

RECENT BOOKS

THE DREAMS AND DEDICATIONS OF GEORGE ANTHEIL

IN several of its important aspects modern music of the twenties is now known only by hearsay. The Italian "Art of Noise" established by Luigi Russolo has totally disappeared; in memory it is mistakenly associated with Marinetti. The work done with speech orchestras, divisions of the half-tone and electrical instruments is for the most part forgotten. Many composers exist today only as names. This is virtually true of Ives, Ruggles and Varese, although enough of their music has been heard during the past fifteen years to make its comparative absence from contemporary musical life lamentable. But in George Antheil's case it is impossible to know whether the lack of his twenties music in the forties is a loss.

At one point (1937) one could spend the afternoon reading Ezra Pound's book, *Antheil and the Theory of Harmony*, and the evening going to the movies and hearing Antheil's score for *The Plainsman*. The following days were full of confusion. Was Antheil a musical genius or just another Hollywood hack? Those who knew Antheil, who had heard his earlier music, were unsatisfying in their assurances. "He was a good composer." "He was not a good composer." "He was a good composer." . . . Antheil's book, *Bad Boy of Music* (Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1945), is equally contradictory, although

many things about it suggest that he was not a good composer.

It is a book in the tradition of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and about as entertaining as Bravig Imbs's *Confessions of Another Young Man*. Like the *Confessions*, it presents the author as just another young man devoid of nobility in a milieu of famous people. Its special quality is a gaudy cheapness which comes partly from the author's inconsistent activities – musician, lovelorn columnist and so on – and partly from the many reasons he gives why the famous people, James Joyce, Igor Stravinsky, Hedy Lamarr, Gloria Vanderbilt, are famous.

Antheil, the musician, was very easily influenced. His first influence, probably the best, was from himself, from a dream he had in Trenton, N. J. This prompted him to go to Europe, to give up concertizing as a pianist, to concentrate on composing, and even provided him with certain musical motives which were the stimuli for all his early work.

Trouble came with influences from outside, the first of these being Stravinsky and the business of neo-classicism. The poetry attaching itself to a composer who pursues music heard in a dream, now began to fall away from Antheil. And this process of losing poetry, or what was really his personal life-necessity, even though

the result of exterior influences, continued throughout his life.

He was persuaded to write operas with the pre-Hitler German opera-loving audiences in mind. This freed him from the Stravinsky attachment but carried him further from the dream. Upon arriving in New York he was asked to write for the ballet. This was an influence back to Stravinsky, so, although he accepted it momentarily, he left the East and settled finally in Los Angeles, where he fell under the spell of Hollywood. He took some time to recognize Hollywood's commercialism as a bad influence, incompatible with serious composition. He partially exonerated himself by moving from a large house to a smaller one. The part of Hollywood that stays with him still is his interest in writing for the "great

public." This confirms his present choice of models: late-Beethoven, Mahler, Bruckner and, as he himself says, "even Sibelius." There is no longer any remembrance of the dream; instead he dedicates the *Fourth Symphony* to "Hedy Lamarr and all the living heroes of all countries," the *Fifth* to "the young dead of this war, the young dead of all countries." Something quite empty is being inflated with a vast amount of volatile profundity.

One may wonder whether the emptiness and the cheap, gaudy quality shown in the book were not present, too, in Antheil's early work. Also whether the new forms and musical concepts admired by Pound, Satie, Cocteau and others, were not merely facades for hollow nothingness.

John Cage