

OSCAR LEVANT AT THE OPERA

Mary Jane Nomura
Music 490
Spring, 1991

Oscar Levant is known for his songs in the area of popular music, but his operas are virtually unknown. Obtaining and studying any one of his three operas should be important for establishing him as more than a popular-music composer.

Levant's opera Carnival, from the 20th Century Fox movie Charlie Chan at the Opera, is especially worthy of consideration. Through careful analysis of this work, much can be learned about the style and interests of Oscar Levant. While comparisons to other composers and their works may be too extensive for this specific paper, some comparisons to Levant's own popular tunes of the same time period as Carnival may reveal remarkable similarities and/or differences. Along with an analysis of the score, observation of the opera as it is presented in the movie will provide information about the basis for its content and reveal its incorporation into the movie's plot. In addition, seeing the movie will give aural information, such as the types of instruments used.

The interest in this topic stems from Oscar Levant's own books- A Smattering of Ignorance, The Unimportance of Being Oscar, and The Memoirs of an Amnesiac. He refers to this opera in A Smattering of Ignorance, but his references to his musical acquaintances in The Memoirs of an Amnesiac may supply additional facts to help in understanding his musical style.

Examining Carnival will contribute to showing the significance of Oscar Levant's style of composition. It will also search into a genre with whose experimentation Levant is entirely unknown: opera.

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Oscar Levant at the Opera

Oscar Levant was a musician and celebrity best known for his piano performances and for his television and radio appearances. He was recognized in the area of popular music through his piano performances of George Gershwin's music and through his own work. Levant composed for instrument and voice. His known vocal pieces are popular songs, some of which were produced for motion picture soundtracks. Although Levant wrote three autobiographies.

The author's appreciation is expressed to
Harry Fox, Jr., Vice-President,
Sam Fox Publishing Company,
Santa Barbara, California,
for his interest and his personal authorization
first, to copy the Carnival sequence and
second, to use excerpts from this score in this paper.

Since no orchestration was ever published, apparently,
for any of this cited music, as used in the movie,
the author's ears were sole arbiter in the estimations
of instruments actually used in the movie version.

Once in Hollywood, Levant began making appearances in film (e.g., *An American in Paris*) and composing for motion pictures. He also appeared on Milton Frankel's radio show *Representing Players*. He also studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg for a short time. In 1940, Levant married his

1. J. P. M. Musical. *Prodigious*. New York: American Press, 1973, 213.

2. M. P. *The Golden Age of Film*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960, 41.

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Oscar Levant was a musician and celebrity best known for his piano performances and for his television and movie appearances. He was recognized in the area of popular music through his piano performances of George Gershwin's music and through his own works. Levant composed for instrument and voice. His known vocal pieces are popular songs, some of which were produced for motion picture musicals. Although Levant wrote three autobiographies, they reveal little about their author's musical compositions. What is generally unknown about Levant is, first, his interesting life and, second, his operatic compositions.

Levant was born in 1906 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where his parents ran a jewelry store. He was the youngest of four boys and a prodigy on the piano.¹ His mother always encouraged her children in music at an early age, and Levant grew up playing piano either for pleasure or as an accompanist on various occasions. He began his professional career in silent-film orchestras. This job did not last, however, because of his retort to the conductor that if he were cued properly, he would not enter at the wrong time.²

Once in Hollywood, Levant began making appearances in film (i.e., *An American in Paris*) and composing for motion pictures. He also appeared on Clifton Fadiman's talk show *Information Please*. He also studied composition with Arnold Schönberg for a short time. In 1940, Levant married his

¹ R. Fisher, Musical Prodigies, (New York: Association Press, 1973), 213.

² M. Evans, The Golden Age of Film, (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1975), 81.

second wife, June Gilmartin. She would remain his wife, television companion, and emotional supporter for the rest of his life. Levant and June had three daughters and remained in Beverly Hills. Levant struggled through many years of mental illness before his death in 1972.

One of the traits most remembered about Oscar Levant is his cynical sense of humor. His engaging personality is evident in his three autobiographies: *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1942), *The Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (1965), and *The Unimportance of Being Oscar* (1968). Levant never held back on his remarks about the character of others. Because of his ability to "read" another person, he always knew how to dominate a conversation or situation. In *The Unimportance of Being Oscar*, he describes how he once contended with a female latecomer to one of his performances by speeding up his playing when she walked quickly down the aisle and slowing down when she slowed down.³

Levant's major instrumental works include a piano concerto, two string quartets, a sinfonietta, *Nocturne* for orchestra, and *Overture 1912*. His film scores include those composed for *In Person*, *Street Girl*, and *Tanned Legs*.⁴ But Levant is better known for his popular songs, such as

³ "Time after time, concerts and recitals are interrupted by latecomers. On one occasion when I was in the middle of a number, a bejeweled matron came sweeping down the aisle, distracting the audience. I stopped my performance of a Poulenc piece and began choreographing her walk by playing in time with her steps. She hesitated and slowed down-I slowed down. She stopped-I stopped. She hurried-I hurried. By the time she reached her seat, the audience was in hysterics and the matron in a state of wild confusion. I don't know if it cured her tardiness, but it gave me a routine to use on other incōsiderate arrivals." (p. 142)

⁴ A. Woll, Songs from Hollywood Musical Comedies, 1927 to Present, (Allen L. Woll, 1976), 136, 191, 195-6.

Lady, Play Your Mandolin, Wacky Dust, Blame It on My Youth,⁵ and *We've Got the Moon and Sixpence*.

It is only in his autobiographies that references can be found to his three operas: *Le crayon sur la table*, *That Tuneless Melody*, and *Carnival*,⁶ all so unknown that it is only in these books that references can be found to the first two of these works. He clearly made significant contributions in American music. Although not famous by any means, his works played an important role not only in establishing American music in the 1930s, but also in establishing the motion picture musical as an American art form.

One film for which Oscar Levant composed the music was a non-musical detective story entitled *Charlie Chan at the Opera*. The music he provided was an operatic sequence named *Carnival*. The movie's plot involves an opera singer who returns to cause havoc at the San Francisco opera after being believed dead. In his book *A Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant described his perception of *Carnival* this way:

With Twentieth Century-Fox, one of my early undertakings was to write an operatic sequence for *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (not, however, *Le Crayon sur la table*)... Since this was a B film there were certain problems to be met, especially those of the budget. Twentieth Century-Fox had just completed an elaborate spectacle with Lawrence Tibbett, of which one of the high spots was a *Faust* scene in which the star wore a magnificent Mephistophelian costume.

One of our first problems arose when the costume was assigned to *Charlie Chan at the Opera*, with instructions for us to put it to work. I had heard of music being written around a singer, but never for a

⁵ Also the title of one of the chapters in The Memoirs of an Amnesiac, p. 86.

⁶ *Le crayon sur la table* first mentioned in A Smattering of Ignorance, p. 72. *That Tuneless Melody* first mentioned in The Memoirs of an Amnesiac, p. 107. *Carnival* first mentioned in A Smattering of Ignorance, p. 117.

costume. Nevertheless, determined to become a cog in the wheel, I set myself to writing an operatic sequence in which the big aria found a baritone wearing this elegant Mephistopheles costume. As an additional slight detail it was necessary for the aria to work up to a point at which the singer stabbed the girl with a lethal knife malevolently substituted for the prop one. This was the whole point of the picture.

Since we had no libretto I wrote the music first, and then the words were written for it by Bill Kernell, a lyricist who also wrote songs. He was assigned to the job because it was thought that he would have more musical understanding than the ordinary hack writer. I never did find out the meaning of the silly English words he wrote for the music, because as soon as he was finished, studio linguists were called in to translate the whole thing into Italian.

In addition to this baritone aria (which came out as a potent mingling of Moussorgsky and pure Levant) I also wrote a soprano scene, rather lyrical and expressive, also a rhythmic little march for some soldiers that we introduced into the episode. (The lead role, that of the baritone, was played by Boris Karloff, though the voice was dubbed, of course.) My only specification in writing the score was that at some point I should be able to use the word "silencio," which always appealed to me. They compromised by letting me begin one aria with "Silencio!"

Having had little experience in writing opera, I asked [Arnold] Schönberg for some advice. He advised me to study the score of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Since this is one of the most unoperatic of all operas it was just what I didn't need.

In the idiom I used there were a few turns of phrase which I considered individual, also a harmonic idiom a little more adventurous than that commonly encountered in such writing. It was acceptable to the producers (they liked the soprano aria particularly because it had a good tune) but I encountered some difficulty with the orchestral players. I was especially irritated with one of the violinists, who took exception to the way I had written a certain phrase, saying, "My finger doesn't want to go there."

(pp. 117-119)

The compilation of the music for this opera sequence is entitled *Songs and Descriptive Compositions from the 20th Century-Fox Picture "Charlie Chan at the Opera"*.⁷ The score is divided into six segments, each one having its own title: 1. *Carnival Interlude*, 2. *Carnival, Ah Romantic Love Dream*, 3. *Carnival, King and Country Call*, 4. *Carnival March*, 5. *Carnival, Then Farewell*, and 6. *Marche Funebre*.

Carnival Interlude is called just that, probably because it is intermittently heard throughout the movie. The baritone's aria is based on its melody, but nowhere in the score can the words to his aria be found. *Carnival Interlude* is marked "Allegro con spirito" and is performed in a quick 6/8 meter. It has a flowing but majestic and broad sound. Most of the time, the melody is played by violins, and the whole section is riddled with quick ascending scale-like passages played either by trumpets or french horns. In the middle is an eight-measure section in 2/4 meter. This section has ascending and descending alternating triplets of sixteenth notes or eighth notes. The ending returns to 6/8 meter and gradually builds to a frenzied climax with ascending sixteenth-note major and minor thirds against major triads of alternating eighths and sixteenths as shown in Example 1 on the following page.

⁷ Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division; reproduced with permission of Sam Fox Publishing Co.

Example 1 *Carnival Interlude*, mm. 42-49

At the finish, all comes to rest on a v_7 chord. This segment is marked "forte" at the beginning with no other dynamic markings.

Carnival, Ah Romantic Love Dream (subtitled *Ah, Sogno d'Amore*) is the "soprano scene" to which Levant referred in his book. It is a 43-measure recitative and aria of which only the aria is heard in the movie. This aria is just as "lyrical and expressive" as Levant says it is. It contains

25

SIEME NOI SEMPRE VIV - REM DEH FAM - MI SEN TIR - LEB-
ER - NAL AS DEEP AS THE SEA THEN KISS ME EV - ER CAR-

BREZ - ZE EI DA - CI AR - DENT D'A - MOR
ESS ME OH LOVE TAKE ME IN YOUR ARMS

30

ME - LLE BRAC - CIA MIO TE -
HOLD ME AL - WAYS UP A -

35

SOR STRIN - GI - MI FOR - TE CON PAS -
BOVE THE STARS ARE GLEAM - ING GUID - ING

SION LOV - E CON AR - DOR WE
ERS SUCH AS WE

AH! DUN SOG - NO D'A FOR CAN - TA IL COR
AH! RO - MAN - TIC LOVE DREAM SWEET RO - MANCE

acc. molto

The instrumental accompaniment to *Ah, Sogno d'Amore* is somewhat more melodic in the recitative but basically follows the singer in the aria. Strings are the main instruments used to accompany the singer. They are sometimes played together with quiet horns, and every once in a while an oboe or clarinet will stand out with a small part of the melody. But, the distinctive feature in this segment of the opera is the ascending scale passage of the harp just before the words "Ah, sogno d'amore" are sung. It is interesting to note that in this particular recitative and aria the singer never enters on a downbeat.

Carnival-King and Country Call is a short aria sung by a tenor as background music while Charlie Chan investigates the inner recesses of the opera house. This is the aria in which Levant gets to use his much-demanded "silencio" in the first measure, but, unfortunately, it is not heard in the movie. The strings and flute begin the aria in the second measure. Although this aria is marked "con agitazione,"(!) it has a very legato sound. The tenor sings a nine-note range from G to A flat. Again, there are eighth-note triplets in almost every measure of the vocal section, either performed by the tenor or by the orchestra. The whole aria is only seventeen measures long and is in cut time. There is a mezzo forte marking in the first measure with no other dynamic markings. The accompaniment is more melodic than that in the soprano's aria. There are descending eighth-note triplet passages between the phrases. These specific triplets are played variously by flute, oboe, or violins. Measures eleven through seventeen have a more march-like sound in the accompaniment. For example, in measure eleven, french horns play quick sixteenth-note triplets and quadruplets under what is probably the king and country call made by a trumpet. The trumpet is then heard making a second call in measure thirteen and is joined by other trumpets in a final call in measures sixteen and seventeen. This aria has the same non-downbeat entrances as does *Carnival, Ah Romantic Love Dream*.

The fourth segment of this sequence is the "rhythmic little march for some soldiers," appropriately called *Carnival March*. This is a lively 27-measure piece that is ideal for marching. The first three measures are an introduction in 2/4 meter followed by the march in 4/4 meter. The introduction features trumpets in the top voice playing an eighth-note triad in first inversion followed by the same triad in a sixteenth-note triplet and

then an eighth-note triplet. Underneath is an upward glissando that is not indicated in the score. The actual march begins with strings playing a rhythmic triplet and sextuplet pattern on a repeated note. The trumpets come in above with their own individual rhythm and melody as shown in Example 3.

Example 3 *Carnival March*, mm. 4-6

The entire march is played with strings, trumpets, french horns, and a tuba. In the middle is a simple flute melody heard over french horns playing chords and a tuba playing a walking bassline. The march closes with a section identical to the introduction, and this march has no tempo markings. There is one dynamic marking of forte in the first measure with no specified dynamic changes.

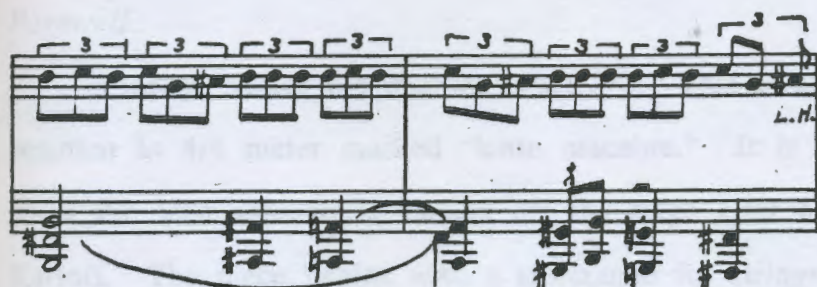
Carnival, Then Farewell, the fifth segment, seems to have been cut and pasted in the movie. The first eight measures are heard at least twice and are always used as an introduction to the baritone's aria based on the melody of *Carnival Interlude*. Although there is no tempo marking, the pace is rather fast, and these eight measures are full of activity. Horns play chords under strings playing descending octaves or chords in dotted eighth and sixteenth-note rhythms. The strings then play a quick descending scale and move up to play eighth-note triplets on a repeated note. A drum makes a downward rolling sound, to be followed by horns playing a short melody. This is illustrated in Example 4.

Example 4 *Carnival, Then Farewell*, mm. 1-6

The musical score for Example 4, measures 1-6, is presented in three systems. The first system consists of a single staff with a treble clef, showing a series of chords and eighth-note patterns. The second system is a grand staff with a treble and bass clef, featuring a descending scale in the bass and eighth-note triplets in the treble. The third system is a single staff with a treble clef, showing a series of chords and eighth-note patterns. The score includes various musical notations such as clefs, notes, rests, and triplets.

The previous two measures are then repeated (not indicated in the score) and then two woodwinds are heard playing another short melody. A clarinet now plays eighth-note triplets in alternating patterns with horns accompanying with chords. This whole section is finished with a sweeping, ascending scale-like passage by the strings (also not in the score) that leads straight into *Carnival Interlude*, as seen in Example 5.

Example 5 *Carnival, Then Farewell*, mm. 7-8

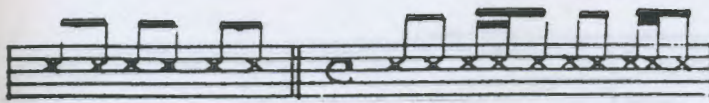


There is an extensive vocal section in 3/4 meter immediately following this active introduction, but there are no indications on the score as to who is to sing the first passage. Later there are markings for "solo voice" and "chorus" with the chorus "wailing" at specified times. The lyrics are unusual.⁸ They appear to be a Romanized version of a foreign language.

Interestingly enough, there is no accompaniment in the vocal section. The solo voice and chorus are accompanied only by a solo drum beating one of two rhythms (Example 6).

⁸ "SANTIMUNGUKAZINA QUISHA. M'WAN AMKEWAN GONA LEA NY UMBA. YEOLE WENU YEOLE WENU. M'WANAM KE QUENDA YE'YE M'BALI... YE'YE NEPENDA HAPANA NAPENDA SASA. OLE WANGU OLE WANGU... CHINGA CHINGA M'WANAMKE UWANGO NO WOOAH M'BAYYA SANA." (pp. 14-17)

Example 6 *Carnival, Then Farewell*, mm. 20-21 (drums only)



The vocal section begins in 3/4 meter with a solo voice and no accompaniment, then changes to common time when the drum and chorus join the solo. It later switches to 2/4 meter, maintaining this until the end of the piece. There are no dynamic or tempo markings in *Carnival, Then Farewell*.

Finally, comes the *Marche Funebre*. This is a short, twenty-measure segment in 4/4 meter marked "lento macabre." It is heard in the movie when the lead soprano is carried off the stage after being stabbed by Boris Karloff. The piece begins with a *sforzando* for strings on a d7 chord followed by an immediate "piano" marking and cellos playing slow octaves underneath. The melody is then heard in the lower voice by violas while woodwinds accompany in the top voice (Example 7a). There are a few appearances of eighth-note triplets before a final quarter-note triplet before strings play a chord with a gong. This chord is sustained until the end while cellos with a bass drum play a three-note chromatic passage downward (Example 7b).

Example 7a *Marche Funebre*, mm. 1-4



Example 7b *Marche Funebre*, mm. 15-20

It is evident that while *Carnival* is only a sequence, Oscar Levant displays complexity, meticulousness, and imagination in this composition. One feature that stands out is Levant's repeated use of triplets. Another interesting, and essentially twentieth-century, feature is that he does not use key signatures in any of the segments. Whether this opera owes more to Beethoven's *Fidelio*, following Schönberg's advice, or to Schönberg's own musico-dramatic concepts is another matter. Oscar Levant deserves due credit for *Carnival*, not only for himself but also for American music.

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Example 1 *Carnival Interlude*, mm. 42-49

The musical score is written for a single melodic line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The score consists of six systems of music. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a melodic line and a piano accompaniment. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The third system features a melodic line with a '45' marking above it, indicating a fingering or breath mark. The fourth system shows a melodic line with a '45' marking above it, indicating a fingering or breath mark. The fifth system shows a melodic line with a '45' marking above it, indicating a fingering or breath mark. The sixth system shows the end of the piece with a final cadence.

Example 2 *Ah, sogno d'amore*, mm. 17-43

AH! AH! SOG-NO DA-MOR - E CAN TAAN-COR PER A-
 RO-MAN-TIC LOVE DREAM SING YOUR SONG

ME, NEW AH! AH! SOG-NO DA-MOR - E VI-VO SOLO DI
 RO-MAN-TIC LOVE DREAM NOW YOUR SONG IS

TE TRUE IL SOG-NO E' SIN-CE - RO ER IN- ET -

SIEME NOI SEM-PRE VIV-REM DEH FAM-MI SEN TIR-LEB-
 ER - NAL AS DEEP AS THE SEA THEN KISS ME EV-ER CAR-

Ex. (2) continued

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It consists of six systems of music. The vocal line is in treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in Italian, with English translations provided below them.

System 1:

Vocal: BREZ - ZE / ESS ME EI BA - CI AR - DENT D'A - MOR / OH LOVE TAKE ME IN YOUR ARMS

System 2:

Vocal: NE' - LLE BRAC - CIA / HOLD ME AL - WAYS MIO TE - / UP A -

System 3:

Vocal: 35 SOR STRIN - GI - MI FOR - TE CON PAS - / BOVE THE STARS ARE GLEAM - ING GUID - ING

System 4:

Vocal: SION LOV - E CON AR - DOR / ERS SUCH AS WE

System 5:

Vocal: (5) (6)

System 6:

Vocal: (5) (6)

Ex. (2) concluded

AH! DUN SOG - NO D'A FOR CAN TAIL COR
 AH! RO-MAN-TIC LOVE DREAM SWEET RU-MANGE

40
 accel. molto

Detailed description: This musical score consists of two systems. The first system has a vocal line on a single staff and a piano accompaniment on two staves. The vocal line includes the lyrics 'AH! DUN SOG - NO D'A FOR CAN TAIL COR' and 'AH! RO-MAN-TIC LOVE DREAM SWEET RU-MANGE'. The piano accompaniment features a 7-measure rest in the right hand and a 7-measure rest in the left hand. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with a 7-measure rest in the right hand and a 7-measure rest in the left hand. The tempo marking 'accel. molto' is present at the end of the first system.

Example 3 *Carnival March*, mm. 4-6

5

3 3 6 3 3 3 6 3

Detailed description: This musical score consists of two systems. The first system has a single staff with a 5-measure rest and a piano accompaniment on two staves. The piano accompaniment features a 3-measure rest in the right hand and a 3-measure rest in the left hand. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with a 3-measure rest in the right hand and a 3-measure rest in the left hand. The tempo marking 'mm.' is present at the beginning of the first system.

Example 4 *Carnival, Then Farewell*, mm. 1-6

This musical score for measures 1-6 of 'Carnival, Then Farewell' is written for piano. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 1-2) features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a harmonic accompaniment. The second system (measures 3-4) continues the melody and accompaniment, with measure 4 ending with a fermata. The third system (measures 5-6) shows the final measures, with measure 6 ending with a fermata. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Example 5 *Carnival, Then Farewell*, mm. 7-8

This musical score for measures 7-8 of 'Carnival, Then Farewell' is written for piano. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system (measure 7) features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a harmonic accompaniment. The second system (measure 8) continues the melody and accompaniment, with measure 8 ending with a fermata. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Example 6 *Carnival, Then Farewell*, mm. 20-21 (drums only)

This musical score for measures 20-21 of 'Carnival, Then Farewell' (drums only) is written for drums. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system (measure 20) features a single staff with a rhythmic pattern. The second system (measure 21) continues the rhythmic pattern. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Example 7a *Marche Funebre*, mm. 1-4



Example 7b *Marche Funebre*, mm. 15-20



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 of instruments actually used in the movie version.