Like many composers who came of age around the First World War, George Antheil had a long relationship with dance. Dances figured among his earliest works—the Three Creole Dances he wrote as a seventeen-year-old the very year the United States declared war on Germany, the Three Spanish Dances and Profane Waltzes he composed two years later, the Ragtime Sonata and Shimmy he wrote in 1923. None of these works was actually intended for dancing; they were composed for the concert hall, not the dance stage and certainly not the dance hall. Still, the fact that Antheil chose to write them at all is revealing of a great shift in thinking in the more serious quarters of the music world. What prompted this change was the Ballets Russes, and the landmark works, including Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring, commissioned by the company’s forward-looking director, Serge Diaghilev.

Music for the dance had undergone a revolution. No longer written to measure by “specialist composers,” it had become the province of “serious” composers—artists as opposed to artisans. Diaghilev made it respectable to write for the ballet stage. At the same time, his Ballets Russes and modernist-oriented companies such as Rolf de Maré’s Ballets Suédois proved a ready source of commissions and a launching pad to international renown. Antheil never wrote for either of these celebrated troupes. Yet as an American who spent most of the 1920s and the early 1930s in Europe, a sometime member of the Lost Generation, he was bound sooner or later to cross paths with them. And given his flair for self-promotion, the encounters were sure to be memorable.

Born in Trenton in 1900, the son of a shoe salesman, George Antheil studied music theory and composition, first in Philadelphia with Constantin von Sternberg, then in New York with Ernest Bloch. He arrived in Paris on the very day of the Ballets Russes premiere of Les Noces—13 June 1923; it was a balmy evening, a ticket was waiting at the box office, and Stravinsky received him warmly backstage after the performance. But fate soon brought the idyll to an end. Antheil relates the events, as an American friend recounted them, in his lively if somewhat unreliable autobiography, Bad Boy of Music. At the party that followed Les Noces, which happened to be given by that golden couple of the Ameri-

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can expatriate colony, Sara and Gerald Murphy, someone asked Stravinsky whether or not he was so terribly impressed by Antheil’s compositions. With apprehension Stravinsky replied that he thought him a fine pianist but that he scarcely knew his compositions. “Ah,’ cried the American and his wife, ‘that’s just what we suspected, a fourflusher.”1 The party ended Antheil’s friendship with Stravinsky.

Far more dramatic was Antheil’s encounter with the Ballets Suédois. Overnight it made him nothing less than a celebrity, the enfant terrible of the Anglo-American avant-garde. It was a scandale, one of those that regularly erupts in Paris, that welcomed Antheil’s debut at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées for the opening of the troupe’s 1923–1924 season, and amazingly, it was all filmed. Or was it so amazing, engineered, as it was by Margaret Anderson, the editor of The Little Review, for her intimate, the actress Georgette LeBlanc, whose new movie needed a riot scene?

“One day,” Antheil recounted, “Margaret Anderson phoned me and asked whether I’d like to play at the opening of the Ballets Suédois—after Diaghileff’s Ballet Russe the next most important social event in Paris. I said indeed I would—as who wouldn’t? Everybody of importance would be present. . . . Margaret said, ‘Start practicing and be sure to program your most radical works, the sonatas that caused riots in Germany.’ I would go on, she added, during the early part of the program, before the ballets commenced.2

Antheil chose three recent works, all for solo piano: Airplane Sonata, which he had composed in 1921, before leaving America; the 1922 Sonata Sauvage, written in Germany; and a new piece, Mechanisms, which trumpeted its modernity in subtitles like Mechanism Cubistic, Mechanism Interrhythmic, and Mechanism Elliptic.3 Halfway through the concert, with the cameras whirring under giant floodlights, all hell broke loose. Antheil was in ecstasy: “In the audience was Man Ray, Picasso, Jean Cocteau, Picabia, and Heaven knows who else’” he wrote. “In one box alone sat James Joyce, the author of Ulysses . . . [and] in another . . . sat Léger . . . [and] Ezra Pound.”4

“People were fighting in the aisles, yelling, clapping, hooting! Pandemonium! I suddenly heard Satie’s shrill voice saying, ‘Quel [sic] précision! Quel [sic] précision! Bravo! Bravo!’ . . . Milhaud was now clapping, definitely clapping. By this time some people in the galleries were pulling up the seats and dropping them down into the orchestra; the police entered, and any number of surrealists, society personages, and people of all descriptions were arrested. . . . Paris hadn’t had such a good time since the premiere of Stravinsky’s Sacre du Printemps.’ As Jack Benny would have said: ‘Boy, they loved me in Paris!’5

Despite its artfully contrived riot and sophisticated interiors, L’Inhumaine, as Marcel L’Herbier’s film was called, was not a success. As the opera singer Claire (who prompts the riot), Georgette LeBlanc had none of the magnetism of a femme fatale, while Jaque [sic] Catelain, the Swedish scientist who is the victim of her coldness, seems to loathe her.6
Capitalizing on his newfound notoriety, Antheil announced to the press that he was working on a new piece, *Ballet Mécanique*, which he hoped to produce with motion-picture accompaniment, if he could find a collaborator. However, in a letter to his American patroness Mary Curtis Bok written in May 1924 (that is, seven months after the uproar at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées), he described the work that was to be his fame and bane in later years as being definitely engaged for a season at the avant-garde Théâtre Bériza with "decor and staging by F[ernand] Léger, the designer of Skating Rink." 7

Léger, who had designed the hero’s futuristic laboratory in *L’Inhumaine* and both *Skating Rink* and *Creation of the World* for the Ballets Suédois, eventually teamed up with the American filmmaker Dudley Murphy to create the film version of *Ballet Mécanique*, a landmark of early experimental cinema. (This was not Murphy’s first encounter with ballet; in 1922 he had worked closely in New York with Ballets Russes alumnus Adolph Bolm on the pioneering *Danse Macabre*.) But the final outcome of Léger’s collaboration with Antheil was almost certainly not determined until later, no matter what the composer claimed in *Bad Boy of Music*. In its genesis, *Ballet Mécanique* was probably what its title suggests—an avant-garde ballet, cousin to such Ballets Suédois productions as *Le Mariage de la Tour Eiffel* and *Relâche*.

For reasons that remain obscure, a stage production failed to materialize. And when the music was eventually heard—at the Maison Pleyel in 1925, at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées and the salon of Mrs. Christian Gross in 1926—it was without the Dudley-Léger film. Antheil scored his original version for sixteen pianolas, but when the master rolls were cut by Pleyel, the music turned out to be about twice as long as the film. For the U.S. premiere of Antheil’s work at Carnegie Hall in 1927, there was a garish backdrop by Joseph Mullen featuring skyscrapers, noise-making machines, and a larger-than-life figure jumping off a diving board. Only in 1935 at the Museum of Modern Art—doubtless through the good offices of Lincoln Kirstein, who was interested in film almost as much as dance—were the two finally synchronized and performed together, albeit in a musical arrangement for one pianola. 8

Antheil composed his first music for dancers in the late 1920s. By then he had left France for Germany, where he wrote incidental music for a number of plays and where his first opera, *Transatlantic*, premiered in 1930. In Vienna, he did some music for Hedy Pfundmeyr, a soloist of the State Opera Ballet and choreographer in her own right, a commission he later described as his “first music for dance,” as well as sketches for a ballet called *Méditerrané*. In 1929, Helen Tamiris choreographed his *Sonatina for Radio* for a concert in Berlin only weeks after the nine-minute jazz sonata for piano had received its world premiere on the German government broadcasting station. Finally, from this same period dates the opera-ballet *Flight*, also known as *Ivan the Terrible*, an unrealized work that “involved the use of projected images rather than formal scenery.” 9
He also tried—unsuccessfully—to interest Boris Kochno in commissioning a score for the Ballets Russes. Antheil described the project to his friend, the poet Ezra Pound, after returning from summer holiday in 1927: “The Ballet, called ‘Le Jour’ with decor by Miró is finished. . . . I am certain that it will create a scandal, as it is unlike anything, except the Airplane Sonata, and the Death of Machines that I have ever done. Kochnow [Boris Kochno], secretary of the Ballet Russe, has informed me definitely that it will be given a tryout in November 1928, in Monte Carlo. However that is a long time, and Tschlietschieff [Pavel Tchelitchew] tells me that I shall have to keep after them to make them keep their promise. . . .

“I wish you would have another go at Sitwell to get at Diageliew [sic]. Don’t tell him that Kochnow has made a tentative acceptance, but make him get at Diageliew, just as if nothing had happened. You can understand that if the thing is to happen . . . and the chances look very bright, that D. mustn’t forget me for a moment, or leave me out of his calculations. I know . . . D. thought . . . that I had tremendous talent, but was ‘too serious’ for the Ballet Russe. He didn’t see where he could make use of me, although he admitted that, as there were no other young men of promise, he would soon be forced to consider what he could do with me.” Despite Antheil’s behind-the-scenes politicking, nothing came of the commission or the ballet.10

A chance encounter with William Butler Yeats in the summer of 1928 led to “his first ballet opera,”11 Fighting the Waves, actually one of the poet’s “plays for dancers.” Produced by Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, it was choreographed by the future matriarch of British ballet, the Irish-born Ninette de Valois. Yeats, she recalled, “had always felt the call of movement in relation to his writings, and he felt the same draw towards music. But he did not show any active interest in music and dance as arts in their own right. For him it was the call of the rhythm of the body, and the musicality of words, the search for a fusion in a unified expression of his dance dramas, symbolic in the oneness of the mystery that surrounded his great vision.”12

For this strange work, blending Celtic myth with the stillness of Noh, Antheil created a percussive score for orchestra that largely eschewed the use of strings. J. J. Hayes in The Irish Times praised the composer for “grasping the Gaelic spirit underlying the story,” while avoiding the “sensationally striking. . . . The dramatic element was always present and the orchestra made clear at all times what was happening. . . . Mr. Antheil’s music was eloquent in meaning and intensity.”13 For Yeats, the work was a turning point. To accommodate de Valois, who refused to speak on stage, he cut many of the speeches and put the verse dialogue into prose. The opening and closing lyrics were left unchanged, “for sung to modern music in the modern way,” as he put it, “they suggest strange patterns to the ear without obtruding upon it with their difficult, irrelevant words.”14 Although at one point Yeats dismissed the play as a “mere occasion for sculptor
and dancer, [and] for the exciting dramatic music of George Antheil," in performance he was overwhelmed by what the totality conveyed—"the ritual of a lost faith." This now became his ideal. 15

In 1933, after spending most of the previous decade abroad, Antheil returned to the United States and settled in New York. The country was mired in the Great Depression; soup kitchens fed armies of the unemployed, and tent cities filled Central Park. Still, it was an exciting time if you were a dancer or a composer. There was energy, a host of young faces, and imaginative daring; organizations were springing up, especially on the left, and audiences were growing—all this when few had a dime to spare. It was a far cry from the hedonism of Paris and other expatriate colonies of the 1920s.

Years later, composer Lehman Engel, who wrote music for Martha Graham and other modern dancers, recalled the excitement of New York in the early 1930s, when he was a student at Juilliard: "There was so much to be seen and experienced, so many people in such a variety of places. These, combined with the opportunity to create, could only have happened in New York, in our land, in our time. The discussions . . . mattered most, I think. They involved the theater, music, painting, poetry, and the dance, and they . . . caused me to think about things that had not before even occurred to me." 16

Antheil threw himself into American life with the gusto that was one of his most endearing traits. There were concerts in Rochester, his home town of Trenton, and Yaddo, the Saratoga Springs arts colony; committee work with Aaron Copland and Wallingford Riegger; movie scores for Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur at Paramount's Astoria studios; a performance of Ballet Mécanique at the Museum of Modern Art. 17

Above all, there was his new opera, Helen Retires. Based on John Erskine's novel The Private Life of Helen of Troy, it premiered at the Juilliard School of Music in February 1934, a time when many were calling for an American opera. The book was rich in humor, and the production design, by Frederick Kiesler, was striking and unusually modern, with lights, slide projections, and even motion-picture footage creating most of the stage effects. The chorus sat on-stage (as in Diaghilev's production of Le Coq d'Or), and the choreography for the student dancers was by Kiesler and Dalcroze expert Elsa Findlay. Arthur Mahoney, the one professional dancer in the cast, scored such a success as the Young Fisherman, that Juilliard hired him on the spot as a teacher and dance director. The opening was like a gala night at the Metropolitan, with many of the city's most distinguished musicians in the audience. 18

In the years since Ballet Mécanique, Antheil had gradually abandoned the more extreme elements of his earlier modernism. By 1930, a neoromantic element could be discerned in his work; a few years later, even a touch of surrealism. At the same time, he was gradually losing interest in "pure" music. "There seems little use to writing trumpet sonatas," he told an interviewer in 1936. "The
arts need to collaborate; otherwise, they become stilted, precious, playing to an ever diminishing audience."

Antheil's interest in dance intensified with his return to the United States. Early in 1932, during an extended visit home, he was in touch with Doris Humphrey about using her pupils in a "little opera" he expected to complete by the middle of March. "It was a very great pleasure for us to meet you, as we always have been great admirers of your dancing, and think that it is of the greatest importance what you are doing for the American dance."

The opera never materialized, but in September 1933 Antheil wrote to Humphrey about exploring "the possibilities of a ballet here in Trenton": "The Trenton Civic Orchestra has been organized, and is ... pretty good. ... I have thought of using that (it is at my disposal) and the new Trenton Municipal Theater (which the city wants me to use) and with the help of the Junior League, and a number of interested people, put on a series of American ballets by American composers, with American dancers ... a sort of Ballet Russe, so to speak, but with a poorer orchestra ... I must admit. ... [T]he ballets could be ordered from the young men, if they are not already written, so that they would not be too ultra difficult. ... Princeton, the New Hope Art Colony, and Philadelphia are all nearby. N.Y. is also only 1:07 minutes away. It might be fun. What do you think? There will be no profits unless Mrs. Roebling underwrites more than she has to date, but that shouldn't stop this first chance at an unlimited orchestra and theater, and enough money for scenery and costumes."

This project too never came off. But within months Antheil had encountered the patron extraordinaire who would make a place for him at the epicenter of New York's "musical ballet-opera theatre" (as he called it)— Lincoln Kirstein. For Kirstein, the big adventure of his life was just beginning. On October 18, 1933, at his behest, George Balanchine had arrived in New York; less than three months later, Balanchine taught his first class at the School of American Ballet; six months after that he presented his first American ballet, Serenade. By 1935, the two (with financial help from Edward Warburg) had founded the American Ballet, the first of several short-lived predecessors to the New York City Ballet.

It was Lisa Parnova, a Russian-born dancer who had worked at the Cologne Opera in the 1920s and was now living in New York, who brought Antheil to the School of American Ballet in late January 1934. He played a rumba for Balanchine (so loudly that the teacher in the next studio came in to protest), and soon they were talking about a ballet. All kinds of ideas were floating around—an American ballet with a scenario by Francis Fergusson; a skating ballet set in Central Park of the 1840s; a ballet to Schumann called "The Enchanted Garden"; a Rover Boy ballet (this eventually became Alma Mater); revivals of works choreographed by Balanchine in Europe.

Only days before the premiere of Helen Retires, Antheil received his first commission—a new score for Les Sanges, or Dreams, as the American version
was called. It was about a dancer and nightmarish figures like the Rat-Acrobat who assail her dreams. Balanchine had produced the ballet in Europe with music by Milhaud. Now, with Derain's sets and costumes at hand (they had come with him to America), he decided to revive the ballet, but with a new score. A few days later, Balanchine demonstrated the dances and talked to him about timings. Within a week, Antheil was playing for the choreographer the music he had already written; it was at Lucia Davidova's and everyone was delighted; it was charming and dansant. By late April, the ballet was in rehearsal; by mid-May, it was nearly done. And Antheil was talking to Kirstein and Balanchine alike about other projects, including a "waltz-ballet" (which probably became Transcendence) and Archipelago, which Frederick Ashton (who had spent the winter in the United States choreographing Four Saints in Three Acts) took back with him to London but failed to stage. By June, he was writing to Ezra Pound that even if the critics had "roasted" Helen Retires, a "flood of new possibilities and ideas" had followed "on the heels of the performance."

Unlike most of the painters and composers associated with the Kirstein-Balanchine enterprise in these years, Antheil was closer to Balanchine than to Kirstein. Antheil's modernism struck a responsive chord in the thirty-year-old choreographer, whose days as a choreographic revolutionary lay not so far in the past. He went up to Juilliard to watch rehearsals of Helen Retires, and, like Kirstein, attended the premiere, and told Antheil (as the latter reported to Pound) "that I am the only composer in the U.S.A. who writes music." Antheil took to dropping in at the School, which was practically around the corner from his apartment on East Fifty-fifth Street, where Kirstein as well as Balanchine were occasional visitors. In late May, all three went to see Asadata Dafora's African dance-drama Kykunkor at the tiny Unity Theatre on East Twenty-third Street. There was talk of Balanchine and Antheil doing a ballet on the theme of Don Juan, and even a film, an intriguing prospect given that within a couple of years both would be working in Hollywood. Still another idea was what Antheil described to Pound as "a ballet-choral work, lasting about two hours, ... [V]ast rhythmic choruses will alternate with dances ... and sometimes just a speaker, reciting poetry ... and sometimes moving pictures and sometimes everything. A new musical stage form with no tenors warbling." On June 10, 1934, the School of American Ballet gave its first performance at the Warburg family estate near White Plains. Three ballets were given, all by Balanchine. The program opened with Mozartiana and closed with excerpts from Dreams. In the middle was Serenade, which was danced in rehearsal costume. By March 1935, when the American Ballet made its official debut at the Adelphi Theatre in New York, this most beloved of Balanchine works had costumes by Jean Lurçat, scenery by Gaston Longchamp, and a new arrangement of the Tchaikovsky Serenade in C for String Orchestra by Antheil. The composer contributed to a third ballet presented during the company's debut season. This was Transcendence, which had a theme by Kirstein inspired by Pa-
ganini, sets and costumes by the American painter Franklin Watkins, and music by Liszt—his Mephisto Valse and various Hungarian Rhapsodies—which Antheil both orchestrated and arranged. Although Transcendence did not remain long in repertory, “a faint echo” of the ballet, Kirstein was to write, survived in Balanchine’s Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet, choreographed more than thirty years later. 29

At the same time that Antheil was working for Balanchine, he was also working for Martha Graham. In Bad Boy of Music, he passes over entirely his encounter with the foremost representative of modern dance, although it produced two works and inspired an adulatory essay. How they met is unknown. Perhaps it was Lisa Parnova (who had a foot in the modern camp), or one of the many composers Antheil had met in New York. Most likely, it was Louis Horst, Graham’s musical director and the composer of several of her early scores, who brought them together. Antheil found himself in good musical company. Although Graham had long used modern music, her interest in American composers was a recent development, an early expression of the nationalist impulse that culminated in American Document. In 1934 and 1935, her roster of composers included no fewer than a half-dozen Americans—Lehman Engel, Henry Cowell, Edgar Varèse, Paul Nordoff, Norman Lloyd, David Diamond—in addition to Horst and Antheil. Graham’s commitment to new American music was unmatched by any other choreographer of the time.

For his first commission, Antheil did not write new music. Dance in Four Parts, a solo for Graham that premiered at the Guild Theatre in November 1934, was based on twenty-four short piano preludes from The Woman with a Hundred Heads. Antheil had written it the year before, inspired by a surrealism collage-novel of etchings by Max Ernst. The individual pieces varied in length and mood, with instructions like “cruel, quick,” “nostalgic,” and “slightly brutal”; some of the pieces were strongly percussive; others had the atonal sonorities of the composer’s later neoclassic works. (Since the Graham score has disappeared, it is impossible to know which ones she used.)

Graham divided the dance into four parts—“Quest,” “Derision,” “Dream,” and “Sportive Tragedy”—each of which she then divided into six emotionally related “moods,” making a total of twenty-four short dances. The result, wrote critic John Martin in The New York Times, “seems oversubtle in purpose and not too well unified in form. . . . It is impossible to tell when one prelude leaves off and the next begins, and similarly where one dance theme ends and the next carries on.” 30 Antheil had nothing but praise for the choreographer’s use of his music: “she does it beautifully,” he wrote to Mrs. Bok, “and I love it.” 31

Far more successful was Antheil’s second work for Graham, Course. A large group composition, it was the outstanding feature of her third recital of the 1934–1935 season. Reviewing it in The New York Times, Martin could hardly contain his enthusiasm: “It is a completely exciting piece of work. From the first entrance of the solo figure and the group with its onrush, there is maintained a
flow of swift and brilliant movement which, in spite of its variations, never pauses for an instant. The ‘course’ of the title is apparently . . . a series of games or contests, comparable to a race course. The seven dancers besides Miss Graham who figure prominently . . . contribute exemplary performances, . . . and George Antheil’s music serves excellently as its background.”32 Alas, the score for Course has also been lost.

Martin was noticeably less enthusiastic about Dreams, which received its official premiere less than a month later. “It seems scarcely worth the labor that has been spent on it, for it is trivial in subject matter and utterly unsuited in style to the young dancers who make up the company. Certainly the abandonment of the Milhaud music was of doubtful wisdom.”33 Other critics were just as damning. Wrote Pitts Sanborn: “The phantasmagoria of ‘Dreams’ . . . proved to be distinctly below the Ballet’s general level of achievement. The choreography was rather tiresomely conventional; the dancing . . . somewhat amateurish in its total effect, and the settings true to a French mode that arouses no excitement today. Moreover, the music, a sort of Viennese disarrangement, was ill-calculated to add lustre to Mr. Antheil’s fame.”34

The season prompted all kinds of debates. One had to do with the relative merits of ballet and modern dance. Antheil flew to the defense of ballet in an punchy article that came out in Stage magazine just as the Adelphi season opened. “At the moment American dancing has twisted itself into such a series of blind alleys that it is time for a little thumbing back over the exceedingly classic files. The curious thing is that, after ten years of pounding upon the theatrical boards with the heels, toe-dancing seems to come as a fresh and novel spring wind. The old ballet technique has been dusted off. Men like Massine and Balanchine have found a thousand new corners and angles to give to an already brilliant and long-perfected technique a new and Mesmeric life. How much more I prefer to see this than the heavy, already demoted Neusachlichkeit of the present school of American dancing. Ten years of it, and it still is short breathed, heavily Germanic, with nothing of our true pioneering spirit.”35

The battle wasn’t simply about modern dance and ballet. It was also about differing views of nationality: what it meant to be American, what was signified by the idea of an American dance, what was necessary for a cosmopolitan aesthetic like Balanchine’s (or Antheil’s, for that matter) to acquire an authentic American identity. There were also class issues at stake. The American Ballet was bankrolled by some very rich people, notably Kirstein (whose money came from Filene’s, the Boston department store) and Warburg (whose family belonged to the international banking elite). They had connections, and they knew everyone. Kirstein brought the rich and famous to rehearsals, laying the foundation for an audience; he courted journalists (including John Martin) and talked to editors, so that by the time the American Ballet had made its debut, articles about the company and the School had appeared in such toney magazines as Vanity Fair, Harper’s Bazaar, Town and Country, and Vogue.36
Thus, in his season round-up, when Martin questioned whether "the organization [is] to attempt the fulfillment of its original policy of developing an American ballet, or . . . to follow the direction of its present season and go on being merely 'Les Ballets Americains,'" given its audience of socialites, expatriate Europeans, and balletomanes, one feels that the company's social aura, so carefully engineered by Kirstein, repelled him far more than Balanchine's choreography. In 1935, with the Great Depression still a reality, many probably shared Martin's distaste.

Finally, the season brought up questions about the nature of ballet. What kinds of stories should it tell? Did it have to tell stories? If not, how was meaning conveyed? What kinds of meaning could and should be conveyed? Diaghilev, Bronislava Nijinska once remarked, "could not readily discard the idea of a literary libretto in ballet." He insisted that Ballets Russes productions have some kind of narrative, even if this was only a pretext for the dances. Once he died in 1929, however, Balanchine and others began to experiment with choreography that abjured narrative.

The most controversial of these experiments were Léonide Massine's "symphonic ballets," so called because they were choreographed to the symphonies of Brahms, Beethoven, and Berlioz. Massine was sharply criticized for plundering the symphonic repertory, but he was also taken to task for seeking to transform what John Martin called "the balanced forms and disciplined abstractions" of ballet into a personal form of expression. "The direction of these romantic, nebulously emotional, philosophical, pseudo-profound creations is the one direction above all others which the ballet must avoid." Martin dismissed Balanchine's work in similar terms.

Erante, he wrote, "falls . . . into the same class of cosmic nonsense as [Massine's] 'Les Présages,' which up to now has held the record for choreographic silliness." Transcendence, "whether because of its training for choreographic novelty or because . . . of its . . . unsuitability to the talents of the company, remains largely incomprehensible." Balanchine's ballets, he concluded, "are evidences of what someone has aptly called 'Riviera esthetics.'"

Martin's criticism did not go unheeded. In the next decade, Balanchine no less than Kirstein would undergo a process of naturalization. In the case of Balanchine, this would result in nearly a score of works for Broadway and Hollywood, an exposure to popular entertainment that ultimately transformed him into an American. Kirstein, too, went his own way. In 1936, he founded Ballet Caravan, a chamber company that aimed to make ballet as American as apple pie. The themes of the ballets were American, as were the designers, dancers, and composers. Most of the ballets were forgettable, but they launched a generation of American talent, and with Billy the Kid, which had music by Copland, choreography by Eugene Loring, and a scenario by Kirstein, Ballet Caravan created one of the most important works of Depression-era Americana.

As for Antheil, in 1936 he set off in search of America, a journey that took him to Florida and New Mexico, and ended in Hollywood. He did not want...
to be, as he put it in *Bad Boy of Music*, “a Parisian in New York.” And in this realization, his collaboration with Balanchine was crucial, even as he continued to laud the choreographer’s genius. By 1937, Antheil was touting Martha Graham as “the very essence of America,” “one of those extraordinary mediums who . . . without knowing it present the mental telepathy of the race and concentrate its essence into the movements of her body.”44 The shoe salesman’s son from Trenton had come home.

Like so many newcomers to Hollywood, Antheil went to work for the movies. He continued to write for *Modern Music* and for a time kept a toehold in the ballet world. When Balanchine went to Hollywood in 1937, he lived only a block away from the composer. “We are often together,” Antheil reported to Mrs. Bok. “Three nights ago we played through the new Strawinsky ballet, Card Party, four hands, which Balanchine recently presented at the Metropolitan. . . . These things are good for my soul, if not for my pocket book.” He was also at work on a new ballet, to be presented at the American Ballet’s next Metropolitan season.45 However, like other ballets of the late 1930s, the project came to nought.46 Indeed, by 1939, Antheil had stopped writing music entirely, even for the movies. To make a living, he wrote a syndicated lonely-hearts column, “Boy Advises Girl”; a book of war predictions, *The Shape of War to Come*, published anonymously in 1940; and articles on the place of endocrinal glands in the human organism. With Hedy Lamarr, he patented an idea about a radio-directed torpedo.

In 1944, Leopold Stokowski conducted the premiere of Antheil’s Fourth Symphony. The event marked his return to the serious music world; within months this “musical Tom Sawyer, gay, fanciful, ingenuous, self-confident, and comical,” as Virgil Thomson once described him,47 was offering his services to the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. “For years I have composed nothing at all,” he wrote to the company’s director, Sergei Denham, “it had a special psychological reason too long to go into. But now I should like to write a wonderful new ballet. And I could.”48 What almost certainly prompted Antheil to resume contact with Denham at this point was his recent appointment of Balanchine as the company’s resident choreographer.

The two were soon back in touch. A few letters from Balanchine to Antheil survive from this period, and they have a jocular, even bantering tone. “Dear George,” begins one dated September 13, 1945. “You reproached me for lack of promptness in answering your correspondence, well, I have reason to reproach you in turn. . . . I hear on the gossip grapevine with some alarm that somebody making a film like the one you indicate” [this was the Ben Hecht production *The Specter of the Rose*, released the following year] “is thinking of hiring a Signor Celli for a possible role. Strictly entre nous, I prefer to believe that this is just idle talk.”49 By August 1946, Antheil was writing to Denham about two possible ballets. One was *Ghost Town*, a revival of the “American folk ballet” choreographed in 1939 by Marc Platt, but with new music (the original score was by Richard Rodgers).50 The other project was a “Creole ballet.” For this, he added,
"I have already (somewhat in collaboration with Georges [sic] Balanchine who gave me 90% of the idea) worked out [a] little story, ... besides collecting a vast amount of themes remembered dimly, but beautifully from my childhood." 51 Among these remembered themes may have been music from "The Creole," an orchestral work that may have been composed as early as 1919. 52

Not only has Antheil's "little story" survived, but also a surprisingly large number of musical sketches. 53 The scenario for the "New Orleans Ballet," as he now calls it, has an unmistakable Balanchine perfume. Like his 1933 ballet Cotillon, it opens with a dressing scene and is set in a ballroom. But there is a cynical undercurrent, a subtle air of moral corruption that recalls the atmosphere of Night Shadow, or La Sonnambula, which Balanchine staged early in 1946. In both the hero toys with a pair of contrasting women, here, a beautiful Creole girl who is his fiancée and the beautiful quadroon servant girl who is his mistress.

In the first scene, the quadroon girl, who is identified in the score as Caroline or the "Black Creole," helps the white Creole girl to dress; at the same time she flirts with her beau, who prolongs the coquetry by rejecting the gowns modeled by his fiancée. The second scene takes place at the quadroon ball, where Caroline has arranged to meet her lover, who soon arrives and dances with her. In the last scene, and here I quote Antheil, "the Creole girl [is] being very decorously escorted home by her fiancé, never knowing that while she was dancing at the white ball, her boyfriend [was having] a wonderful time at the quadroon ball."

Why the project failed to materialize is unclear. The most likely explanation is Balanchine's departure from the Ballet Russe to join Lincoln Kirstein in founding Ballet Society, which presented its first program in November 1946. Without him the project was dead, although Antheil kept trying, unsuccessfully, to resuscitate it. 54 In fact, the ballet may have been Balanchine's project all along. This is suggested by the existence in the George Balanchine Archive at the Harvard Theatre Collection of an "original scenario" by Katherine Dunham for a "dramatic ballet in one scene" entitled "The Octoroon Ball." 55 Balanchine worked with Dunham and members of her company in 1940, when he choreographed the Broadway music Cabin in the Sky. The scenario almost certainly dates to this period. Dunham's thrust is fundamentally political—outrage at a system that encouraged the concubinage of beautiful young girls of mixed blood to wealthy white libertines, while forcing them to abandon the dark-skinned slaves they love. Where Balanchine’s love triangle involved two women and a man, Dunham’s involved two men and a woman. One can easily imagine Balanchine taking Dunham's basic plot and reversing it. Moreover, even before Antheil offered his services to Denham, there was talk of Balanchine possibly doing a ballet called "New Orleans," with music by Morton Gould. 56

In 1950, Denham approached Antheil about a project that did materialize, although the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo would not produce it. This was Antheil's last ballet, Capital of the World. The idea was born over a sumptuous
lunch in honor of Ernest Hemingway at a palazzo on Venice’s Grand Canal. Somehow the discussion turned to ballet and Hemingway’s short story “The Capital of the World,” which has as its climax a macabre scene where two Spanish boys, waiters in a pensión for second-rate matadors, play bullfight with a chair that has two razor-sharp meat knives strapped to its legs; Paco misses a pass; a knife plunges into his belly, and he dies. All agreed it would make an exciting ballet and should be done at the Met. Hemingway turned to a young American writer in his entourage. “Would you like to do it, Hotch?” Hotch would. So began a byzantine journey for A. E. Hotchner, the future author of Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir—“four harrowing, impresario-infested years,” as he put it, that ended, amazingly, with both a premiere at the Met and a broadcast on national television. 57

Hotchner wrote his scenario for Denham (whose sole piece of advice, “no cousins,” sounds suspiciously like Balanchine’s injunction against mothers-in-law). Denham forwarded the script to Antheil, who then contacted the writer, expressing his enthusiasm for the project. A year later the score was finished, and Antheil played it for Denham, who wept and kissed him, told him it was beyond anything he had expected, that it would open his next season at the Met. Then nothing.

Hotchner, a newcomer to the ballet world, was shocked. “Things are not conducted in the ballet world as they are in the world of writing and letters,” Antheil remarked in a letter. “Writers think in terms of all sorts of rights, firm contracts, legally binding papers. To step from this world into the world of ballet, where everything is done with mirrors and where no contract I have ever signed has ever protected me an iota, is a big step.” 58

Antheil himself was no slouch when it came to plotting and scheming. As Denham procrastinated, the script made the rounds of Hollywood. At one point, director Stanley Kramer was interested, then turned it down because John Huston had announced he was doing a picture called Matador. There was talk of a ninety-minute television opera for Omnibus, the NBC series sponsored by the Ford Foundation that had already broadcast Menotti’s Amahl and the Night Visitors and Britten’s Billy Budd, followed by an expanded version for Broadway. At some point Denham drew up a contract, but with so many other irons in the fire, Antheil never signed it. In any event, Denham was pretty much bankrupt. At Hotchner’s urging, the composer wrote to Lincoln Kirstein, now managing director of City Center, in charge of all its constituents. Kirstein was not interested, either in the ballet or in Antheil’s new opera, Volpone. He responded that he was not in a position to commission any new works. 59 Yet in less than a month, the Center would receive a $200,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation “to cover the costs of creative preparatory work on new productions in ballet and opera.” 60

Kirstein’s real beef was Antheil’s account of Balanchine in Bad Boy of Music. How it must have galled him to read that working with Balanchine on his
“Parisian ballets” was what had “fulcrumed” the composer out of New York.61 Ever one to hold a grudge, Kirstein now wanted nothing to do with Antheil, dismissing him as late as the 1970s as an “enthusiastic if disappointing collaborator,” who “hardly fulfilled his early heady notoriety.”62 As a friend of Hotchner’s reported, “Kirstein is much too peeved with you over your book to entertain the project in any size, shape or form.”63

With the New York City Ballet out of the question, Hotchner sent the script to Ballet Theatre, which then forwarded it to Eugene Loring, the choreographer of Billy the Kid, who was now living in Los Angeles. Antheil invited him to lunch and played him the sketches. Loring loved the music but felt that extensive changes were needed for the script to work as a ballet.64 With Hotchner’s permission, they set to work on the revisions. The setting was moved from a pensión to a tailor shop catering to bullfighters. A love interest was introduced, along with a café scene. Once Loring had agreed to choreograph the ballet, everything fell into place: the Omnibus premiere in early December, the gala Met premiere just after Christmas. In what was very possibly a ballet first, the Ford Foundation’s TV Workshop was underwriting the production. Antheil received $600 for his score, and a royalty of $15 for each theater presentation of the ballet—not much, even at 1950s prices.65 And he agreed to provide two scores: one for a twenty-piece television orchestra, the other for the sixty-piece orchestra the company would have at the Met.66 Antheil’s years of experience in the movies, where composers had to work fast, now stood him in good stead.

Capital of the World was a narrative ballet in the character tradition popularized by Massine in Le Tricorne, Gaité Parisienne, and many other works. Much of the action was conveyed by pantomime, and much of the choreography was in Spanish style; there was also something of the faux primitivism of so many Hemingway works, especially those set in Spain, such as Death in the Afternoon, which celebrated bullfighting, and For Whom the Bell Tolls, his powerful novel inspired by the Spanish Civil War. Paco, the hero, dreams of being a bullfighter; he is an idealist, chaste in his admiration for the coquettish Elena, kind to the wrecks who visit the tailor shop to pawn the precious suits they once wore in the bullring. The heart of the ballet is Paco’s solo, a rare moment of introspection; the shaming scene that follows where he is taunted by several whores; and the fight that ends in his death. Rather than a comic hero à la Massine, Loring gives us a character with the innocence and soulfulness of the new movie heroes of the 1950s, along with a fight scene that in its intensity and in the physical closeness of the two men expresses a kind of perverse love. Roy Fitzell gave a glowing performance as Paco; Scott Douglas was a splendid Enrique, and Lupe Serrano was appropriately sexy as Elena.67

Virgil Thomson, long an admirer of Antheil’s work, reviewed the score in his music column in the New York Herald Tribune. The Capital of the World, he wrote, revealed the composer “as a master [of] the choreographic musical theater. . . . Rarely have I heard music for dancing with so much real energy in
It is no mere accompaniment for dancing: it generates physical activity on the stage, moves the dancers around. It is colorful, too, bright and dark and full of the contrasts that are Spain. Its tunes are broad and strong; its harmonic structure is clashingly dissonant; its orchestration is picturesque, emphatic, powerfully underlined, a master’s score.

“Everything about the music is boldly conceived and completely effective. . . . In this ballet Antheil has found scope for his talent. That talent has ever been for clowning, for caricature. And of the art of the great caricaturists—of Hogarth and Goya and Daumier and Steinlen and Boardman Robinson—is an art always compacted of tenderness and anger, of joyful exuberance and implacable debunking, these qualities are in Antheil’s music too. Never before, however, have they been so powerfully used as in this ballet. . . . Antheil’s score for Eugene Loring’s choreography is the most original, striking and powerful American ballet score with which I am acquainted.”

The response to Loring’s choreography was far more mixed. In Dance News, P. W. Manchester complained that “Loring very rarely broke into straight choreography to tell what story there was . . . and for the greater part of the time kept his dancers strutting or tripped (according to sex) about the stage, accompanying themselves with assorted groans, laughs, jeers, coughs, screams, or the whirring of a hand-operated sewing machine.” For Doris Hering, writing in Dance Magazine, “the most absorbing moments . . . were those when the pantomime blossomed into dance—as in the seduction duet . . . and in Paco’s touching solos.” Like Manchester, she found the characters one-dimensional, “like bright figures in a Spanish travel poster.” As for The New York Times critic John Martin, he hated it: “The original tale, if it is to be made into a ballet at all, would demand the services of a psychological expert like Antony Tudor, who would not blanch at its sadistic undertones. But Mr. Loring has treated it rather cutely, and altogether for surface values. There is hardly a nickel’s worth of dancing in it. It is diffuse, unchoreographic and undramatic, and except for outbursts of laughing, coughing, groaning (for real!) it suggests some old silent movie directed, perhaps, by Massine.”

Martin had once admired Massine, just as he had once admired the character tradition from which Capital of the World descended and to which it still partly belonged. But for Martin, as for other New York critics, the spell of Balanchine coupled with the growing presence of his New York City Ballet, made it increasingly difficult to appreciate older choreographic styles. Like Esteban Francés, the ballet’s designer, who gave up painting when abstract expressionism made surrealism démodé, Balanchine’s formalism, his distillation of plot and character, emotion and symbol into a dance shorn of everything but movement itself, made Loring’s work seem hopelessly old-fashioned—as well as impure. Unlike a ballet by Balanchine or a painting by Jackson Pollack, Capital of the World could not be understood merely in terms of its form, or as an interplay of abstract properties; it was a mixed bag. In these reviews, with their Greenberg-
ian echoes, one finds an early crystallization of the sensibility identified with the critics who came to the fore in New York during the 1960s.

Capital of the World stayed in repertory for a couple of years. Not long after the ballet went on the road, Antheil wrote to his publisher that a new commission was in the offing, on a subject he “could do particularly well.” Like so many of his projects, this one came to nought.

Five years later, he died of a heart attack and was promptly forgotten by the dance world. Yet he had worked with two of the twentieth-century’s greatest choreographers along with several lesser ones. He had played a part in Balanchine’s first American seasons and contributed to the first ballets he choreographed in America. An enthusiastic collaborator, he wrote music that revealed not only a deep understanding of theater but also an intuitive grasp of dance. Had he lived, George Antheil would have celebrated his hundredth birthday this year. Surely, the time is ripe for the dance world to remember him, to rediscover his music, and even perchance to choreograph new works to it.

**NOTES**

2. Ibid., p. 131.
7. Quoted in Shirley, “Another American in Paris,” p. 10. Marguerite Bériza, a one-time prima donna of the Chicago and Boston operas, sponsored some of the more interesting experiments in lyric theater of the mid-1920s. Reviewing her 1925 season, *Musical America*’s special Paris correspondent wrote: “The work is often crude, for Paris theaters are not equipped for experiment, but it is always vital. With a company of singers as well as dancers, Bériza has been able to produce a series of ballets, opéras bouffes and miniature operas, which were not only novelties but successful ones. The outstanding works of her season were two ballets to modern music which has already been acclaimed in Europe and America—Francesco Malipiero’s ‘Sept Chansons’ and Manuel de Falla’s ‘El Amor Brujo’ (L’Amour Sorcier) . . . . The setting for
['Sept Chansons'] and most of the other Bériza ballets were done by Ladislav Medgyès, a Hungarian artist, who completed the harmony of the effect by staging the works himself” (Henrietta Malkiel, “Paris Modernists Rebel Against Outmoded Ballets,” *Musical America*, 25 July 1925, p. 3).


10. George Antheil, letter to Ezra Pound, [autumn 1927], Ezra Pound Papers, YCAL MSS 43, Series I, Box 2, Folder 71, Beinecke Library, Yale University (hereafter Pound Papers).


17. For Antheil’s activities in this period, see George Antheil Scrapbooks, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter MD-NYPL).


21. Antheil to Humphrey, 11 September 1933, Humphrey Collection, Folder C346.20, DD-NYPL.

22. Antheil to Bok, 25 February 1934, Antheil Collection, Box 1, MD-LC.
23. In a letter to Mrs. Bok written in April, Antheil claimed that the day after the reviews of Helen Retires had appeared, “the new American Ballet, represented by Kirstein (editor of Hound and Horn), Warburg (the financier of the new ballet), Balanchine (its guiding spirit and artistic director), and Dimitrieff came up here in a body and commissioned me to do a new ballet for them for production this year” (Antheil to Bok, 8 April 1934, Antheil Collection, Box 2, MD-LC).

24. Whether Antheil received any payment for his efforts is unclear. He later claimed, with much bitterness, that Warburg refused to pay the $400 commission he was promised. See Antheil to Bok, 17 June 1934, Antheil Collection, Box 2, MD-LC.

25. Antheil to Bok, 8 April 1934, Antheil Collection, Box 2, MD-LC. An orchestral work, Archipelago premiered as “Rhumba” (its subtitle) on 7 April 1935 by the General Motors Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Howard Barlow.

26. Antheil to Pound, 26 June 1934, Pound Papers, YCAL MSS 43, Series I, Box 2, Folder 74.

27. Ibid. On the day of the premiere of Helen Retires, 28 February 1934, Balanchine, Kirstein, and Warburg sent the following telegram to Antheil: “Homage and many congratulations to our friend and collaborator” (George Antheil Papers, Columbia University [hereafter Antheil Papers, CU]).

28. Antheil to Pound, 26 June 1934, Pound Papers.


31. Antheil to Bok, 8 January 1935, Antheil Collection, Box 2, MD-LC. Antheil first mentions Graham in a letter to Mrs. Bok written on 22 September 1934: “This season . . . I shall have more new works upon the boards than almost any other American composer. Martha Graham is presenting a rather large work of mine The Woman With 100 Heads, which I wrote last year in Europe, on November 8th. . . . She is known to be the very first American dancer, so this will be a rather important event” (Antheil Collection, Box 2, MD-LC).

32. John Martin, “Two New Dances by Miss Graham,” NYT, 11 February 1935, p. 15. The cast consisted of Graham (One in Red), Bonnie Bird, Lil Liandre, May O’Donnell (Three in Green), Dorothy Bird, Sophie Maslow (Two in Blue), Lily Mehlman and Anna Sokolow (Two in Red). The program and sundry clippings can be found in George Antheil Scrapbooks, MD-NYPL.


34. Pitts Sanborn, “New Items on Program of Ballet,” in George Antheil Scrapbooks, MD-NYPL.


37. John Martin, “The New American Company’s First Season Rated as a Success,” NYT, 10 March 1935, sec. 8, p. 9. Marya Mannes spoke of this as well in her column for Vogue: “The Ballet audience was truly a concentration of all brilliant chi-chi; given over to hysterical applause, delighted gasping, and a startling lack of discrimination. It was apparently smart to laugh at the inept buffoonery of ‘Alma Mater,’ to clap every entrechat; and to weep over the colours that Tchelitchew gave ‘Errante,’ which were indeed exquisite and far superior to the composition itself. This same audience at a peerless performance at the Radio City Music Hall would not have lifted a finger. In justice, though, there were some in the audience who took the ballet at its worth: as a group of charming and talented youngsters working in a purely Russian convention that could give considerable optical pleasure, but that naturally needed time and fresh direction to bring it to any real importance. Of America, the only evidence is the directness and vitality of the dances, and that should be, above all, nourished. In one thing did the aesthetes and the sober-heads agree; William Dollar could be one of the leading dancers of to-day. But, as one critic pointed out the morning after the American Ballet opened, this wild applause of the fashionable is the greatest danger that promising group can know” (“Vogue’s Spot-light,” 1 April 1935, p. 77).


41. Martin, “American Ballet Opens Second Bill.”
45. Antheil to Bok, [June 1937], Antheil Collection, Box 2, MD-LC. At the time Antheil was living at 8163 Willow Glen Road in Hollywood.
46. A letter to Antheil from Sergei Denham dated 21 May 1939 indicates that at some point a project with the ballet Russe de Monte Carlo was in the offing, but that the composer had unaccountably failed to pursue it (Sergei Denham: Records of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Folder 1389, Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (cited hereafter as Denham Papers, DD-NYPL).
48. Antheil to Denham, 26 November 1944, Denham Papers, Folder 1389, DD-NYPL.
49. Balanchine to Antheil, 13 September 1945, Antheil Papers, CU.
50. Ghost Town, which premiered on 12 November 1939 and was set in a ghost town of the American West, had choreography by Marc Platt (Platoff), "ravishing" costumes by Raoul Pène du Bois, a future Tony award winner, and a "gem" of a backdrop by him as well. For a review of the premiere, see John Martin, "'Ghost Town' Given By Ballet Russe," NYT, 13 November 1939, p. 15. See also Marc Platt, with Renée Renouf, "Ghost Town Revisited: A Memoir of Producing an American Ballet for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo," Dance Chronicle, 24, no. 2 (2001), pp. 147–192.
51. Antheil to Denham, 3 August 1946, Denham Papers, DD-NYPL.
52. Antheil conducted the work in Trenton in 1932 ("Famous Trenton Composer Plays Here to Help Hospital," Trenton(?!) Times, [late] February 1932, n.p., Antheil Collection, Box 2, MD-LC). According to the program, however, the piece "was conceived in 1919" ("George Antheil Fèted in His Home City," Musical Courier, 12 March 1932, in Music Clippings File [Antheil, George], MD-NYPL). Linda Whitesitt in The Life and Music of George Antheil also lists a "Creole Festival," which Antheil performed in Dresden in 1923 (p. 203).
53. Both the scenario and the sketches are in Folder 88, Antheil Papers, MD-NYPL.
54. See, for instance, Antheil's letters to Denham of 17 December 1946, 27 December 1946, and 21 September 1947, Denham Papers, DD-NYPL.
55. Correspondence, Box 14, Folder 9, Balanchine Archive, Harvard Theatre Collection.
58. Ibid.
59. Kirstein to Antheil, 5 March 1953, Antheil Papers, CU. The above account is pieced together from Antheil's correspondence with Hotchner in the Antheil Papers, Columbia University. This correspondence includes not only Hotchner's letters but carbon copies of Antheil's frequent and voluminous replies.
60. Grant authorization 5316, 1 April 1953, Rockefeller Foundation Collection, R.G. 1.2 (Projects), Series 200R (U.S./Humanities), Box 392, Folder 3390, Rockefeller Archive Center, Pocantico Hills, N.Y.
62. Kirstein, Thirty Years, p. 49.
63. Hotchner to Antheil, [early April 1953], Antheil Papers, CU.
64. Antheil to Hotchner, 16 September 1953, Antheil Papers, CU.
66. Antheil to Lurie, 19 November 1953, ABT Records, Folder 74, DD-NYPL.
67. This description is based on the revised libretto and two drafts of the television script (Eugene Loring Papers, Folders 50, 53, and 54, DD-NYPL) and a kinescope of the Omnibus telecast, which is also in the NYPL Dance Division.
72. Antheil to Samuel Weintraub, 10 May 1954, MD-NYPL.