

The Last of the Original 20th Century Mavericks

Leo and Pauline Ornstein speak with Vivian Perlis

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1. The Elusiveness of Inspiration

VIVIAN PERLIS: People in music don't seem to retire or what you consider retiring, at least--have you ever considered retiring?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Giving up writing?

VIVIAN PERLIS: Yes.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't know. There have been periods, actually, yes. I think there have been some periods when the writing almost became a bit of a burden. I think I wrote to Severo once a letter. I said: "It would be a great comfort if I could exclude ideas from coming into my head and just absolutely have a completely empty head, just sit in a rocker and have absolutely no ideas crowding in. But what are you going to do when the ideas do crowd into your head and keep tormenting you until you finally get it down on paper?" It's not, again, a voluntary act at all. How are you going to exclude things coming into your head? How are you going to exclude music wandering into your head and just churning around?

VIVIAN PERLIS: Have there been times in your lifetime where that has happened, where the material doesn't come?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes, absolutely. Yes, indeed. Indeed, very often you sit before the paper and nothing but trivialities come into your head, and obviously you're not prepared to put those down if you have any critical evaluation at all. So finally either you give up in despair or you put down whatever you hear and eventually tear it and throw it away in the wastebasket.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: This happened right in the middle of the Quintet. One morning he was bitten by what he was thinking of, and he wouldn't use it, and the next day he wouldn't use it, and the next day he wouldn't use it. He was in a terrible state. And finally we picked up and went down to New York, right in the middle of the summer, to see whether something would change in the environment. And when we got there, the problem was solved. He sat down at the piano and went right straight ahead where he wanted to.

VIVIAN PERLIS: And you have no idea what makes that?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I haven't the faintest idea. I don't have an idea because there we were in the mountains, in an atmosphere and a landscape that would have been conducive to writing and everything else. But I got into a problem, and none of the solutions were possible, and in despair finally I said: "We've got to get out of here" because I was just absolutely almost on the verge of doing something, actually. We got to New York, and you can imagine what an apartment in the middle of the summer in New York, with the sheets over the furniture and so on, and the camphor balls all over the place. You know this sort of thing. And then we opened up the windows, and I think there was a hurdy-gurdy and whatnot.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Something subconscious, then.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't know. It's almost as though it were staged almost, you see. Suddenly I went over and put it down.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So all of the beautiful scenery--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Didn't do a thing for me, not a thing.

VIVIAN PERLIS: And nature didn't do anything.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, just the very thing that we were talking about.

VIVIAN PERLIS: We were just saying earlier, before we started recording, that that has not really meant a great deal to you in your writing.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, apparently not.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: You'd be surprised how many mornings, when the news is on or something he's listening--he goes over to the piano and just starts working. He must not hear what's going on because he doesn't even take the trouble to shut it off. He just begins to...

VIVIAN PERLIS: ...Is it that you don't hear other things that are going when music is...

LEO ORNSTEIN: I think sometime the absorption can become so great, yes. But you really lose track of almost any sounds, unless it were some aggressive sound right in your ear. But generally speaking, of course, it does not work that way at all. You have to have a certain amount of quiet.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That's one of the reasons you were saying that this is a good place for you.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, exactly, and this is just absolutely perfect for that because we've discovered that actually we're as quiet here as we had been in the mountains, right in the middle of our woods. This matter that we were talking about, about how subjective one can become is something also terribly puzzling because it seems to me that what has happened to the arts is something altogether different from what other composers have experienced. Most of them have been willing to stay within the limitations and within the language that they had been taught. While they did superimpose upon it their own thinking and their own hearing of what they heard, they still stayed somewhere within...shall we say their training.

2. Today's Compositional Tower of Babel

LEO ORNSTEIN: Today each composer is not only involved in aesthetics, but he's actually trying to create his own language. We have the paradox of each one making up his own language. The danger of that--and there's a grave danger that I, myself, have to be very aware of--is that you become so involved and intrigued in the language that sometimes you lose track that that is only a means to an aesthetic experience that the listener has to get. No wonder it is very difficult for the listener to make any evaluations because, before anything else, he has to first of all learn the language. And since each one invents his own language today, the poor listener is really in quite a stew because how can he make any evaluation? How can he even understand what the aesthetic value of the piece is, when he still is floundering around trying to understand and learn the language first of all? So that one can't blame many listeners who rebel because...

VIVIAN PERLIS: They simply don't understand...

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's it. They don't understand.

VIVIAN PERLIS: And when they say they don't understand, it's like somebody saying: "I don't understand a man speaking Chinese."

LEO ORNSTEIN: Exactly. And the analogy is that you could have a great Chinese poet and a very inferior one. Since I do not know Chinese, each one recites his poem.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Yes, that's a good point.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I can make absolutely no evaluation at all because I do not understand the inspired poet or the fifth-rate poet, so then I have the problem, if I persist in trying to understand what it is they're saying, that I first of all have to learn the language and then I can, of course, begin to make at least my personal evaluation as to which of the poems I find gives me the most--or which I find the most original, the most subtle, or whatever other qualities I may see in the poem.

VIVIAN PERLIS: There is a distinction--and you pointed it out earlier--because of the fact of music being an abstract art.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, it is. Of all the arts, music is really the most abstract. It never has any--shall we say any formal anything before it that can deal with--you see, the painter obviously has some object that he looks at. A writer has all the aspects of life before him. But the musician deals with something that is so...

VIVIAN PERLIS: It's not based on any natural prototypes.

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's it. Nothing that he has before him that can at least give him a start... He has nothing at all, but just lines.

VIVIAN PERLIS: For that reason, it is not quite the same as learning a language because the specifics of meaning are not as necessary.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, because you've learned to make certain distinctions, and then suddenly you're

confronted with a new element in which you really have no criterion and no basic values that you can guide yourself by, and you have to establish--then, of course, very few people have the time to be able to repeat enough of their work to get thoroughly acquainted, and until you do, no one's evaluation can really be taken seriously. That is why, of course, the critic is very often at a terrible disadvantage because he has to make some kind of an estimate on one or two hearings. He might hear possibly one rehearsal and then the performance. As astute as some may be, there is a specific limit beyond which it's very difficult to really make any assertion that would really have ultimate validity.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Can a composer be concerned about what the audience understands, or can he just go ahead and do what he feels he needs to do? Obviously, in your own work it's a paradox in a way because you're very concerned about emotional impact and communication and that that should not be lost. On the other hand, you're very unconcerned about performance. So there's a paradox there.

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's right. There is a paradox. There is a paradox because I think you've struck a chord there that we ought to simply pursue--it is true that music is a form of communication. If you sever that line, then the whole point of the composer even writing the thing down becomes futile except as an exercise merely to see what his thoughts look like.

3. The Independent Life of Musical Compositions

LEO ORNSTEIN: It's always an interesting thing, by the way, for the composer suddenly to see--I remember that when I wrote this "Wild Man's Dance," I wrote it down, and I was so involved, and then I was traveling around and playing it. Then, finally, when the proofs came, I remember I simply said: "Oh, my goodness. So *that's* what it looks like on paper." See, and I had been playing it, and I wrote it down and then sent it off to Schott, but when the proofs came I had to really look at the thing to make the corrections.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That's interesting...that you surprised yourself and that you didn't visualize it.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Not necessarily, not necessarily. Every time I'm a bit surprised always, what the patterns look like and what the whole thing looks like because, of course, I primarily hear. I know that there are some people who apparently operate with their eyes on the paper. They are more guided almost by the pattern.

VIVIAN PERLIS: The visual pattern.

LEO ORNSTEIN: By the visual pattern, but mostly I'm guided entirely by my ear, what I hear. Now, there are sometimes making a connection between one section and another that sometimes you do want to see the pattern because it helps you to lead into the next thing--it's a rhetorical thing, where you just see how the pattern has to go into the next thing. But in the end, music is ultimately an aural art, pure and simple. What it looks like on paper may be interesting enough, but what the listeners hears is ultimately what stays with him, that he is concerned with. But anyway, what relationship there is between what one hears and what one sees on paper is beyond--I've just never attempted to try to analyze, and I don't know that much would be gained by it, unless some very concrete relationship might be able to be made between...

VIVIAN PERLIS: Except if it's the kind of notation that some composers have used that is actually visual notation; that is, a performer is expected to read according to the relationships on the page. In other words, there are no bar lines and there are no staff lines. They are expected to make their own evaluations of the distances. It's a kind of visual notation.

LEO ORNSTEIN: For me, that would be much too improvisational. No, I'm afraid that I would not be satisfied to leave it quite as loosely because the elements of error become so wide that one could just completely go off the track.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That's another aesthetic idea, that each time the work is performed, then it's different, only within some bounds, but each time it's performed--of course, that's true about all music. Each time it's performed, it's different.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. It seems to me that to some extent that that kind of writing is a form of abdication, really, on the part of the composer. I would be willing to say it's something of an abdication. In other words, either there's a mental laziness there or else the composer, himself, hasn't really waited until the thing has crystallized and become shaped and formed absolutely and has a certain inevitability about it. In the long run, I wonder whether a work would be so subject to what we call immediate whims--not that immediate whims may not have some value of its own--but it's much too haphazard.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Well, the composer loses a lot of control that way.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Of course. That's what I meant when I said that he abdicates. That's what I meant. He passes the thing onto the performer then. Now, you understand there are moments, there are times when you hear a thing in your head that is absolutely perfectly clear, and then of course it's simple enough to write down what you hear. There are times when you hear things that are not really a finished product. In other words, it's all quite vague. You haven't yet established the shape of the thing, you haven't really established a time that you want to have it in, and so on.

VIVIAN PERLIS: The instrumentation also?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, and sometimes even the instrumentation, although it's much less in that field, as the actual concept of the statement that you're making. Those are the times when you should not write at all--obviously not because you would be just writing something that you're not in control of at all. You wouldn't really know what to write. You have to wait until the thing crystallizes in your own mind, and very often some of the ideas you have to abandon because they are of such an improvisational nature that we have really no notation that is adequate enough to be able to explicitly put it down on paper. After all, the spots we put on paper are nothing but just directions to a player what note he blows...

VIVIAN PERLIS: A practical matter.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Exactly, exactly. Or the pianist has to know what key he has to push down, or the cellist or the violinist--at what point on the string that he has to put his finger on. Those are just directions. How can you give directions to someone when you, yourself, haven't yet established what the direction should be?

VIVIAN PERLIS: Giving those directions, being able to do that is a crucial matter.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Of course it's a crucial matter because that is the thing that ultimately is the work of art. You take, for instance, a Bach fugue and you go to work and a few of the notes get vague--and the whole line can be immediately altogether destroyed.

VIVIAN PERLIS: What about this matter we started to talk about that I'm not going to let you get out of, but I don't think you want to, the paradox in your own situation, where you obviously are very caring about ideas and about--not emotional impact but that music must in some way have some kind of communication. And yet you have stayed away from--actual performance of your own works doesn't mean terribly much to you. You're ready to go on to the next work and leave that.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. You're talking about two different things. If you're talking about insisting on spending your time on having things performed, I was thinking in totally different terms. When I was speaking about communicating, I meant that the listener--we have to reach the listener; otherwise, of course, you're writing the piece, as I say, only for the satisfaction of seeing it on the paper for yourself, and then it ends right there. Now, what we are not talking about, what you're really coming to, is what compromises one makes so that the listener understands somewhat of what you're doing, what you're trying to express.

VIVIAN PERLIS: No, what I'm talking about is why you have been willing to care so much about that and yet not care so much about the work being performed, and letting it lie for a long time.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, well, I tell you, because once I have completed a work, I simply am interested only in what I may hear in the next work that's coming. Once the work is finished and written down, then it enters into a totally different sphere. One can hope, of course, that somebody will be interested enough they'll want to hear the music. If not, I am not prepared, certainly, to give up any of my time for the purpose of just exploiting a work--not at all.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Isn't it of interest to you to actually hear it, or do you feel that you really hear it?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Most of it I really heard. There are very few surprises. Naturally, I've heard the thing, and I've accumulated enough skill so that I can really play the thing certainly not professionally but enough so that--as a matter of fact, the real satisfaction, of course, is the hearing of the thing. And then, finally, for the purposes of a record, you just put it down. Also, you might simply ask that pointed question: "Why do you write it down at all?" You write it down because finally, when it's written down you do get it out of your system somewhat. And that is tremendously helpful; otherwise, these things just go on and on and on, around in your head. Sometimes you will get a theme that is really very pungent.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I wonder what would happen if you didn't.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I think that you could really, literally almost go out of your mind.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I was going to say that, but I didn't want to.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. I think that one could. But, you see, what happens is that there's a tremendous release. Once you've put it down there, to some extent you've given birth to the idea and you really then concretely--the concreteness really lies mysteriously enough, in those little spots there on those lines. Afterwards, anybody that's interested can simply take those symbols and translate them for themselves, whether it's on the piano or on the orchestra or in a string quartet or quintet or whatever the combination is you've written the piece for.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I was interested when you were talking at the piano about the difference between those ideas that churn around and your playing them in order to work them out as composition, and how different that would be from improvising.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, heavens, yes. Improvisation is terribly haphazard. A person improvising is sometimes very fortunate that just at that second things coincide. Again, there can be for every one success probably any number of disasters where you have not had time to organize in your own mind what it is that you're thinking. In writing music, the structure of each piece is a very important factor. I've been very much interested as to what it is that we really listen to in music. What is it that really happens when we crowd ourselves into a hall with our elbows against the next man, listening to something that lasts maybe twenty-five or thirty minutes? Besides merely some pleasure that we get out of the combinations of pitches together and lines, I think that there is some satisfaction that we get in the fact of having this diffuse thing organized very concretely and put onto a frame and have it actually decided. There's just a pleasure in seeing this sense of organization, the sense of logic, this clarity. I believe eventually, in the last analysis, that that is really what holds our attention to a piece of music more than anything else.

4. On Serialism, Experimentalism and the Study of Composition

LEO ORNSTEIN: I distrust anything that you don't hear. You might say--we're getting into a very subtle situation--you might say that everything ultimately is accident. For instance, you might simply say why bother whether you hear the whole thing as a component part? Why not simply put one part down and write another part and another part and then see what it sounds like? Now, if you're interested in gambling and blindly just putting down lines and having them put together and just simply see what may happen, that's a totally different thing than what I'm interested in. I'm interested in producing a work of art, and unless I hear the thing thoroughly, I would have no reason to put it down at all. Sometimes, of course, it does happen that--for instance, you put it down as you heard it, immediately. Then, in contemplating and working on it, suddenly another version occurs to you or some change. Of course, then, by that time you begin to use whatever knowledge you've acquired, whatever skills you've acquired to make whatever modification. And the modification--it only has to be in order to enhance the thing. And what enhances a piece of music? Who knows! I haven't the faintest idea, my dear child, why one series of notes going that-a-way makes something change in the motive that hounds us, and another chord that goes that-a-way simply leaves us absolutely, utterly unmoved. That is that gamble, that thing that bites into the artist all the time, this involuntary thing because he'd like to know exactly which ones of these endless notes, pictures that he could pick up and rearrange it. But you cannot do it that way. We enter there into a different category altogether. We enter into the category of mathematics. Strangely enough, you can musically hear the most incredible mathematical relationships with the greatest of ease, but if you sat down and tried to do it from the other end, from the mathematical end, you tried to write it, you never could see the intricacies of rhythms and voices that you hear against each other and so on, with the greatest ease.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Isn't serial composition a little bit like that? Twelve-tone and intricate serial composition, where you must choose a combination in advance, a mathematical combination, a tone row, and you must stay with that.

LEO ORNSTEIN: It verges on the very thing that I'm talking about.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You begin with the mathematical.

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's it, and then try to create some aesthetic experience out of that.

VIVIAN PERLIS: The really great composer would never let it get in the way. I think of Schoenberg, where the system was something that he did develop and he did use, but would not let the system be the thing that would direct.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Because essentially Schoenberg was an extremely gifted man. And in spite of many of his theories and so on, when he really began to write music, he still was guided very much by his internal hearing, by what we call your internal ear. Absolutely.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That's why he would never teach students this twelve-tone method. He didn't like people discussing it as a method and so forth.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't know. It just strikes me as something sterile, sterile to go about it--it would seem to me that it's a reversal of the whole process of musical aesthetics, to begin with that end and sort of hoping to reach some musical concept, musical state that way. We all have to learn the trade, certain

techniques, by all means, of course. We depend a great deal upon that, too. But not at its inception... We can use techniques in modifying things, in controlling things, but the first impulse has to be something that you simply cannot make just out of technique, or else it becomes perfectly evident that it is nothing but technique that you're exercising.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Do you think somebody can just say in advance that they're going to become a composer? Is there such a thing? Should there be composition students?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Well, you understand one can learn to write music out of technical equipment. The difference between the student and the born composer is he really hears the thing, and they have to stage it and manipulate it by technical equipment. But they might possibly hit on something really inspired. That may be because, I'll tell you, the whole of life is just so full of unexpected things that surround us day and night, and our entire lifetime. But it's possible. The likelihood is not very great... Experimentation might even lead to suicide, but the mind absolutely is not to be shut off, one's imagination. Never, never... That is why to try to formulate a barrier and simply stay beyond that, is absurd.

VIVIAN PERLIS: But it reminds me: once you said to me that you felt--when you felt that you had gone as far as you could go--I think you used irrationality; otherwise, you'd get into--and yet it was almost a feeling that you reached the brink of sanity.

LEO ORNSTEIN: At least there is certainly a personal limit that you feel. By the way, the point between rationality and what we would call the irrational is a very difficult point to establish. There's no specific line, as you know.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Where does the twentieth century begin and the nineteenth century end?

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's it, exactly. Look at the battle we're constantly trying to establish between what we call reality and unreality. But, of course, over every reality there is always superimposed this utter unreality. You never can even separate the two things. The so-called reality melts into unreality. Those are the utterly undefined lines. But for each one there is a point of what he considers rational, beyond which he's not willing to go. You might simply say that even your rationality has its own values and its own interests--no doubt about it, no doubt about it. We even become interested in watching mentally unbalanced people. We will watch them by the hour sometimes, watching to see human beings whose controls and everything else are of a different nature than ours. It may be interesting enough, and you may want to even be working within that field. I think many of the plays today by Beckett and Ionesco reach into that field. I don't know whether you ever saw the *Endgame*... You've seen that. You saw there were points at which you had to decide for yourself what you might consider the irrational or not. There again, in a play like that, the leeway that is left for you to fill in your own personal reactions, and your own personal conclusions become great.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It's like giving a performer and the audience choices in music that you don't feel willing to do as a composer.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, I'm not prepared to abdicate at all, but I feel that my thoughts either are so positive that I'm not willing to--and, by the way, if my thoughts are not really concrete and positive, then I wouldn't know how much leeway or how little leeway I should give shall we say the performer if it's going to be that. How much leeway should I allow him because if I'm so uncertain myself as to what

it is that I'm really thinking or what I want to put down, then it becomes an intellectual game that has nothing to do with aesthetics. Look here, child, I'm essentially really interested only in one thing. I'm really interested in writing a piece of music that will move you, that will really move you. That is really the only reason that I'm writing music. Otherwise, I wouldn't write a note. I'm only interested in writing something that will give you what I call a musical experience.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That assumes that you can assess what will move me.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, of course, naturally. I may be wrong entirely.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I don't mean me...

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, or move the listener. Oh, yes, that may be. That's true. But at least I am motivated, and my impulse is primarily that, to express exactly what I want, and hopefully that I will be able to transfer to you what we call these musical things that I'm trying to project.

VIVIAN PERLIS: There are people that feel that pure color, both in visual arts and in poetry and in sound, can indeed, on its own, move.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, of course. It's really a cheap rationalization.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I thought you would say that.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, it is. It's really a cheap rationalization because you take the palette. Of course, it has all different colors, and of course you could get a response to that. But is that really formulated art? Is that really art for you? Yes, it's a primitive kind of a thing, surely. Look, the man that goes into a haberdashery and carefully looks at this tie and that tie and chooses exactly the kind of pattern he wants and the kind of color, he's also exercising a certain amount of shall we say aesthetic judgment. But essentially, you might simply say, what does that got to do with someone who is really able to appreciate shall we say the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue or the *St. Matthew Passion*?

VIVIAN PERLIS: How would you feel, then, about the kind of thing that Varèse was trying to do in placing, actually placing blocks of sound...

LEO ORNSTEIN: It's an interesting experiment. It simply doesn't satisfy me as a musical issue. I'm still primarily really interested in music as such--recognizably music. It doesn't matter how far I may have carried some of the things, but I always pull back at the point where it ceases any longer to really be music. Then it becomes something totally different. There's absolutely no reason at all--I cannot simply take this machine and get all kinds of sounds and noises and then put them together in some kind of a shape. But I'm not satisfied with that. Surely, I don't feel that that is the province of the composer who presumably claims that he's really involved in manipulating sound--pitches in other words.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I started to say that the barrier, the line--if there is ever one--as to how far, what might be considered innovative can go.

LEO ORNSTEIN: There are points beyond which each composer has to decide. Each composer has to decide for himself.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It seems to have continued to go further and further and further and further since the time when you were doing it.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, but I tell you, the question is to what extent really have we gained a real aesthetic experience.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Now, there's a good point.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Of course, experimenting-- Look, a young man came in to me, who was very much interested in the "Danse Sauvage" and everything else. He was obviously very intent upon how much further than everything else--and I suggested to him--I said: "Now, look, you can do one final thing. Lie down right on the keyboard. You'll play all the notes right at once, and then you've eliminated what we call your material in one fell swoop. Now there's nothing to be said anymore. You've done it all. You've played all the eighty-eight notes, right simultaneously at once. That's it." So you see, there is a point beyond which you cannot go. Yes, of course, that is that last act. That's the last act of suicide (I mean speaking aesthetically). And you can give it a very elaborate title...

VIVIAN PERLIS: You might think of a very amusing one.

5. On Personality and Interpretation

LEO ORNSTEIN: Hopefully, I have a certain amount of what you call musical talent. If I haven't got that, I don't think that I have anything. That is something I don't really know enough about myself, but I certainly know that my personal life has almost never been associated with the writing because--we are coming back to the thing that we talked about, where the music that you hear is so involuntary that you can't really tell to what extent your own personal life may reflect that, but in any concrete way that you could actually point to, obviously not.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That's why you are less interested in talking about biographical facts.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. Remember, the very first time we met, I said: "Do you want gossip, or do you want to talk about ideas?" I consider that my own personal life and anecdotes may be amusing enough and interesting enough, but they're in a different realm.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Well, yes. They set the scene in terms of where other people see as certainly a very interesting life. It might be an interesting life if your ideas had not made it so.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I'm essentially interested in ideas, really, and not too much in events. There are some events, of course, which obviously are fraught with ideas. I think that to some extent that I rather resent--it may be too strong a word, but--I rather disapprove of the expectation of personality. That's the long and short of it. That's really the crux of the whole matter. That is why, for instance, sometimes I get so irritated at a concert by the antics of the conductor, for instance, that I find it may enlighten and do something for the listener who has to make some visual connection (which, of course, I don't require at all) between the sound that he hears and what he's looking at. But the general expectation of personality, I find rather distasteful, generally speaking.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You would prefer one conductor very much over another one in terms of the way they handle their...

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, to the point--I'm only talking about where the person imposes himself so definitely that actually, to some extent, you're really forced to shut your eyes to evade perhaps what you would call an intrusion or a disturbance.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Which is a kind of vanity.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Well, artists are notoriously vain. As a matter of fact, I don't object to that, if they're able to--if that is the crux, the point at which they get tribute to produce a work of art, it doesn't matter to me at all what the motivation is, not at all, because in the last analysis, the thing that is going to remain with me will be the music.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Do you think about whom you're writing for?

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, no. Hardly, because you would be introducing an element there that would be a very disturbing element. First of all, for whom are you writing it? Are you writing it for one set of people or another set of people? Are you writing merely in order to just merely build your own reputation? I don't believe it's quite as sordid as that. I doubt it. No, I think that a person writes a poem because they have an inner urge of something that they want to express, and I think it's that inner urge that you want to express when you write a piece of music. It's something that just, as I said, is from

behind you, just pushing you.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Was this true earlier, with the music that caused such a furor--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes. The style of the thing has nothing to do with it. The urge is the same thing, whether stylistically it's one thing or another. The urge behind it is still the same, absolutely.

VIVIAN PERLIS: The fact that you played your own music in the early years, the piano, and part of the early composition was piano music, did that make a difference later in performance of your music? When you stopped playing it, there weren't people who could do the same kind of performance of your own music. Has that made a difference in terms of performance?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Well, no. I believe that it's not at all impossible that some of the performances that I've heard so far by some pianists may be superior to my own playing because those are two totally different acts altogether. It doesn't necessarily mean at all that the composer plays his own works best. By no means can you say that. First of all, there are many composers that do not have any athletic skills for any instrument they have written music--

VIVIAN PERLIS: Young performers are coming to you now--and I know that that they are--asking you about interpretation, asking you about some things that perhaps are not in the music. I wanted to ask you about that. Dan Stepner the violinist, for example, would point out that the bowings--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I left it entirely to them to put in some of the bowings. Some I made, that I definitely wanted in a certain way, and some I simply decided to leave to the discretion, to the impact of the performer, himself. I wrote a letter on the subject to this young man saying: "These markings, particularly the metronomic markings, are merely points of stability from which you then can take off, to some extent, yourself." They are just a guide. They are not absolutely a mark of--in other words, I didn't insist that it had to be exactly. Of course, they have to approximate somewhere the metronomic marks because actually the piece was thought at that speed and should be played at that speed, which it was. But then there are little leeways. For instance, there are hundreds of inflections that each individual person puts in, which the composer really cannot give the directions to. Besides, the interesting thing is this: that it's not at all impossible that a person taking a piece of your own music may play it in some fashion that hadn't even occurred to you and which you would be perfectly accepting--you will simply say Yes, I think it enhances the piece, played that way. It's perfectly possible.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: I've been amazed how closely they have all come to the original tempi, with no help or contact with Mr. Ornstein, and very few directions. But they almost universally struck the thing very close.

LEO ORNSTEIN: In other words, you see, they apparently sense the music enough, closely enough, so that they really play approximately at the speed at which I thought--and some of them, I think, did it even without consulting necessarily the metronome marks. They apparently just sensed it. Of course, that's what we really do. For instance, when we play a Bach fugue, it's very rare that we take the metronome at all. We just presumably sense that--now, there are some pieces that are very ambiguous as to the speed at which they might move, but generally speaking, if you have any sensibility at all towards the art, you will sense about the approximately speed at which the music was really intended to go, to move.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So you feel that the performer should be given some leeway of interpretation—a great deal, as a matter of fact.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, by all means--unless, of course, as I said, unless they intrude so far into the music that they then destroy the continuity or the context.

6. Computer Music and Recordings

VIVIAN PERLIS: Now, composers can get sounds and rhythmic combinations--anything-- on a computer; limitations are eliminated.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, oh, I realize it. And possibly it's not totally impossible that if I were a younger person, that I might very well be thinking in other terms, what the aesthetic results will be, and no one can foretell. There is, of course, an element that is eliminated right then and there. You are not involved in the element of what we call experimentation. You've got to be able to separate--you see, aesthetics and experimentation do not necessarily have to go together at all because you can experiment very wittily and with a great deal of fertility and still produce really inferior art.

VIVIAN PERLIS: But it is...

LEO ORNSTEIN: But it's a new field, by all means. It has all kinds of possibilities.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Almost as though it's a new instrument, in a way, and a new means of using an instrument. There's a great deal of composition now using an electronic tape combined with performers.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, a real legitimate thing to do.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You get some sound combinations.

LEO ORNSTEIN: And they find they can get them.

VIVIAN PERLIS: And that way, you don't eliminate the visual aspect of having performers, the human element of it.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, I wouldn't object to that at all. I wouldn't object at all if the human being actually were excluded because ultimately you have very little effect. For instance, you can shut your eyes when you listen to a piece of music. You don't necessarily have to look at the performer at all. As a matter of fact, very often I really get more pleasure out of listening to the music without the visual disturbance of the performer, who may have mannerisms and gestures and so on.

VIVIAN PERLIS: In terms of conducting.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, exactly.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Sometimes you're much better...

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's right. You feel that you would rather...

VIVIAN PERLIS: Take your eyes away from the--particularly the ones that are all over the place.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, exactly. Sometimes I find it rather disturbing. The elimination of the individual wouldn't be a factor at all because obviously in music we are dealing with an aural art. To the person that deals in visualizations, I suppose there is something rather exciting about a whole set of people--they all going symmetrically, up or down, in a military sort of precision.

VIVIAN PERLIS: There *is* something strange about entering a hall, a concert hall, because we're conditioned a certain way. As you have pointed out, we are what we are, and conditioning can be very, very strong. People entering a concert hall where they expect to see performers come in and instruments.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Because the expectation has been something else altogether. But those things are easily adjusted to. There are some people, by the way, that associate a certain amount of visualization with the performance of music. Those are people that really are not centrally concerned only with music, the traditional things. It's like people, for instance, use music to put themselves into some kind of a personal mood in which they hear the music only vaguely and in which they then go into some kind of personal trance, which is a frightful mistake because three-quarters of the music--instead of listening to it really realistically and hard boiled, as combinations of sounds, it stimulates them into some subjective mood. By that time, they're only half aware of what they're listening to.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Do you think that was some kind of reaction, in a way, to some of your early performing? According to the reviews, you had a very interesting visual appearance on stage, a dynamic one, that didn't matter to you but seemed to be...

LEO ORNSTEIN: You see, as I said, one of the reasons--when I spoke to you about the intrusion of personality, apparently it affected some people--merely the personal appearance, the personal motions and movements of the individual. That may have a value of its own, theatrically speaking, but it has nothing whatever to do with music, nothing whatever. Actually, if you're visually watching the performer, probably a good deal of your attention has now been diverted from the very thing that your attention should be on, and that is listening to the music, listening to the combinations that are being performed for you right there. So, you see, it's a mixture, really, of almost two different arts.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Audiences are much closer to that elimination in terms of music recording.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I think recordings have been a terrific advance because now, when you have a piece of music, particularly something that appears to the listener very complicated, there's really a push to the world to try to figure out what it was that he was hearing. Today, with a recording, he can hear the thing enough times until he really gets acquainted with the language, and then he can begin to make an estimate of the intrinsic, aesthetic value of that piece of music.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Particularly with people who are really studying works, with a score.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Exactly. Oh, it's terrifically helpful.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It's very difficult to get the recording companies to record new music. They want to do all of the old things.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Of course, they have a much larger audience for those than they do for the modern things. Actually, we've got to admit that the large proportion of the concert-going public has still not entirely reconciled itself to the modern idiom. When I drew sizable audiences, it was primarily on the basis of my pianistic endeavors. Quite frankly, when I played exclusively new things, they had to be more or less in smaller theaters because the larger audience simply wasn't prepared to accept the modern vernacular.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: You can't imagine, because you weren't born then, you can't imagine the rigidity of the public at that time.

VIVIAN PERLIS: The changes are so enormous, although there are still very rigid audiences now, but it's very different.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes. And there is now at least, even if it's rather a small audience, but there is an audience now that at least has an open mind towards the newer things.

7. The Greatness of Bach

LEO ORNSTEIN: I adore Stravinsky's music, and I like some of the Schoenberg things, I like some Bartók. Some of the things I care for less; some of the things I feel are labored, but that's neither here nor there. Some of the things are just first-class, first-class. Oh, no, indeed--as a matter of fact, my leanings are very much more towards the newer things, obviously, because they're very much more intriguing. The other things become somewhat--one gets somewhat blasé, you know?--although I will say about the music of Bach that I never, never find anything there that I could call bad. I found a lot of Beethoven blasé, and a lot of Schumann and Chopin, yes. But something--most of the music--some of those cantatas absolutely are utterly indescribable. And you talk about lack of self-consciousness--I suppose that Bach is one of the most eminent examples of a great, great artist utterly un-self conscious. To him, it was just his profession. It was his trade. He had to just produce a cantata on such-and-such a Sunday, and he sat down and just simply wrote the music down. That it happened to come out something so utterly unbelievable was something that went way outside of him. Actually, it was just a daily chore. He knew that he was expected to produce that cantata for a certain holiday or a certain Sunday service, and then, as I said, then came something that was out of his ken altogether. Then he began to hear these things. He never could have made those things. First of all, my dear child, he never could have written a tenth of the works that he has done if he had to laboriously try to put them together and try to guess: "Let me see, maybe this combination should go with that." My dear child, he would have spent a lifetime merely just trying to decide which combination to use. But these things just came to him. I imagine he wrote the things down practically as quickly as you and I write a letter... Now, let's talk about the *St. Matthew Passion*.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Is that the greatest work?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I believe that that is probably one of the greatest works of art that I know. I don't know all music by any means, but whatever music I do know, I keep coming back to that.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You had mentioned it before. Why particularly that work instead of, say, the B Minor Mass?

LEO ORNSTEIN: There is something about the combinations of the sounds which I can't explain, that just hold me absolutely. I think that probably the two greatest pieces--if you were to ask me, really, I think I'd be satisfied to say that the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue and the *St. Matthew Passion* are probably, are certainly two of my most favorite pieces of music. I could hear that just hundreds and hundreds of times, and I can hear anybody else play the Chromatic Fantasy. I've played it myself hundreds of times. And if I had the facility still with me, I would still play it one hundred times more.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Have you thought about the qualities that are in those two works...

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, I wish I could. I wish it were possible to retranslate a musical sound into a literary form, but I cannot do it. There have been a few writers that have attempted to do that, and what has really happened is this, curiously enough: The result has been that the interest they have for you is not so much that they give you an estimate of the work. What you then become interested [in] is to see what the work did to them, and that can be interesting enough. But if I were to try to simply say by what I've read that I now could guess what the work is like, of course, it's obviously fatal. Supposing you had gone to a concert and you heard a piece of music that stirred you tremendously. You went to work and wrote your impressions and everything else and so on, and you wrote your critique. Now I,

reading that, would be absolutely put to it to be able to say: "Oh, yes, that's the piece that you wrote about," if I heard it. In other words, how can you describe, for instance, a series of chords connected up--

VIVIAN PERLIS: The problem in writing about music is you cannot, really.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, you can only give your own general impressions, and by that time they become, really, three-quarters literary rather than musical.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I didn't mean that in terms of translating the work into literary terms. I meant if you had thought about, even now or earlier, in thinking about the qualities that are in those works, and whether they have any influence on what you would like to achieve in your own music.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I will say this, that I am moved by that music as I'm almost never moved by too many other things I listen to, that I've heard. For instance, one of the things that fascinates me are the recitatives. There's a sort of a wonderful, almost a natural kind of urgency about this person that has to tell you--like someone who buttonholes you and can no longer contain himself and has to tell you about some event or something that's on his mind. The urgency of that has almost never been equaled in music--besides, of course, the various set pieces that the thing is made out of.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It's a quality of vitality.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I suppose it is that. But also that isn't enough, too, because there's a certain amount of vitality going over to the piano and thinking officially--there's vitality there, too, but the question is to what extent is it really a great aesthetic experience. You see, I'm finding out that so much today that is going on is of that nature. Those are all intellectualizations of some kind of another. Of course, any intellectualization is interesting enough, but I'm talking about art, I'm talking about aesthetics, I'm talking about getting an aesthetic experience. And if a piece of music does not give me an aesthetic experience, no amount of ingenious rhetoric about it has the slightest effect on me. For instance, Bach obviously was motivated by the most incredible kind of religious impulse that is almost not understandable by our modern generation. Now, it doesn't matter to me that that was the thing that triggered him. But, you see, I'm interested now, as a listener in the twentieth century--I only respond to the music. I'm not the slightest bit concerned--no, not concerned--yes, it's interesting as a biographical explanation, if you wish, as a little sort of side remark, but intrinsically...

VIVIAN PERLIS: It's not a religious experience.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, of course, not. That's it. I am absolutely moved by the music, just pure and simple. And even if you were to eliminate the entire subject matter and never told me anything about it, it wouldn't make the slightest difference to me. The music still is the thing that moves me. What we are talking about, you understand, is really that incredible something that he heard, those combinations that he just put together, the continuity of the line he heard. It's all these tremendous things that he heard. Sometimes you simply say why that man should have been so incredibly gifted, so everlastingly gifted as to be able to call out one thing after another. You would simply say enough. Now, why couldn't some other person have been given some of it, no?

VIVIAN PERLIS: There's a certain amount of luck involved in terms of the fact that we have the music of Bach at all. Now, do you consider that's true, that there's a possibility that his music could have been lost to the world if, indeed, there had not been someone who came afterwards who saved it?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, sure. It just results, again [from] one of those incredible coincidences, that Mendelssohn happened to be at some household, the thing happened to be on the desk where he took a look at it, and having the music, liked it and said: "What is that? What is that?"--and, of course, looked into it further...

VIVIAN PERLIS: It is possible, which is a frightening thought, that the world could exist easily without knowing what they had missed, without the music of Bach.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, of course.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Are there other people like that?

LEO ORNSTEIN: It's possible that there is some art that has just gone by the wayside. I tell you, today, with all the research and everything else, it's not likely. It's not likely. Of course, I can't say it positively, but it's possible that, for instance, that even if Mendelssohn had not come into the room and seen it on the desk, that later on some other person might have stumbled on some of the things and had the music acumen to realize at once what it is that was there. Or else, yes, it might have vanished and simply never appeared in our musical consciousness. Just think what we would have missed.

8. Hearing a Score

VIVIAN PERLIS: Do you feel if something is good enough it will definitely be found somehow? I'm thinking in terms of bringing this into your own music.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, that's the reason--yes, I have absolute confidence that a work of art that really has real intrinsic value will survive some amount of neglect.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You must feel that way about some of your own.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Well, I do. I'm interested, as I said, in just writing what I hear, primarily. As I said, I get a certain personal satisfaction of seeing it on the paper because once you put it on the paper, you've concluded the thing, and then you can move on to the next thing. Until you do that, there's always the feeling that it hasn't yet entirely been formulated for yourself, and you still continue staying with it. But once you really get it formulated, whether for the best or less so, you're finished with it, and then you can move onto the other thing. There's a certain amount of conclusion about the thing. It's the same thing as a novelist. Finally, he brings his book to an end and can then begin to think in terms of another work. You're talking to me about the worldly part of it. I don't know that I would have been any happier if the things had been done very much more than they have. I don't know that I would have been particularly changed by it in one way or another, no. I don't disclaim a certain amount. Now you're getting into the realm of vanity, a totally different category altogether. Surely, I don't imagine that I'm entirely immune to a certain amount of vanity.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Isn't that a need for a composer to want his works to be performed?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I think so. I think there is a certain amount of satisfaction when someone looks at your work and simply says--well... I had known Stokowski purely as a pianist. I played various concertos with the orchestra. I took it up to him. He had a little room up in the upper stories somewhere in the back of the stage, in the rear part of the stage. He'd change his clothes and had a sofa to lie down to rest on. He looked at the thing, and he said--took another day or two, and then he called me and said: "Let's do it."

VIVIAN PERLIS: The Piano Concerto.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. I suppose that was gratifying that he saw through it. And I remember at the end of the slow movement, he turned around to me and he said: "How did you think that?" He was apparently somewhat moved by the way it closes up there. He said: "How did you think that?" I suppose there was a certain amount of satisfaction.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I'm not sure that satisfaction is vanity.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Well, I don't know. What would you call it, child?

VIVIAN PERLIS: I still don't have trouble coming to--if your aim is to communicate, which you have said several times, if it is vanity to care about...

LEO ORNSTEIN: There is a combination of vanity. You can't deny that.

VIVIAN PERLIS: But how else are they going to be communicated then?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Well, I tell you the way I really felt, just my own personal reaction has been this: that somewhere, somehow, someone will look at the work and I believe will see that it has some really significant music value and will then proceed to whatever arrangements are necessary to have things performed. Or else, if that person does not see that quality in the music, then obviously I have failed, or else they may have failed in comprehending or understanding. By that time, don't let's get into the realm of recrimination--whether I produced a great work of art that someone doesn't understand quite and doesn't quite follow, or whether I have *not* produced a great work of art and therefore the person says: "It's not a great work of art," which, of course, it may be.

VIVIAN PERLIS: There are very few people who have the ability to look at a work in score, as Mendelssohn did with Bach, for example--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Particularly a modern score.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Yes. And say: "Ah! Here is--." Obviously, he heard...

LEO ORNSTEIN: Therefore, I'm assuming that the person that looks at your work, that comes across it, will see enough evidence of something and then will pursue it eventually to the point of having it [performed], if they are incapable of hearing it away from a performance, that they will then arrange somehow to have a performance so that it may be heard and they, themselves, may hear it if they are not capable of hearing it internally. You see, some people can hear music, as you know, quite readily, by looking at the page. I do not believe that a complicated work--there may be some people that are adroit enough, but generally speaking, I'm a bit skeptical that a complicated work of art like that, a really complicated modern score today, one can hear the thing by just reading, by looking at the score. I suppose that some conductors, for instance, maybe have that facility and that faculty. Others may have to put it on the piano and reduce it and see what the essential terms are of the piece and so on, and make their judgment that way. That I don't know. That depends, of course, entirely upon the skill, how tutored the performer is--whether he's a pianist or whether he's a singer or whether he's someone who is accustomed to reading string quartets or string music and be able to hear. Almost anybody who has had some musical training probably can hear. Take a Haydn quartet, and I think with a certain amount of training you can more or less hear. They tell of an interesting story about Berlioz. As you know, he was woefully poor as a young student in Paris. In the library, of the quartets, they only had the first violin part [of Beethoven's quartets]. By looking at the first violin part, he was able to deduce what more or less the harmonization and the other instruments would be doing, enough to really get a fairly clear picture of what the quartet was. But in the later quartets, as the themes became more complicated and the harmonies became more personal, he began to flounder. And he realized then, when he heard it finally, he realized that he had completely missed the point because by that time, Beethoven had already put in a harmony, as I said, that was purely personal and that the routine harmonies that he had in the earlier quartets no longer fit. And that's what happens. As a matter of fact, as our harmonies become more and more complex, it becomes very difficult--unless, as I said, unless you're very intuitive and, particularly in the vernacular, to be able to estimate the work.

9. The Public Life of Performing

LEO ORNSTEIN: As a composer, I rather relished the anonymity. As a performer, I rather suffered a good deal because of a certain amount of emphasis that was always placed on personality. That is why I developed something of a touch of resentment, that very often I felt that the personality of the performer helped cloud the actual performance or actually helped interfere with the listener whose attention should have been entirely on the music. How you can eliminate that, of course--you can't eradicate yourself. I suppose you can play an instrument or the orchestra can play with a screen in front, but then the screen itself would be a hindrance of a kind, so that all in all, as you see, you can't entirely evade the issue. One of the reasons, frankly, that I finally gave up playing in public was that I just wanted a certain amount of privacy. As a composer, I could have that because if the work was performed once in a while--unless I particularly wanted to hear it--very often, I wasn't even at the performance--that may have been one of the real attractions, eventually my giving up concertizing.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Even when you were concertizing, you were always looking for places where you could have a certain amount of privacy, weren't you?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. That was one of the reasons why as soon as Pauline and I were married--and I suppose you know that within a month we will have been married fifty-nine years. And then we were engaged for about three or four years before we were married. So we've known each other for a full lifetime. Almost as soon as we were married--we were married in December, on the 13th--it was a Friday. Now you can see how little that combination can frighten one, or need frighten one. We spent the following summer in the mountains. Pauline went to a little village that she knew, and there was a little quaint house that was up on a hill that must have been at least a hundred years or more than that, possibly a hundred and fifty years old. They put in the necessary equipment for us to be able to spend the summer. Around July, August we were talking about where we would settle. Obviously, we were living in suitcases all the time, in hotels and wandering around loosely across the country, back and forth, endless numbers of times. I finally decided that I would try it out, anyway, so we found a place that I could buy, about eighty acres of land, right adjacent to my father-in-law, and the place, and went into the woods about a quarter of a mile or possibly nearer to half a mile, it might have been. It was a beautiful grove of pines and hemlocks, enormous old trees. They were perfectly vast. It would have taken two or three people with their arms spread out fully to have been able to encircle the tree. They cut down a few of the smaller trees, and then we found a very quaint character there... I told him what I wanted--the size and everything else--and he then had the lumber--they had to take the lumber right through the woods, and they tied the lumber--the horse--that was just prior to the automobile. Of course, there were no roads at all. One spot in the trees, that we could find a location, and they carried the lumber, dragged the lumber out there, and he finally put a stone foundation. There were always enormous boulders and stones all over New Hampshire, as you know. When it was built, they cut down some trees, and they put the grand piano on its side, and two horses--they widened it enough so the two horses drove the thing up to the studio, where they finally got it in. It was a very hazardous experience because they didn't make any road at all; they just cut down some of the trees. Now and then the wheels would get up on a little stump, but somehow they got it in. And then later, the fall, we began to build, started building the house. At that time, obviously, my finances were limited, and we put up this small house first, and then later on, as we seemed to prosper, we put on a very large addition, and then finally we put on still a third addition.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Were you prospering from your concert career?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. It was obviously--yes, surely.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So you came in and out of this isolated place?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. We had some really extraordinary experiences, too: I was playing a series of concerts with the Boston Symphony. They used to make a trip to Washington or Baltimore and Philadelphia, and we had to go out to the mountains--something about questions of building--some problems they wanted to resolve. And we got caught in a storm. My evening clothes were with me because you were going to get on the train, and then that storm came. Of course, you could only navigate on snowshoes, you understand, the snow got so deep. We forded the river because, of course, it was frozen. And then the next night we were in Washington.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It was a very nerve-wracking kind of existence, wasn't it?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. Well, that way--we've had rather an interesting life that way because we've done a great many things that had nothing whatever to do with my profession. Through my father-in-law, I became somewhat interested in farming. When we were living in Philadelphia, I bought some land there, some twenty-five or thirty miles out of Philadelphia, a place called Chalfont. I wanted the children to have some experience in a rural setting because I used to see them once in a while with their nursemaid. We had an apartment off the Rittenhouse Square, and I'd see them just going around like little animals in a cage. I said, no, let's try that, and I bought this land, and we put up a small barn, with a few horses and a few cows.

VIVIAN PERLIS: This was during the time that you had the Ornstein School in Philadelphia?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, and I was still traveling, and we had just a terribly full life, at least as far as just the externals were concerned because I was still traveling, and then people would block up, waiting to have their lessons, and the hallway was just impossible, with twenty people sitting there, waiting to get into the room because I had to postpone so many of their lessons when I was traveling.

VIVIAN PERLIS: But it was not only the desire for privacy and the rigors of this kind of life. Performing was not a pleasure for you.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Essentially, really, performing was never anything like the center of my life in any way, no. I must admit that, of course, it was very remunerative at a certain period, when I happened to be quite a good deal in the limelight, of course. I was then beginning to get very substantial fees and so on. Obviously, as the children came along, we needed certain financial--you know, we just needed things to be able to live. But I was never really particularly interested in a pianistic career. No, I was not.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Did you suffer terribly from--concern about performances and nervous--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I was particularly concerned with that, too--possibly more so than some people. Very strangely enough, I've never been able to get used to nightlife of any kind. As you know, performing--of course, you only began to function about eight or eight thirty, and then afterwards, there were all these people that wanted to drag you around. I never could get used to it. As a matter of fact, I always looked forward longingly to the summer, when the concert season came to an end, and I could live a perfectly quiet country life. Even now I get up very early. We go to bed very early. I get up about five o'clock and very often come out there and look at the sky and get reacquainted with some of the

stars. I enjoy the morning. The morning means a great deal to me. It opens up things, and I'm still hoping, wondering what ideas might come into my head, whereas in the evening I begin to wilt. I'm not working. I don't work at night. I never have been able to work at night. As a matter of fact, I find that if I cannot write in the morning, I cannot write, and that is that. In other words, you see, we're coming back over to the same thing: I don't need the sort of exotic stimulus of some kind or another. I never have. Either a musical idea came into your head, or it didn't. And why it came into my head, I do not know; and why it did not come into my head, I do not know. I simply do not pretend to understand it. All I can say is I can only be grateful that some things have come into my head that at least I thought were worthwhile putting down, and then other times I was left absolutely bare.

10. The Compositional Process: Influence and Memory

VIVIAN PERLIS: If somebody says to you: "How--what was it that, as a teenager, that you began to compose music--not only compose, but compose music that nobody else had ever--"

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I haven't the faintest idea, my dear child, because I was brought up, of course, in the most orthodox way you can imagine. I had heard almost nothing at all of new music. I think I knew one or two pieces of Debussy and a piece of Max Reger, and that was really, actually, literally among the so-called current music that I knew. Otherwise, I had been brought up on the classics, pure and simple. I remember that when I first began to hear the inklings of the "Danse Sauvage" and the "Impressions of Notre Dame," I happened to be in Vienna. I was going to play some for Leschetizky. I began to hear these things. I remember that actually the start of the "Impressions of Notre Dame," I began to put down the notes. The trunk had just been put in. There was no piano or anything. The trunk had been put in, and I had some music paper that I always carried with me, and I began to notate that. Then the man that had the hotel reserved the upper floor, and part of the upper floor for himself. He had a grand piano. They said he was away on his holiday in Switzerland or in the Tyrol, but they gave me the key, so I could go up there. And that was the first time that I heard, that I played the "Impressions of Notre Dame" for myself, and then made a few changes, but rather few. I was very fortunate to have heard it completely. That's what I--when we were talking before about how some things come into your consciousness that are perfectly clear-cut, and then, of course, it's child's play to put it on. But then other things are very ambiguous and very tentative, and nothing is really entirely shaped. And, you see, music has no meaning at all--we're coming to something that has interested me a great deal--I think until you frame a work of art--in other words, until you can find it within what we call a frame--it has no meaning at all. It's actually just sprawls all over. It's shapeless. And therefore it doesn't interest us. It's only until we give it a concrete, specific shape that it becomes of some intrinsic meaning to us, of some value to us. That means that we have to finally frame it. We have to confine it.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Is the confining it the writing out of it?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, of course, it's the organism--and each piece demands its own organism. In the Classical period, they were perfectly willing to accept a formula that had been established, but today, when we speak of a sonata, it's so vague today because it becomes so personalized, they're just vague indications of the so-called traditional sonata form. Almost a personal invention, a personal arrangement...

VIVIAN PERLIS: I see that there are some sketch materials here, and there are things on the piano and so forth--you're working on a symphony now.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. I keep the notes separately, but I tell you what happens. It's interesting. As I'm writing--for instance, there will be a line or two left unused, and I say to Pauline: "Quickly, throw me a piece of paper." But I'm so afraid I'm going to lose it that I put the continuation in between another piece, just because there happens to be a little space there. And then quickly, of course, I get it together and dictate it to her so that it will get the continuity. But that's nothing at all. That's why you will sometimes see something, and then you see something that obviously doesn't belong. It's only because there was some paper left that was open, and I quickly put it down. You see, my memory is nothing as reliable as it used to be. Oh, nowhere near. I must say that I must have had quite a fairly good, decent memory because I was able to remember a piece of music that would last twenty minutes, or twenty-five. I played a sonata in public, oh, for two years. I gave it probably fifty performances. And I haven't

yet gotten to write down a note because I simply was so crowded for time, but I remembered it. And, do you know, then I went to other pieces, and I never have been able to--then, of course, I forgot it, and I cannot recapture it.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So actually there are a couple of piano sonatas, aren't there, that have never been captured.

LEO ORNSTEIN: What really happened was this: that as you thought of the music, it was also relegated to your memory at the same time, so that by the time I finished thinking the music, I really had it memorized. That's why I was able to play it. With the "Three Moods [Anger, Peace, Joy]," for a long time I played them again and again and again, and for a long time I never put them down until finally I was cornered.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Those were written in--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, I don't know the year.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It was before the First World War.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes. Right during the First World War.

VIVIAN PERLIS: And they were not written down, I believe, until--

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's it, for a long time.

VIVIAN PERLIS: ... 1940-something.

LEO ORNSTEIN: It's possible. It's very possible it might not have been. And then I was forced--I think somebody was going to play it or something, and then, of course--

VIVIAN PERLIS: For a concert in memory of Paul Rosenfeld.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. Then, of course, I was simply forced to.

11. Performing vs. Composing

LEO ORNSTEIN: I took it very much more for granted and accepted it more casually that I would be paid well for playing the piano because I remember the months and months of unbelievable practicing and laboring away at the piano to perfect passages and to prepare the work, so that I could accept that I was being paid for a certain amount of work. But when I began to write music, and I remember getting paid for a piece of music, I was tremendously excited because that came very casually. There was no athletics concerned with it. All I needed was a pencil and some music paper. That some intrinsic idea that I had in my mind, someone was willing to pay for I found extremely exciting. I remember that time-- I'm talking about the *Russian Suite* that I had been playing in Norway. I was on my way to Paris. I remember I stopped there, and I played this suite and some other pieces. They all sat around, and I was just this youngster, this utterly--unaware of anything--and just simply said: "why would they be interested in something that came out of my head?" And then they told me that they wanted to consult, and so I went out and went over to the marketplace and wandered around. When I came back, they had a contract, with a certain amount of money that they gave me. That was the very first time that I had actually been paid. I remember on the train being terribly elated that an idea that apparently came out of my head was sufficiently intriguing to them to want to publish it and to pay me for it, whereas I never had that feeling there about piano playing.

VIVIAN PERLIS: When you started to write some of what we'll call the experimental, futurist works--really during the period of time you were studying with Bertha Fiering Tapper...

LEO ORNSTEIN: When I was in Paris, yes. I went to Paris and there I really suddenly began to write things that had very little connection between the earlier few pieces that I had written. Also, you must understand, I did not have any theory about the way music ought to be written. I had no theory at all about the composition of music. I simply heard those things, and I put down what I heard. Really, as a matter of fact, I simply said to myself: Well, obviously, if you're thinking in terms of the "Wild Man's Dance," these harmonies and these percussion sort of effects obviously would be appropriate to express what it is that the title itself would indicate. It was not really a theoretical interest in trying to evolve a new system or anything. I wasn't particularly interested in that at all. I was interested in making it as graphic as possible. Then I realized that all the knowledge that I had acquired was only limiting me and inhibiting me. I had to finally dig through that and simply use whatever was at hand to produce the effect that I wanted to, simply to produce the piece and make it into a living thing. And so then I simply didn't hesitate at all. I just used whatever harmonies came into my head, irrespective of all at how unorthodox they might be. But it wasn't out of the theory that I believed, well, that such combinations we ought to use. I've never been particularly interested in that angle of writing music. Even today I am not. Sometimes I fluctuate, as you saw, stylistically, tremendously. Well, that is because once in a while I will hear something of that sort. Sometime[s] I will hear something entirely different. In between, I'm entertaining myself while I'm working on the symphony, which probably will take me a number of years. It's not a piece you could write within a few weeks. I'm entertaining myself with a series of short pieces for the piano called *Vignettes*. Well, you'd be perfectly surprised the range there is there, from the most horrific combinations, I suppose to the standard listener would be just hair-raising, and then some, on the contrary, rather vaguely within certain limitations that you might accept. And don't ask me why because since I have no theory--

VIVIAN PERLIS: Could you show us that?

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, I can't remember any. I don't remember the pieces anymore at all.

I cannot play my own things at all anymore, not at all, because I tell you what has happened: I can't remember them at all anymore. Just as soon as I write them--that's why today--that's why I write on these scraps, anything that lies at hand, so as not to forget. I used to be able to depend upon my memory so it didn't matter at all, but now I can't. I would frankly have to start reading, and I'm not a very good reader, either. ...I would only give a misrepresentation of the piece because I don't play the piano at all. I haven't touched the instrument--haven't for years. I wouldn't be able to play it. At least if I had known, I might have given some hours of preparation, but I wouldn't be able to give the slightest impression.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Mostly I try to work out--mostly I would sit at that table over there, on the kitchen table, and have the music there. Every so often, I would go over to the piano and try out what I've written down, just to make sure.

12. On Limits

LEO ORNSTEIN: Are there no limits at all to what you can do on an instrument or how many instruments you can combine or how you can combine them? For instance, in a painting, if you get overstimulated--you draw something, you put something on your canvas--then you add something more, then you're still not satisfied. You add something more, and you add, and you keep on adding. And finally what you have done is you've destroyed the very thing that you wanted to paint, and all you have is a blotch of black because in your anxiety to put more colors on, you simply just muddied each one. While theoretically there may be no limitation, there is actually the limitation of what our ear will take in. Even assuming you have the most developed ears, there is a point at which you can only take in so much. Look, two people can converse with each other. Even a third one can converse with you. But then comes in the fourth and the fifth and the sixth, and you know perfectly well if six people talk simultaneously, you hear absolutely nothing unless you make a dreadful effort to exclude them, get it? Then they might just as well stop talking. If you can exclude them, you will hear what you and I are talking about. But otherwise, you have a room full of people talking at the same time. And there absolutely the classic example as to how far you--now, theoretically why we cannot get in fifty people into the room, all talking at the same time. But what aesthetic value does it have or meaning, when we no longer can hear anything? I came to the point where I had to finally make a decision as to how far I could carry it or how far it would be sufficiently audible to the listener, because there was obviously no sense writing something where you could not differentiate things any longer. So, you see, it has its natural limit. I hate terribly to set any limit and simply say you cannot go beyond that, but a certain amount of--if nothing else--a certain amount of common sense dictated. We are talking, you understand, about something really very important, and that is--what actually we're talking about, child, is the over-utilizing of material. That is a very serious thing that every artist has to be concerned with because that is part of his shall we say equipment because if he has no sense and over-utilizes material, why, then he can destroy even the best idea.

VIVIAN PERLIS: They're universal problems.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. And, by the way, the limits are not only merely in aesthetics. The limits are our entire lives, our entire makeup, our whole metabolism and everything else that we react to. There are certain specific--after all, my dear child, we can reach so far and no more. And I grant that within that prescribed area one may have longer arms, one may have a little shorter--but there is a specific limit beyond which we can't reach. I've always felt that mentally it doesn't matter how adroit or gifted, there is a specific element within us that has the same kind of a limit--we can only hear so much and no more. And if I walk away a certain distance, you can see that I finally disappear on the horizon. And that's all there is to it. That is why also, unless you consider music some internal expression of yourself and utterly void of communicating--but I'm not. I'm very much interested in giving this series of sounds that I produce for you to hear--whether approvingly or disapprovingly has nothing to do with it. But I *am* interested for you to hear the thing. To some extent, that's a human question we're talking about. Communicate with human beings. We all--exactly--have that urge.

13. Heritage and Influence

LEO ORNSTEIN: I had a letter from the committee that was giving a formal dinner on the fiftieth birthday of Albert Einstein, and I was asked whether I would write a piece for the occasion. I, of course, was very pleased to do it and said that I would try to write something. They asked whether I would also play the piano part. I rehearsed it with a violinist and then we played it. There were some speeches, and then, in the middle, they announced that this piece had been written in honor of Albert Einstein. The dinner was given at the Commodore Hotel in New York. I remember they were very much pleased.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Why did you call it *Hebraic Fantasy*?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't know. It seemed a logical thing to do, in view of the antecedents of Einstein.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You have used the Hebraic modes and sounds...

LEO ORNSTEIN: It's a very appealing mode, and it seems to come fairly naturally to me. I saw no reason at all why I should not use a mode that came so naturally to me.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That comes from your early years in Russia.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I imagine that undoubtedly it does have something to do with some hereditary thing, the whole earlier life and earlier training. The influences that we live under are influences that are constant before us. They do not cease from morning until night. Everything that we look at, every person that we talk to, every thought that we think ourselves, actually modifies us, so that we are under their influence perpetually. Right now, you realize that there's an unconscious influence going on between all of us right here. We may not be able to put it into concrete words, but actually every incident in life and every occurrence leaves immediately some kind of influence on you, unmistakably--particularly as a child, in the formative period, those influences were probably even greater on you.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I remember you told me once that there was one memory that stayed with you for so long.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, there's a lifetime. I'd never been away from home as a child. At about the age of eight or so, I was taken to St. Petersburg. I played with some committee, and I was accepted as a student. Two or three days afterward, I was enrolled, and I was going to stay there for the winter. My father sent me back to a little town in the Ukraine called Kremenchuk. I had a period of adjustment to make devastating alone and this homesickness. It left an unbearable mark on me. There was a very curious coincidence. It was just at the beginning of the war between Russia and Japan. There were innumerable cars, which really amounted to cattle cars, where soldiers were being put into, for the trip up to the front. There were these thousands and thousands of young people and their wives and children, saying goodbye to them as they were leaving. It was a very curious coincidence. But I don't believe that I have ever in my life had such an emotional upheaval as that was, the departure of my father, and this unbelievable melancholic state came over me. I had an awful time until nature took over and, little by little, I began to adjust. And then the memory of that acute moment was beginning to fade away a little bit more. I tell you, how grateful we have to be for the element of forgetfulness. If we did not have that, if we really could remember the state, I don't believe that we would be able to survive. This curious thing that happens, that time does to us is one of the most interesting things altogether. It's some kind of a curious, pervasive barrier between us and some former incident. It seems to just blur

things. Even if you want to hold onto that moment that that you may experience, it's impossible to do so because little by little your memory begins to fade, and the incident itself, the agony of the incident, gets less and less and less and less--although there is a residue that you never can escape. Even at my age today, I always--towards evening--am inclined to have a certain kind of a momentary feeling that I'm sure is associated with that period. I know that for many years afterward I would always light a light to try to avoid that period between darkness and light. I suppose it helped in some way to lessen the awful feeling.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Was one of those periods of time that might have been difficult for you when you decided to stop performing--the world talked about--was there a nervous fatigue involved?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, no, no. Much of the decision to really give up concertizing and get rid of the burden of traveling and everything else was primarily dictated by my wanting very much more time for my writing.

14. Early Career

VIVIAN PERLIS: You were what would have been considered a musical prodigy from the time you were a boy in Russia.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. You asked an interesting question about this as far as my family was concerned. They, of course, didn't understand it at all because I was brought up in the usual fashion, that I was this wonder child, and they saw visions of my bringing in huge sums of money, playing these Liszt rhapsodies and the Chopin ballades and scherzi and all the standard works. Then suddenly I veered off and went into a channel that they did not understand and that obviously was not going to lead to fabulous sums of money at all. So the family, as far as they were concerned, they didn't understand what happened to me at all. When I actually gave up playing, they couldn't figure it out.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Were you helping to support--you were the twelfth in a family?

LEO ORNSTEIN: There were twelve, but there were only seven that survived. Well, I was helping my family.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: He's a twin.

VIVIAN PERLIS: What about Mrs. Bertha Fiering Tapper? She was more to you than a piano teacher.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, yes, of course. I lived there a great deal of the time, and I spent many of the summers there. They had an extra little studio there that was given over to me, and that's where I practiced and wrote some of the things. I think, myself, that she understood the earlier things and was always enchanted by those. But I think that when I went off into a category which she wasn't able to follow at all, I think she substituted then her deep affection for me, but I don't think she really followed what was going on. By that time she was an elderly woman, and she was unable to overcome her traditional indoctrination and training that she had had. As I told you, even I had an awful time to reconcile myself to those things because, as I said, I simply thought of them as things to enhance just that one individual thing that I would be writing. I didn't see it at all as a system for writing music at all. And I was very careful. Even as young as I was, even at fourteen, at fifteen I already understood the grave danger of bogging yourself down in your own style. It's very easy to do that. It's very easy to imitate your own style. Then I realized how dangerous it was, and I almost made an effort to see that I avoided stylizing myself. And that is why you have these large variations, "the three moods" of the quintet, get it? Two totally different ends of the stick, you might say. And I've enjoyed that very much. Of course, it has been involuntary because I couldn't command what I heard. What I heard was this, or what I heard was that.

VIVIAN PERLIS: The early works that you did that were considered so far out--

LEO ORNSTEIN: I suppose they were at that time.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Your early works had such a reaction on people and on critics and on your friends and on your family, I'm sure, because they were so different from what your life had been. What did people think about those works? What did Pauline think?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't know, frankly, that we talked about my writing too much. She learned to play

some of the things. As a matter of fact, I think she kept it like a secret. I never heard her practice these things, and she never would play the things for me, so actually I can't tell you. The response varied, of course, a great deal. Some people were very much excited when they heard these things and they were stimulated; others were terribly angered, for whatever reason. I cannot explain. Some would possibly be frightened by this onslaught of sound that seemed utterly unrestrained. I told you that I had moments also myself of wondering whether I wasn't exposing things, some deep, hidden feelings that we almost dare not face ourselves.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Do you remember what you thought of some of those works?

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Yes. I think the things that I first understood were things that moved a little slowly, the slow movements. I remember *The Three Moods*, the middle one, Grief, was very much more accessible to me. But, on the other hand, when I learned to play them, I got a most terrific satisfaction out of playing Anger. I could get everything in my system out of it. It was a real sensation to play it!

VIVIAN PERLIS: But you were already an Ornstein fan, so to speak.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Yes.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You went to school together.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Yes, we went to school together. I knew him ever since he came to this country. I remember when he had his lesson just before me.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You had the same teacher.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Yes, we had the same teacher, and then we went, both of us, to the Institute. Of course, he kept making me furiously mad because every time I was up against it, he could just walk in and it didn't bother him at all. I remember I had been slaving over a Mozart concerto that I was supposed to play with orchestra. I found it very difficult. I had worked weeks on it. We had an examination at the Institute, and I had the music with me. Dr. Damrosch hadn't come in yet, and we were all talking together. He said, "Let me look at it." And he put it up on the thing, and rattled it off as if he'd practiced it all his life. I was just raging to think what work I had had to put in on that. And the same thing with some of the ear training examinations, and all the things that I put down that I was fairly sure of, but with difficulty, and he just handed in his paper as soon as the teacher had finished dictating.

15. Husband and Wife Teamwork

VIVIAN PERLIS: When these musical ideas come to you, how does that work for you?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I try to write it down as fast as I possibly can. Since I've gotten older and my memory, of course, is nothing like what it was--now I have to depend--as a matter of fact, now I just rush for the pencil and the paper as fast as I can to get it down because very often--five minutes afterwards--I say to Mrs. Ornstein: "My goodness, it's gone, dearie." Maybe often I would write the thing on that table there, and I would hear the thing, and I would put it down. As a matter of fact, most of the things I really write away from the instrument, and then I come over to verify some things once in a while. They say that Wagner had a little upright in his room always, and when he wrote things, he would sometimes go over just to try the thing out.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: And he says the feeling in his hands helps him to remember, too, sometimes.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Your association with each other went over a very long period of time, before you were married, so you were familiar with Leo's way of writing.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Yes, we were twelve years old--eleven or twelve, I think.

LEO ORNSTEIN: We knew each other practically--

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: We were fellow students, you see.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It made it easier when you were working together for you to--having known the music for such a long time, Pauline--to work together with Leo. I wondered when I first saw the manuscripts, there were very few of them in your own hand. Only the very early--I think there's one called "Suicide in an Airplane" of 1913, and there's *The Three Moods*, and a few others, perhaps, that are in your hand. From that time on, from very early, from about the time you were married--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, she entirely took a role--because then I tell you what: then I just had the pencil copy, whatever I wrote down in pencil, and then we began to develop quite a system, where I dictated a great deal to her.

VIVIAN PERLIS: That's a very unusual system. I've never heard of anything like that.

LEO ORNSTEIN: She has been copying and writing this manuscript for me for fifty years now, over fifty years. I've asked her quite frankly why she has done it, to have given up so much of her life, and she had the best answer that I could have expected.

VIVIAN PERLIS: What was the answer, Pauline?

LEO ORNSTEIN: What better could she have done with her life?

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: I enjoy doing it because I can go over it and hear it again and again as I'm writing.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So it's partly your own pleasure that you're doing it.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Yes, surely.

VIVIAN PERLIS: How does the system work? You had said that it's fairly simple.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Supposing, say, I want to dictate this.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Give me a pencil. I can't do it without my pencil.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Here they are, dearie. Here is one of the *Vignettes*.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: No, it has no lead.

VIVIAN PERLIS: There's some at the end here. This is a short piano work that you're writing--

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, they're a relief because the organic part of a short piece is very much easier to be able to control and to manipulate. When you get into a larger work, the architecture itself gets to be very much larger and so the whole scope becomes much more difficult. It's obviously much more difficult material to manipulate around than a short, concentrated piece. Now, it doesn't mean necessarily that the short piece--like a short poem--may not actually have sometimes more intrinsic meaning than a large work, but obviously, taking a larger work, the mechanism is a much more unwieldy thing to work with than a short piece.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: I must interrupt and tell you one thing. My hearing is not quite as keen as it used to be, and it's hard for me to distinguish between E, D, and B. So he says: "Second letter or fourth letter" and so on, to help--

LEO ORNSTEIN: According to scale, so she knows--I simply say: "Second," and she now knows it's a D.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Do you mean to say, although you say this is a simple procedure, that every note and everything you literally dictate, not that you play it and then you take--

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, no.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: Oh, I couldn't. He does hear it, so I have a guide.

LEO ORNSTEIN: For instance, what I thought now, if we were quiet and I were by myself and composed, I would probably remember just about maybe what I played, and I would put down just enough of the harmonization and the outline, and then the actual detail I would then dictate to her.

VIVIAN PERLIS: And you put that much down, in order that you don't--as a reminder.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Well, naturally. The section might be slightly longer or slightly shorter. Then, of course, once I have that, very often I'll say: "Let me have the music," so she gives it to me, and then I play, and then, of course, the connection is made in my mind.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I know you have said that it's really a very simple procedure, the dictation.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes,

VIVIAN PERLIS: But it is really unique, and it may seem simple to you. If you could describe that a little bit in terms of how Pauline takes this down. You mean to say that you actually tell her every single note to put down?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, of course.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Including instrumentation and orchestration?

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, no, no. First we have those notes that she makes. Then I do the orchestration myself. Then afterwards I orchestrate it.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So you would say to Pauline--

LEO ORNSTEIN: For instance, I'll dictate something to her now.

VIVIAN PERLIS: All right.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Pauline, this is going to be in two-four time. Now, the upper line--Treble and bass, that's right, and it's two-four time. Now you'll see it's very simple. You go to the A-flat, Pauline, the top line, A-flat, the extra line, A-flat, for an eighth. And now you go to two sixteenths, the B-flat and the A-flat again. Go down to E for a quarter, and close your measure up. Now, she should do that there with the stems up, and then I'll tell her the harmonization underneath it, and that's all there is to it.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Having done this for such a long period of time, there are certain things that you can do very quickly.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes. But, of course, some of the very complicated things I write down enough, as you saw in this *Vignette*. I wrote down--because some of the harmonies I had to put down so that I would be sure to have them because my memory, as I said, I can't quite rely upon the way I used to, so I'll write it down very quickly. And I dictate to her--this business I dictated this from here, and she has it down. We've taken one copy here. We're so afraid of fire. We keep the copy in the car, in the trunk, and eventually I will put those in. As you will see, I simply didn't need to put in the time because in this case the time values were so self-evident that I didn't spend the time. It's very curious: very often I will have the outline first and then the harmonization afterward, and very often the harmonization is the motivating factor, and I will get that down, and the outline will suggest itself as the result of the manipulation of the harmonic system. So there is no one specified rule by which I guide myself at all. It depends entirely upon what it is that you're hearing. Let me tell you an interesting experience. I played a piece once into one of these cassettes. I was in a hurry, and I decided to play it in quickly. Then we came back afterwards, and we wanted to translate it. I wanted to write it down. The thing moved so fast that I could not take each individual thing, unless we could--yes, of course, I'll take any dictation down, but you have to slow it down; but moving rapidly, even I got the general impression, but the actual detail moved much too fast to be able to--now, I suppose if I heard it one hundred times and got it memorized, then, of course, I'd be able to play it. Or else if it could be slowed down enough so that then I could actually hear each detail. But the thing moving through at that rate, I could not take it--and so finally I realized that if I just played it over enough times and then something clicked in the memory, thank

goodness... You make a large contribution, because you make the contribution of judgment, which you have to have all the time because there are some things that you simply say, well, that is not right, that isn't what I want to put down--and then you simply eliminate--oh, no, your judgment must be constantly operating. And that is where the composer really comes in. But what he hears, he obviously cannot make; he just hears what comes into his head. And then, by process of elimination, he can simply say to himself: "That isn't worth anything. I'm not going to put it down." My dear child, if you would see the hundreds and hundreds of pages that I simply consider inferior and I just simply threw it away. And Mrs. Ornstein tells me some of the best material I've thrown away. And she has been frantic again and again, and it has led to tears and whatnot, that I would throw away something, something she thought--and, as a matter of fact, she sometimes says that actually I throw out things that she would consider slightly less good than what I really decided to choose. But again, you see...

VIVIAN PERLIS: But you're the one in the choosing seat.

LEO ORNSTEIN: But unfortunately, I had to abide by my own judgment, and my judgment may be very bad, may be very poor, as a matter of fact. But, of course, you only have your own judgment to live by. Nothing comes whole, as you know. Of course, it cannot, naturally. But you mean sequences that come right, yes.

VIVIAN PERLIS: This probably sounds naïve, but in order to get some idea of the way this works, suppose a piece of music takes twenty minutes or even something shorter, a Vignette is seven minutes.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, yes. Five to seven minutes, approximately.

VIVIAN PERLIS: In your mind's ear, when this first comes to you, is it playing to you at the speed...

LEO ORNSTEIN: That's interesting, too. That's interesting, my dear. When I think of a piece of music, I don't have to debate: "Let's see, shall the piece go faster, go slower?" No, no. You hear the piece exactly at the speed at which it's meant to be.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So a seven-minute piece would take...

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, no. I didn't mean only seven minutes. That is, of course, the organism finally. It's the structure of the thing. In other words, it's the architecture that is just that much and no more, get it? And whether it may last five minutes or maybe seven, that depends, of course, on the material. But I'm interested also that the speed at which a piece moves is absolutely simultaneous with what you hear. You hear it at the speed. You don't toss up a coin and simply say: "Maybe this should go a little slower." No, nothing of the sort.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Not even tossing up a coin, but you don't even have to think too carefully in terms of metronome markings you want.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No. Then I tell you what I do: Finally, when I get it finished, then I simply fool around with the metronome until it comes to the speed at which I heard the piece. Oh, yes, apparently it's a hundred to the quarter. Then the metronome gets adjusted. "Oh, no," I say, "push it up; it's too slow." I play it over for her. So she moves it up and then finally the metronome comes in and beats just the speed at which the piece...

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: The thing that gets me is he is able--I don't know where all this connection comes from--to get his hands on those notes at full speeds, where he's never practiced them, he's never thought of them before.

LEO ORNSTEIN: As a matter of fact, after I write it down now, it would be a terrific labor to reproduce it again, because then I'd have to go through the process of actually almost learning the piece. But when I hear the thing first...

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: I feel as though I've been married to a spook all my life! It's absolutely--it's terrifying.

VIVIAN PERLIS: How do you like that? You didn't realize she felt that way about you.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I feel entirely assured.

16. The Shortcomings of Music Notation

LEO ORNSTEIN: The limitations of our notation are perfectly evident. We can only think certain things at specified speeds. Beyond those, we really cannot think it. For instance, we had to abandon again and again, if the thing moves rapidly, a quarter that really is the duration of five sixteenths. Now, if it moves slowly enough, it is perfectly possible to conceive of a quarter that will incorporate the length of five sixteenths instead of the classical four sixteenths. You take a syncopation. We can make a syncopation horribly fast, but not because we can think it but because we can physically make it--here, for instance: [plays piano, hitting notes with increasing rapidity]. But I couldn't possibly think that each, the left and the right, the sequence as fast as I can simply just make it--in other words, make my arms move that rapidly. And that's why there have been so many disasters sometimes when the syncopation gets closer and closer, and finally--particularly in the orchestra, you've got to be very, very careful because obviously there's a point at which they simply cannot come in in such a small area. Have you ever tried that? It's very funny. You can do it yourself. Just take a pencil. Take a pencil and [hits table] do this with it, and then say [hits table rhythmically as he says, in syncopation, with increasing rapidity]: "Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah." What will happen is that your "ahs" will run right together with your--in other words, you cannot think in between your beats when they move at such a rapid pace. And yet, as you know, one can of course do this sort of thing: [plays piano for five seconds], almost running together.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Is it one of the reasons, when you were performing your own music, you could physically do virtuoso things that were difficult to write down, that the writing down, then, was almost more difficult than playing?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. I suppose that I developed, in trying some of the things out, I developed some mechanical skills, what you would call athletic skills. That may be so. Usually, there is really no problem if you hear the thing clearly and definitely, if it's really defined--in other words, if you can really define it so that your harmonies and your rhythms and all the ingredients are perfectly clear to you, then there's no problem in writing them down. The problem remains when you get something in your head that is rather vague. Unfortunately, you're then forced to make some compromises. For instance, there's no use trying to think a quarter, five sixteenths, at a very rapid pace because the human mind simply is incapable of really encompassing, and so finally we begin to make various little minor adjustments on notation and with our capacity to be able to divide time--fast only up to a certain point, and beyond that we're incapable to make these separations. That's why, as I said, a very fast syncopation is a very dangerous thing because eventually everybody lands on the beat.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Particularly for polyrhythmic things.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, indeed.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Is this work you were showing me--is that one of the *Vignettes* or part of the symphony?

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, no, these are all the *Vignettes*. I keep that in a separate envelope.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Are there polyrhythmic combinations in these?

LEO ORNSTEIN: There are some. Oh, yes, there are some. And the moods are also--a very wide range. Some are of a very varied nature, and some are rather suave.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Is this the current work that you would have been working on before we arrived, what you have right on the piano?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. This really is the one we're now working with. Mrs. Ornstein has some of that already written down, and some of it, of course, I'm still in the middle of. I've reached--now I need a middle section that I'm now debating, and I've had two or three suggestions that have come to me, but none of them quite satisfies me. The writer of music has so many problems, so many problems. They depend upon something that hasn't anything particularly to do with aesthetics maybe. There are some days where it doesn't matter what I think. I simply just find it utterly unpalatable and I simply refuse to use it. I just don't feel that it's good enough. It doesn't satisfy--my good evaluation just refuses to accept it. And sometimes--the danger, of course, you understand, with the composer being over-critical: he can annihilate himself completely because it's very easy to simply assume--everything that you hear is not worth putting down.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Well, there are some composers like that. Carl Ruggles eliminated a great deal...

LEO ORNSTEIN: And finally you just simply rub yourself out. It almost verges on the psychotic, if you take some people who are so hopelessly critical of themselves, some of them finally even do away with themselves. There are these extreme points. And yet, of course, if you write music without any critical evaluation at all, why, then you'll put down anything indiscriminately. Some composers--very gifted ones lack a certain amount of judgment as to know what to put down or not, and they will put down some things of which obviously you're very critical.

VIVIAN PERLIS: This work, this Vignette, would you be playing it first before you write it down? Would you play that at the piano?

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, this one I wrote down and dictated to her almost at once. Now, as I said, some of the things I will want to try at the instrument, particularly some very new combinations. Now, look, you cannot use it because--no, I cannot let you use it because--look, it's too haphazard. This is not a moment, for instance, in which I can really write a piece of music that I would want to have represented, nor can I play it efficiently enough, no. I'm afraid that that's not in the cards because I don't play the piano anymore. I don't like to play the piano. Therefore, I wouldn't even want to distort my own piece. To improvise something at the moment is just--the chances are that under the circumstances, with all these lights, this is hardly the condition under which you can sit down and think music that would satisfy you, so it would be haphazard, and I wouldn't want it to go out there to be used publicly, obviously, no.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You say you have the materials for the symphony in a separate envelop.

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't want it confused with all this mass of manuscripts.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Does the manuscript material look the same?

LEO ORNSTEIN: As far as you will be able to tell, it looks just about the same. Then, of course, I've already begun to orchestrate the first movement. Those are these huge sheets that I use. And I'm beginning to have a little problem there with my eyesight. My eyes get a little tired. As a matter of fact, I was operated on my left eye a few months ago. I cannot see marvelously through it, but at one time I

would see nothing through it. And I do eliminate all these personal things. I don't think they belong in--

VIVIAN PERLIS: You use large music-writing paper for the orchestrating?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I make my notes on sheets with the lines further apart.

VIVIAN PERLIS: When you hear music that's not piano solo--chamber music or the orchestral works--do you hear it orchestrated?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, oh, yes.

VIVIAN PERLIS: You do. There's never any question about things.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No. Oh once in a while you will come across some debatable spot that you can't quite make up your mind what the combination might be, but generally speaking, when you're thinking for orchestra, you're really thinking orchestrally, obviously. When you're writing chamber music, I've had a number of people that play the Cello Sonata, particularly the first one. Actually, you wouldn't believe that I couldn't play the cello. They said: "Look here, you must have been born with a cello right between your legs."

VIVIAN PERLIS: The cello has been of particular interest to you.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes. It's an instrument that has particularly fascinated me because it has a certain richness and a certain depth that appeals to my ear enormously. Some day, if you get a chance, you really ought to study those Six Preludes for Cello and Piano. I believe, frankly, that it's probably one of the best pieces of music that I've written, one of the soundest. I think if any music is going to last, I have a feeling that that may be it.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It's wonderful that they have been recorded.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Only three. As a matter of fact, the three that I consider by far the [best]--were not recorded. They were, of course, very difficult. They were much more the difficult ones and harmonically much more advanced and experimental. I was surprised. Apparently even among the classicists they were able to penetrate through the rhetoric that apparently seemed very gauche to them. After I played it for the League of Composers and a few other places, I had an invitation from the Beethoven Association to play, to have that done. I was quite surprised they would have had anything as radical as that in their programs.

17. On Polystylism

VIVIAN PERLIS: When you have been composing all through the years, and looking at many of your compositions, which I have done, I'm amazed at the variation in styles, even in the same period of time.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I know. That has puzzled me, too. I can only say to you, child, that I refuse to bog myself down because if I did I would simply discard those things and simply say they don't fit in within the theory that I've established or developed. I refuse to theorize about it. Therefore if I happen to hear something stylistically entirely different, I don't hesitate at all to put it down. My only criterion is really this: Is it really good music? Does it say something? It's the intrinsic value of the music that I'm concerned with--in other words, the substance of the thing. Some exteriors simply do not fit what you're hearing at all. And so everything thought really commands its own environment that you're surrounded by. Some of the melodic lines obviously do not fit, shall we say, into the kind of harmonies that I used in the "Notre Dame" or in *The Three Moods*.

VIVIAN PERLIS: In the early days, was that a problem? Did you feel that you were expected to write in a particular way?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't know, possibly. But it's rather difficult for me to be railroaded because those are inner conditions that are inside of you...

VIVIAN PERLIS: I asked that because it seemed to me an amusing incident of a composer by the name of Vannin.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes. I wanted to see--that was a totally different thing.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Can you explain that?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes, I remember that. I had written three pieces, which were really quite typical of the kind of work I was doing at that period. Well, I just wanted to see the reaction of my name being removed from it altogether. But I will say that the audience was astute enough to realize soon enough--

VIVIAN PERLIS: Oh, did they?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, on the whole. Oh, there were, of course, some, but I will say that at least a good many were astute enough to at once doubt whether I wasn't behind dictating the thing to Mr. Vannin.

VIVIAN PERLIS: So on the same program of music, there was music by Leo Ornstein?

LEO ORNSTEIN: Oh, yes. I played some of my own things, and then I played under the pseudonym of Vannin.

VIVIAN PERLIS: And it was a little bit of a game you were playing?

LEO ORNSTEIN: You might really say that. I was just curious to see--I wanted to be removed entirely from my own personal association with things that I had been writing at that period. I just wanted to see what the reaction would be, peculiar to the music of someone that wasn't right there at the moment, sitting at the piano and playing it, get it?

VIVIAN PERLIS: And the so-called Vannin pieces were the conservative ones.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, on the contrary. No, they were extremely advanced. Oh, no.

VIVIAN PERLIS: I see.

LEO ORNSTEIN: They were extremely advanced. That's why a number of people simply said: "It sounds too much like Ornstein." Or it was just one of those things that a young person will try out. It was just a bit of fun to some extent, too.

18. The Uniqueness of Each Individual and Immortality

LEO ORNSTEIN: It always astonishes me that each human being that we see, even in the most casual way, is really one individual...

VIVIAN PERLIS: Did you realize that there is not another person in billions and billions in the entire world that is exactly the same? It's extraordinary.

LEO ORNSTEIN: When you stop to think, you realize--for instance, our inability to be able to distinguish things until we become thoroughly familiar. Familiarity is one of the most important factors in making a judgment about almost anything. Even in music, your understand of a piece of music on one hearing is one thing; on the tenth hearing, it's an entirely different thing. You take the eight hundred and fifty million Chinese that to most of us, casually, seem to resemble each other hopelessly, and yet we know perfectly well that each one is an individual and that it's unthinkable that someone would mistake his friend for someone else.

VIVIAN PERLIS: There are people that I know well--they're not superstitious or uneducated people--who feel very strongly that they have existed in another life, that they will again, and they feel they have known certain people in another life. That's why there are feelings between them.

LEO ORNSTEIN: And some rationalize about it extremely well, with a great deal of verbal facility and so on, but the convictions have to come from within you.

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: A conviction of every human being is that you're going to go on living. You can't conceive that you're not.

VIVIAN PERLIS: But it must be very comforting to really believe in reincarnation.

LEO ORNSTEIN: Yes, I imagine it does. It gives you a certain amount of comfort because--in my case, I see the end of a life with complete and inexorable, as I said a moment ago, finality, that that is really the last--

PAULINE ORNSTEIN: I think it's impossible to be so final about anything.

LEO ORNSTEIN: But, of course, that realm is so lost and so murky to us right now that we have really no right to commit ourselves with any finality, however difficult it may be for some of us, to be able to surmount that wall, what we call common sense, reality, whatever analogy you want to use.

VIVIAN PERLIS: Isn't part of the reason for composing to achieve some kind of immortality?

LEO ORNSTEIN: I don't believe, quite frankly--I should rather doubt really whether any composer, as vain as he might be, really starts off with a premise of merely leaving his name to immortality. I don't believe so. I realize that we're all vain and, of course, would like to leave our name for posterity everlastingly. But actually I don't believe that is the primarily motivation. There is some kind of an urge--look here, when the things come into your head from somewhere that you can't explain that just keeps crowding and banging away in your brain, you finally put them down on paper, as I said, in self-defense because once it gets organized on the music paper, some pressure has been relieved from within you. There's no doubt about it.

VIVIAN PERLIS: It's not so much the name as the music itself, if you consider that a century later or two hundred years later or whatever, that you will communicate something of yourself.

LEO ORNSTEIN: No, I don't believe that I sit down writing a piece of music with this august, huge consciousness of leaving that to posterity. No, I don't believe so. I think it's just an immediate thing that is churning in your head that you yourself get a certain amount of pleasure seeing it finally defined on the music paper, where the final definition really lies and is symbolized there.

19. Postlude: Vivian Perlis Remembers Leo Ornstein, March 19, 2002

(Spoken to and transcribed by Frank J. Oteri on March 19, 2002)

I was doing interviewing in the '70s and people like Goddard Lieberson at CBS and Oliver Daniel at BMI would say to me: "Whatever happened to Leo Ornstein, the great futurist composer? You really ought to do something about finding him. He's alive, but no one seems to know where he is." He had disappeared from the music world, so it was a challenge, which is one thing about oral history: it's partly fun and partly nerve racking detective work to track someone down to get an interview.

Ornstein had taken himself away from the music world, and he was traveling around in a trailer with his wife Pauline. In the winter, they'd get themselves clear across country to Brownsville, Texas, and they would park their trailer at Sierra Mobile Park, Lot #32, and stay there until the weather changed, and then they'd go clear across country and see their daughter in Kansas City and end up in New Hampshire where they had a place. So, it was difficult to find where he was. But it was even more a matter of making some kind of contact.

I found a nephew, and the nephew said, "I can't tell you where he is but I'll put you in touch with his son." So, at that point, I got in touch with Severo who said, "I don't think Dad's going to want to talk to you or anybody else. He hasn't wanted to do that for a long time. But, we'll see about it." Leo, I think, really did not want to start talking to anyone, but Pauline felt that the time had come. They were at that point--both well into their 80s--and I think that she was worried. They both felt that someday something would happen, that the music would be recognized and that they would be back in the world of music. She had great faith, of course, in Leo's work, and she was worried about the manuscripts as well. So I began to talk to her on the phone. She was a little older than Leo, a couple of years older. She said, "We'll meet you in Kansas City at our daughter's place." Edith [Valentine] lived there. And so we made the appointment. But it was broken. And then we made another appointment for I forget where, but always with a little bit of notice, it wasn't the right time. And I began to think this is going to be the most difficult interview I've ever had to do and that the man is obviously paranoid about talking to someone. Finally, I made an appointment--Severo was then living in Boston--I made an appointment to see them in Boston. In the meantime, there had not been any discussion at all about the music manuscripts or the papers or anything, except for one conversation I had with Pauline in which she said, "What should I do with the manuscripts? They're in a barn in New Hampshire and the mice are eating them. Some of them are in an advance state of lace. Can you help us?" Well, I'd helped place manuscripts, so I said, "Of course, I can help you." But I hadn't even met them yet. I said we'd talk about it later.

So the day came and I left for Boston. I had my tape recorder, which in those days was the latest in technology, a suitcase with a reel-to-reel, and I thought that was really something small you could carry around... And I rang the bell. It was a very nasty February day, and it was about to snow. Sure enough, the granddaughter came to the door with a note. And my heart sank. Oh, no, not again. There was a note from Leo saying, "Sorry. Snow coming. Have to leave before we get snow bound. Have left a few things for you in the dining room." It's really a moment I'll never forget. I walked into the dining room and it was absolutely filled with brown paper bags and boxes of sixty years of music manuscripts. You know how it feels just before it's going to snow, like time's standing still, that moment was like that. So there I was sitting with all these music manuscripts, and I still hadn't set eyes on Leo Ornstein. He certainly was something of a mystery man. I called the Yale Music Librarian and said "How would you like the entire music manuscripts and papers of Leo Ornstein?" And he said, "Of course, it would be fantastic."

And I said, "All you have to do is come with a truck and get it." It was given to me to place with the understanding that that's what I would arrange.

Two weeks later, I arrived back at the same door, and this fairly short fellow, with a Russian accent, was at the door bowing and saying, "My deepest apologies. I was working on a trio and in the old days I could remember everything." (He was known for having an incredible memory.) "But now I was afraid that if I started to talk to somebody after not talking to anybody for so long, I would get very excited, and I would forget my train of musical thinking. But now I have finished that piece and I'm ready to talk." He started talking to me at the door and he didn't stop! So that was the first meeting with Leo.

Leo Ornstein fits into the early heroic avant-garde, the first years of Ives, Varèse, Cowell, Rudhyar--that early beginning of the avant-garde that was so shocking. This first group of early modernists has a special place just as the firsts have in most areas. I think the early works, the ones that were innovative at the time ("Danse Sauvage," "Suicide in an Airplane," "Three Moods," etc.) have an historical significance. And I think that Ornstein has a historical significance as a really interesting figure who had the courage not to be pushed into composing further and further away from tradition. He had the self-confidence to go ahead and compose what he felt he needed to. But for me the later works are not as interesting as those early innovative ones where he uses tone-clusters and so forth.

After his manuscripts came to New Haven, I thought I could read through some of the material, but it was too tough for me. There was a very good pianist who was doing his degree recital and he was a terrific reader. William Westney (Bill) went into the materials and started reading through some of the piano works, and he gave a recital in New York and included Ornstein. We produced the first recording, and it included the Quintet and Three Moods. After that, a number of recordings came out. Ornstein was primarily a keyboard composer. And his orchestral works read like they're by a pianist. I'm not sure if he ever got over that. It's hard for a concert pianist to become a composer of orchestral music. He once said that the sounds just came into his head, and he wished they'd go away.

For a long time I had thought someone would discover that the real Leo Ornstein is Pauline because one of the interesting things about the early manuscripts is that they were all in her hand. And I tried to get at this when I talked to them. It was some kind of symbiotic relationship they had where he was able to dictate the music to her and she would write it down. She was a musician. It was just amazing. But he was the boss, there's no doubt about that. She really did what he wanted her to do, because she believed so strongly in his talent. And, when I started corresponding with them, the letters were in her hand. The letters I have from him toward the end of his life were in his hand. After she died, he wrote and said, "I have nothing to live for." But a few months later he was back composing. He managed to pick himself up and continue.

Leo Ornstein had a quality that was unique. I never saw it in anybody else. He taught himself philosophy, music, art history, aesthetics, current events, world events, several languages, for many, many years, without the need to use it for something, just for his own self-edification, for his own satisfaction, not for teaching anybody, not for making social conversation, just for his own desire for education. He was interested in ideas, philosophical ideas primarily. And he made that very clear from the beginning. He said, "I'm not interested in telling you my biography. Let's get down to ideas." Today, we've heard so much about contemporary music, that some of the ideas may sound naïve, but most of what he had to say makes a lot of sense and is absolutely sincere. There was only occasionally a word that would come up that would clue you in to the fact that he wasn't right with the times. Sometimes he'd say "gramophone" instead of "record player," or he'd say "My dear child..." To him, of course, I

was a much younger person.

He once was a child prodigy and the family kept lopping off years whenever they could. They were a rather poor family and they looked to him as the great virtuoso who was going to make a lot of money playing Chopin and Rachmaninoff and Liszt and so forth. And the longer they could keep him a child prodigy the better. So all the books and dictionaries of the time have the birth date a few years off.

I have pictures of him from various stages. In one he must be about 65, but he looked 45. One time, he was getting an honorary doctorate from St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin. I went to that; it was a big occasion. He was 95, and he looked wonderful as he came down the aisle in a cap and gown. And to listen to him talk to the students. They were mind-boggled. This man was talking about pre-World War One! He spoke to them very clearly about the horse and buggy, before there were cars, and what New York was like at the turn of the century. One of the things he told me when we talked was, "Can you imagine? My father lived to 104 and it's just an amazing thing. And I wonder about somebody living that long." Then he lived even longer.

The last letter I have was from age 100 and he wrote, "I'm beginning to feel my age." And then he wrote rather wistfully, "I always thought there'd be some kind of epiphany in my lifetime but now I know it's not going to happen." I thought, meaning that his music would be more fully recognized. I continued to send him a birthday card and holiday greetings and Edith would get in touch with me and say, "Dad sends greetings back." It was a very nice relationship.