



future events

NEXT WEEKEND

Ballet mécanique

In 1924, an American composer living in France named George Antheil was preparing to debut a score he'd written to accompany a surrealist short film by Man Ray and Fernand Léger. Both the composition and the film were titled *Ballet mécanique*, though for reasons that remain unclear, they were to be performed separately. (A rediscovered print of the film that's believed to be the original screened at Vienna will team with a recording of the original score next weekend; more on that in a bit.) Antheil styled himself a revolutionary — he titled his autobiography *Bad Boy of Music* — and the score he wrote for *Ballet mécanique* was something like a Roaring '20s version of heavy metal, a barrage of industrial noise whose instrumentation included a siren, bells, three airplane engines, and 16 player pianos. It had elements of "ragtime and jazz and some Rimsky-Korsakov, a real kitchen-sink composition," says Paul Lehrman, a MIDI programmer who was instrumental in getting the work its first proper performance just two years ago. "It's brutal, relentless, and really, really loud — and then there are places where nothing happens for 30 seconds, there's absolute silence. It was way ahead of its time."

In fact, as originally written, *Ballet mécanique* was unperformable, since no one had yet developed a way to synchronize the player pianos. It wasn't until the 1980s — with the rise of MIDI, an interface that allows computers to interact and direct live instruments — that Antheil's music became playable, and the original went unperformed well into the 1990s. In 1926, Antheil modified the score, keeping most of the original intact but shifting the burden onto multiples of two human-played pianos while retaining, for flavor, a single player piano. The debut of the piece that year in Paris caused riots — at the time, a complimentary recognition of genius — but the 1927 New York premiere at Carnegie Hall was marred by a *Spinal Tap*-like comedy of errors (including a malfunctioning siren, which refused to operate during the performance and then erupted as patrons were leaving the theater), and Antheil's reputation was scarred. He radically altered the score in 1952 — this time omitting player pianos altogether — and this final version became the best-known.

Beginning in May 1998, Lehrman — an ex-hippie, a classically trained bassoonist, and a MIDI specialist with a taste for adventurous music (he was also a *Phoenix* contributor in the late '70s) — accepted a commission from Antheil's publisher (the composer died in 1959) to encode the original score. This mammoth undertaking has made it possible for anyone with the proper resources — in Lehrman's words, "a hot percussion ensemble, at least four MIDI pianos, and an insane conductor" — to access one of the great vexations of 20th-century music. In 1999, Lehrman's transcription was premiered in Lowell with the help of UMass-Lowell students and faculty. (A European ensemble with a similar idea performed a version of the original in 1996, though they used only two customized player pianos to play the 16 parts, and their transcription is unusable by other ensembles.)

Lehrman modified and edited a recording of the Lowell concert, along with another recording he'd made with the pianos playing at faster tempos, to accompany a newly discovered print of the film, making possible for the first time ever a marriage of the original music and the original film. The combined *Ballet mécanique* will be premiered as part of the Boston Cyberarts festival next Saturday at Brandeis, after which it will embark on a world tour of museums as part of a 130-film program called "Unseen Cinema." Two days earlier, moreover, the music will receive a full performance, with 16 Yamaha Klavier player pianos, by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project at Symphony Hall.

The scored 1927 print of the film Ballet mécanique will have its world premiere next Saturday, May 5, at 1 and 7 p.m. as part of the BEAMS Marathon at Brandeis University's Slosberg Recital Hall, Waltham. It's free; call (781) 736-3331. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project's full performance of the score of Ballet mécanique is presented as part of "Orchestral Music at the Digital Frontier" next Thursday, May 3, at 8 p.m. at Symphony Hall, 301 Mass Ave in Boston. Free tickets must be reserved by calling (617) 363-0396.

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Issue Date: April 26 - May 3, 2001

