

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS V.

George Antheil

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FEW American composers have been more scathingly criticized and more enthusiastically ridiculed than George Antheil. Although only a fraction of his compositions has been heard in America, his name has gone from coast to coast. The Bad Boy of American music to some people, anathema to others, the mere mention of his name has provoked amusement. For one can probably say, without stepping on anyone's toes, that in the popular imagination his music has come to symbolize the very acme of demented modernism. The public, ever eager to prove that modern musicians are not right in the head, has eagerly devoured as tangible evidence what the press, on the look-out for good copy, has given them. To be sure, many of our composers have enjoyed notoriety for their subversive methods. But generally the tempests have soon blown over and been forgotten. Not so with Antheil. In spite of the failure of the concert of his music in Carnegie Hall in 1927, there is a persistent curiosity about his career and work. Meanwhile so much that is derogatory has been said about him that one almost feels there must be something in him, perhaps something really worthwhile: his music cannot be wholly bad or he would long since have passed into oblivion. So it seems that the time is ripe to make a dispassionate appraisal of the man.

He was born in 1900 in Trenton, New Jersey. Ill-favored artistically, it was as purely a political and industrial environment as one would be apt to find among our cities. He has not lived there since he was twenty-one, but it left an indelible impression on his mind. He was not tempered by the sophistications of our larger towns, not ripened under a western sun or made dreamy under a southern moon; no mountains caused him to contemplate the Deity, no chill wind in the north made him austere and pes-

simistic. It was the factories themselves among which he was born, the exquisite functioning of powerful machines, and all the sleek, ominous, piercing sounds that accompany them, which pounded on his brain and made him seek escape, to transform and interpret. His fellow-citizens, under similar stress, found similar outlet chiefly in the movies and jazz. And to this day it is in the interpretation of manifest industrialism and of the spirit of popular music that Antheil speaks most naturally and authentically.

He received his musical instruction principally from Constantine von Sternberg in Philadelphia. From the start he was passionately interested in modern music and even gave a series of lectures in Trenton with many illustrations. In 1921 he completed a first symphony, now called *Zingareska*. To judge from excerpts, it is a naïve but exuberant work and in the last movement one recognizes immediately a type of jazz which has subsequently become a definitely personal characteristic of his style. In 1922 Antheil went to Germany and *Zingareska* was performed by the Berlin Philharmonic under the direction of Schulz Dornberg. It is said Krenek, who was present on that occasion protested vehemently against the use of jazz in a symphonic work. . .

Upon impact with Europe, Antheil immediately began to try to evolve a working esthetic. Composition was no longer merely an uninhibited self-expression but a problem to grapple with. Theories of "abstraction" began to seize him and, almost by consequence, surrealism, which is so much the antithesis of abstraction—unless it be the abstraction of the unconscious. These were things to be decided. So, passing the winter in Berlin, he experimented in a series of works for piano: *Sonate Sauvage*, *Airplane*, *Death of Machines*, *Jazz Sonata*, *The Profane Waltzers* and *The Golden Bird (after Brancusi)*.

In the spring he moved to Paris. There the mad pursuit of theories took on even greater proportions. With dadaism on its last rachitic legs, surrealism in the ascendant and neo-classicism a *deus ex machina* about to be lowered onto the stage at any moment,—*Les Noces*, *Ulysses*, *Pacific 231*—, the city was teeming with an artistic heterogeneity, outdoing itself. Into it at this time, like Parsifal entering Klingsor's supernatural garden, strode

George Antheil. If his primarily creative mind was torn this way and that in the maelstrom of conflicting ideas, it is not to be wondered at. He ultimately evolved a theory of "abstract" music and "time-space," which he claimed was the canvas of music, and set to work with the determination of a zealot on a series of compositions which should exemplify the elements of his creed. Now one should neither minimize nor overstress the importance of a working esthetic in creative activity. Whether one's esthetic is made articulate or not matters little; but unfortunately when it is articulated, it very seldom holds water. Ezra Pound's book, *Antheil*, containing a most cryptic theory of harmony, with marginal emendations by Antheil himself, was published in Paris in 1924. This book has probably not enhanced the composer's reputation for though it might serve to make the jaded concert-goer realize anew what a curious phenomenon concert-going is, it revels chiefly in paradox and abounds in nonchalant inconsistencies. Nevertheless, its principle that music should be "as hard and indestructible as a stone" and the idea that rhythm and invariability of tempo were all-important—these were the theories that served as the spring-board for Antheil's compositions of that time. Of the three violin sonatas, 1922-23, the second, using drums (with the utilization of *In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree* and the ingeniously transmogrified *Hootchee-kootchee*) was played at the Carnegie Hall concert, where its effect was wholly swallowed up in the confusion that reigned on that occasion. The *First String Quartet*, 1925, also played there, seemed vastly to overreach the medium. The *Jazz Symphony*, likewise on the same program, is to my mind one of the most successful of all Antheil's works, with its unquestionably American flavor, its polished and resourceful use of the orchestra. Antheil employed a true jazz band, consisting of two clarinets, three saxophones, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, two upright pianos, a grand (solo) piano and a string quintet. Oddly enough this is one of the very rare instances in which a composer of so-called classical jazz has done his own scoring for such a group of instruments. In those two upright pianos, as well as in the violins cockily chirping in an insistent rhythm "below the bridge," and in the deliciously banal and expansive coda, one finds Antheil's

true musical personality, a certain dyed-in-the-wool Americanism. For although his jazz is less insinuating than Gershwin's, less rhythmically absorbing than Copland's, less polished than Carpenter's, it is more robust and closer to its origins. There are those who see in this aspect of his music only vulgarity and a bid for applause. Meanwhile we anxiously look for a genuine American music, a truly indigenous style. It would be strange if it suddenly appeared and, because it did not coincide with our preconceived ideas, we should fail to recognize it.

Antheil's motivating theories came to their fullest exemplification in the *Ballet Mécanique*, 1923-25. Upon this unholy work rests Antheil's widespread reputation in America as a publicity-seeking rogue, charlatan and insincerist. Such sport was had by critics when the *Ballet* was an item of current events that for a fresh point of view it might be well to look into it now as an established historical fact.

To begin with, let no one doubt the passionate sincerity of this work. It is perfectly clear, through knowing both him and those who knew him as he wrote it, that he did so as one who is called to reveal a new religion. "The music of the future would be like an incredibly beautiful machine." There must be no disrupting changes in time, no romantic contrasts for effect. In short it was to be the quintessence of industrialism, undiluted, uncompromising. No one had ever essayed such a thing to such a degree, and later attempts, for example Mossolow's *Steel Foundry*, have been but pale counterfeits compared to the work that Antheil now diligently fashioned. In order to achieve the most complete de-personalization, he wrote for player-pianos, five in number, and a group of percussion instruments and other devices of indefinite pitch. He scrupulously avoided the warmth of the usual wind, brass and stringed instruments—which is greatly to his credit, since such works as Mossolow's seem only to desecrate the conventional orchestra. The player-piano rolls, still listed in the Pleyela catalogue, were prepared, and Ferdinand Leger made a film to be shown in synchronization with the music. Experiments were made on top of one of the buildings in the Champs-Élysées and an integral performance finally took place in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1926. The story is everywhere told how

the audience's nervous resistance broke down when a small propeller-like device, calculated to serve as a pedal-point, caused discomfort in the front rows. Whether or not this precipitated it, a riot ensued. A group of surrealists protested violently against the Philistines and pandemonium reigned. Instead of the revelation of a new art that Antheil had sought to create, there was only notoriety; and he had for his pains only the allegiance of the few who knew and were in sympathy with what he had been striving to say.

The following year a young American impresario resolved to bring him to America. The methods of publicity that were pursued would lead one to believe that the management hoped to repeat the same stunt. Unfortunately for Antheil such shouting and advertising took place before the Carnegie Hall concert that an anticlimax was inevitable. Fresh from Paris, he innocently supposed that these were our customary high-pressure salesmanship methods. A typical musical-comedy backdrop depicting a jazz-boy was the last word in bad psychology, if it was hoped to enrapture the intelligentsia. A more tittering, curiosity-seeking audience has rarely been assembled. The chamber music on the program had no legitimate place there. The *Jazz Symphony* was impatiently tolerated in anxiety for the *Ballet Mécanique* to get under way. In a masochistic frame of mind people had come with the determination to suffer and disapprove and any postponement of the pleasure was irksome. When it finally came, it soon proved too strong for them. If the work seemed amorphous and monotonous we can perhaps only take the composer's word that it was an insufficiently rehearsed and ragged performance. The film unfortunately was not shown. For some obscure legal reason the player-piano rolls had been withheld; much of the mechanical quality was sacrificed in the substitution of pianists. The number of pianos was doubled upon pressure from the ambitious promoters and for the absurd reason of having the music carry well in such a large auditorium the composer was prevailed upon to add more percussion at the eleventh hour. Even under ideal circumstances this work is complex and difficult to perform, abounding in alternating measures of 2/2, 7/16, etc. Inadequately presented the result was cacophony. The public

improve his workmanship; and yet his directness, simplicity and total lack of artifice have their appeal. One wonders whether a certain rough-and-ready handling is not going to be a characteristic of our national style. Whitman seems more essentially an American writer than Poe. Dos Passos could learn much from Edith Wharton about certain literary qualities but his writings are undeniably more of the soil, more uniquely our own. Dos Passos and the Whitman of the "barbaric yawp" are closely akin to Antheil. He is no more a perfectionist than either of them. But, as with them, content dictates the style. Certainly a rough style dictated by real content is better than an impeccable style revealing no content at all. Like it or not, we will some day perhaps be brave enough to admit that this roughness is a family characteristic of ours. . . . As in Whitman, there is a good deal of spread-eagle-ism in *Transatlantic*; but Antheil, despite his living abroad, is fervently patriotic. Some may dub his manifestations of patriotism "boy scout," but others will cheer, because in this respect he contrasts so favorably with a lot of our more delicately-minded composers. And after all he is dealing with a presidential election!

Antheil wrote his own libretto. Though in no sense a literary achievement, it shows an uncanny knowledge of the theatre. The opening scene is particularly effective, the deck of a gigantic liner approaching New York. Helena and Hector, the presidential candidate, meet and declare their love against a recurring monotonous rhythm of blues. Another scene is laid in a nightclub, with *Fifteen Years on the Erie Canal* and the comment from Ajax: "Dass ist ein echt Americanisches Volkslied!"; the two sock-pianists in the pit; the long atonal sextet resolving into a jazz melody against chorus, simple to a degree but singularly compelling. In the political headquarters scene Antheil is in his element. Checking up the returns on the electric signboard; row upon row of stylized telegraph and telephone operators; the steel-blue light over all; campaign songs, *Tammany*, *Hot-time* etc., giving an effect of a multitude milling and seething beyond the limits of the room but all somehow touching it. . . . The candidate's reputation is besmirched and a murder ensues, with the pitch of excitement culminating in the gunshot that serves as the



GEORGE ANTHEIL

A new portrait by  
BORIS SMIRNOFF

shattering cadence to the second act. In Act Three, twenty-eight scenes, shown by means of four raised platforms and a movie-screen, depict the subsequent precipitous events. The scene in which the news of the murder is read in the papers by the mob, while re-enacted in *slow motion* on the platform where it took place, is a breath-taking stroke of theatre. Later, Hector, believing himself defeated, is shown at intervals in the process of throttling Helena, whom he suspects of duplicity. He is out of his mind. A banal election march, off stage and independent of the orchestra, runs through two scenes with telling effect. In another, Hector, sitting with back to the audience, dreams that years later outside a café he meets Helena walking the streets of Paris. Heavy-hearted, she scarcely recognizes him and is indifferent when he offers to aid her. This is portrayed on the movie-screen, the actors singing as if in a sound-picture. A small orchestra plays a tawdry ditty backstage and the whole scene, with its threadbare music, is poignant and affecting. . . Ultimately Hector's integrity carries the election and a stereopticon caption announces the "Happy Ending." Brooklyn Bridge at sunrise, with titanic skyscrapers slowly rearing up and taking form, like a movie of growing crystals, is the scene in which the lovers are reunited and acclaimed by the mob in a gradually mounting chorus.

It is a fusion of romantic opera and cinema technic. There is probably little hope that we shall ever hear it at the Metropolitan but one feels that if a German opera company ever undertook to bring it over, it would at least arouse a little more enthusiasm than the American operas we have had to date.

Since *Transatlantic*, Antheil has written a *Capriccio* for large orchestra, recently played in Berlin; a *Concertino* for flute, bassoon and piano; and an opera about Helen of Troy's latter days for which John Erskine has written the libretto. It will be interesting to see what this combination produces and what Antheil does with a libretto not written by himself.

It is impossible to pronounce a final verdict upon Antheil. He is young, boyish, a fundamentally simple person in spite of the cerebralism into which he has at time been drawn. It would be doing him an injustice to imply that he was now at the height of his powers, perfected and fully rounded-out. His scoring is

fluent, facile and instinctive, refreshingly devoid of preciousness, though in the tutti one feels at times a lack of middle orchestra. He is overfond of certain accompanimental devices; his choral writing is block-like, solid and often highly original, as for example in the second act of *Transatlantic*; but one feels that it could be improved in variety of timbre and particularly in sonority. By nature expansive and impulsive, he has been violently accused of an unseemly love of publicity especially by those who would give a good deal for more of it themselves. As it happens, a large part of the publicity accorded to him, passing undisputed, has been misleading and injurious. To be sure, like Händel, he has kept his finger on the pulse of the public, and one can only say that his lack of diffidence has at least secured him numerous performances of his works. He states insistently that he wants to be known first and foremost as an American composer. He is militant for a friendly spirit of cooperation towards an American School. Some people, loth to be caught in such a collaborative effort, declare that is all very well but he would want to be leading the procession. I may err, but if he fulfills his promise, if his achievement is proportionate to his determination—and unless the rest of us look out—it is just possible that he might be.

One would not hope by praising George Antheil to put him in the front rank of modern composers. But one would like by silencing false reports, based on ignorance of the facts, to see him given the respect and encouragement that his talents well deserve.

## LIST OF WORKS BY GEORGE ANTHEIL

DATE		PUBLISHER
1919	Five Short Songs—after Adelaide Crapsey	Manuscript
1919	Two Fugues for Piano	Manuscript
1919	Piano Suite—Pastoral, Minuet, Popular Song	Manuscript
1921	Zingareska. First Symphony (four movements)	Manuscript
1921	The Serpent—after Brancusi (piano, four hands)	Manuscript
1921	The Golden Bird—after Brancusi (piano)	Manuscript
1922	The Profane Waltzers (piano)	Manuscript
1922	Sonate Sauvage (piano)	Manuscript
1922	Airplane Sonata (piano)	New Music and This Quarter
1922	Death of Machines. Sonata (piano)	Transatlantic Review
1922	Jazz Sonata (piano)	Manuscript
1923	The Battle of the Amazons. Ballet	Manuscript
1923	First Violin and Piano Sonata (in four movements)	Printed by Composer
1923–25	Jazz Symphony (for jazz orchestra)	Manuscript
1923	Second Violin and Piano Sonata (one movement)	Manuscript
1924	Third Violin and Piano Sonata (one movement)	Manuscript
1924	First String Quartet (one movement)	Manuscript
1923–25	Ballet Mécanique	Manuscript
1925–26	Symphony in F	Universal Edition
1926	Piano Concerto	Universal Edition
1926	Small Suite for Orchestra	Manuscript
1927	Crucifixion—after Juan Miro (string orchestra)	Manuscript
1928	Second String Quartet	Manuscript
1928	Oedipus (incidental music)	Oesterheld Verlag
1929	Fighting the Waves. Ballet after Yeats	Manuscript
1929	Transatlantic. Opera in three acts	Universal Edition
1930	Capriccio (orchestra)	Universal Edition
1930–31	Helen Retires. Opera in three acts, Erskine	Manuscript
1930	Flight. One-act Opera-Ballet	Manuscript
1930	Concertino Trio for Piano, Flute and Bassoon	Manuscript