

**opera review: *Transatlantic***  
**Libretto and Music by George Antheil**  
**Directed by Christian Marten-Molnár**  
**Sets and Costumes by Nikolaus Porz**  
**Conducted by Gerard Oskamp**  
**Produced by the Schleswig-Holstein**  
**Landestheater**  
**Opening Night: May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002**  
**reviewed by Guy LIVINGSTON**

**Now playing in Flensburg:** Futurist Opera... Where? Flensburg?! I fished out the map and discovered it was on the German border with Denmark...it would take seven trains and twelve hours of travel each way. Undeterred, I bought the tickets and set off through four countries to the Flensburg Landestheater.

What was so important that I had to see and hear? The opera *Transatlantic* (no relation to our magazine), completed in 1930 by a very young and reckless genius named George Antheil. In 1928, Antheil, already notorious in France and Germany, began writing a new stage work called *Glare* which was to become the innovative and prescient *Transatlantic*, a hot-potato of an opera about corruption in the U.S. presidency, now even more brilliantly topical than ever. Pre-dating Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing*, Antheil's opera mixes a love story between Hector and Helen with a sleazy and surreal blend of presidential scandal and oil-company racketeering. The premiere was at the Frankfurt State Opera in 1930.



With some apprehension I considered the theme as I sat in the darkened Flensburg theater waiting for the opera to begin. Would this be a corny re-hash of the Clinton scandal or of the Enron affair? Or would they have transposed the action to Constantinople to remove it from sensitive modern ears? Instead, the Landestheater's premise was universality: this type of corruption can happen anywhere (of course it does, just without the singing) from Tennessee to Schleswig-Holstein. To bring home their point (Antheil himself belabored the American-ness extensively), they included a video especially shot for the occasion, projected toward the middle of Act I to the sound of cash-registers, telephones, and typewriters. The footage, in deliberately grainy, security-camera style, shows the real-life local mayor of Flensburg hanging out with the stars of the opera, all of them 'participating' in the bribery scandal. For each of the three towns in which the opera will be performed, the Landestheater team went out and filmed the local mayor in his best ceremonial robes, cheerfully committing perjury, bribery, etc., and then drinking champagne to celebrate. (Except that it's not real champagne, that being forbidden in German government offices).

Although the opera certainly makes reference to other composers—namely the stage works of Kurt Weill and Ernst Krenek, the songs of Gershwin, and a passing nod to Puccini's *Turandot*—*Transatlantic* takes no prisoners and is daringly original from start to finish. That Antheil, who had supposedly converted to neo-classicism in his 2<sup>nd</sup> piano concerto (1926), could have written such a brilliantly creative and forward-looking opera three years later, is astonishing. The music is sensual, danceable, funny, and often deliberately melodramatic. Sappy-ness is calculated, silliness is liberally offered, and at the end, surrealism takes over. Director Christian Marten-Molnár says it was easy to choreograph the complex slapstick of the show's wilder moments: 'the music showed us exactly what to do.'

The opera opens with a jazzy overture that only hints at the delirium to follow. A scrim of New York City and the Brooklyn Bridge rises to reveal a spare no-frills white set with Hector and Helen singing on the deck of the *Transatlantic* ocean liner as it pulls into New York harbor. So far, it all seems pretty simple. But within the next five minutes,

Antheil begins to pull one trick after another out of his hat, until by the end of an overwhelming second act, the decor, action, and costumes have become surreal and the plot has spiralled out of all control into something revolutionary. The set revolves between scenes to offer a steeply raked green ballroom, complete with trapdoors in the walls and floor, into which the soloists are constantly appearing and disappearing, as if in the card game of "Go" or "Memory," starring the Marx Brothers.

With her magnificent voice and demurely sexy demeanor, Helen (Cornelia Ptassek) is the beauty around whom the action revolves. Gavin Taylor, as Hector, makes an engagingly confused presidential candidate. Their love interests, and the duets this engenders, are some of the most emotionally moving moments of the evening. Ajax, the oil magnate, is sinister in an ominous role. Leo (Diver Higuita) is a brilliantly funny as the mafia scum, stealing a scene simply by slowly wiping his greasy hair back. Helmut Tromm plays Jason, regal in a top hat and grey tails. Gladys (what happened to the classical names?) is Leo's vampy girlfriend, played with gifted energy by Antje Bitterlich. The wildly unpredictable music is conducted by Gerard Oskamp, who demonstrates a rare energy and commitment to this very difficult score. Funky tempi and plenty of notational mistakes in the score did not make his job an enviable one. And for the singers, Antheil demands a very wide range.

The chorus, twelve cowboys and twelve cowgirls (clad in pink satin dresses and pink cowboy hats like a nightmare version of *Oklahoma*) keep popping out of doors and windows in the set, to comment on the action. A Greek chorus it ain't! They vote, protest, dance, play at Coney Island sideshows, take bribes, seduce the president, and somehow manage to sing very well in their spare time.

The Flensburg production is so good that all Antheil's defects as a composer (he wrote too fast, lost interest on projects before he finished them, demanded too much of his performers, never hired copyists) disappear before the sheer intensity of the music and the brilliant staging. The set, much less diffused than the original, and ingeniously complicated, revolves every few minutes to change aspect entirely, and plays along with the comic genius that sarcastically illuminates

the work. Antheil's all-too-deserved reputation as a derivative composer (much of his music was 'borrowed' from Stravinsky) is nowhere evident here. As in *Ballet Mecanique*, the work is startlingly original. Occasionally the music drags, particularly in the interludes between scenes, which may have been intended to cover scene changes(?) and during the unintentionally comic suicide attempt by Helen, who is about to jump from the Brooklyn Bridge. But otherwise the score is one of Antheil's astounding masterworks.

Most bizarre of all, and highlighting Antheil's visionary conception of opera, is the Guardian Angel (more like an Angel of Death), played by Lutz Wiggers. In a completely surprising plot twist, the Angel appears for the first time near the end of the opera, hoisting himself up onto the back of the stage wearing pale blue wings, a black jacket, mod sunglasses, and no shirt, looking for all the world like a combination of Mack the Knife, the Phantom of the Opera, and a particularly hung-over raver. Commenting on the action, telling the characters what to do, confiscating guns and doling out bad advice, this doppelgänger transforms the story as if Borges had suddenly pulled one of his famous literary punches, almost but not quite admitting that the characters were puppets in wonderland, and the real story was happening elsewhere.



It's rare for a composer to write his own libretto. And Antheil was such a bad letter writer that surely his friends would not have encouraged him. Nor would his endless and bragging manifestos have suggested any skill. But fiction was his forte, and his pseudonymous mystery novel (*Death in the Dark*) and his autobiography (*Bad Boy of Music*, also mostly fiction) attest to his skill with anecdote, suspense, and surprise. So does the libretto for *Transatlantic*. Full of sarcasm and a kind of Alice in Wonderland disregard for scale, coherence, and linearity, this libretto breaks new ground, and shows why Antheil felt so at home with Parisian friends Satie, Cocteau, and Joyce.



Originally written in English, and under the working title of *Glare*, after a few months of feverish composition by Antheil, the libretto was hastily copied and prepared for performance, and temporarily named *The People's Choice*. The modern music impresario Hans W. Heinsheimer recalled: "We had it poorly translated into German by a Viennese obstetrician who doubled as a musical writer, published the vocal score...renamed the work *Transatlantic* and persuaded the opera house in Frankfurt to perform it on May 25, 1930, a few months after the riotous premiere of Weill's *Mahagonny*. George had brought a trainload of American friends and their fellow travellers from Paris. Their boisterous presence and outlandish dress irritated the Frankfurt burghers and added to the general negative reaction to the piece. It never had a second production and disappeared from the Frankfurt repertory." (*Opera News*, 1980.)

Nor was the local reaction the only criticism Antheil received...when his patron Mary Louise Curtis Bok heard to what use he was putting her funds, she sent him a tersely worded letter (now in the Library of Congress)

encouraging him to loftier goals and criticizing his use of popular musical idioms and his ridicule of the American presidency. (Bok was particularly offended by Gladys, who telephones the president naked from her bathtub in the original staging).

As the director of the Flensburg production also points out (see our exclusive interview below), political theatre of all kinds disappeared under the Nazi regime, and thus Antheil's seminal opera was lost and forgotten until the 1980s. The U.S. premiere was in Trenton, New Jersey, by Encompass Music Theatre, directed by Nancy Rhodes, in October, 1981. The Minnesota Opera subsequently produced a large-scale version of the opera in 1998, directed by David Albee. This latter production was supposed to be picked up by the New York City Opera, but despite rave reviews (including *The New York Times*), the City Opera appears to have dropped their plans. The Encompass Theater also performed a concert-version of the opera recently in Connecticut. The Trenton Capital Arts Festival is currently discussing plans to produce one or more Antheil operas in May of 2004. In Germany, the only other country in which it has been performed, *Transatlantic* was played for the first time since its 1930 premiere at the Bielefeld Opera House in 1987, where it was timed to coincide with a major election. The impressive Landestheater version is the second production since then and is playing in the north of Germany in five more performances: this is a must-see production for anyone interested in 1920s opera. Flensburg is accessible by train, and though it takes a while to get there, it's a beautiful seaside town, and worth the trip.

**More information on Antheil:**

[www.GeorgeAntheil.com](http://www.GeorgeAntheil.com)

[www.Antheil.org](http://www.Antheil.org)

[www.operaworld.com/special/transatlantic.shtml](http://www.operaworld.com/special/transatlantic.shtml)

[www.sh-landestheater.de](http://www.sh-landestheater.de)

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Photographs are courtesy of the Landestheater.

For ticket information, contact the Schleswig-Holsteinische Landestheater: +49.461-23-388  
Additional dates: May 23 and 30; June 2 and 5.

## director interview:

Interview with Christian Marten-Molnár, *ChefDramaturg* of the Landestheater, and director of a new and innovative production of *Transatlantic*, a political-jazz opera by George Antheil.

Antheil on his opera *Transatlantic*:

"The whole thing shows the horrible whirlwind of 1927 in America; a 'Happy End' is practically pasted on the opera to make it even more ironic. I wanted to have rose petals falling all over the stage at the end. (It was) a satire and the first modern political opera."

**Guy Livingston: Antheil had some radical ideas. What's exciting about this opera musically?**

Christian Marten-Molnár: It's a wonderful opera...it's an opera of music *and* of theatre. By working on it we found so many things which were the intention of the composer, but not necessarily notated or written down at the time.

The collage aspect is very interesting both for the conductor and the director. Which is why I like George Antheil's operatic construction technique: he composed as if for a movie. Start with a big love scene, full of emotions. Then cut...to circus music! In his composing one type of theatrical art is followed in immediate succession, one second later, by another theatrical art—and there is no bridge between them.

**This production has dozens of trapdoors, dancing, a revolving stage, and 22 cowboys in pink hats! How did you invent the incredibly complicated staging and slapstick routines?**

The music showed us the way to the acting. Indeed it was not difficult for the singers to each find their character, and it helps that the characters are rather stereotypical. Antheil's work with danceable music (rhumbas, ragtime, latin rhythms, marches, waltzes, fox trots) is funny, and the movements of the actors, comic or not, build from the dance qualities of the score. Plus, the character of the three agitators is immediately obvious as purely slapstick comedy. When I first heard their music I pictured them immediately.



**Antheil was notoriously rushed, and often left out accidentals, clefs, and even worse...what type of problems did you run into with *Transatlantic*?**

I would say there are two problems with the opera. A real problem is that the voices change register so often. To a certain extent Antheil helps the singers

out in the lower parts by asking the orchestra to play very quietly. And changes in tempo were necessary to find the opera's consistency. The orchestra must follow our conductor constantly, every second.

Our conductor made it work wonderfully well, but this is the biggest problem for the orchestra. However these are really the only two problems.

**Was it difficult to handle the frantic timing and avoid chaos?**

As far as our interpretation, we merged a lot of scenes...The opera has its own motoric sense. Once you get in sync with this feeling you really *like* the music. If it's slower, you have problems. But no, it's not too frantic at this speed. We did make one cut, of about two minutes. Five people were singing at once, and we couldn't find enough structure in that passage, so we made a brief cut.

And we removed the movie from the end of Act 3 and replaced it with our own, in the first act. For that we needed music which Antheil had not composed. So we used piano music from the third act and sounds of typewriters, telephones, etc. for the video. This movie is our own invention. We filmed local mayors involved in the "bribery" scheme. This gives the whole political angle a local relevance as well.

In the original scenario, the two-minute film shows Hector and Helen coming together five years later in Paris—in my opinion not good for the opera. This is an idea from the twenties and he was experimenting with his love of movies. In our show we put this in live. This ends the original opera.

**Why was such an unusual opera forgotten, and what's the relevance to today?**

After January 1933, this kind of theatre was forbidden in Germany. People no longer came in contact with this art for the next twelve years, which were deadly for this type of music. And after the war, people had other interests...they wanted optimism.

Look at Clinton and Bush and Kohl. Many things resonate with the politics of today. Audiences like this kind of theatre now. In Giessen, when I directed *Machinist Hopkins*, people liked it. Everyone now loves the 1920s. This kind of political thinking is now necessary for *our* time.

We must do this step-by-step so that people like modern music. This is a first step for bringing people and modern composers together... the grounds of understanding, you could say.