

CRI SD 502  
George Antheil

George Antheil: *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1933) (40:11)  
David Albee, piano

Notes by Charles Amirkhanian

On September 20, 1933, at the Second Yaddo Festival of Contemporary Music in Saratoga Springs, New York, composer **George Antheil** gave the world premiere of his *La Femme 100 Têtes* preludes. He had composed the music in the southern French coastal town of Cagnes-sur-Mer near Nice on the Riviera, in the Winter of 1932–33. He had lived there with his Hungarian wife, Böske, since June of 1932 on a Guggenheim Fellowship which thankfully had rescued him from the brink of financial collapse and had returned the couple to their commonly-adopted country after a brief interlude in the U.S.

This unusual set of visionary etudes, inspired by *La Femme 100 Têtes*, a book of collaged etchings assembled by the surrealist painter Max Ernst from their original sources in volumes of nineteenth-century picture storybooks, and each given subtitles with hauntingly suggestive overtones, typifies Antheil's music during what the composer himself referred to as his earlier "mechanistic" period (1922–25).

In a letter written September 7, 1933, from the composer's hometown in New Jersey to Mr. Henry Allen Moe, the longtime custodian of the Guggenheim program, Antheil refers to these preludes as "short, terse and steely"—representing "the subconscious and strange feelings of my childhood in Trenton." (Shades of Jack Duluoaz, the young protagonist in *Dr. Sax*, Jack Kerouac's novel of intense autobiographical reminiscence, centered on his adolescence in industrial Lowell, Massachusetts.)

By the Fall of 1933, with Hitler's rise to power, and the end of an era of American expatriate artists living the good bohemian life abroad in France, Antheil had returned to the U.S. for good. The composition of *La Femme* marks the end of a decade of experimentation and initiation for young Antheil and the beginning of a period of reassessment.

George Antheil was the first United States composer to enjoy a substantial European reputation. In the mid-twenties, he burst on the Paris scene with his flamboyant and aggressive piano works and for a few years between 1923 and 1928 was widely regarded as the most radical active living composer.

His story is preserved in his 1945 autobiography *Bad Boy of Music*, reissued in 1981 by Da Capo Press. It is the most provocative and engaging composer's autobiography yet written and certainly the most entertaining.

Born on July 8, 1900, to Polish immigrant parents, Antheil started his professional life as a concert pianist, although he had composed music since childhood. His early studies with Constantine von Sternberg (a pupil of Liszt) in Philadelphia and the composer Ernest Bloch in New York City reinforced his modernistic tendencies and instincts.

In 1922, Antheil was accepted as a protégé by the concert manager Martin Hanson, who gave the young performer a European tour, after which Antheil decided to stay abroad. From that time, he lived in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and other European cities, emerging as a serious composer whose violent and percussive piano pieces (*Sonata Sauvage*, *Jazz Sonata*, *Death of the Machines*,

*Airplane Sonata*) were envied by the young Aaron Copland. “When I first went to Paris I was jealous of Antheil’s piano playing—it was so brilliant; he could demonstrate so well what he wanted to do.”

According to Copland, “George had Paris by the ear.” In 1923 his first Paris concert, delivered as a curtain raiser for a performance of the Ballet Suedois, caused a general riot, due to the almost absurd obsessiveness of his use of repetition. Antheil, influenced by the Russian ostinatos in the music of Stravinsky, had carried the idea to lengths which would later be exceeded only by the repetitive music composers of the sixties—Riley, Reich, and Glass.

Antheil’s years in Paris, 1923 through 1927, were tumultuously exciting. As the toast of the literary and artistic world there—not the musical one, which was dominated by the airy, charming, and anti-dramatic music of Les Six—Antheil had hobnobbed with the likes of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, Ford Madox Ford, Ernest Hemingway, Fernand Léger, Sylvia Beach, and countless others who held Antheil in extremely high regard.

The tremendous impact in 1924, 1925, and 1926 of the clangorous *Ballet Mécanique* by Antheil, scored for three xylophones, eight grand pianos, one pianola, two electric doorbells, two wooden and one metal airplane propellers, tam-tam, four bass drums, and siren, climaxed a sensational ascendancy for the composer. When played properly—at full speed and imitating a giant mechanical orchestration gone mad—the work is smashing. And yet, even to this day, it rarely is played well in the U.S. One secret to its early European success in the days of limited virtuosity among percussionists: the xylophone parts—fiendishly difficult at the specified tempi—were performed by keyboard-operated instruments in Paris. None such were available when the work was performed in Carnegie Hall April 10, 1927. And the overbearing pre-concert publicity, handled by an overeager literary agent rather than a concert promoter, prejudiced the sold-out hall in advance, creating an artistic setback for Antheil which haunted him for years afterwards; in fact when Antheil wrote *La Femme*, he found himself quoting generously from the thematic material of the *Ballet Mécanique*.

Upon his return to France in the early thirties, Antheil stopped by his old Paris haunts, including the bookshops of Adrienne Monnier (*Les Amies des Livres*) where the experimental French writers were carried, and Sylvia Beach (Shakespeare and Company) where the English language modernists were to be found. Very likely it was at Ms. Monnier’s establishment that he purchased copy number 657 of 1000 of the first edition of Max Ernst’s *La Femme 100 Têtes*, published in 1929 by Editions du Carrefour with an introduction by no less than André Breton. George’s copy of the first edition is carefully inscribed in the hand of the composer, “George Antheil—not to be borrowed.”

Antheil always had been intensely interested in modernist painting. Having first encountered it via his friendship with Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, publishers of the *Little Review* who lived in New Jersey and befriended Antheil in his pre-Europe days, the composer particularly had admired the work of de Chirico, the Cubists, the artists of *de Stijl*, and later the Surrealists, including Ernst himself, whom Antheil and Böske had known in Paris.

And Antheil had attributed his own unconventional use of modular repetitive units in *Ballet Mécanique* to the influence of Cubist painting, in which prismatic distortion is the norm. “I portrayed a foot so large that the rest of the body must be imagined as extending beyond and out of the picture.”

In fact, many of the aesthetic currents in the experimental arts which Antheil encountered in his Paris days—the absurd miniature Dada theatre and sound poetry pieces—the similar works by

the Futurists—the episodic and often austere simplicity of the piano music of his friend Erik Satie—no doubt validated for Antheil the kind of brutal and hard-edged quality of certain preludes in the *La Femme* collection.

The boldness of the music, with its epigrammatic references to everything pianistic, from parodies of Hanon *Études* to echoes of the pianola of the *Ballet Mécanique*, lends the work a freshness which is startling even by today's standards half a century later.

Antheil noted in several items of correspondence that he intended to do 100 preludes for the Ernst book, the title of which translates roughly *The Hundred Headless Woman*, “100” in French being homonymous for “without” (*cent; sans*). In fact, there are neither 100 collages in the book, nor 100 preludes in the complete set by Antheil.

Ernst's book presents 146 collages in nine groups (chapters) with thematic imagery in each of the nine. But at best, the narrative thread is healthily disjunct, and the reader is lead further into Ernst's “liberated world where everything is possible” (Dorothea Tanning in the introduction to the American edition).

In the existing Antheil piano score, there are forty-four preludes, each with a Roman numeral, and a concluding “Percussion Dance.” Antheil notes in his correspondence with Mr. Moe that he played forty of the preludes—excerpts from the (promised) group of 100—at Yaddo. It is possible that a few others were added to round out the series to forty-five at a later date, but since the holograph apparently is lost—only a copyist's version is extant—it is difficult to determine just what is the precise history of the score. On the numerical front, perhaps the last laugh is Antheil's. His collection is complete *sans cent*! Antheil does note in *Bad Boy of Music* that the *La Femme* music was choreographed by Martha Graham for her [1934 ballet] *Dance in Four Parts*, a solo premiered at the Guild Theatre November 11, 1934.

As far as is known, the second concert performance of the entire score of *La Femme*, and perhaps the first of all forty-five pieces in the group, took place on November 20, 1970, when they were played by Julian White, during an all-Antheil concert sponsored by KPFA Radio at Hertz Hall on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. A subjective selection of plates from the Ernst book were projected by artist Carol Law on that occasion during the performance.

In 1976 at the Holland Festival, during which a great number of Antheil works were revived under the direction of composer-pianist-conductor Reinbert de Leeuw (some documented on Philips 6514.254 available in the U.S.), the Argentinean pianist Jorge Zulueta, a specialist in Antheil's music, and his Grupe de Acción from Buenos Aires, presented a theatrical version of *La Femme 100 Têtes* in which the characters of Max Ernst, Böske Antheil, and George Antheil were dramatized beneath projections of Ernst's collages. A stream-of-consciousness compilation of Antheil's music from this and other 1920s pieces such as the *Airplane Sonata*, formed the musical basis of that presentation. The only other known performances of the piano version have been done in several concerts since 1977 by David Albee.

Antheil's large opera, *Helen Retires*, his second, was premiered unsuccessfully at The Juilliard School in New York (28 February 1934). The impact of the Depression, on top of his recent relocation from Europe and the response to Helen, left Antheil searching for new directions.

When Ben Hecht and Charlie MacArthur hired Antheil to do the music for their motion picture *Once in a Blue Moon* (1935), Antheil was launched on a series of new careers. Moving to Hollywood in 1936, he pieced together an income by writing occasional movie scores, writing

articles for *Esquire*, maintaining a syndicated lovelorn column, acting as a radio and newspaper war analyst, and patenting a torpedo in collaboration with actress Hedy Lamarr.

Antheil's music after 1940 took a turn toward classical forms, incorporating his own individual mixture of bittersweet lyricism, satirical paraphrases of military marches, American folk tune quotations, and rambunctious boogie-woogie rhythms, often tempered with the metallic dissonance of his early music. Antheil's avant-garde status was preempted by the dodecaphonists after World War II, but his faith in his neo-Romantic style was reinforced by the successes of his spiritual allies Britten, Shostakovich, and Prokofiev.

Between 1939 and 1951 Antheil composed eight symphonic overtures on American themes. His large symphonic works were performed by most of the country's major orchestras. Symphony No. 4 was introduced by Stokowski and the NBC Symphony (1944). Symphony No. 5 was premiered by Ormandy and the Philadelphia (1948), and No. 6 by Monteux and San Francisco (1949). Antheil's ballet, *Capital of the World*, after a story by his old friend Hemingway, was introduced on the CBS television program *Omnibus* (1953).

Throughout the fifties, Antheil worked tirelessly to establish himself as an opera composer. His setting of Ben Johnson's *Volpone* (1953) contains magnificent, virtuosic vocal writing in a lively and appealing evening-length work. Other operas premiered subsequently were *The Brothers* (1954), *The Wish* (1955)—both to his own libretti—and *Venus in Africa* (Michael Dyne, 1957).

In 1958, Antheil returned to New York City to compose music for the weekly CBS-TV documentary series *The Twentieth Century*, hosted by Walter Cronkite. He died of heart failure there on February 12, 1959.

December 25, 1983  
Belton, Texas

For further definitive information on Antheil's music, which has not appeared on this label since CRI 103 was issued in 1955, the reader may refer to the following:

Albee, David. *George Antheil's La Femme 100 Têtes—A Critical Study of the Preludes*, University Microfilms, 1977, Ann Arbor.

Antheil, George. *Bad Boy of Music* (new introduction by Charles Amirkhanian with photographs from the Antheil Estate collection), reissued by Da Capo Press, 1981, New York. (Pages 255-286 describe Cagnes-sur-Mer.)

Ernst, Max. *The Headless Woman* (introduction by André Breton, translated into English by Dorothea Tanning), reissued by George Braziller, 1981, New York.

Pound, Ezra. *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (new introduction by Ned Rorem), reissued by Da Capo Press, 1968, New York.

Whitesitt, Linda. *The Life and Music of George Antheil*, UMI Reprints, 1983, Ann Arbor.

The score of *La Femme 100 Têtes* (edited by David Albee) is published by Antheil Press (ASCAP), 7722 Lynn Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530.

*Composer Charles Amirkhanian has been music director of Pacifica Listener-Sponsored KPFA-FM in Berkeley since 1969.*

**David Albee** has been hailed for his "tremendous talent, a firm and vigorous technique, and a sure musical taste." His appearances as an orchestra soloist and recitalist have taken him to major music centers throughout the United States. He has two other recordings and several articles to

his credit and has conducted extensive research in American piano music, including the works of George Antheil. He is associate professor of piano at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, and pianist of the Baylor Trio.

This record was funded by a grant from Baylor University.

*La Femme 100 Têtes*—Antheil Press, El Cerrito, Calif. (ASCAP)

Recorded by Paul Concilio in Waco, August 1983.

Recorded on a Bösendorfer Imperial Grand, courtesy of Kimball International, Jasper, Indiana.

For CRI:

Producer: Carter Harman

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*(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*