

From Stravinsky to Paul Whiteman The Historical Context of Antheil's *A Jazz Symphony*

by Mauro Piccinini

Among the musical manuscripts held at the Paul Sacher Foundation are three scores by the U.S.-born composer George Antheil (1900–1959). These recent acquisitions (2003) are representative of his early compositional period: *Sonata Sauvage* (Berlin, 1923), the second String Quartet (Paris, 1927), and *A Jazz Symphony*. They are also representative of the variety of musical languages he was using during this early phase of his career: from the Stravinskian-Bartókian savagery matched with futuristic machinery-like aesthetics in the *Sonata Sauvage*, through the neoclassicism of the quartet, to *A Jazz Symphony*, a sort of European vision of American jazz.

As far as we know, *A Jazz Symphony* was composed between October 6 and November 2, 1925,¹ and slightly revised for the 1927 première at Carnegie Hall, New York. Later on, in 1955, Antheil revised the piece again, reducing its instrumentation and adding a section taken from his earlier *Jazz Sonata* for piano (Berlin, 1923).² Further studies suggest, however, that this fascinating piece was originally conceived as a jazzy piano concerto sketched out in Berlin in 1923, when Antheil dreamed of a possible concert tour with Stravinsky.

Stravinsky and Antheil met in Berlin in late October 1922. At that time, Stravinsky was waiting for his mother to cross the border of troubled Russia and disembark in Stettin. Due to bureaucratic delays, he was forced to stay in nearby Berlin, where he was approached by the young, good-looking American musician, who idolized him as the greatest composer of his time.³ What is little known and studied are Stravinsky's earlier attempts to attract American friends to his music (and wallet). Before Stokowski, Damrosch, and some influential American expatriates, Stravinsky had no U.S. acquaintances to count on, and did not know much about America.⁴ His main problem during that period was to find a way to obtain the royalties for his previous works and to offer publishers his new ones. Another source of income could have been playing or conducting his own compositions, an idea which he wanted to apply also to a tour in America, for which he had been making contacts with U.S. impresarios since 1921. When Antheil introduced himself to the skeptical older colleague, he struck

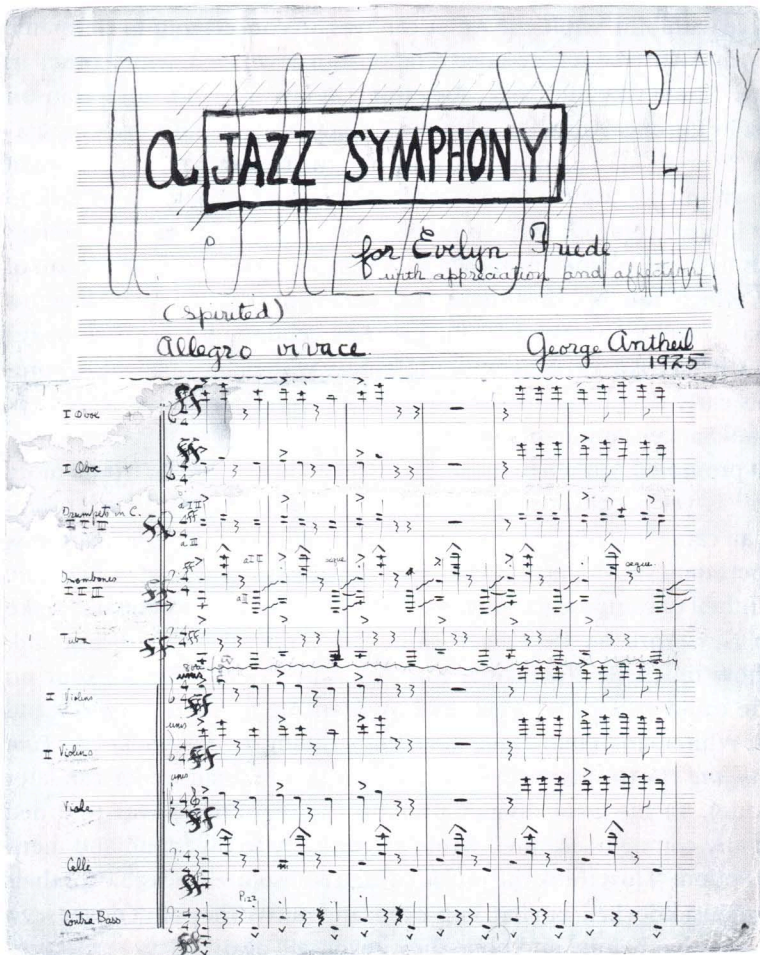
the right note by mentioning his nationality and his friendship with his impresario Martin H. Hanson, the former manager of Leo Ornstein and of Busoni during a tour of America. Hanson was also a friend of Fischer, the New York publisher, and seemed quite pleased to help his young protégé in his plans with Stravinsky. When the Russian left Berlin, he promised Antheil a piano engagement in Paris, and the latter swore to exert his pretended influence in finding a publisher and organizing Stravinsky's American debut.

What happened instead can be followed by reading the Ansermet–Stravinsky correspondence:⁵ Antheil, not as powerful and well-provided with connections as he thought, was unable to secure a good deal for Stravinsky. In the meantime, the latter was contacted by Leopold Stokowski, who became his first champion overseas. Still, until mid-summer of 1923, Stravinsky was counting on Antheil, and had a lively correspondence with him, while the American was on concert tour in Germany, Hungary, and Austria. A four-sided relationship developed, with Antheil in Germany, Stravinsky in Paris, Ansermet in Switzerland, and Hanson traveling in Europe. Antheil's main plan was to establish his own reputation as a "Stravinskian pianist," the only one the master really approved of for his own music.⁶ Maybe then – Antheil hoped – he could come back to America in a concert tour with Stravinsky conducting and himself playing.⁷ With this in mind, Antheil proposed to Ansermet a jazzy piano concerto of his own, which he was unfortunately unable to finish at that time.⁸ It seems more than possible that this was the early conception of *A Jazz Symphony*.⁹ The latter, in fact, is a sort of symphonic fantasy with piano obbligato. Moreover, this early date explains the later quick completion of the score kept at the Paul Sacher Foundation.¹⁰

What prompted Antheil to finish a work in an idiom that he felt no more his own¹¹ is yet another story. When the famous jazz-band leader Paul Whiteman came to Paris on tour in summer 1925, playing his first successful "Experiment in Modern Music" (i.e. Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*), he asked Antheil to compose a similar piece for his second Experiment, to take place in New York on December 28th. The proposal was enticing and, seeing how much Gershwin was earning, Antheil envisioned a tour on which he could at last play a piece of his own. He finished the piece and sent it to Whiteman in mid-November 1925, calling it "*Americana*", for Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra (this caption can still be read under the later pasted title). To his great disappointment, the manuscript was returned without any comment. Antheil wrote sarcastically to his friend and mentor Ezra Pound: "I just think the music (which is absolutely possible for their orchestra) just knocked 'em flat, bug-eyed, and nutty. They ain't never seen nothing like that before, and hope they never will again."¹²

Antheil put the score away and turned his compositional style towards neoclassicism (always following Stravinsky at a distance). It was only in

1927 that, through an invitation of the publisher Donald Friede, he had a call from his motherland for an all-Antheil concert where he could give the première of the retitled *A Jazz Symphony*. The piece, now dedicated to Friede's wife Evelyn, was revised, with a new coda and some cuts in the last pages of the score. It was played by Allie Ross, the black conductor of an "all-Negro orchestra." Probably it was the only piece the audience really appreciated during that concert, which otherwise proved such a gigantic fiasco that it haunted Antheil's name for decades. The critic Gilbert Seldes described the piece as "simply grand. It is better jazz than Gershwin and better music than Stravinsky."¹³ Alas, this little jewel of the Roaring Twenties was not heard again until 1986. Still, despite the many years, it has not lost its original freshness and vivacity and certainly deserves to be performed more often.



Example 1: George Antheil, *A Jazz Symphony* for orchestra (1925), full score, p. [1] (General Collection).

¹ Date mentioned in a letter to Ezra Pound (end of December 1925), Ezra Pound Papers, Box 2, Folder 70, Beinecke Rare Books Library, Yale University. (Orchestration: 022.ssx+asx+tsx.0/0331/2perc/ 2bjo/(gtr). 3pf (1st=solo)/str.)

² Measures 3–21 of the *Jazz Sonata* appear in the 1955 version as the second theme (mm. 33–45), given to the orchestra rather than to the piano and recapitulated at the close. The 1955 version (1030/0330/perc/pf/str) is a much shorter work, lasting approx. 6'30" as opposed to the 12' of the 1925 version.

³ The episode and a fairly inaccurate – but altogether funny – report of the weeks spent in Berlin can be read in Antheil's *Bad Boy of Music* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945), pp. 30–38.

⁴ "I gathered the impression that, in common with most artistic Russians of his era, he thought we in America were still busy chopping down the trees and, in certain isolated western sections, still having trouble with the Indians," *Bad Boy of Music* (see note 3), p. 33.

⁵ Particularly revelatory in this matter is a letter from Stravinsky to Ansermet dated (by Tappolet) February 5th, 1923 (Igor Stravinsky Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation), published in *Correspondance Ernest Ansermet–Igor Stravinsky (1914–1967)*, vol. 2, ed. Claude Tappolet (Geneva: Georg, 1991), pp. 42–43.

⁶ As Antheil later recalled, Stravinsky told him: "You play my music (...) exactly as I wish it to be played," *Bad Boy of Music* (see note 3), p. 40.

⁷ Evidence of this plan can be found in a letter from Antheil to Mary Louise Curtis Bok (July 26, 1923, George Antheil Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress): "There was some talk in the beginning of my accompanying Stravinsky to America (for he says that I am the best pianist of his piano works) for a Stravinsky-propaganda-conducting tour." Read also Stravinsky's remarks to Ansermet: "Vous verrez Antheil et Hanson. (...) Je ferai volontiers des voyages avec vous et eux, mais (...) il faut qu'ils trouvent un moyen quelconque d'édition. (...) S'il me l'arrange – ils pourraient compter sur ma participation dans des combinaisons de voyage en Amérique (qui sera le but de leur visite chez vous) avec vous." (February 5, 1923, in *Correspondance Ernest Ansermet–Igor Stravinsky*, see note 5, p. 42.)

⁸ See a letter from Ansermet to Stravinsky (February 13, 1923, in *Correspondance Ernest Ansermet–Igor Stravinsky*, see note 5, p. 46), where Ansermet mentions a (lost) letter from Antheil which reads: "Je viens d'écrire un nouveau Jazz-Concerto." Further proof can be found in Antheil's letter to Mrs. Bok (April 1923, George Antheil Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress): "Ansermet is interested in Switzerland in a new piano concerto ... (still a newer one) and has signified his willingness to do it with me there when I have it finished, but I have no time."

⁹ Some sketches at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts can be dated to about this time (George Antheil Papers, JPB 94-1, N° 148, labeled "Jazz Sonata Sketches"). They clearly show that *Jazz Sonata* and *A Jazz Symphony* were born from the same sketches, in which Antheil had already indicated a possible orchestration.

¹⁰ In composing his more complex orchestral works Antheil was never so quick.

¹¹ As he wrote in a letter to Mary Louise Curtis Bok (November 15, 1925, George Antheil Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress): "I hate 'jazz'; my infatuation with it belongs to a period long past in my musical development" – another clue to its earlier conception. However, Antheil would change his mind after 1928, using jazz again as a background for his opera *Transatlantic*, and later (1935) in his movie-soundtrack for *Harlem Sketches*.

¹² Letter to Ezra Pound, end of December 1925 (see note 1).

¹³ "Music of George Antheil Storms Carnegie Crowds," *New York World*, April 11, 1927.