

# Bad Boy Made Good

*The George-Antheil-Festival in Trenton, New Jersey*

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**A recent festival honoring George Antheil in Trenton New Jersey, organized by pianist Guy Livingston and composer Frank Brickle, offered a colorful and diverse mixture of scientific and intellectual lectures, films, concerts, and a dance party, which the multit talented Antheil would definitely have enjoyed.**

The Bad Boy of Music, as Antheil described himself in his autobiography was of German-American heritage. In the 1920s he, like so many American artists, chose to spend time in Europe where in his mid twenties he developed a career as a modern concert pianist and composer. With a tendency towards sensationalism in performance and a strong desire to be popular, Antheil also tried to present himself as a serious composer—and truly, he fought with this issue his whole life—who not only pursued the newest directions, but also helped to construct the roots of new music. After a long time during which he was somewhat dismissed in American music, in the 1990s there has been a re-awakened interest in Antheil compositions and in documenting and observing his music. The Antheil festival in Trenton can be seen as a continuation of this Antheil renaissance.

The documentary film, *Bad Boy Made Good*, by Paul Lehrman, offered an introduction to what amounts to a rather tragic life story. He described the genesis of a composition that after an emerging popularity in Europe as an ultramodern composer, by his return to America, had turned to romanticism. He fought between the ultramodern composition and this new, less, aggressive, modern style on his return to the US. In the second half of his life, partly for financial reasons, he moved to Hollywood, where he struggled with a difficult work-rhythm of film scoring and serious music compositions until he died in 1958 of a heart attack. Antheil's life was presented

through family photos and personal life stories by Antheil's nephew, Arthur Antheil McTighe, bringing us closer to the real George Antheil.



*The Baudelaire String Quartet*

Trenton, the location of the festival, is the birthplace of the composer. Once a lively industrial center, which inspired Antheil's rhythmic mechanical musics, today it is a depressed city; It's therefore all the more astounding to see that the city's musical heritage could re-emerge in this context.

The lectures took place in a grand hall in an old industrial building with large windows that looked out on the city. The public was alert and interested. They

included young people, students from NY, Baltimore and the area, but also a 75-year old retiree, who had been educated as a pianist at Juilliard in composition, and was interested in his hometown of Trenton, and walked from the other end of the city to participate in this historical pilgrimage.

Among the honored guests of the festival were the composer and musicologist Charles Amirkhanian, who brought wide-ranging knowledge, as a promoter of Antheil's, with new facts and questions for discussion. As the leader of the discussion, «Ballet Frénétique, the multiple lives of George Antheil,» he balanced the different orientations of the participants which resulted in a colorful picture of Antheil, split between two cultures, talented, and with tremendous unstoppable energy for projects that took him in multiple musical directions.



*Frank Brickle*

Another special guest was Mauro Piccinini, who had come from Trieste and crossed two continents, traveling across America and Europe, to assemble a varied collection of letters and materials. Piccinini presented a lecture about the interesting collaboration between James Joyce and Antheil, which he illustrated with many period letters. Piccinini also presented Antheil's sketches of the incomplete opera *Cyclops*.

The theme of American and European cultural intermixing was frequently raised during the lectures and discussions, and was clarified in the talk by Mary E. Davis, in which Antheil's style was interpreted as a mixture of French art-music and American popular idioms. Lynn Garafola, a NY dance historian, demonstrated that until now, few have paid attention to the connection between George Balanchine and Antheil, a collaboration which led to a series of ballets and incomplete works

The focal point of the program was the presentation of the experimental *Ballet mécanique* of 1925 composed as a soundtrack to the Fernand Léger film of the same title. The original version of this work, for diverse percussion, sirens, bells, airplane propellers, and pianolas, anticipated the musical future, but was not performable in Antheil's lifetime. This led to several successive re-orchestrations of the work. Similar difficulties appeared in the synchronization of the film and music, so that, in the end, the two acquired separate identities.

The festival presented the *Ballet mécanique* in various unique perspectives. Paul Lehrman, a computer music and midi specialist who with the help of new computer technology premiered the version for 16 pianolas, lectured on this extensive project. His documentation of efforts to synchronize the film and music created a highpoint of the Antheil festival. The merging of music and film demonstrated a fascinating montage in the complex tempo of turbulent camerawork and fast-paced accompaniment of hammers, repetitions whose contemporary video clips had the feeling of MTV. With a sense of modernity the works busied themselves with ideas of silence, a musical curtain, and a time-space continuum, which were to be further developed years later by Cage, Feldman, and the minimalists.



Dr. Piccinini and Maestro Peress

The conductor Maurice Peress, who had directed *Ballet mécanique* in Carnegie Hall in 1989, read from the manuscript of his book, *Dvorak to Ellington*, due to be published by Oxford University Press this autumn. And conductor Daniel Spalding, who recorded a highly successful CD in 1999 of the other version of *Ballet mécanique* (1953), was interested among other things in the contrast between the different versions of the work, whereby Antheil eliminated the long segments of silence and ecstatic repetition.



Alan Mallach and Carlton J. Wilkinson

The composer Carlton J. Wilkinson oriented his lecture "Antheil's Machine : Modernism in the Piano Works," towards a structural analysis of the early airplane sonata from 1922 in which he articulated the connection to later minimalist works. His musical examples were illustrated by Alan Mallach on the piano.

The singer Marni Rice and Guy Livingston performed French songs and Kurt Weill, and then magically brought Antheil's song « Just one Moment Annabelle! » to life along with the solo piano works of Antheil, in a successful cabaret evening in the style of 1920s Paris.

Livingston offered energetic presentations on the closing night of the Sonata Sauvage and the Fifth piano Sonata, and worked out the rhythmic nuances that differentiated the pieces and the mechanical repetitions, all emphasized with a powerful sound.



Tony Rothman

Other lectures during the festival were by physicist Tony Rothman, discussing George Antheil and Hedy Lamarr's invention of a system for directing torpedoes; and a round-table discussion, «The challenges of Antheil's music,» which among others challenges looked at the opera *Transatlantic* (1928).

In all it was a successful festival, articulating the issues and distinguishing Antheil and his music in a new way; offering a new means to both broaden and to focus our understanding of Antheil.

(translated from the German by Neale McGoldrick)