on half tone, and but a step farther to Ornstein, who writes in a half dozen or so keys at one and the same time. True, theories of music as they were taught us ten or a dozen years ago are frankly smashed into smithereens. But is law, as represented by our older ideas of harmony, interval, proportion, etc., essential to the creation of legitimate musical beauty, or does the emancipation of recent music from law, as we understand it, represent a previsioning of

some wider, some keener music in the future?

This article does not presume to answer so difficult and perplexing a question.

Painting and sculpture concern themselves to a certain extent with concrete, bed-rock conditions and objects in the world about us. Unless we are prepared to doubt the evidences of our senses we positively know that the average human form (dare we say as much) is not as Matisse and Brancusi usually picture it. Music, on the other hand, works upon us very much as a perfume does. Essentially emotional in its appeal and indefinable in its substance, it is the art best fitted to suggest to us those elusive sensations which we all experience but cannot express in mere spoken words.

Now music, as we have been taught to understand it, is sound arbitrarily compressed into intervals of whole tones and half tones and into certain conventional sequences of notes which we call scales. But perhaps we have all been on the wrong track; perhaps nature withholds from our infantile capacities sound secrets of a greater, sharper loveliness than the kind of formularized sound we have always called music. Schonberg would probably say to you something as follows: "The thing you call harmony and beauty is merely the thing you are accustomed to; the thing you call discord and ugliness is merely the thing you are not accustomed to.

"**O**NE consideration only determines the use of a combination of notes—the quality of the result. Is it effective? Does it convey a sensation (not necessarily a pleasing one, you understand) of a more or less acute and vital kind? If so it is permissible."

Ornstein and his confrères do not repudiate discipline and beauty because they are antagonistic to beauty, or incapable of appreciating it. Richard Strauss is famous as a Mozart conductor; Debussy venerates the classics; Ornstein is a slave of Haydn, Schubert and Chopin. No, the modernists merely won't admit that definite boundary lines can be placed around the domains of musical sound.

With the exception of two years' study at the Petrograd Conservatory, Ornstein's musical education was obtained in America. Although his compositions have been mainly for piano, he has composed a striking symphonic poem, *The Fog*. He has recently completed a violin sonata so difficult that it has been called a violin solo for four hands.



LEO ORNSTEIN

Composer and interpreter of what the classicists call  
Futurist Music