

LEO ORNSTEIN Piano Music, Volume Two

Complete Waltzes, s400–16 (1958–c.1980)

1	No. 1, s400	1:44
2	No. 2, s401	6:04
3	No. 3, s402	5:29
4	No. 4, s403	3:38
5	No. 5, s404	5:04
6	No. 6, s405	2:19
7	No. 7, s406	4:10
8	No. 8, s407	3:13
9	No. 9, s408 <i>Moderato con moto</i>	5:39
10	No. 10, s409	2:45
11	No. 11, s410 <i>Vivo</i>	2:56
12	No. 12, s411 <i>Allegro</i>	2:21
13	No. 13, s412 <i>Moderato</i>	2:54
14	No. 14, s413 <i>Allegro non troppo</i>	2:22
15	No. 15, s414 <i>Allegro con moto ed bravura</i>	3:16
16	No. 16, s415	2:05
17	No. 17, s416	4:09

Suite Russe, s58 (1914) 11:20

18	No. 1 <i>Doumka (Andante espressivo)</i>	1:45
19	No. 2 <i>Extase (Allegro con eleganza)</i>	1:04
20	No. 3 <i>Barcarole (Andante sostenuto)</i>	1:40
21	No. 4 <i>Mélancolie (Andante con moto)</i>	2:10
22	No. 5 <i>Danse Burlesque (Vivace)</i>	0:49
23	No. 6 <i>Berceuse (Andantino con semplice)</i>	2:17
24	No. 7 <i>Chanson pathétique (Allegro con forza)</i>	1:35

25 *A Morning in the Woods*, s106 (1971)* 7:24

TT 78:54

ALL EXCEPT * FIRST RECORDINGS

Arsentiy Kharitonov, piano



Leo ORNSTEIN

Piano Music Volume Two

Complete Waltzes
A Morning in the Woods
Suite Russe

Arsentiy Kharitonov, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

LEO ORNSTEIN Piano Music, Volume Two

by Malcolm MacDonald

Leo Ornstein was born and grew up in Russia, and it shows in his music, though he spent most of his life in the USA. He was born in Kremenchuk, on the River Dnieper in the Poltava Oblast region of the Ukraine, on 11 (or maybe 2) December 1893 (conflicting sources also name 1892 or 1895 as the relevant year: such vagueness about dates bedevil accounts and traditions of Ornstein's early years).¹ His father and first teacher in music was a synagogue cantor. Ornstein was recognised as a child-prodigy pianist and, after study in Kiev with the composer-pianist Vladimir Puchalsky, began studies at the St Petersburg Conservatoire at the age of nine (or maybe twelve). At the recommendation of Osip Gabrilovich, Ornstein auditioned for Alexander Glazunov and, reportedly, amazed everyone by realising that the piano was flat and serenely transposing his entire programme up a semitone.² After he had spent five (or so) years in St Petersburg as student of Anna Essipova for piano and Glazunov for composition – as well as making money on the side as an accompanist and opera coach – Ornstein's family, alarmed by anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia, decided to emigrate, and thus he arrived on the Lower East Side of New York in February 1906 as a (probably) thirteen-year-old immigrant. He trained at the Institute of Musical Art (now the Juilliard School) with the pianist Bertha Fiering Tapper, and within about four years was establishing himself as one of the most remarkable pianists of his time.

After a fairly conventional and well-received recital in 1911, Ornstein travelled in Europe, giving recitals in England, Scandinavia and Paris. Before long his programmes were introducing many works by Ravel, Scriabin, Busoni, Bartók and Schoenberg to America; his own pieces, some of them furiously dissonant and percussive, glorying in unremitting, machine-like rhythms, tone-clusters (which he may have been the first to introduce to the concert hall), crushed seconds, gong effects and irregular metres, won glowing reviews from the more modern-minded critics. Paul Rosenfeld wrote of Ornstein's early works:

¹ Ornstein's family brought no official documentation with them to the USA and he himself was unsure of his precise date of birth, though he celebrated it on 2 December. Michael Broyles and Denise von Glahn have confirmed 1893 as the correct year in *Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007, p. 3.

² This story is suspiciously reminiscent of the selfsame feat credited to the young Brahms, during his tour of North Germany with the violinist Reményi in early 1853; but untuned or mistuned pianos are an occasional hazard for pianists the world over.



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More Leo Ornstein and Arseniy Kharitonov on Toccata Classics



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interesting composer. The pieces represent many different styles of Ornstein who is largely known as a 'modernist' composer. In fact, much of the music on this CD is of more familiar romantic and post-romantic style and is very accessible and very enjoyable to hear. The performer Arseniy Kharitonov is clearly a spectacularly gifted musician in addition of being a breathtaking virtuoso pianist. It is difficult, however, to impress with sheer virtuosity these days as so many brilliant young pianists show off in all kinds of virtuosic music. What sets Kharitonov apart are his profound musicianship and his deeply personal voice. His tonal colors are exceptional. His approach to each set of pieces depends on the musical language used in the set and its musical logic. There is seem to be nothing arbitrary in his keen musical judgment; it is clearly dictated by the music and not his wish to be 'original'. In short, in this recording I have stumbled upon a marvellous musician. I anticipate his next recording with great excitement.²

Customer review, amazon.com

‘very crisp, bracing pianism, exciting and driving when need be (as in the sonata’s finale and No. 9, “The Dance,” in *Cossack Impressions*), yet also by turns tender and mysterious when the score calls for it. In other words, he’s an excellent pianist in the modern vein, and in his photo he looks a little like a young Mick Jagger. This is given the title *Leo Ornstein Piano Music, Volume One*, so I’d have to assume that Toccata is going to record the composer’s complete oeuvre, hopefully with Kharitonov as the pianist throughout. In any case, this is a very auspicious beginning to what will undoubtedly be a fascinating set when it is completed.’³

Lynn René Bayley, *Fanfare*

‘The first volume of piano music by Leo Ornstein displays varied works of this less known yet very

They are music young in all its excess, its violence, its sharp griefs and sharper joys, its unrelenting tumbling strength. The spring comes up hot and cruel in them. Always one senses the pavements stretching between steel buildings, the black hurrying tides of human beings; and through it all the oppressed figure of one searching out the meaning of all this convulsive activity into which he was born.³

Ornstein was widely dubbed a ‘Futurist’ musician on the strength of such works as *A la Chinoise* (perhaps composed as early as 1911, though not published until 1918), *Danse sauvage* (1913?), *Suicide in an Airplane* (1918?), and the brooding, proto-Messiaenic *Impressions de la Tamise* (1914). At this period he was perhaps the most visible and notorious of the ‘immigrant’ modernists (others included Edgard Varèse and Dane Rudhyar) whose impact on music in the USA compounded that of ‘indigenous’ Americans such as Charles Ives and Henry Cowell.

Precisely where Ornstein’s aggressive modernist outpouring stemmed from is something of a mystery – seemingly also to the composer himself, who declared:

Having had a strictly conventional bringing up musically it is difficult to understand why, when in my teens and completely unaware of any contemporary trends, I should suddenly have heard anything like the *Impressions of Notre Dame* or the *Poems of 1917*. Essentially every person writing music is the victim or recipient of something ‘way beyond’ himself. It has little to do with training. It has little to do with consciousness or with theories. It is incomprehensible as the fact of being alive.⁴

Clearly some of his pieces, such as the *Danse sauvage* (also known as *Wild Men’s Dance*) and the *Three Moods* (1914), are related to the contemporary fascination with the sophisticated treatment of primitive emotion, enshrined most dramatically in Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps*. But Ornstein’s pieces in this vein sound quite individual. And although his name was associated with – and he made his early reputation by means of – this highly dissonant, ‘avant-garde’ style, there were always contrasting sides to his musical language. They included a sweeping and sustained melodic idiom, clearly indebted to the Russian nationalist schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; a delicate and haunting adaptation of the language of French impressionism as perfected by Debussy and Ravel; and a pastoral vein that delighted in evocations of landscape and the natural world.

³ Quoted by Michael Sellars in notes to *Danse Sauvage – The Early Piano Music of Leo Ornstein*, Orion ors 75194 (1975).

⁴ Quoted by ‘S. M. O.’ (Severo Ornstein) in sleeve notes to Orion ors 76211 (1976), an LP of works by Ornstein for cello and piano performed by Bonnie Hampton and Nathan Schwartz. The reference to ‘hearing’ his works reflects Ornstein’s conviction that in the act of composition he was simply transcribing music that was already present to his inner ear.

In Ornstein's later music these perhaps more traditional elements came more to the fore, sometimes giving rise to accusations of nostalgia. Typical in this regard is the large-scale Fifth Piano Sonata of 1973–74 which he entitled *A Biography in Sonata Form*. Subsequent works like the Seventh and Eighth Sonatas (1988 and 1990 respectively: No. 8, written at the age of 97 or 98, was his last completed work) show plenty of the old fire and dissonant assertiveness, though these characteristics are perhaps more clearly subsumed into a more kaleidoscopic 'late style'. Stylistic 'purity', the exclusive cultivation of a particularly radical or revolutionary approach, was never Ornstein's aim; in fact, he distrusted it. "That he composes in varied styles is deliberate," wrote the piano-music authority Donald Garvelman, "for he believes that no composer should adhere to a single style because he would only begin to imitate himself."⁵ Ornstein himself put it thus:

Whatever I have had to sacrifice, including lack of uniformity of style, the primary motivation has always been that the music should be spontaneous and thoroughly uninhibited. I feel that much of music today deals with so many personal refinements that in the end musical implications are altogether erased. I find it disturbing, this race to establish some personal style, which may almost be called an individual trademark, and the neglect or absence of substance.⁶

In 1918 Ornstein married another student of Bertha Tapper, Pauline Mallet-Provost. Though still at the peak of his powers, he began to feel burnt-out and started to withdraw from the concert platform in the 1920s, taking a position as head of the piano department of the Philadelphia Academy of Music. Later he established with his wife the Ornstein School of Music in the same city. (Two of its best-known students were the jazz musicians John Coltrane and Jimmy Smith.) By the later 1930s, while he pursued a private teaching career, his music and influence was beginning to be forgotten. Ornstein retired from teaching in 1953, but in fact had nearly 40 years of creativity left to him. He died on 24 February 2002 at his home in Green Bay, Wisconsin, at the age of 108.

In addition to his remarkable and very numerous piano works, Ornstein composed many orchestral and chamber pieces, including the Piano Concerto which he premiered with Leopold Stokowski in Philadelphia 1925, a (now lost) symphonic poem *The Fog*, sonatas for violin and for cello, the epic Piano Quintet of 1927, dedicated to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, which Ornstein performed with the Pro Arte and Stradivarius String Quartets, and three string quartets. There are also songs, choruses, and some striking incidental music to the *Lysistrata* of Aristophanes.

⁵ Donald Garvelman, sleeve notes to Genesis GS 1066 (1976), 'Piano Music of Leo Ornstein' performed by Martha Anne Verbit.

⁶ Quoted by 'S. M. O.' in liner notes to Orion ORS 76211.

ternary form but rather a kaleidoscopic sequence of different ideas, some perfumed and Skryabinesque, some dissonant and percussive, some surgingly melodic, some exploring Ornstein's favourite five-against-three waltz polyrhythm. One of the subsidiary themes becomes a kind of fanfare to introduce the final virtuoso flourish and granitic repeated chords of the conclusion: surely one of the most unorthodox endings for a waltz ever devised.

Malcolm MacDonald is the author of the volume on Brahms in the 'Master Musicians' series (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002). He has also written The Symphonies of Havergal Brian (three vols., Kahn & Averill, London, 1974, 1978 and 1983) and edited the first two volumes of Havergal Brian on Music (Toccata Press, London, 1985 and 2009); further volumes are in preparation. His other writings include books on John Foulds, Schoenberg, Ronald Stevenson and Edgard Varèse.

A prize-winner of numerous national and international competitions, including the 1991 Sergei Rachmaninov Competition (Russia), 2003 'Slavic Music' Competition (Ukraine), Beethoven Piano Sonata Competition (Memphis, USA), and the Franz Liszt International Piano Competition (Los Angeles, USA), **Arsentiy Kharitonov** has been heard in solo recitals and with orchestras in Finland, Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Ukraine and the United States.

He studied at the Rimsky-Korsakov College of Music of the famous St Petersburg Conservatoire in Russia, where his musical progress was immediate and astounding. Soon he was giving solo recitals, featuring his own compositions and brilliant improvisations in variety of musical styles in addition to the standard piano repertoire. Kharitonov's first orchestral appearances in Russia included solo performances with the St Petersburg Philharmonic and the Mariinsky Theatre Youth Philharmonic Orchestra. Upon graduating from St Petersburg, he moved to the University of North Texas – the largest music school in the United States. His major teachers have been Igor Lebedev of the St Petersburg Conservatory and, in the United States, Nikita Fitenko and Joseph Banowetz.



scale), is the first of the very late waltzes (completed 8 February 1980) and the first in this sequence to have a tempo indication (*Moderato con moto*) and quite detailed dynamic markings. Its gorgeous, richly coloured opening section is almost entirely chordal, switching to a soulful tenor tune with glistening right-hand figuration in a contrasting section directed to be played *Con [sic] animato* and ‘with warmth’. Later a carefree right-hand tune floats above bell-like chords, but a dramatic crescendo returns the listener to a brief reminiscence of the opulent music of the beginning, now in A sharp minor/major. In a coda (so marked), the main tune is dissolved against a pulsing left-hand ostinato.

Waltz No. 10 in D sharp minor [10], dated 3 June 1979, starts out in a vein of sweet regret but soon turns passionate with a big tune in octaves against a surging left-hand accompaniment. This melody generates some glorious pages but Ornstein is able to rein the ecstasy in and return to the delicate writing of the opening. **Waltz No. 11** [11] (19 June 1979) is marked *Vivo*, and is a spiky, clattery, helter-skelter affair with ceaseless left-hand motion. In the coda (again, so indicated), Ornstein plays off rhythms of seven against three before a brief orgiastic summing-up.

Waltz No. 12 [12] (6 July 1979) – in F, more or less – repeatedly takes off like a rocket and descends in loquacious, fluttering triplets. The middle section is more of a development than a contrast. **Waltz No. 13** [13] (11 January 1980) is a moderately paced dance based on a tune that continually turns in and about itself within a narrow melodic compass. A more expansive contrasting theme rises and falls in conjunct motion over a rippling accompaniment. A return to the *Tempo Primo* now presents the inward-turning tune in richer harmonies, in C sharp major.

Waltz No. 14 [14] (16 April 1980), *Allegretto non troppo* in B flat minor, starts out in sweet innocence and then develops one of Ornstein’s broad tunes that seem to look towards a far steppeland horizon. The return of the opening idea is not quite so innocent, but on the whole this is a sunny piece. The date of 17 May 1980 makes **Waltz No. 15** [15] probably the latest work in this recording, but it shows the 86-year-old composer still at the height of his powers and having lost none of his old fire; indeed, it may be the most brilliant of all his waltz-toccatas. It has a rushing metallic motion which makes one think of the bustling, crowded streets of early-twentieth-century New York. A passage of bludgeoning chords is marked *barbaro*, and though the pace slows a little for a suave scrap of tune, this is essentially a bravura celebration of speed and power, rising at one point to a *furioso* outburst combined with an *ffff* dynamic. The final bars are surely guaranteed to bring an audience to its feet.

The last two waltzes are undated. **Waltz No. 16** [16] opens placidly, with a charming, repetitive little tune, then bursts into riotous, obstreperous motion that is cut short and the placid little ditty returns apparently unaffected, only to become agitated in the coda. Finally, **Waltz No. 17** [17] offers no simple

Not much of the music on this CD really shows Ornstein in his ‘radical revolutionary’ aspect; rather, he largely appears here in the guise of an affectionate exponent of the major nineteenth- and early twentieth-century traditions of Russian piano music, with an occasional flash of the ‘barbarism’ that brought him such notoriety in his early years. Apropos of this stylistic mixture, it may be relevant to consider Ornstein’s answer, in an interview with Terence O’Grady that appeared in *Perspectives of New Music in 1984*, to the question if he withdrew from public life as a composer because of the ‘audiences clamoring for novelty’, or because he had ‘exhausted the style’ in which he had ‘gained so much notoriety’.

I suppose it’s a bit of both. Perhaps it was to some extent the demand of just creating more novelty, and I became, as I grew older, much more involved in other matters in music than novelty. Substance was really becoming very much more important to me. And the externals, how I transferred that substance, meant much less to me. That’s why I’m not excited at all whether the style is particularly nouveau or whether it’s actually old classical style. It doesn’t bother me at all because it’s the intrinsic value of the piece that now counts. That’s the thing that I’m really concerned with now.⁷

The earliest work here, the *Suite Russe*, dates from 1914 and would have graced the pen of Rachmaninov or Medtner. It has seven short movements, of which the first is a haunting ‘Doumka’ in C sharp minor [18]. The word originally meant a lament; it is also a diminutive of the Ukrainian term *duma*, signifying a narrative ballad. In Slavonic music, the *dumka* usually has a ternary (ABA) layout, usually alternating slow and fast sections, as in Dvořák’s ‘Dumky’ piano trio, but Ornstein’s ‘Doumka’ is slow throughout, a haunting and melancholic *Andante espressivo*. The little rapid left-hand *gruppetto* perhaps evokes a bard strumming a lyre.

The ensuing ‘Extase’ in D flat major [19] could almost have been written by Chopin. It rises to a brief climax of dotted-rhythm ardour and then sinks down again, satisfied. The B flat minor ‘Barcarole’ [20] is dark-hued and melancholic, brightening briefly in an E flat major middle section, but the uneasy sextuplets in the tenor register weave through it all. The E minor ‘Mélancolie’ [21] is oppressive and repetitive, the two hands mainly in rhythmic unison as if chained together, unable to break the depression that afflicts the music. The ‘Danse Burlesque’, *Vivace* in B flat [22], a jolly staccato affair, brings welcome relief.

The E major ‘Berceuse’ [23] is a perfect miniature, a tender cradle-song presented with both simplicity and sophistication. Finally, back to E minor for the ‘Chanson pathétique’ [24], which despite its title is a stormy *Allegro con forza* through which the melody in question sounds out in ever more stentorian tones

⁷ Terence J. O’Grady and Leo Ornstein, ‘A Conversation with Leo Ornstein’, *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Autumn–Winter 1984, pp. 131–32.

until the grim final bars. It makes a barnstorming finale to a memorable and expertly crafted group of miniatures.

A Morning in the Woods [25] was composed in 1971, yet stylistically it looks back sixty years or so. If any other composer is evoked here it is the Debussy of *Le plus que lent* (for this is really a very slow waltz in D flat) and the Attic pipings of the *Epigraphes antiques*. Yet there is a glistening, vernal freshness to Ornstein's recreation of the impressionist pastoral. The involute filigree of the right-hand figuration appears to wave this way and that in the breeze, and there would seem to be a stream in these woods, quietly purling away and flashing in the sunlight that pierces through the leaves. Apparently rhapsodic, it is very carefully structured in terms of texture and phrasing. Though precisely notated, the right hand *fioritura* cry out for the sensitive application of *rubato* to impart full shape and meaning (and receive it in Arsentiy Kharitonov's performance). Though the mood is mostly one of innocent delight in nature, a more sombre, elegiac note emerges in the coda, with its deep bell-like bass chords.

Being itself a sort of waltz, *A Morning in the Woods* would make an apt introduction to the collection of seventeen *Waltzes* that Ornstein composed between the late 1950s and 1980 or so, seven of them (Nos. 9–15 in the published score) in less than a year between June 1979 and May 1980. Over the basic waltz-tempo they cover a wide gamut stylistically, some of them being of uncertain tonality and employing some of the pungent dissonances of Ornstein's earlier, radical piano works; others are more nostalgic revisitations of nineteenth-century waltz style – but all are irradiated with Ornstein's original personality. The expressive range that he conjures from the idea of the concert waltz is remarkable. Probably he intended them as separate pieces, a collection rather than a cycle; they are played here in the sequence devised and numbered by the composer's son Severo, in which they appear in the published edition. This sequence does not follow their chronological order, and in fact the dates of five of them are unknown.⁸ The majority of them are without tempo-marking or dynamics, leaving such interpretative matters up to the performer, though this is not true of the seven waltzes of 1979–80. When performed thus as a sequence – perfectly possible given their sheer variety – they add up to a very impressive whole, and also probably constitute one of the best possible introductions to the breadth and generosity of Ornstein's invention.

Waltz No. 1 [1] is one of the undated ones. In a chromatic idiom that recalls middle-period Skryabin, it combines a melodic line in thirds, mainly in the tenor register, with restless right-hand figuration like the dance of flames in a log fire. The chromatic-scale element transfers to the left hand and becomes obsessive as the waltz drives to a climax; after a moment of stasis the opening music returns only to dissipate with a final gust of sparks.

⁸ The dates of the rest have kindly been supplied by Severo Ornstein.

The huge **Waltz No. 2** [2] seems to be an isolated inspiration from July 1967 and is an epic conception. The opening section, which is passionate but with a certain aristocratic hauteur, sees the right hand largely in octaves, with occasional intervening notes to add further spice to the already dissonant harmonies. In the middle section Ornstein plays quintuplet rhythms (five in a bar) against the basic waltz metre (three in a bar) and builds up the intensity with a tolling left-hand pedal-point. A faster transitional section then drives to a climax, at the height of which the opening idea grandly returns. The tonality, so far unstable, coalesces into a shining F sharp major for the thrilling closing pages.

The astonishing **Waltz No. 3** [3] (dated 13 December 1966) is also a large-scale movement, but in some respects is more like a toccata than a waltz. It begins in perfumed Skryabinesque chromaticism, but Ornstein soon unleashes what can only be described as a torrent of notes that soon breaks up into bravura interchanges between the hands. There is also a grand, sweeping tune, but the overall impression is of virtuoso fireworks.

Waltz No. 4 in C minor [4] – the first of the collection to vouchsafe a key signature – is undated, and is an altogether more romantic affair, perhaps with a tinge of Tchaikovsky to the main idea of the outer sections. The central episode, in 6/4 time and starting in F minor, makes delicate play with polyrhythms.

Even more than No. 3, **Waltz No. 5** [5], written some time in 1966, is essentially a brilliant toccata, in which the underlying waltz-rhythm disappears beneath the vibrant machine-rhythms of the surface and spiky Prokofievian percussiveness. Virtually everything here is cunningly and obsessively derived from the opening figure of three repeated notes. There is a gentler contrasting idea in arpeggios for both hands, but it appears for only a couple of brief episodes.

Although No. 5 has nothing to do with the ballroom, it is entirely possible to imagine couples dancing to the nostalgic strains of **Waltz No. 6 in E minor** [6], dated 15 December 1966, a piece that seems to hark back to Schubert and Schumann, though Ornstein throws in a few of his personal trademarks (like left-hand arpeggios in five-in-a-bar). It makes an appropriate pairing with **Waltz No. 7 in F minor** [7], composed a couple of weeks earlier – it was completed on 28 November 1966 – which starts out as a gorgeous romantic reverie, but has a more chromatic, feverish central section in which the spirit of Chopin is plain to hear.

The undated **Waltz No. 8** [8] struts as much as it dances, like a kind of march in three time. There is a gentler, slightly oriental-sounding melody for the central section, with a little recurrent decorative curlicue. After the opening music has been reprised the waltz mounts to a climax in which this melody is given a brief grandiose apotheosis, before a coda of unexpectedly intense, percussive dissonance. **Waltz No. 9** [9], to begin with nominally in C sharp minor (though Ornstein persistently sharpens the third degree of the