

Critical Writings: EAR Magazine, Summer 1989

GEORGE ANTHEIL

Bad Boy of Music  
Carnegie Hall, NYC  
July 12, 1989

George Antheil's music has influenced far more people than have actually heard it. Varese's *Ionization*, Nancarrow's player pianos, Cage's *Constructions in Metal*, even Branca's guitar ensembles – all owe a great deal to Antheil's *Ballet Mecanique*. Composed in 1925, it is scored for eight pianos, six xylophones, two bass drums, sirens, mechanical alarm bells, ratchets, an airplane propeller, and solo pianola (at which the player pumps pedals controlling the volume and speed of the perforated rolls).

Antheil was searching for a new form of music, beyond sonatas and symphonies, beyond Stravinsky's pervasive influence. To inhabit this new form he created an outrageous pulsing sonic mass. It's easy to see why *Mecanique's* premiere at a Paris avant garde salon of 1926 caused such lasting controversy. In Antheil's own words: “ **A number of persons instantly fell over from the gigantic concussion! The remainder of our guests squirmed like live sardines in a can.**” The historic Carnegie Hall concert of 1927 (which this concert recreated) caused a scandal bordering on catastrophe for the composer, for *Ballet Mecanique* was merely the acme of his youthful experiments.

As a prophetic masterpiece, however, it stands up very well, the airplane propeller being the only gimmick. An unusual moment comes up in the third movement when a siren, a percussive pianola part, and chunks of silence dance about each other. In the lingering acoustics of Carnegie Hall, these rests were as musically fulfilling as they were courageously composed. The evening's music was faithfully reconstructed and directed by Maurice Peress, with every attention to detail.

Also on the program was the fabulous *Jazz Symphony*, composed in the same year as *Mecanique*. A wild and funny piece with abrupt changes in style, it negotiates its way among tasteful homages to Gershwin and Stravinsky, Ellingtonian smoothness, and Cecil Taylor-like cadenzas. The orchestra, a large jazz band with strings which [also] includes banjo, bassoon, and a second piano, ventures into full-blown parody at times. The performance well deserved its **five encores**, resulting in an instant replay of the last half.

It's worth trying to find a copy of George Antheil's autobiography *Bad Boy of Music*. He's an entertaining writer, too.

[PS- Among his other achievements, Antheil collaborated with actress Hedy Lamarr on conceptualizing and inventing radio controlled torpedos that were actually used to great effect in WWII.]

-David Simons