

“A joyful drunkenness of contradiction”

Born in 1900, in Trenton, New Jersey, George Antheil (pronounced “ANN-tile”) dropped out of high school at seventeen, studied music briefly with Ernst Bloch and Constantine von Sternberg, and then traded obscurity in the United States for overnight success in Europe. He was just twenty-two years old.

“Antheil had Paris by the ear,” said Aaron Copland, as George proceeded to scandalize European audiences. A concert pianist and vanguard composer, Antheil became known as the “Bad Boy of Music.” The ultimate American in Paris, Antheil was an avant-garde provocateur of the first order who made his name composing iconoclastic compositions: the loudest and brashest classical music of his time. But this album gives us three new performances, which reveal another, forgotten side of Antheil: the incurable romantic.

Antheil was famous for his aggressive style and mechanically inspired works: *Ballet mécanique*, *Airplane Sonata*, *Death of Machines*, and the visionary opera *Transatlantic*. Adopted instantly by Erik Satie, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and the moderns of Paris, his unruly career as a futurist pianist-composer was phenomenal.

Adrienne Monnier, one of the key commentators of the time, wrote: “George Antheil certainly has genius. I do not believe that he has arrived at the definitive formulation of his art. What he is presently giving us are rather his studies, his researches, which are very close to those of Picasso: without concession. . . . However, I have already been permitted to enjoy the absolutely new pathos of it, the uprooting rhythm, a joyful drunkenness of contradiction. . . .”

After a brief but spectacular European career, Antheil returned to the United States in 1933, where he eventually migrated to California, reinventing himself as a film composer during the golden age of Hollywood. Restless and prolific, he composed seven operas, six symphonies, three piano sonatas, and more than a hundred film scores in the next two decades. Among the B-movie scores and hackneyed crowd-pleasing themes, there are also gems, works of brilliance. During this period his symphonies were championed by Stokowski, and he became a household name (again) thanks to his fictionalized autobiography and his appealing film and television scores. When he died suddenly in 1959, the radio host Jean Shepard eulogized, “He made the whole world know about America.”

Antheil’s reputation as a serious composer suffered due to his restless creativity. Audiences and critics remembered him for other things: writing advice to the lovelorn for *Esquire* magazine, creating patents with actress Hedy Lamarr, infuriating huge crowds in Paris, faking his own death in the Sahara, seducing starlets in Hollywood, or composing film scores to please a generation of moviegoers. Antheil’s classical music remained unpublished and largely forgotten until recently. The three newly recorded works on this CD open a window into the disorderly joyfulness of his music.

Piano Concerto No. 2

Written in 1926–27, after the height of Antheil’s radical period, the concerto is an experiment in classical form. The work contains the same sudden juxtapositions and abrupt contrasts of mood as his futurist music. But the excesses of his recent *Ballet mécanique* (written for 16 player pianos!) are compensated for by an almost spare, baroque orchestration and motifs that draw on Bach as much as on Stravinsky. In three movements, Antheil employs a more restrained but still exuberant style. The beautifully meditative slow movement is followed by a virtuosic and compelling toccata. Each movement ends on an overtly Bachian cadence, most obvious in the sweetly naive coda of the final movement.

According to Antheil’s wildly inaccurate autobiography, the motivation for the concerto came after a bout of pneumonia in Paris: “One day Vladimir [Golschmann] came to sit by my bed. He said, “Why don’t you

write a piano concerto? . . . go away for six months, write the concerto, recover your health, and then practice so that we can top our last concert at the Champs Elysées?”

Antheil had already written an unperformed piano concerto (Berlin, 1922), and he was eager to start: “Here, at last, would be my *typical Parisian work*, the synthesized result of three and a half tumultuous art years in Paris!” Once installed in Chamonix for the “cure,” he began composing “something novel that would rock artistic Paris to its very foundations!” Antheil had decided, in his own words, to “super-classicize” neoclassicism.¹

From the restful fresh air and mountains of Chamonix, George and his fiancée Böski moved on to Salzburg, Vienna, and then to her native Budapest. George wrote in a letter to Sylvia Beach that two-thirds of the work was finished. He was especially pleased with the middle movement. “It is the best slow music I have written since the string quartet.” The first movement had swelled to at least five times its original size, and the third was “a brilliant and fast finale.” Initially each movement would have been ten minutes, but soon the concerto had been pruned down to a more reasonable eighteen minutes. Marked *Moderato*, *Largo*, and *Allegro*, the three movements are ordered along precise classical lines, though the first keeps breaking into nervy miniature piano cadenzas which would have given Antheil a chance to show off his virtuosity.

In January “I premiered the new concerto but only in a two-piano arrangement.”² The Hungarian press, accustomed to my swashbuckling music of some four years before, was vastly disappointed by this tame piece.”³

Antheil had always performed his own music. So it’s all the more surprising that the orchestral premiere of this concerto took place entirely without him. Not only did he not play the solo piano part, but he did not attend the rehearsals or the performance. In fact, the work was played only once, on March 12, 1927.⁴ Vladimir Golschmann conducted, and his brother Boris was the soloist. So where was Antheil? He was in New York, unwittingly co-organizing the worst fiasco of twentieth-century music: the utterly disastrous Carnegie Hall premiere of his *Ballet mécanique*. What had been a *succès de scandale* in Paris was an awesome flop in New York, and a financial disaster.

His tail between his legs, Antheil returned to Paris in May: “I now began to lose not only the remainder of the friends formerly made by the *Ballet mécanique* and the piano sonatas, but the new friends of last year’s symphony. Paris—as is the way with Paris—now had me down for what the piano concerto seemed to indicate. I had become a mere imitator . . . of Stravinsky. I can’t honestly record that they were entirely wrong. . . .”⁵ Antheil ruefully reminisced, “the incident of its composition proves—at least to me—that under proper conditions I can be the greatest idiot on earth.” Disappointed and angry, Ezra Pound wrote to him of the difficult artistic moment when one “is no longer the white hope of boy prodigism and not yet the *homme fait*.”

¹ Hugh Ford’s description in his book, *Four Lives in Paris*, gives invaluable insight into Antheil’s experiences in the Paris of the Lost Generation.

² Antheil composed the original two-piano version (with the orchestral version already in mind) while in Chamonix, played it in Budapest, and then orchestrated it after the Budapest concert. Occasional markings in his sketchbooks [Princeton, Sylvia Beach Collection] show his intentions: “clar” “tutti” “split strings,” and his obvious comfort with the piano as both a voice in itself and as a tool for interpreting other instruments.

³ “On the evening of the concert Béla Bartók seated himself directly in front of me on the concert stage itself . . . this upset me very much; I have always had a tremendous respect for this Hungarian and was afraid of making a mistake.”

⁴ Carelessly, or intentionally, Antheil labeled this (four years after the 1922 piano concerto, a brasher, youthful work) as “Piano Concerto Number One.” It is dedicated to his new wife, Böski Marcus.

⁵ *Bad Boy of Music*, page 198.

Indeed George was anything but: he was a twenty-six-year-old kid from Trenton, and was not really writing in his own idiom. He had created a severe handicap for himself.

What is perplexing about the concerto is what it represented in terms of Antheil's evolution. On the one hand, he was in New York premiering a work which was years ahead of its time, and would not be properly performed until the next century; on the other hand, he had written a new piece in a new style, which he had neither played nor heard, and which marked a reactionary change in his compositional direction. The fact that he was in New York during the sole performance of his lifetime means that (except for playing the two-piano version) Antheil never heard this concerto performed.⁶

The Paris audience, accustomed to the chaos of Antheil's previous compositions, was disappointed by the neoclassicism of the concerto, and Virgil Thomson, usually a staunch supporter, wrote a lukewarm review. Antheil's reputation had hit rock-bottom by early 1927.

Dreams

Six years later, Antheil had moved to New York City, to start his career anew. The Great Depression, changing politics in Europe, the failure of his mechanical style and his neoclassical style, had all left him searching for new possibilities. He began work in new mediums: film and ballet, as well as an opera, *Helen Retires*.

In 1934–35, Antheil was working for Ben Hecht and Charlie MacArthur as music director of their film studio in Astoria, Queens, which provided him with valuable new experience in orchestration. And he was composing a dance score for Martha Graham (*Dance in Four Parts*) based on his piano collection, *La Femme 100 Têtes*.

Antheil recalled later that since “Balanchine was looking for an American ballet *sufficiently Parisian!* I regret to say that he found exactly the combination of Americanness [sic] and Parisianness he wished in me. He had attended the premiere of *Helen Retires*, liked it (he was probably the only one), and on the strength of that commissioned me to write him a ballet. I did. It was called *Dreams* and had a décor by Derain, explained by Balanchine in gorgeous Balanchinesque choreography.”⁷

While they did share a recent Parisian history, Balanchine had already met Antheil in New York, through an introduction by the Russian dancer Lisa Parnova.⁸ Antheil came to Balanchine's studio and played through his ‘Rumba’ (probably from *Archipelago*, his orchestral work-in-progress).

What Antheil doesn't mention is that *Dreams* had a prior existence, in Paris. It was called *Les Songes*, and Darius Milhaud wrote the music in 1933. The plot was based on a surrealist poem by the painter André Derain. And Balanchine choreographed the production for his company *Les Ballets 1933*.

The following year in New York, Balanchine acquired Derain's sets and costumes, discarded Milhaud's version of the ballet, and asked Antheil to write a new score, which initially may have been also called *Les Songes* or perhaps *Cirque de Paris*.⁹ The premiere was on March 5, 1935, in New York City, with the

⁶ The concerto was not performed again in Europe until the 1970s, and received its U.S. premiere on October 7, 2005, under the direction of Daniel Spalding, with myself at the piano, at the Miller Theater, Columbia University.

⁷ Antheil's autobiography is even more inaccurate than usual on this subject. So I am especially indebted to Lynn Garafola, a dance historian and professor at Barnard College, for her extensive research on the Antheil-Balanchine collaboration in her collection of essays, *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance*.

⁸ “George Antheil and the Dance,” essay by Lynn Garafola.

⁹ In Antheil's hand on the manuscript. Milhaud, meanwhile, recycled his score in England for two different ballets:

American Ballet and the American Ballet Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sandor Harmati.¹⁰ Derain's plot centers around the dreams and nightmares of a ballerina. In a posed period photo, eight beautiful dancers—in tight-fitting polka-dotted bodices and flounced long skirts—reach upward, holding stylized masks above their heads. They wear ecstatically joyful expressions.

For this recording, Daniel Spalding used the same orchestral parts and comments, “The score is in Antheil's own hand—complete with lots of hard-to-read cuts. All the cuts were observed (some of them were pretty long) except one. There is a bracket over two measures near the end of the *King's March* where he writes ‘cut there, Bal asks for cut.’ Musically, it just didn't make any sense for me to leave out those measures so I couldn't bring myself to do it. Plus, the other cuts are forthrightly crossed out while this one isn't—maybe Antheil won this battle, I don't know.”

Antheil plays sarcastically with contradictions: waltz versus march; folk song versus orchestral romanticism. This is marvelous ballet music, and the unexpected structural and melodic changes keep us on the edge of our seat, amused and entertained.

The score alternates between the inspiring and the insipid: after a banal *Introduction*, the *Andante* offers a novel waltz in 2/4 time.¹¹ The *Polka* moves with Antheil's trademark enthusiasm, rhythmic drive, and percussive sense. *Rat* is a tone-poem, a musical painting. To prepare for *Acrobat*, the pianist places a piece of paper softly over the strings before playing—the effect is Antheil's so-called “harem theme.” Combined with flute and oboe solos in the high registers, it creates a haunting image. *The King's March* is rousing Slavic music, with lots of chromaticism over a securely C-major bass-drum. And, astonishingly, development of the theme, including a reference to the 2/4 waltz. *Can-Can*, (co-orchestrated by the young composer Henry Brant) has much in common with the open orchestration and brief riffs of the piano concerto. The *Valse's* chromatic modulations return to a predominant and clear tonality. Meanwhile, a strongly indicated metric pulse and lush orchestration place this movement squarely in the Russian school of ballet writing. The end fades out in a manner that promises more, but. . . . Antheil does an about-face and the *Finale & Epilogue* recaps earlier material in a waltz, with careful doses of bombast, and an intensely difficult piano cadenza. A creepy bit of piano tremolos bring back the “harem” and *Can-Can* themes.

The lack of a formal structure does not hamper Antheil; he seemed to thrive on it, both in this piece, and in many others he wrote. Despite the cut-and-paste exoticism and the predictable thematic material, this music sounds appealingly American—folksy, populist, and engaging. Antheil's brilliant orchestration makes these works shine.¹²

Antheil recalled with pleasure that writing the ballet “took a considerable while, and in order to get it just right, I had to come to [Balanchine's] classes very often.” Antheil was living a bohemian life with his wife and another artist in an apartment near Carnegie Hall, and remembered those as good times despite

Coullisse d'un cirque and *La leçon apprise*.

¹⁰ The original program, March 5 and 6, 1935, consisted of three ballets choreographed by Balanchine: *Dreams*, *Alma Mater* (music by Kay Swift), and *Transcendence* (music by Franz Liszt, arranged by Antheil). This recording uses the score from the ballet production, except that some of the movements have changed titles relative to the published program of 1935, then listed as: The Ballerina; The Polka; The Acrobat; The March; The Can-Can; The Lady and the Prince; The Finale; The Epilogue. The orchestration is: 1(pic).121/2210/perc/pf/str.

¹¹ These waltzes hark back to an unpublished work from 1919, the *Valses Profanes* for solo piano. This remarkably sophisticated *détournement* of the traditional waltz is a clever product of the teenage composer's ingenuity.

¹² Postlude: A few years later, to Antheil's delight, he unexpectedly ran into one of the dancers in Texas, the “prince” from *Dreams*, who had moved out West to run his own ranch. “It is a picture I shall retain,” recalled Antheil, on seeing his morning warm-up under the hot sun: “a tough cowboy in spurs, but stretching out like Pavlova tripping up to the footlights.”

the Great Depression: “Balanchine would occasionally join us, usually arriving at two or three in the morning—rather late afternoon for us.”

Unfortunately, Antheil and Balanchine did not complete any more projects together, nor was *Dreams* ever revived. But the work lived on in several forms: *La Vie Parisienne*, a collection of solo piano pieces which Antheil composed in 1939, incorporates similar themes and styles. And the *Can-Can* also exists in a solo piano arrangement of Antheil’s: *Can-Can from the Ballet Dreams* [G. Schirmer, publ.].

Serenade No. 2

In 1949 Antheil was living in Hollywood, and had become an established movie composer. Despite, or because of, his Hollywood association, his symphonies were performed and broadcast across the United States, and he claimed to be the third-most-performed American composer of the time.

Not much is known about the genesis of the *Serenade No. 2*, but it was probably commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber Symphony in 1949, perhaps after they heard the *Serenade No. 1*. As the work neared completion, he wrote, the *Serenade* “. . . is as important, for me, as a new symphony; indeed, it can be played by a major symphony orchestra.”¹³ It’s a beautifully orchestrated, lush work. The premiere took place in 1950, conducted by Harold Byrns.

Both serenades are in three movements—the first is for strings alone while the second adds a wind section and a percussionist. Some of the themes from the first serenade recur in the second serenade. Says Spalding, “He develops his ideas further, and he quotes himself with a little ‘cowboy theme;’ it’s got a lilt to it, and sounds like the prairie—very American.”

Moderately Fast. Antheil immediately gets our attention. It’s darker, more raw, a post-war sound. The long line that runs through the first movement is unexpected from this composer of disconnected futurist collages and on-demand film cues. Antheil is not giving us his Picasso sketches; he’s caught up in the process of composing a fluent, sustained piece.

Slow. The second movement has a bit more rhythm at the start, replying to the strings of the previous movement with flute solos and a drum beat hidden below. The mood is dark and foreboding. The piano goes off on a tangent, while the tension builds, then fades away.

Quite Fast. Jaunty and joyous, this movement has lots of piano, dual tonalities and extensive percussion. Antheil seems to relish (always) writing passages of great virtuosity. Antheil ends, as always, on a high note.

George Antheil embodied every paradox of the American artist: businessman and musician, writer and celebrity, womanizer and inventor, visionary and reactionary. And he will continue to surprise us with the breadth of his music. No un-played, unpublished composer can be properly understood, and this disc represents a valuable step toward understanding Antheil’s contradictions—joyful and drunken as they are.

— Guy Livingston

Guy Livingston has written extensively about George Antheil and the Lost Generation. His articles have appeared in Paris Transatlantic Magazine, The Paris New Music Review, New Music Box, and the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik.

¹³ At least, that’s the claim Antheil made to (famous patroness) Mrs. Sprague Coolidge, to whom he dedicated *the Serenade No. 1*. (Whitesitt, p. 237)

The **Philadelphia Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra**, comprised of some of the region's foremost musicians, was founded in 1991 by its current music director, Daniel Spalding. The orchestra performs a concert series in Center City, Philadelphia, as well as in unusual venues throughout the region which are designed to reach new audiences. Their vast repertoire encompasses music from the Baroque to Modern eras, and programs often include new discoveries of lesser-known works, world premieres, and arrangements written especially for the orchestra, as well as standard repertoire, occasionally performed with creative visual effects such as special lighting or stage movement. Since 1996, the Philadelphia Virtuosi has been in constant demand outside its home city and is often on the road. The orchestra has performed at New York's Lincoln Center, Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, and Columbia University's Miller Theater, the Bermuda Festival, and on three extensive tours to South America, and in virtually every region of the United States. The orchestra is also known for its series of recordings on the Connoisseur Society label and on Naxos.

Daniel Spalding is a graduate of Northwestern University. He studied conducting with Mircea Cristescu in Bucharest and with Max Rudolf, and attended several international courses including those with Ferdinand Leitner in Salzburg and Luciano Berio in New York. His European debut with the Romanian State Philharmonic in Cluj in 1985 was followed by his appointment as principal guest conductor, and he was subsequently appointed by Sergiu Comissiona to be his assistant with the Houston Symphony. Daniel Spalding is an active guest conductor throughout Europe and the United States, and since 1991 has devoted himself to developing the Philadelphia Virtuosi into a highly respected world-class ensemble, leading the orchestra on numerous national and international tours and making several well received recordings.

Guy Livingston leads a varied career as a pianist and producer on both sides of the Atlantic. Based in Paris, Mr. Livingston has given recitals at the Louvre, Châtelet, and the Centre Pompidou. His performances have also taken him to Holland, Russia, Italy, Poland, Germany, and South Africa. In the United States, Mr. Livingston has performed in New York at Lincoln Center, the Knitting Factory, Cooper Union, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and Columbia University.

Guy Livingston is one of the foremost performers and promoters of Antheil's music today. He organized the Paris Antheil Centennial Concert, and was Artistic Director for the 2003 George Antheil Festival in Trenton, New Jersey. Livingston has been the focus of three television documentaries on Antheil, as well as appearing in *Bad Boy Made Good*, a film released by the Electronic Music Foundation.

Livingston holds degrees from Yale University, the New England Conservatory of Music, and the Royal Conservatory of the Netherlands. Prizes and awards include the Huntington Beebe Scholarship, the Gaudeamus Competition, the Harriet Hale Woolley Scholarship, and finalist at the Orléans Twentieth Century Piano Competition and the Sitges-Barcelona Concorso de Piano Segolo XX.

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Cello: Daniel Pereira, Miguel Rojas, David Gotay

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Oboe: Geoffrey Deemer

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Complete String Quartets. Del Sol String Quartet. Other Minds 1008.
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Jazz Symphony. Michael Rische, piano; Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, Wayne Marshall conducting. Arte Nova CD 510510.
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Antheil Collections

The Estate of George Antheil (memorabilia, photographs)
Butler Library of Rare Books at Columbia University (correspondence)

Library of Congress, Music Division
Lilly Library of Indiana University (letters from Ezra Pound)
The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (manuscripts, scores, and archives)
Stanford University Music Library (correspondence)
Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library

Websites

antheil.org
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3. Polka	1:04

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