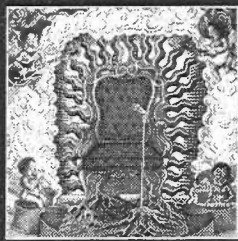


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SARAH CAHILL HONORED ORNSTEIN WITH A CONCERT ON DECEMBER 2, THE DAY HE BELIEVES IS HIS BIRTHDAY.

Oldest Living Composer Makes a Late Case for Rediscovery

TRI-CENTURY MAN

BY KYLE GANN

How many composers can you name who lived in three centuries? Leo Ornstein, whose 90th birthday was celebrated here in 1982, has now entered his third. Born in 1892, he turned 108 this week, surpassing the conductor-musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky, who died a few years ago at 101, and even the greatly underrated French impressionist composer and critic Paul LeFlem, whose dates are 1881 to 1984. Pianist Sarah Cahill honored Ornstein with a concert at Miller Theater December 2, the day that Ornstein believes is his birthday, though documents differ. In preparation, she visited him last week 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. So now you know.

All the more amazing because Ornstein's career peaked in the 1920s, when he was, along with Henry Cowell and George Antheil, one of a trio of scandalous American pianist-modernists who played driving repetitions, unprecedented dissonances, and clusters hit with the palm and fist. The '20s were a golden age of American music, which flourished and grew according to its own rules for 15 years before the Nazis chased Europe's best musicians across the Atlantic, bringing with them a weight of history and foreign tradition that we're still trying to dig our way out from under. And way back then, Ornstein was already considered a major composer—a 1914 London newspaper had described his music as "the sum of Schoenberg and Scriabin squared." Populism and the Depression drove modernists underground in the '30s, and Ornstein gave up iconoclasm to teach and write mild romantic-impressionist music for the rest of his long life.

However, Cahill celebrated not only Ornstein but Antheil (in honor of his centennial), and what an alternation of their works inadvertently showed was that, of the two, Ornstein's were by far the more substantial. Early Antheil works she played, like the *Airplane Sonata* and *Sonata Sauvage*, were delightful for their audacity but not much else: the repetitious figures,

of the former can still shock the ear, but without convincing it. Ornstein's *Impressions of the Thames* of 1913, on the other hand, if Debussyan in its textures, used more prickly chords than Debussy ever dared, and also clusters in the treble range and a low pounding that foreshadowed Charlemagne Palestine, yet modulated among the three with a compelling sense of unity. Ornstein deserved his early reputation.

And if the late Ornstein slid into mild-mannered mood painting, Antheil descended into downright triviality. Cahill's sparkling technique brought life to Antheil's 1948 *Toccata*, but couldn't hide its limited harmonic tricks. Nor could she turn his *Ben Hecht Valses* into more than a cute bonbon. Late-period Ornstein gave her much more to work with. 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.

Cahill negotiated all these and other difficulties with consummate grace, leaping rapidly all over the keyboard without ever losing her even sweetness of tone. And while Ornstein's *Suicide in an Airplane* of 1913—perhaps his most famous work—reminded one a little of Scriabin's *Vers la Flamme*, with its rumbling trills and crashing dissonant chords, she brought out its originality and made it bristle. Cahill has a famous second career as a radio interviewer at San Francisco's KPFA (which she has temporarily given up to live in New York for awhile), and leavened her recital with excerpts from her interview with Ornstein and with a charming 1958 interview with Antheil available on the new *Antheil Plays Antheil* disc on the Other Minds label. It was Ornstein's reputation, though, never quite as bright as Antheil's, that benefited from the comparison, and made him seem overdue for reevaluation. After all, how often do you get to review a living composer who is also a 19th-century one?

» I apologize for stating, in my last column, that IRCAM stands for the Institute for the Recycling of Crappy Atonal Music. I am informed that it actually stands for the Institute for Recalcitrant Composers of Atonal Music. ▀