

SCRIPT (excerpt)

BAD BOY OF MUSIC : RISE AND FALL OF A COMPOSER

Commissioned by Radio National (Australian Broadcasting Corporation)

Produced, written, and directed by Guy Livingston

Executive Producers : Cathy Peters & Gretchen Miller

Writing Consultant : Aletta Becker

Engineering and Musical Consultant : Erik Hense

Recorded at WOTH Studios, in The Netherlands

Historical Consultant : Mauro Piccinini

Broadcast date: February 25, 2015

Synopsis:

George Antheil was born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1900. Despite little training and no conservatory experience, he became one of the most revolutionary composers of the Lost Generation in Paris. Complete with airplane propellers and 16 mechanical pianos, his *Ballet mécanique* provoked riots and scandals in France, though the American premiere a year later in Carnegie Hall was a fiasco. Antheil moved to Hollywood in the 1930's, and started a new life as a composer for the movies. A creative genius, he also invented a secret communications system which is the foundation of modern spread-spectrum technology. His co-inventor was actress Hedy Lamar. His neo-romantic symphonies were popular across America, but Antheil never regained the musical fame of his early years. He died suddenly of a heart-attack in New York, at age 59.

SCENE 1 Ballet mécanique

CUE MUSIC Ballet mécanique

EFFECTS: Scattered applause and catcalls over music.

CROWD [yelling]: Au secours ! Stop the music! Stop this madman! Bravo!
Faster! Silence! Arrêtez ! Non !

ERIK SATIE ACTOR: Quel précision!

EZRA POUND ACTOR: “You are all swine! Give him a chance!”

EFFECTS: French audience rioting, police sirens

FRENCH VOICES: Police! Gendarmes!!

VOICEOVER: This is *Ballet Mécanique*, one of the most radical compositions of the 20th century. The score calls for sixteen player pianos, three xylophones, four bass drums, tam-tam, two grand pianos, seven bells, a fire siren, and, get this – three airplane propellers. At its premiere in 1926, it caused a riot in Paris at the *Theatre du Champs Elysées*. The composer was a boyish youngster fresh from New Jersey. His name was George Antheil.

GEORGE ANTHEIL [historical audio]: We played it in Paris and had a great success there, from the point of view of riots and discussions. The critiques of the concert appeared on the front pages of the Parisian newspapers instead of the back pages. Mostly because there were riots and people punched one another. My friends the surrealists came in and punched everyone. So you can understand there would be some rioting (and) the police came in.

VOICEOVER: That was George Antheil, talking about his Ballet mécanique premiere in 1926. Actually, it was a sign of success in those days to have a riot at your concerts – it showed you were a composer of genius. Vladimir Golschmann, the famous conductor, tried to get the audience to shut up:

VLADIMIR GOLDSCHMANN [historical audio]: The house was overcrowded, over sold-out, and everyone who was interested in new music was there. Some people start shouting during the performance and some people were shouting « shut up, we want to listen to the music » that you know you couldn't hear one note of what I was playing. Nobody want to listen, they want to fight, so I said, "Silence please; I will play the work a second time, and then after you can fight if you want" ...So the *Ballet mécanique* created a sensation.

VOICEOVER: Here's radio host Gene Shepard, a friend of Antheil's:

GENE SHEPARD [historical audio]: And back in the early 1920s, he was an enfant terrible. You know? He was one of the people who made the whole world know about America. Yes, George Antheil. From Trenton! Yes, Ezra Pound, all of 'em, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, the whole crowd. They thought he was the greatest writer who ever lived, who ever wrote music. He was a wild little man. And when this thing was first done in Paris, the Ballet you're listening to now, people got up and rioted. Cheered and screamed, and threw things; hollered. And George Antheil still laughed!

VOICEOVER: In the 1970's, conductor Reinbert de Leeuw revived Ballet mécanique:

REINBERT DE LEEUW: People were like this you know, WAAAKAKA WAAAAAKAKA, and you got this, you felt this shock in the audience, you know....VERA BETHS: very physical... REINBERT: very physical, and of course we loved that.

...Suddenly you are so close to the early twenties in Paris, and Gertrude Stein and especially with James Joyce and all these Americans living in Paris, and this incredible excitement about things — and of course all these stories when he was giving concerts there and huge scandals.

VOICEOVER: In case you're wondering what the heck this music is, it's *Ballet mécanique*.

I'm Guy Livingston, and this show is called: George Antheil, Rise and Fall of a Composer. I'm a concert pianist and I've performed Ballet mécanique many times, in different versions – with orchestra, with electronics, and even as a solo.

So why is it such a thrill?

It's classical music like rock music. The physical challenges are so intense, the adrenaline is pumping, the wall of sound is massive, everything is carried to extremes. This unbelievable cacophony glorifies a mechanical utopia from which we emerge breathless, sweaty, and exhilarated.

We spoke with composer and lecturer Paul Doornbusch:

PAUL DOORNBUSCH: It seems that Antheil was courting fame in a way similar to modern celebrities – however Antheil had plenty of talent in reserve...

Through his relationship with Ezra Pound in Paris, Antheil learned to manipulate the press, and unfortunately to me, took this route to success for some time.

To me, Antheil seems to be something of a flawed genius. He had talent to burn, but perhaps not the philosophical background to focus it.

VOICEOVER Antheil has been called every name in the book: he was a plagiarist, a thief, a scoundrel, a womanizer, a Don Juan; publicity hound, liar, arriviste, bad boy, cacophonist, noisemaker, *enfant terrible*, has-been, sellout; a menace, a dreamer, a hollywood hack, and a four-flusher. OK, sure, but George Antheil was also an inventor, a writer, a novelist, and a composer of genius.

I discovered his music in the early 90s, after reading his hilarious and wildly inaccurate autobiography entitled Bad Boy of Music. Inspired, I found myself a

few years later, hard at work in the basement of the New York Public Library, sifting through his manuscripts. Over the years I would learn all of his piano music, and record the complete sonatas on CD.

Antheil was fascinated by machines, and by technology – he dreamed of a whole new world of musical possibilities, where mechanical instruments would overcome all human limitations. He even foresaw the advent of the DJ. For *Ballet mécanique*, he imagined 16 synchronized pianos onstage, controlled by one person, from an electronic console. But the technology of the time couldn't fulfill his vision. Synchronized player pianos just didn't work.

Antheil expert Paul Lehrman describes his influences:

PAUL LEHRMAN: so that idea of using multiple player pianos almost certainly came out of his conversations with Stravinsky. Once Antheil got to Paris, he also was familiar with people like Milhaud and Satie, who were using mechanical noises of various kinds, and bizarre percussion noises of various kinds – Satie with his typewriters, Milhaud with his South American percussion, and I imagine that Antheil was also aware of the Italian futurists like Luigi Russolo and their *intonarumori*, their noisemaking machines.

VOICEOVER: *Ballet mécanique* is cubist and recklessly anti-classical. For example the ending is the beginning played backwards and twice as fast. Some themes are repeated hundreds of times, decades before anyone else thought of minimalism. On the last pages of the orchestral score, there are remarkable silences which foreshadow John Cage. Electric bells ring, and a fire siren yells out to whomever's left in the audience:

Modernism has arrived!

Antheil is in the house!

VOICEOVER: Poet Adrienne Monnier 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, as far as he can in a domain that is often arid. However, I have already been permitted to enjoy the absolutely new pathos of it, the uprooting rhythm, a joyful drunkenness of contradiction, a private discovery such as children sing to themselves-- it drives out demons and fixes gods without asking them for their opinion.”¹

ANTHEIL: I was rather audacious. I developed at that time; 1923 or 24 in Paris a new theory of music called time-space, which is the idea that music evolves in time....up until this time I felt that music had been a product—the architecture had been a product of tonality- but never took account of *time* in which music exists.

MUSIC: *Ballet mécanique* ends with a flourish.

ABRUPT SILENCE.

¹ Les Gazettes d'Adrienne Monnier, translated by Richard McDougall, as *The Very Rich Hours of Adrienne Monnier*, Charles Scribner's Sons, NY, 1976

“Rise and Fall of a Composer” was directed and presented by Guy Livingston. This is the script for scene 1. The full show is 53 minutes long and includes the following scenes:

SCENE 1 BALLET MECANIQUE

SCENE 2 FLASHBACK TRENTON YOUTH

SCENE 3 BAD BOY IN BERLIN

SCENE 4 PARIS LOST GENERATION

SCENE 5 CARNEGIE HALL FIASCO

SCENE 6 BACK HOME

SCENE 7 THE MYSTERY OF HENRY

SCENE 8 A SECRET PATENT

SCENE 9 HOLLYWOOD WITH STARLETS

SCENE 10 SYMPHONIST

SCENE 11 EPILOGUE: FALL OF A COMPOSER

SCENE 12 CLOSING CREDITS

go to <http://GuyLivingston.com/radio> for more information.