

"Counterparts," and "Clay." Several of these essays will become familiar references in later criticism; others, as I have suggested, will simply fall by the wayside.

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*FIGHTING THE WAVES: MUSIC OF GEORGE ANTHEIL*, Ensemble Modern, conducted by H. K. Gruber. BMG/RCA Red Seal 09026-68066-2. 1996, \$19.00.

As one listens to the recording of George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* on this CD, it is difficult to reconstruct what all the fuss was about. But when the piece had its première—at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1925, with Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Sylvia Beach, among others, in attendance—there was a riot. It is worth quoting Beach's account of the event at length, since, apart from being highly amusing, it provides a fascinating insight into just how passionate the audience's reaction to the performance was:

The audience was strangely affected by the *Ballet Mécanique*. The music was drowned out by the yells from all over the house. Objectors on the floor were answered by defenders above; Ezra's voice was heard above others', and someone said they saw him hanging head downward from the top gallery.

You saw people punching each other in the face, you heard the yelling, but you didn't hear a note of the *Ballet Mécanique*, which, judging by the motions of the performers, was going on all the time.

But these angry people suddenly subsided when the plane propellers called for in the score began whirring and raised a breeze that, Stuart Gilbert says, blew the wig off the head of a man sitting next to him and whisked it all the way to the back of the house. Men turned up their coat collars, the women drew their wraps around them; it was quite chilly.<sup>1</sup>

Though Beach's recreation of the *Ballet Mécanique* première reads more like a scene from the Marx Brothers film *A Night at the Opera* than a serious concert, Antheil's compositions in general—and the *Ballet Mécanique* in particular—were heralded for a time as the most representative examples of modernist ideas about music. *Fighting The Waves*, which includes *Ballet Mécanique* and eight other works composed between 1920 and 1933, provides an excellent overview of Antheil's oeuvre. In so doing, it helps contemporary listeners understand why he proclaimed himself the "bad boy of music."

Antheil was born in Trenton, New Jersey, but made his name in Europe, where he lived from 1922 to 1933. He was a friend of Joyce and even planned at one time to compose an opera based on the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses*. Though this work never materialized, he did eventually set one of the pieces in *Pomes Penyeach* to music for *The Joyce Book*.<sup>2</sup> Besides composing, Antheil's interests included endocrinology, criminal justice, and military history. He even held a patent, together with actress Hedy Lamarr, for what is today known as frequency hopping, or spread spectrum, technology. This technology, based on the paper rolls that operate a player piano, used radio signals that hop from one frequency to another to guide torpedoes without the enemy detecting them or jamming their transmissions.<sup>3</sup> In the mid-1930s, Antheil established himself as a film composer in Hollywood. He died in 1959.

*Ballet Mécanique*,<sup>4</sup> which Antheil composed while living in a flat above Beach's Shakespeare and Company bookshop, was originally scored for sixteen electronically synchronized player pianos and a bizarre ensemble of electronic bells, sirens, airplane propellers, gurgling engines, and various shards of steel and tin. Because of technical difficulties, this version of the piece was never performed during Antheil's lifetime.<sup>5</sup> The Ensemble Modern recording uses the far less ambitious instrumentation of four pianos (played by human beings) and percussion.

Antheil once said that his music was "composed out of and for machines," and his fascination with technology is nowhere more evident than in the driving staccato rhythms of the *Ballet Mécanique*.<sup>6</sup> One critic who attended the Paris première described the piece as "written to music that resembles machinery's strident noises. . . . It is just as if you were to listen to the notes of circular saws biting their way through steel mixed with the crash of a steel die plant."<sup>7</sup> Though the piece sounds tame by today's standards, it was revolutionary in its time for the way it incorporated actual machines and machine sounds into music. The "circular saws" are gone, and what remains resembles more the bustling sounds of busy city traffic—punctuated by the occasional clanging anvil—rather than the clatter and clash of a steel mill. The piece as a whole has a relentless mechanical energy that drives it forward. But despite the frenetic pace, it never becomes oppressive or overly discordant. In fact, *Ballet Mécanique* remains surprisingly jaunty and good-humored throughout, somewhat like the musical equivalent of a roller-coaster that frightens and amuses at the same time. But it hardly seems the kind of composition that would require Antheil to pack a pistol under his tuxedo to defend himself against irate audiences.<sup>8</sup>

The other pieces on the *Fighting the Waves* CD highlight Antheil's musical eclecticism, which included everything from the popular music of the time to jazz and classical influences. Compared to *Ballet Mécanique*, *A Jazz Symphony* and the *Jazz Sonata* are positively banal. Based on popular tunes and ragtime rhythms that are almost danceable, their staccato beats strongly evoke the *Ballet*. And like the *Ballet*, these pieces have a wonderful bounciness and sense of fun about them, like something from the musical *Oliver*. Other compositions, like *Fighting The Waves* (based on the text by W. B. Yeats<sup>9</sup>) and *Lithuanian Night*, are more florid and sentimental, exactly the qualities in music that Antheil rejected in pieces like *Ballet Mécanique*. These works find Antheil reverting to a kind of brooding and darkly melodic neo-romanticism that fits uneasily with his other work. In listening to the *Fighting The Waves* CD, it becomes clear that Antheil's music has aged considerably since the 1920s. But the work is nevertheless a fascinating portrait of a split musical personality: the bad boy of the *Ballet Mécanique* and the conventional composer of Hollywood film scores.

Reviewed by James Geary

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Beach, *Shakespeare and Company* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Hughes, ed., *The Joyce Book* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), pp. 55-57.

<sup>3</sup> According to Chris Beaumont's website (<http://www.ncafe.com/chris/pat2/>), the idea for spread spectrum technology was dreamed up between George Antheil and Hedy Lamarr at a dinner party during World War II. Similar technology is currently used in digital cellular telephony. Beaumont is Antheil's son. See also Alan Butler's "Brunette Sinks Battleship," *New Scientist* (19/26 December, 1998—2 January, 1999), 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> The *Ballet Mécanique* was originally written as a companion piece to a Surrealist film of the same name by Fernand Léger in 1924.

<sup>5</sup> Computer technology has now made it possible to perform Antheil's original score. The world première of the first (1923-1924) version of *Ballet Mécanique* was presented in the Concert Hall at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell on 18 November 1999.

<sup>6</sup> This quote is from an article by Paul D. Lehrman called "Blast From the Past" that originally appeared in *Wired* magazine in November, 1999, and can be found at <http://wired.lycos.com/wired/archive/7.11/ballet.html>. Lehrman drew the quote from an article Antheil wrote for the avant-garde publication *De Stijl*.

<sup>7</sup> The quotation is that of Koger Fuller, writing in *The Paris Tribune* (21 January, 1925), as quoted on Beaumont's website (<http://www.ncafe.com/chris/pat2/antheil-in-paris-trib.html>).

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Materer describes an incident at a concert in Budapest, recounted in Antheil's autobiography, *Bad Boy of Music* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1940), in which the composer placed his .32 caliber pistol on top of the Steinway piano to ensure the full attention and good behavior of his listeners—see Materer, *Vortex: Pound, Eliot, and Lewis* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 64-65.

<sup>9</sup> W. B. Yeats, "Fighting the Waves," *Wheels and Butterflies* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1935).