**George Antheil** (1900– 1959)

George Johann Carl Antheil was an American composer, pianist, author, and inventor. He is best-known for his 1924 composition, *Ballet Mechanique*, originally scored for sixteen player pianos, two grand pianos, an assortment of percussion, three airplane propellers, and a siren.

Antheil was born in Trenton, New Jersey. He began to study piano at age six and travelled first into Philadelphia and later into New York City for lessons. His time in these cities not only fostered Antheil’s musical development; it also introduced him to European art trends like Dadaism and to Alfred Steiglitz and Margaret Anderson, key members of the American avant-garde. In 1919, Antheil met Mary Curtis Bok, the woman who would be his benefactor for the next twenty years.

Antheil became increasingly interested in the work of Igor Stravinsky and *Les Six*, a group of experimental French musicians. In 1921, he wrote the first of his own experimental pieces and also began work on his first symphony. Determined to establish himself as a serious musician, he sailed for Europe in 1922. He landed in Berlin and began performing there as well as Vienna and Budapest. In Germany, Antheil met Stravinsky, who encouraged the young American to relocate to Paris.

Once in Paris, Antheil found himself at the cultural epicenter of the day. He lived in the apartment upstairs from Sylvia Beach’s celebrated bookstore Shakespeare and Company. Beach introduced him to Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, and James Joyce. Antheil and Pound began collaborating immediately. Antheil helped Pound articulate his musical theories and also assisted with his Villon opera. Pound saw Antheil as a musical Vorticist, and not only wrote *Antheil* *and the Treatise on Harmony* (1927) but also commissioned work and arranged for the composer’s 1925 Parisian debut.

*Ballet Mechanique* began as an experimental film collaboration with Ferdinand Leger, Dudley Murphy, and Man Ray. The association was rocky from the beginning, and ultimately, Antheil premiered his work alone in June 1926 to a riot and wide acclaim. Encouraged by this reception, Antheil arranged for a performance at Carnegie Hall the following April. It was a disaster. Audiences did not appreciate the wind machine aimed directly at the front rows. Worse, the final siren missed its cue, sounding only as the audience was leaving. Reviews were blistering, with one exception by William Carlos Williams for *Transition*.

Antheil returned to Paris chastened. He continued to compose, but his work turned conservatively towards neoclassicism. One motivation for the shift was Mrs. Bok, who had cut her support after the *Ballet Mechanique* debacle. But Antheil not only wanted to regain his financial footing, he also wanted to rebuild his shattered reputation. In 1928, after an elaborate conspiracy with Pound, Antheil convinced Bok he was no longer under the influence of the scandalous “Joyce crowd,” and she renewed her support (Templeton 77). He returned to Germany and in 1933 premiered his first opera. Titled *Transatlantic*, the work transported ancient Greek characters into Jazz Age New York and was well-received by both critics and audiences.

Changes in Germany’s political climate prompted Antheil’s return to the United States in 1933. He settled in New York but relocated to Los Angeles and reinvented himself as a successful film composer, scoring over 30 movies. In addition to his work in Hollywood, Antheil continued to compose instrumental music. A polymath, Antheil also wrote a detective novel, his own autobiography, a series of articles on endocrinology, and a regular movie music column. Finally, he collaborated with actress Hedy LaMarr in developing the famous technology that is the foundation for much wireless communication: Bluetooth, WiFi, and cellular networks.

**Major Works:**

*Ballet Mécanique* (1923–25, revised 1952–53)

*A Jazz Symphony* (1925, revised 1955)

Piano Concerto No. 1 (1922)

Violin Sonata No. 1 (1923)

Violin Sonata No. 2 (1923)

Violin Sonata No. 3 (1924)

*Transatlantic* (1930) opera

*Helen Retires* (1931) opera

*Dementia* (1955) film score

*In a Lonely Place* (1950) film score

*Knock on Any Door* (1949) film score

**References and Further Reading:**

Antheil, George. *Bad Boy of Music* (1945). New York: Doubleday, Duran and Company. Reprinted by Samuel French, 1990. Antheil’s colorful and entertaining autobiography. Readers should be aware that Antheil can be prone to exaggeration and hyperbole, and he’s unreliable with regard to specific times and dates.

Ford, Hugh. *Four Lives in Paris* (1987). San Francisco: North Point Press. Biogaphies of four American expatriates who lived in Paris in the 1920s and 30s. In addition to Antheil, the book features editor Margaret Anderson, writer Kay Boyle, and critic Harold Stearns.

Schafer, R. Murray. *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism* (1977). New York: New Directions. A composer himself, Schafer not only provides all of Pound’s writings on music in a single place but also provides helpful commentary.

Templeton, Erin E. “Dear EzzROAR,” “Dear Anthill”: Ezra Pound, George Antheil and the Complications of Patronage.” *Music and Literary Modernism—Critical Essays and Comparative Studies.* Edited by Robert McParland. New York: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006. 66-86. This article uncovers the way that Ezra Pound and George Antheil worked together in Paris in the 1920s to their mutual benefit: Antheil helped Pound learn musicianship while Pound promoted Antheil’s music.

Whitesitt, Linda. *The Life and Music of George Antheil, 1900-1959* (1983). University of Michigan Press. The definitive scholarly monograph on Antheil’s life and work with selections from Antheil’s personal correspondence, and a complete catalog of Antheil’s work.

Paratextual:

Photo of George Antheil: <http://www.otherminds.org/html/Antheilphotos.html> Rights reserved by the Antheil Estate, Charles Amirkhanian, Executor.

Audio: *Ballet Mechanique* [http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/25557#](http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/25557)

Audio: Valentine Waltz #2 <http://www.otherminds.org/mp3/Valentinewaltz.mp3> Rights reserved by the Antheil Estate, Charles Amirkhanian, Executor.

Quicktime trailers for both the film version of *Ballet Mechanique* and a performance of the piece at the National Gallery in Washington DC are available on [www.antheil.org](http://www.antheil.org), but I couldn’t figure out a way to link to them.