

## George Antheil (1900-59) *Ballet mécanique* (1923-24)

Writing for De Stijl magazine in 1925, George Antheil boldly asserted, “My *Ballet mécanique* is the new FOURTH DIMENSION of music...My *Ballet mécanique* is the first piece of music that has been composed OUT OF and FOR machines, ON EARTH...My *Ballet mécanique* has a closer connection to life than any of the tonal music that preceded it...The *Ballet mécanique* is the first piece in the world to be conceived in one piece without interruption, like a solid shaft of steel...”

And so on. Twenty years later a somewhat mellower Antheil was able to reflect on *Ballet mécanique* as “a mad, youthful prank” which was, nevertheless, “completely sincere”. In explaining his choice of title for a work never intended for choreographic treatment, Antheil offered further insights into his artistic intentions: “The words ‘*Ballet mécanique*’ were brutal, contemporary, hard-boiled, symbolic of the spiritual exhaustion, the superathletic, non-sentimental period commencing ‘The Long Armistice’...My idea was to warn the age in which I was living of the simultaneous beauty and danger of its own unconscious mechanistic philosophy, aesthetic.”

According to Rex Lawson, the pianist who has done more than anyone to revive Antheil’s original concept, “The machines which Antheil was seeking to glorify in his music were from the 1920s, the sort of machines that enslaved humanity in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, not silent and super-efficient robots which play without human intervention.” Lawson further believes that Antheil originally envisaged a work for four pianos and percussion, with no *mécanique* component at all, and confided his plan to Stravinsky during a visit to Germany in 1922. Ironically, Stravinsky ended up using Antheil’s suggested scoring (plus voices) for his next ballet, *Les noces*, an artistic appropriation that Antheil appears to have taken on the chin. He attended the 1923 premiere of *Les noces* in Paris and expressed genuine admiration for it. But what happened the next day really blew him away. Stravinsky invited Antheil to Pleyel’s piano warehouse and replayed the entire score for him on an electric pianola. “I liked the second version even better than the one we had heard last night”, Antheil recalled. “It was more precise, colder, harder, more typical of that which I myself wanted out of music during this period of my life.” Stravinsky had serendipitously shown Antheil the path he knew he must now take, which was to create a large work which somehow rose above human imperfection and placed the machine centre stage. And if Stravinsky’s pounding, repeated chords found their way into Antheil’s work, it was perhaps just compensation for the Russian having taken the American’s scoring. In the end, it was as if Stravinsky and Antheil found their way to a similar destination from completely opposite directions: Stravinsky from the ancient Russian past, and Antheil from a gleaming, imagined future.

*Ballet mécanique* went through many revisions between its first sketches and its premiere. Having decided to use mechanical pianos Antheil launched into an extravagant scheme involving sixteen pianolas, but experiments revealed that it was impossible to keep so many mechanical instruments in time with each other. He was persuaded to add ‘live’ pianos to the mix, and that is how its first audience heard it, along with percussion and airplane propellers. The *Ballet’s* premiere in June 1926 elicited yet another riot at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, with some comically minded audience members opening their umbrellas in order to shield themselves from the physical and sonic cyclone. A Carnegie Hall performance the following year used only two pianolas and eight grand pianos. *Ballet mécanique* was proving difficult to mount, and its novelty value was wearing thin. Finally, in 1952, Antheil salvaged his unwieldy score for performance by recasting it for the more practical ensemble of four pianos and percussion, sadly relegating the mechanical element to the title only. The advent of MIDI technology and the tireless advocacy of Rex Lawson have made it possible to restore *Ballet mécanique* to a state that approaches Antheil’s youthful, crazy, mechanical dream.

-Philip Lambert, ANAM