George Antheil’s Jazz Symphony, described by the composer as “synthesized jazz,” was written while he was living in France, a year after his sensational Ballet Mécanique. Like Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, it was commissioned by Paul Whitman for his second “Experiment in Modern Music” concert, which took place in Carnegie Hall and not in Aeolian Hall, as the one which premiered Rhapsody in Blue. But Antheil didn’t finish the work in time for the concert, thus it was premiered in 1927, also at Carnegie Hall, by the W. C. Handy Orchestra. When rehearsing the music, Handy realized that its complexities were well beyond his meager abilities as a conductor, so he hired Allie Ross, conductor of the New Amsterdam Symphonic Orchestra, to do the job. Thus we have a fascinating dichotomy here, a piece composed by a white expatriate American premiered by an all-African-American orchestra in the composer’s native land. Despite receiving an ovation and being unanimously praised by critics and musicians, it fell into oblivion.

The problem was not that the work was not interesting or original. It was. The problem was that it was very little “jazz” in the syncopated sense of the word. The music leans heavily on the sort of ostinato rhythm as the Ballet Mécanique of 1924, despite the use of instruments in a much more jazz-inflected timbre. In brief, it’s a good piece, fascinating and well constructed, but it bears even less relationship to jazz than Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G, which is also very tenuously connected to the American art form.

One thing is for sure, though: Gil Rose and his Boston Modern Orchestra go all out in their performance here. The same is true of the original version of the Ballet Mécanique, which includes sirens and other sound effects in addition to the clangor of pianola parts mixed with live pianists. His original vision was to have 16 pianolas playing in synchronization, but in 1924 the technology did not exist for this; however, by the 1990s one could synchronize pianolas by using MIDI-compatible computer-controlled player pianos (so the notes tell us) like Yamaha’s Disklavi and QRS Music’s Pianomation. The first such performance took place in Trossingen, Germany in 1996, conducted by Franz Lang.

Annotator Paul Lehrman explains that Anthiel’s sole tempo marking is “Pianola=85,” which has been taken to mean that the piano roll is scrolled at 8.5 feet per minute, which is too fast for either humans or the pianolas to play it. A 1999 performance given in Lowell, Massachusetts slowed the tempo down from what Anthiel’s marking is assumed to be (152) to MM=100. But conductor Peter Rundel “came up with the idea of slowing down the tempo in the most rhythmically difficult part of the piece, a 127-measure section towards the end, to between MM=90 and 95, which would make it possible to play the rest of the piece considerably faster.” This is also the performing method used here by Gil Rose, although only eight Disklavi’s could fit onto the Jordan Hall stage when the recording was made. No matter: It’s plenty noisy enough!

If you are a fan of Ballet Mécanique (I am, though I freely admit that its impact is greatly enhanced when you watch the surrealistic film to which it was originally set), you’ll revel in this disc. If not, there are plenty of “Mellow With Mozart” CDs for you to enjoy. This is a real barn-burner of a disc! Lynn René Bayley