

## William Butler Yeats, George Antheil, Ezra Pound Friends and Music

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### *Abstract*

William Butler Yeats was throughout his life determined to relate his words to music, and involved many writers and musicians in his search for the key. While in Rapallo staying near Ezra Pound, he met the young composer George Antheil, who became one of his converts. Others followed, with Yeats continuing to expound and clarify his ambition.

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It is March 1929 and an eccentric group has gathered for dinner at a small restaurant in Rapallo, along the Italian coast. Around the table are the American poet Ezra Pound and his artist wife Dorothy, who live permanently next door; the Irish poet and playwright William B. Yeats and his artist wife and medium George, who have their own large flat up the road; the German dramatist and novelist Gerhart Hauptmann and his violinist wife Margarete; the British music critic and poet Basil Bunting, considered by Yeats «one of Ezra's more savage disciples»<sup>1</sup>.

All have escaped to Rapallo for the winter, its balmy climate boasting nine times more sunshine than England's; the Yeatses in fact, like the Pounds, have long-term apartment rentals, and Bunting has come to work as Pound's secretary. All are artistic revolutionaries – Hauptmann's play *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (*Before Daybreak*, 1889) caused an uproar when produced at the Freie Bühne in Berlin; Bunting was imprisoned in England as a conscientious objector; Pound was already known in England and France as critical gadfly and iconoclastic early modernist poet, ambassador for Imagism and Vorticism; Yeats was constantly searching for new themes and rhythms in both poetry and drama and, although now retired from the Senate after incendiary but unsuccessful speeches for divorce and against censorship, still meddling in Irish politics and running the Abbey Theatre from afar.

Notwithstanding Pound's constant overriding interruptions and Yeats's inability to understand his fellow Nobel Laureate (Hauptmann spoke no English and talked incessantly, but in appearance reminded Yeats of William Morris<sup>2</sup>), this was a harmonious friendly group, constantly liberated by Hauptmann's insistence on the finest champagne and by George Yeats, the most accomplished linguist in the group, who served as interpreter. Later she would confess that «talking German through champagne is like playing chess to prevent sea-sickness»<sup>3</sup>.

Joining this distinguished literary group is a young man, described by George Yeats as «adorable, quite crazy, and probably a genius, so one forgives him being exceedingly tiresome and hysterical»<sup>4</sup>. She was also prepared to forgive his appearance – «If he weren't short, stout, flabby, broken nosed, dubiously shaved, & black of finger nail, he'd have half Europe at his feet»<sup>5</sup> – such a contrast to Hauptmann who, she reports, always «dresses for dinner in frock coat & a kind of high waistcoat, stock tie, & white kid gloves»<sup>6</sup> and even to Ezra Pound, whose sartorial appearance (a green coat with blue square buttons) was intended to make a statement. The newcomer is George Antheil, avant-garde American pianist and composer, who has recently returned from Berlin with his young wife Böske (art critic and niece of Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler).

But on this particular evening the subject is not music, poetry or drama, despite the group's illustrious reputations and connections. All are busy collaborating on a detective novel, the plot provided by young George Antheil based on his theories of endocrinology and his belief that hormonal types determine both action and physical appearance. This 'glandular detective story', about the murder of a concert agent, and partly drawing upon the spectacular failure of Antheil's concert in New York's Carnegie Hall the previous year, was an attempt to satisfy his companions' thirst for new crime novels, since they had all by now exhausted the local English library. Yeats was perhaps the most voracious reader in the group, who cheerfully admitted that he «read[s] nothing as a rule but poetry & philosophy (& of course detective stories)»<sup>7</sup>, and dismissed all crime stories not modelled on the French, which he claimed at least had «intellect in them»<sup>8</sup>, unlike the English versions.

Although written by committee – or perhaps because of this particular committee – the novel *Death in the Dark* (1930) was published a year later by the prestigious London firm Faber and Faber, after further editing by T.S. Eliot. It appeared under the pseudonym 'Stacey Bishop', which may have been an amalgamation of 'Stacey Blake', one of the authors of a series of popular crime novels, and a recent popular mystery novel, *The Bishop Murder Case* (1928) by S.S. Van Dine.

But despite the appeal of detective novels and the fame of its creators (George Yeats also seems to have contributed), *Death in the Dark* was not a critical success; although I found it moderately interesting, it is currently listed

in the catalogues of only three libraries worldwide. However, some years later, Antheil went on to publish, under his own name, *Every Man his own Detective: A Study of Glandular Criminology* (1937; subtitled: *X Marks the Gland where the Criminal's Found*), describing how an 'endocrine criminologist' visiting a crime scene could, by surveying the forensic evidence, immediately determine what hormonal type (usually those regulated by the thymus gland) had perpetrated the crime. It was a little more successful than *Death in the Dark* – I have discovered copies in forty-five libraries.

Antheil was also later to achieve some notoriety for his articles in «Esquire» magazine, especially those entitled *Glandbook for the Questing Male* (1936) and *The Glandbook in Practical Use* (1936), which rated women's accessibility according to their walk, build, height, and size of bust. The latter resulted in collaboration with the actress Hedy Lamarr on a 'secret communications system' which is today in wide use and known as 'spread-spectrum technology' or 'frequency hopping'. Although Antheil and Lamarr secured a patent in 1942, neither gained anything financially from their invention, which was rejected by the U.S. Navy. But by the early 1960s armed forces were routinely using frequency hopping to scramble signals, and the spread-spectrum is one of the bases of present-day internet and cell-phone traffic. In 1997 Antheil, by then deceased, and Lamarr, long retired, belatedly received a national award «for their trail-blazing development of a technology that has become a key component of wireless data systems»<sup>9</sup>. Few are aware that the original system as designed by the actress and the musician utilized eighty-eight different frequencies – the number of keys on a piano.

Five years later, in April 1934, the Yeatses would have more than a passing interest in hormonal theories when W.B. Yeats underwent the Steinach's 'rejuvenation' operation (a simple vasectomy) in the belief that this would stimulate production of male sex hormones and encourage his creativity as a writer. It may well be that, before reading the literature on the subject, they were prepared to accept Steinach's ideas because they had learned so much about glandular detection from the young pianist. But in Rapallo in 1929 their interest in aerial communication and channelling was restricted to their study of the occult, as W.B. Yeats revised and polished a second edition of *A Vision* (1925; 1937), his attempt to comprehend and apprehend reality – time, space, history, personality, psychology – within a much larger and more universal framework than one lifespan or one nation's history or even the world as we know it. This second new *Vision* for the first time publicized – much to his wife's dismay – the role her automatic script had played in developing the philosophy (or 'system') behind it and all his later writings. But George's automatic script, based on her husband's eager questions, dealt with far more than what appeared in either edition: speculations on the relationship between the spiritual and the material world, inner and outer nature, process and concept. In their philosophical explorations, the couple developed the

concept of a balanced relationship between creativity and sexuality – leading to Unity of Being. And Unity of Being included union of all the senses, including passionate speech. All of these thoughts too were in Yeats' mind during that idyll in Rapallo in 1929.

Now, it was George Antheil the composer and musical theorist who became important. Having just had success in Germany with his incidental music for a production of *Oedipus Rex* (1925), he had enthusiastically agreed to write the music for a trilogy of Yeats' plays – *Fighting the Waves* (1934), a ballet founded upon his earlier play *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919; the scenario arising out of George's early automatic script), and *On Bailé's Strand* (1903; 1904) and *At the Hawk's Well* (1916; 1917), all three based on the Cuchulain saga. The Pounds and the Yeatses were old friends – Dorothy Pound née Shakespear was a step-cousin of George's and it was to them and Rapallo she had turned when her husband was seriously ill. And though Yeats hardly ever agreed with or followed Ezra's lead, he never ignored it.

George Antheil was one of Pound's most recent enthusiasms. The young composer had begun his professional career in Europe achieving notoriety by performing behind locked doors with a revolver at the ready on the piano (to discourage any one from leaving early), and then causing riots with his composition *Ballet mécanique* (1924), originally intended as score for an abstract Dadaist film by the cubist painter Fernand Léger and photographers Man Ray and Dudley Murphy. Léger's sixteen-minute film, influenced by the Dadaist and subsequent surrealist manifestos of the period, employed montage a year before Eisenstein's famous episodic *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was produced; fragments of giant machines and inanimate objects are contrasted with human body parts, «close-up shots of ordinary objects, and repeated images of human activities and machines in rhythmic movement»<sup>10</sup>. Although I have found no critical reference to support my suggestion, the film's series of images of a woman's lips, teeth and eyes might have influenced Samuel Beckett's later short play *Not I* (1972) where we see only a woman's mouth suspended on stage, while the dialogue of the Music characters in Beckett's radio plays *Cascando* (1962) and *Words and Music* (1961) could well reflect Léger's and Antheil's concern with blocks of time, «slow and rapid passages, rest and intensity composed and contrasted against one another»<sup>11</sup> (Beckett's friends in Paris were also friends of Antheil).

Léger claimed that, true to its Dadaist roots, his film was the first without a scenario: «objects freed from all atmosphere, put in new relationships to each other»<sup>12</sup>. In his turn Antheil eschewed melody altogether, claiming «it has nothing to do with tonality»<sup>13</sup>. But in the early 1920s the synchronization of sight and sound was not yet reliable (the first feature-length movie originally presented as a talkie was *The Jazz Singer*, released in October 1927). And so Antheil's music soon took on a life of its own independent of Léger's cubist film. Besides, the composition lasted twice as long as the film. Its performance

called for three xylophones, four bass drums, a tamtam (gong), two pianos, a siren, three airplane propellers, seven electric bells, and sixteen synchronized player pianos. Before the production, it was decided to use leather strips in the airplane propeller to make it more audible; this had never been tried before, and unfortunately, a strip flew into the audience during the show. The onstage propeller also blew off toupees and hats, which caused further scuffles in the audience. Although the two works – Léger's film and Antheil's music – were finally performed together at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1935 accompanied by a single pianola roll, *Ballet mécanique* (1924) was never heard with full orchestration until 1999.

As described by one critic, «one must hear it to get a real sense of its chaos. It moves frighteningly quickly, up to 32nd notes at tempo (quarter = 152). It sounds like an onslaught of confusing chords, punctuated by random rings, wails, or pauses. The meter rarely stays the same for more than three measures, distracting from the larger form of the music and instead highlighting the driving rhythms. However, the piece is definitely structured in a sonata rondo»<sup>14</sup>. Thus shock value within a precise structure controlled by, among other devices, mechanical player-pianos. Antheil originally entitled his 1924 composition *Message to Mars*; the project was to illustrate «a new fourth dimension of music... *time-space*», «composed out of and for machines»<sup>15</sup>.

As with Paul Hindemith and Igor Stravinsky, many of Antheil's compositions were first punched out for the player piano. George Yeats, who as an amateur musician kept as keen an eye on developments in music as she did on contemporary drama and painting, knew the *Ballet mécanique* in its original piano-roll form. The Abbey playwright Lennox Robinson (who owned a player piano) had first approached Antheil in Paris the year before, suggesting that he wrote a score for the play Yeats was writing for the dancer Ninette de Valois and the newly-established Abbey School of Ballet<sup>16</sup>.

Always eager to sound out the new, Yeats was keenly aware (and Pound would have emphasized) that everyone of the European avant-garde had attended Antheil's groundbreaking concerts in France, Germany and Austria – imagine an audience of Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Ernest Hemingway, Natalie Barney, Eric Satie, Tristan Tzara, Igor Stravinsky, Diaghilev, Jean Cocteau, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson. It was during the early 1920s, while living above Sylvia Beach's legendary Shakespeare & Company bookstore in Paris' Latin Quarter, that Antheil first met Ezra Pound and James Joyce. There, where Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) was first published, the three contemplated an opera, *Cyclops*, based on this novel. An existing fragment, *Mr Bloom and the Cyclops*, summarizes Antheil's ambition to achieve «the ecstatic poetry of space! The satisfying hardness of time!». Foreseeing the amplification and intensive use of percussion we now live with, his score would illustrate, he claimed, «[t]he life of man. The destruction of music. Enormous phonographs with amplifiers. New musical machines»<sup>17</sup>. Unfortunately – like

many of Antheil's radical schemes – the *Ulysses* project never got beyond the planning stage; the machinery he envisaged was not yet to hand.

During the 1920s Ezra Pound himself was producing more music criticism than poetry: Antheil orchestrated Pound's 1923 opera, *The Testament of François Villon* (performed in masks just ten days after Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* startled Paris), and in turn the poet once accompanied the musician at a concert, playing the bass drum. To Pound, Antheil was representative of the 'new music', a sound which must have «[...] hard bits of rhythm. Hammered down, worn down, [...]» (320), a «musical world [...] of steel bars, not of old stone and ivy» – alongside Stravinsky representing «a definite break with the "atmospheric school"»<sup>18</sup>. Antheil insisted that the ideal concert was one produced mechanically, the only way one could achieve the most perfect reproduction of the original score: «A conductor does not want temperamental players in an orchestra. All he wants is a player to carry out the orders of the music perfectly or, in other words, he wants a mechanical player»<sup>19</sup>. Antheil frequently filled his 'time spaces' with either endless repetitions of a single chord, or long silences, where «time itself acts as music»<sup>20</sup>. We are reminded of more recent developments such as the 'chance' and electronic music of John Cage (whose composition *4'33"* (1952) consists of the sounds of the environment while the performer sits motionless).

It is not surprising that the futurist Antheil was attracted to the artistic concepts of the Bauhaus School of Design in Germany, with its collaboration of art, craft and technology, whose founder Gropius sought «an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast cars»<sup>21</sup>; where Kandinsky taught theory based on his geometric abstract paintings; Oskar Schlemmer's stage workshop developed the *Triadic Ballet*, a plotless play in which the essential features of geometrically stylized masks and costumes defined the dance (this would have especially interested Yeats and Pound); and at parties the so-called Bauhaus 'Jazz' Band produced a «fanatically rhythmic and penetrating din» created by «chairs, gunshots, handbells and giant tuning forks, sirens and pianos» with «a swinging sledgehammer rhythm»<sup>22</sup>. The 1927 list of Bauhaus books advertises *Musico-mechanico* by Antheil, which, like many of his other promised projects, does not seem to have appeared, though he did later publish on the relationship between rhythm and jazz, 'angular and elliptical' counter rhythms<sup>23</sup>.

All of this excited Yeats, who needed at this time some new stimulus. Besides, despite his inability to carry a tune and admitted ignorance of music<sup>24</sup>, Yeats had always chanted his poetry and insisted on 'heightened speech' in his plays. Very early on he and the actress Florence Farr Emery experimented with a modified form of lilting his lyrics to the accompaniment of the psaltery, a twelve-stringed lyre designed by Arnold Dolmetsch especially tuned for the purpose. Farr was an extraordinarily fine verse-speaker, influenced in part by the incantation both practised in their magical experiments of the occult

Order of the Golden Dawn. Portions of the simple scores she created and performed for the early plays *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), *On Baile's Strand* (1903), *The King's Threshold* (1904) and *Deirdre* (1907) are extant, and we have Yeats's assertion that «[Florence Farr] Emery alone satisfies my ear»<sup>25</sup>. Yeats did not want singing that would «turn my words to honey and oil in the modern way»<sup>26</sup> but rather what he called 'spoken song'. Songs in the plays should be «sung so as to preserve as far as possible the intonation and speed of ordinary passionate speech»<sup>27</sup> and again «a lyric which is spoken or chanted to music should... reveal its meaning, and its rhythm so become indissoluble in the memory»<sup>28</sup>.

«I am persuaded», he wrote during these early experiments, «that the fixing of the pitch gives more delicacy and beauty to the 'personal interpretation,' for it leaves the speaker free to preoccupy himself with the subtlest modulations [...] If the speaker to musical notes will attend to the subtleties of rhythm as carefully as a singer attends to the musical inventions of the composer, his speech will not "drift" into "intoning"»<sup>29</sup>. In Farr's transcription there is no melodic line as such, or even suggested tempo or rhythm; the few notes are in a comparatively high register, but in performing they were played an octave lower to suit her beautiful speaking voice. On rare occasions Yeats did not even want the words to be too clearly recognizable; he was after a combination of rhythm, sound and the relationship between the two rather than a recognizable melody that would force them apart. Basil Bunting's later pronouncement may well have come from either Yeats or Pound: «Poetry, like music, is to be heard. It deals in sound - long sounds and short sounds, heavy beats and light beats, the tone relations of vowels, the relations of consonants to one another»<sup>30</sup>. Inevitably theory was not always practised, especially if Farr was not available. In his published instructions to the plays Yeats admitted, «I have rehearsed the part of the Angel in the *Hour-Glass* with recorded notes throughout, and believe this is the right way; but in practice, owing to the difficulty of finding a player who did not sing too much the moment the notes were written down, have left it to the player's own unrecorded inspiration»<sup>31</sup>. Encouraged by Yeats, in 1909 Farr published a small book, *The Music of Speech*<sup>32</sup>, which includes musical notations for several poems spoken to the psaltery, but by then she had long ceased collaborating with her former lover.

After Farr decamped, Yeats turned to more professional musicians: Edward Elgar at the request of George Moore composed music for the production of Yeats and Moore's ill-fated *Diarmuid and Grania* (1901), including a horn motif, some incidental music, and a Funeral March; Irish composer John Larchet, who served as music director of the Abbey Theatre for over a quarter of a century (from 1907 to 1934), provided the music for Yeats's *The Green Helmet* in 1910. But Yeats was dissatisfied even with contemporary traditional music. Then he met «that queer creature Ezra Pound, [...] a great authority on the troubadours», who, he thought, «got closer to the right sort

of music for poetry than [Florence Farr] – it is more definitely music with strongly marked time & yet it is effective speech. [...] However», he admitted that Ezra «can't sing and he has no voice. It is like something on a very bad phonograph»<sup>33</sup>.

From then on, however, Pound's enthusiasm was palpable. When Yeats's Cuchulain play *At the Hawk's Well* was produced in 1916 with designs by his artist friend Edmund Dulac, Pound served as stage manager; by then both he and Yeats were strongly influenced by the Japanese Noh tradition, with its stylized ritualism of mask, sound and movement. In this and later Noh-style dramas Yeats replaced the psaltery with zither, gong, flute, and drum performed by masked musicians sitting on the stage throughout the action, unfolding and folding the curtain and chanting when comment was required. Dulac deliberately made use of instruments that would, in Yeats's words, «have great pictorial effect»<sup>34</sup>, and he himself was one of the musicians in the first performance. From now on the musicians would be considered actors, not accompanists (Yeats later described how the one woman musician – who composed some of the music for that first drawing room production – complained because it was tradition for all to stop while the musicians had their turn). In later productions music was composed by Dulac for his special instruments.

Yeats remained convinced that «on no account must the words be spoken "through music" in the fashionable way»<sup>35</sup>. He stuck to his words of 1906: «it will be a theatre of speech [...] for I would restore the whole ancient art of passionate speech, and would no more let a singer spoil a word or the poet's rhythm for the musician's sake than I would let an actor [...] spoil the poet's rhythm that he might give to a word what seemed to him a greater weight of drama»<sup>36</sup>. Florence Farr Emery and Frank Fay had shown it was possible; he continued his search for the ideal «music to adorn the words»<sup>37</sup>. For his next play *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), the dramatist drew upon the services of an old friend of his wife's and Pound's, the pianist Walter Rummel, known for his performances of Debussy, his occult interests, and lively amorous pursuits (Isadora Duncan was one of his lovers). For at least five years, even though encouraged by Maud Gonne, Rummel had been refused permission to write music for *The Countess Cathleen*, so eagerly accepted the opportunity to compose for *The Dreaming of the Bones*. His «difficult and beautiful» music again was written for four musicians performing on «a plucked instrument, a bowed instrument, and flute and drum»<sup>38</sup>. Rummel wrote to Yeats from Paris, «You won't know what to do with this music, so bring it to Dulac who, no doubt, will be able to decipher it. It is as simple as I could make it and even the fourth Musician is not absolutely necessary. However the musicians must be *good* musicians and not amateurs [...] The values and other indications must be faithfully upheld [...] I have indicated no movements to the songs. The singer must first recite the words to himself in good speech rhythm and he will thus deduce the musical rhythms for his song from it»<sup>39</sup>. The fourth



Musician was indeed dispensed with in the first production. And Rummel wrote no music for the dance, feeling that would require the dancer's help.

But Dulac and Yeats's experiments, like those with Florence Farr Emery, were still not satisfactory. Yeats turned to the Irish composer Arthur Duff for *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934). Later Lennox Robinson would contribute music for (and direct) Yeats's version of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (1928), which when rediscovered was annotated by Duff. Although becoming more interested in the dance form, Yeats continued to insist that the verse must keep «its natural passionate rhythm»<sup>40</sup>.

And so, in 1929, George Antheil, self-styled «bad boy of music», came along at just the right time. Revived by the soft air of Rapallo and the stimulation of Pound's argumentative presence, Yeats was no longer bed-ridden and after a drought of eighteen months was once more writing verse. He «says he is full of themes», his wife reported to one of Antheil's Paris friends; «yesterday came dashing along from his cot to announce that he was going to write twelve songs and I had got to purchase "a musical instrument" at once and set them to music [...] All said songs being of a most frivolous nature!»<sup>41</sup>. I do not know whether George Yeats found a suitable instrument, though she was certainly capable of playing one, but we do know that the songs «of a frivolous nature» were the beginning of the Crazy Jane series of poems later published in *Words for Music Perhaps* (1932). Written «not so much that they may be sung as that I may define their kind of emotion to myself. I want them to be all emotion & all impersonal»<sup>42</sup>. They were, he felt, «unlike my past work — wilder and perhaps slighter»<sup>43</sup>.

At the same time he was listening to Antheil's setting for *Fighting the Waves*, pronouncing it «the only dramatic music I have ever heard, a powerful beat, strangeness, something hard and heroic»<sup>44</sup>. Relieved that the composer «promises to keep the instruments required [...] within the range of the Abbey» and having convinced himself that his own theories were once more in vogue, he admitted: «If I knew one tune from another I should probably hate it for I judge from Ezra's conversation that [Antheil's] affinities are all with the youngest of the young. Not knowing anything about music however I am delighted to find a man whose theories about the relations between words and music seem to be exactly my own [...] In my moments of personal hopefulness [...] I begin to think that what my friends call my lack of ear is but an instinct for the music of the twelfth century»<sup>45</sup>. George Yeats privately observed that difficulties in communication may have assisted in the apparent unanimity between George Antheil and W.B. Yeats. However, she too thought Antheil's composition «Stupendous. Terrific. Antheil played it this afternoon before tea and after tea again and sang it (a lovely voice). It is overwhelming and immense»<sup>46</sup>.

Although to work on an opera prevented him from composing music for the other two Cuchulain plays, Antheil had, with much urging from

Lennox Robinson throughout the summer, produced his «most strange, most dramatic music»<sup>47</sup> for *Fighting the Waves* on time. The ballet, danced and choreographed by Ninette de Valois, with masks by the Dutch sculptor Hildo von Krop (present for the première) was, Yeats proudly informed Olivia Shakespear, «my greatest success on the stage since *Kathleen-ni-Houlihan* [...] Everyone here is convinced as I am that I have discovered a new form by this combination of dance, speech, and music»<sup>48</sup>. When Lady Gregory saw it, she too was impressed – «wild, beautiful, the motion of the dancers, the rhythm of the music, the scene». She went on to add that the words were lost and the masks hideous, which only «added to the strange unreality. We might all have been at the bottom of the sea»<sup>49</sup>. «When you selected Antheil I think it was [a piece of] divination»<sup>50</sup>, Yeats wrote to Lennox Robinson after the first performance of *Fighting the Waves*. He did not use the word lightly, especially since he was still refining his thoughts on *A Vision* and his wife's work as Sybil. Interestingly, five years later when granting permission for the music to be published in *Wheels and Butterflies* (1934), Antheil wrote from the United States (he settled permanently in Hollywood where he became well-known as composer of film music), «I am very honored in your asking [...] I was very happy writing this music [...] it seemed as if some spirit moved me, and spoke through me, and as I listened to the music that came from within I realized, almost as if it came from somewhere or someone else, that it was very Irish-heroic. It was mediumistic»<sup>51</sup>. However, such music required a «large expensive orchestra» and so Antheil's contribution lapsed. But not Yeats's insatiable quest for the secret to music and words.

About the same time Antheil's music was published Yeats had received four visits in the space of a week (mid-November 1934) from another even younger American «bad boy of music», Harry Partch, who believed it his destiny to answer Yeats's call in *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (1906): «I have to find men with more music than I have, who will develop to a finer subtlety the singing of the cottage and the forecastle, and develop it more on the side of speech than that of music [...] to [...] re-create the regulated declamations that died out when music fell into its earliest elaborations»<sup>52</sup>.

Partch had invented a forty-three-tone scale (and a great many new instruments) to allow for a new style of vocal setting following the contours of the speaking voice. And the voice he sought was Yeats's, for he not only asked permission to employ his theories in setting Yeats's *Oedipus the King* to music, but persuaded the playwright to read passages from the play while the composer made a rough graph of his inflections and memorized «his vibrant tones». None of the music was yet written, and Partch's composition for four «intoner-actors»<sup>53</sup> would not be produced until well after Yeats's death. But Partch sang to the accompaniment of one of his adapted/invented instruments (there would be over forty by time he died) and the two men animatedly discussed Partch's musical outline for his proposed setting of *Oedipus* and their

shared belief in the notation of music rooted in the spoken word. «Edmund Dulac and George Antheil had both guaranteed his music though not his theory»<sup>54</sup>; Partch had apparently met Antheil the previous year in New York. Delighted with this further confirmation of his beliefs, Yeats wrote letters of introduction to Arnold Dolmetsch, the musicologist and instrument maker who had devised Farr's psaltery thirty years before, and to Edmund Dulac:

His whole system is based upon a series of notes within the range of the speaking voice, within that range he has found a series of minute intervals, more minute than quarter tones. He believes that he has re-discovered the foundation of Greek and Chinese music. He never sings or even chants to his viola but always speaks, and every inflexion and tone of his voice is recorded in the score. He is, in fact, working out what Florence Farr and I attempted but with a science and a knowledge of music beyond Florence Farrs reach. [...] He has not yet attempted to deal with poetry where the unit of sound is a stanza or period, nor has he faced the problem of narrative poetry. He himself feels that he has to perfect his instruments and to leave the development to others.<sup>55</sup>

Both Dulac and Dolmetsch met with Partch, and were sufficiently impressed by his research; moving on to Rapallo, Partch however found Ezra Pound «a most difficult man»<sup>56</sup>. Yeats and Partch never met again, though the poet seems to have read and found interesting a manuscript the musician sent him (perhaps an early draft of Partch's *Genesis of a Music*, revised many times and finally published in 1949).

Meanwhile, Yeats's composition of the 'Crazy Jane' poems had continued. That wild, irrepressible and visionary figure, though founded on real-life 'Cracked Mary', a mad woman of the roads who entertained Yeats and Lady Gregory with outrageous stories and «audacious speech»<sup>57</sup> (and whom Gregory appropriated for several of her own plays), in turn seems to have arrived unexpected and unbidden at a time when Yeats was questioning the roots of creative energy, once again contemplating the relationship between creativity, sexuality and 'Unity of Being', and receptive to the harshly strange and powerful rhythms of Antheil's composition. And though he stated that «"For Music" is only a name, nobody will sing them»<sup>58</sup>, in rhythm, structure and tone the Crazy Jane poems are markedly different from much of his earlier work, demanding even more of the speaker than his and Farr's experiments with the psaltery years earlier. In a lecture he would insist that poetry must be read «rhythmically [...] there is no other method. A poem is an elaboration of the rhythms of common speech and their association with profound feeling»<sup>59</sup>.

But the speaker is only a vehicle and must never descend to the casualness of everyday speech. The Abbey Theatre tradition demanded that the voice – not bodily gestures or appearance – dominate (hence his fascination with the formalism of Noh and masks). «All that is personal soon rots; it must be

packed in ice or salt»; «the world's last great poetical period is over»<sup>60</sup>. The poet must be removed from the poetic *persona*. In part this concentration on restraint and emphasis on the will of the speaker alone was the result of George Yeats's geometrical designs for *A Vision* – «I believe I shall have a poetical rebirth for as I write about my cones and gyres all kinds of images come before me»<sup>61</sup>. It was also a return to energy and daring after long illness. The result was startling in a violence and freedom that (though I would not claim it came only from Antheil and Pound), led to new experiments in rhythm, syntax and interplay of voices that continued to the end of his career. Vibrant Crazy Jane with her preoccupations with sex and death – the eternal antinomies of the exuberant natural animal world and the sterility of organized, life-denying religion, the spirit versus the law – haunted Yeats for several years until he was finally determined to «exorcise that slut [...] whose language has become unendurable»<sup>62</sup>.

The seven Crazy Jane poems, like Antheil's music (and indeed, much of *A Vision*), are not easy to read, exciting and strange in meaning, but also in presentation. In the first he composed, *Crazy Jane and the Bishop* (1929), there are two voices, and within Jane's a third – the recollected words of the bishop even before he was ordained. Jack lives more vibrantly in Jane's mind (and in God's) than the Bishop ever will. As night takes over, Jane's power also increases so that by the end of the poem her refrain reverses the meaning of the two epithets: «coxcomb» (vv. 7, 14, 21, 28) with its multiple implications of folly and frivolity, knavery and madness, the outcast, gradually applies not to dear virile Jack but to the moralizing sterile Bishop; whereas the connotations of «the solid man» (vv. 7, 14, 21, 28), stable and sensible, dependable and wholesome, unyielding and socially acceptable, are appropriated for the once-sullied travelling Journey man. Just as the oak, a sacred tree rooted in the pre-Christian world and witchcraft, no matter how blasted will outlast Church, Bishop and Jane and her lover, so this poem will outlast all. But the poem has strong rhythm and tone – there is nothing soft or romantic about its music or its thought; the image and counter-image clash directly, similar to the harshness of Antheil's music.

Yeats continued writing the Crazy Jane poems over the next two years, and in publication re-ordered them, but always «keeping the mood and plan of the first poems»<sup>63</sup> (one was suppressed because of its imprecation concluding each stanza, «May the devil take King George»). Of those he began during those heady few weeks in Rapallo, *Crazy Jane Reproved* (1930) makes use of a different kind of counterpoint, the 'burden' or refrain often found in traditional ballads, juxtaposed to an altogether different rhythm. Here the speaker is not the Bishop, and Jane's response seems to be relegated to the finger-snapping, nonsensical burden. The images in the poem on the other hand are weighty, drawing upon the upsetting of the natural and supernatural order, human versus divine love. Even Heaven must strain to achieve perfection, so do not count on permanence from anything less. In contrast to the rest of the poem

the burden was, he wrote, «meant to be gayer, more clearly a song» and to be «sung to a melody [...] There is no special value in 'fol de rol' any meaningless words would do [...] Kingsley once used "barrum, barrum, barrum, baree". I think when you find words like that in an old ballad, they are meant to be sung to a melody, as Partch, the California musician [...] sings his "meaningless words". He uses them to break the monotony of monotone»<sup>64</sup>.

The actress Sara Allgood used to sing a folk song with the same refrain, *Fol de rol, fol de rol*, given here to Jane, and occasionally she contributed the music for songs in the Abbey Theatre plays. For Yeats was not the only one concerned with the relationship between words and music in his plays. Until John Millington Synge's death in 1909 (the year Ezra Pound appeared on the scene), Yeats and Lady Gregory both turned to their fellow director for advice. Synge had started his career as a professional musician and composer, winning awards in harmony and counterpoint as a student, only switching to literature when stage fright made performance impossible for him. *Riders to the Sea* (1903), his first finished play, is in structure almost an extended aria (in his 1927 opera *Riders to the Sea*, Vaughan Williams had no need to alter Synge's dialogue, adding only one line to the libretto). When annotating his play scripts Synge invariably used musical terminology, emphasising always the silence surrounding words and actions. All his plays begin in silence and his stage directions indicate where gesture and even facial reactions accompany the words. George Moore claimed that *The Well of the Saints* (1905) was in itself the stuff of opera; and Synge himself toyed in his early drafts of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) with the idea of a ballad-singer as framework. When he returned to poetry in the final years of his short life he experimented with the ballad form; so raw were his poems *Danny* and *The Curse* that Lolly Yeats refused to publish them in the Cuala Press, but her brother W.B. Yeats never forgot their sharpness and «clash of incompatibles»<sup>65</sup>.

Synge wrote his plays as if they were musical scores, depending on counterpoint as much as harmony. Yeats called upon music that represented heightened country speech; in his dramatic criticism he believed that «when familiar with a form of life one can catch its tune»<sup>66</sup>. It was however the third member of the directorial triumvirate, Lady Gregory, whose work most directly draws upon music in both theme and structure. Many of her plays – *Dervorgilla* (1912), *The Wrens* (1922), *On the Racecourse* (1926) – incorporate ballad singers as commentators on the present action, and all of them insist upon full use of music, some entirely dependent on song and dance. Even the short comedy *Spreading the News* (1904), whose plot builds from the singing of a ballad, has been made into a comic opera. Lady Gregory once described drama as simply «conversation rearranged»<sup>67</sup>; she might have added, with that talk considerably strengthened by the ballad and its airs. Depending on the collective memory of her audience – for as balladeers have always done, she is addressing her own people and expecting them to recognize the sentiments

expressed – the songs thus do double duty, assisting the play's actions through narrative while calling forth the emotions roused by the music and its song. When, at the end of his life, Yeats recalled those early experiments by himself and his colleagues, he reiterated: «I wanted all my poetry to be spoken on a stage or sung [...] bringing all back to syntax that is for ear alone»<sup>68</sup>. Perhaps that gathering in Rapallo provided even more than he realized at the time.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> W.B. Yeats to O. Shakespear, 2 March 1928. Unless otherwise indicated, all of W.B. Yeats' letters are quoted from *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, Oxford UP (Intelex Electronic Edition), Oxford 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished letter from G. Yeats to L. Robinson, 21 April 1929. Unless otherwise indicated all of G. Yeats's letters to L. Robinson are in the possession of The Huntington Library, San Marino.

<sup>4</sup> G. Yeats to L. Robinson, 16 April 1929.

<sup>5</sup> G. Yeats to L. Robinson, 19 April 1929.

<sup>6</sup> G. Yeats to L. Robinson, 4 March 1928.

<sup>7</sup> W.B. Yeats to W. Lewis, 24 April 1929.

<sup>8</sup> Lady Gregory, *Journals. Vol. 2*, ed. by D.J. Murphy, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross 1987, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> On 12 March 1997 H. Lamarr and G. Antheil (posthumously) were given a special Pioneer Award from the Electronic Frontiers Foundation for their U.S. Patent No. 2, 292,387, considered the foundational patent for spread spectrum technologies.

<sup>10</sup> C.S. Eliel *et al.*, *L'Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris, 1918-1925*, Harry Abrams, New York 2001, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> F. Léger, *The Functions of Painting*, trans. by A. Anderson, ed. by E. Fry, Vintage, New York 1973, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> G. Antheil, *My Ballet Mécanique: What it Means*, «Der Querschnitt», 9, 1925, pp. 789-791, quoted by L. Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil 1900-1959*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor 1983, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> *A Musical Analysis*, anonymous contribution to *Ballet Mécanique*, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballet\\_Mécanique](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballet_Mécanique)> (05/12).

<sup>15</sup> G. Antheil, *My Ballet Mécanique: What it Means*, cit., p. 104.

<sup>16</sup> See L. Robinson, *Curtain Up*, Michael Joseph Ltd., London 1942, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> L. Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil 1900-1959*, cit., pp. 110-111.

<sup>18</sup> E. Pound, *George Antheil*, «The Criterion», 2, 1924, pp. 321-331, quoted by R. Murray Schafer (ed.), *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism*, Faber and Faber, London 1978, pp. 252-253.

<sup>19</sup> Extract from R. Fuller, 'Ballet Mecanique,' to *Wipe Out Big Orchestras, and Audiences Too*, «Paris Tribune», 21 January 1925, quoted by L. Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil 1900-1959*, cit., p. 292.

<sup>20</sup> L. Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil 1900-1959*, cit., p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> A full description of the Bauhaus philosophy can be found in W. Curtis, *Walter Gropius, German Expressionism, and the Bauhaus, Modern Architecture Since 1900*, Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River 1987, pp. 309-316.

<sup>22</sup> See E. Neumann, *Bauhaus and Bauhaus People: Personal Opinions and Recollections*, Van Nostrand, New York 1970, p. 147.

- <sup>23</sup> See G. Antheil, *The Negro on the Spiral or A Method of Negro Music*, in the revolutionary anthology *Negro*, collected and ed. by N. Cunard, Hours Press, Paris 1934, pp. 346-351.
- <sup>24</sup> W.B. Yeats to G. Craig, 1911, about Carlo Leoni's plan to make an opera out of *Countess Cathleen*.
- <sup>25</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Dramatis Personae*, in Id., *Autobiographies*, Macmillan, London 1955, p. 413.
- <sup>26</sup> Yeats's first use of the phrase occurs in the *Preface* to *Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends*, Cuala Press, Dublin 1931, p. 2.
- <sup>27</sup> W.B. Yeats, note to *On Baile's Strand*, in Id., *Poems, 1899-1905*, A.H. Bullen, London 1906, p. 278.
- <sup>28</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Uncollected Prose II*, ed. by J.P. Frayne, C. Johnson, Columbia UP, New York 1975, p. 160.
- <sup>29</sup> W.B. Yeats to the Editor of the «Academy», 7 June 1902, p. 196.
- <sup>30</sup> R. Caddel, *Introduction*, in B. Bunting, *Complete Poems*, New Directions, New York 2003, p. 9.
- <sup>31</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Plays in Prose and Verse, Collected Works*, vol. III, Shakespeare Head, Stratford-on-Avon 1908, p. 223.
- <sup>32</sup> F. Farr, *The Music of Speech*, Elkin Matthews, London 1909.
- <sup>33</sup> W.B. Yeats to Lady Gregory, 10 December 1909.
- <sup>34</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Preface* to Id., *Four Plays for Dancers*, Macmillan, London 1921, p. vii.
- <sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. v.
- <sup>36</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Preface* to Id., *The Poetical Works of William B. Yeats*, Macmillan, London 1921, p. viii.
- <sup>37</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Preface* (October 1912), in Id., *A Selection from the Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, Bernhard Tauchnitz, Leipzig 1913, p. 6.
- <sup>38</sup> *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, vol. II, The Plays*, ed. by D.R. Clark, R.E. Clark, Scribner, New York 2001, Appendix B, p. 781.
- <sup>39</sup> W. Morse Rummel to W.B. Yeats, 29 September 1917, in *Letters to W.B. Yeats*, ed. by R.J. Finneran, G. Mills Harper, W.M. Murphy, vol. 2, Macmillan, London 1977, p. 335.
- <sup>40</sup> W.B. Yeats, *A General Introduction for my Work*, in Id., *Essays and Introductions*, Macmillan, London 1961, p. 522.
- <sup>41</sup> Unpublished letter from G. Yeats to T. MacGreevy, 11 February 1929. Unless otherwise indicated, all letters from George Yeats to Thomas MacGreevy are in the Manuscripts Room of Trinity College Library.
- <sup>42</sup> W.B. Yeats to O. Shakespear, 2 March 1929.
- <sup>43</sup> W.B. Yeats to O. Shakespear, 29 March 1929.
- <sup>44</sup> W.B. Yeats to L. Robinson, late April 1929.
- <sup>45</sup> W.B. Yeats to S. Moore, 24 March 1929.
- <sup>46</sup> G. Yeats to L. Robinson, 19 April 1929.
- <sup>47</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Preface* to *Wheels and Butterflies*, quoted in Id., *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. by R.K. Alspach, Macmillan, London 1965, p. 1308.
- <sup>48</sup> W.B. Yeats to O. Shakespear, 24 August 1929.
- <sup>49</sup> A. Gregory, *The Journals, vol. II*, cit., p. 456.
- <sup>50</sup> W.B. Yeats to L. Robinson, late April 1929.
- <sup>51</sup> G. Antheil to W.B. Yeats, 27 June 1934.
- <sup>52</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Plays and Controversies*, Macmillan, London 1923, p. 185.
- <sup>53</sup> B. Gilmore, *Harry Parich: a Biography*, Yale UP, New Haven 1988, p. 199.
- <sup>54</sup> W.B. Yeats to A. Dolmetsch, 18 March 1935.
- <sup>55</sup> W.B. Yeats to E. Dulac, 21 November 1934.
- <sup>56</sup> B. Gilmore, *Harry Parich: a Biography*, cit., p. 109.
- <sup>57</sup> W.B. Yeats to O. Shakespear, 22 November 1931.
- <sup>58</sup> W.B. Yeats to O. Shakespear, 13 September 1929.

<sup>59</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Modern Poetry*, in Id., *Essays and Introductions*, cit., p. 508.

<sup>60</sup> W.B. Yeats, *A General Introduction for my Work*, ivi, p. 522.

<sup>61</sup> W.B. Yeats to O. Shakespear, 2 July 1929.

<sup>62</sup> W.B. Yeats to G. Yeats, 22 December 1931.

<sup>63</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Dedication to Edmund Dulac*, *The Winding Stair and other Poems*, Macmillan, London 1933, p. vi.

<sup>64</sup> W.B. Yeats to M. Collis, 23 November 1934.

<sup>65</sup> The phrase is from T. O'Brien Johnson, whose *Synge: The Medieval and the Grotesque*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross 1982, thoroughly discusses the concept.

<sup>66</sup> W.B. Yeats to L. Robinson, 8 September 1930.

<sup>67</sup> A. Gregory, *Seventy Years: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory*, ed. by C. Smythe, Colin Smythe Limited, Gerrards Cross 1974, p. 412.

<sup>68</sup> W.B. Yeats, *An Introduction for my Plays*, in Id., *Essays and Introductions*, cit., p. 529.

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