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Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices

Michael Broyles, Denise von Von Glahn

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Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices traces the meteoric rise and heretofore inexplicable disappearance of the Russian-American, futurist-anarchist, pianist-composer from his arrival in the United States in 1906 through a career that lasted nearly a century. Outliving his admirers and critics by decades Leo Ornstein passed away in 2002 at the age of 108. Frequently compared to Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, for a time Ornstein enjoyed a kind a celebrity granted few living musicians. And then he turned his back on it all. This first, full-length biographical study draws upon interviews, journals, and letters from a wide circle of Ornstein's friends and acquaintances to track the Ornstein family as it escaped the horrors of the Russian pogroms, and it situates the Russian-Jewish-American musician as he carved out an identity amidst World War I, the flu pandemic, and the Red Scare. While telling Leo Ornstein's story, the book also illuminates the stories of thousands of immigrants with similar harrowing experiences. It also explores the immeasurable impact of his unexpected marriage in 1918 to Pauline Mallet-Prevost, a Park Avenue debutante.

Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices finds Ornstein at the center of several networks that included artists John Marin, William Zorach, Leon Kroll, writers and activists Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank, Edmund Wilson, and Clair Reis, the Stieglitz Circle, and a group of English composers known as the Frankfurt Five. Ornstein's story challenges directly the traditional chronology and narrative regarding musical modernism in America and its close relation to the other arts.

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