GEORGE ANTHEIL (1900-1959)

A JAZZ SYMPHONY
BALLET POUR INSTRUMENTS MÉCANIQUES ET PERCUSSION

BOSTON MODERN ORCHESTRA PROJECT
GIL ROSE, CONDUCTOR

[1] A JAZZ SYMPHONY
(ORIGINAL VERSION, 1925) 13:14

[2] BALLET POUR INSTRUMENTS MÉCANIQUES ET PERCUSSION
(ORIGINAL VERSION, 1924) 26:37

TOTAL 39:53
By George Antheil

If the public still thinks of me at all, it probably thinks of me as the composer of this damned Ballet Mécanique. It is now strange for me to remember that I actually finished it as long ago as early 1925, twenty years ago—yet I am still listed among the “young American composers”! Therefore this Ballet Mécanique has become to me what the “C Sharp Minor Prelude” must have become to Rachmaninoff: it is frankly my nightmare, this in spite of the fact that since 1925 I have never again touched the idea of “mechanism” in music, either aesthetically or practically.

Better men than myself have been longer remembered and damned for their youthful escapades or some flamboyant action than for their more sedate efforts. Don’t get the idea, however, that just because I grouse and mumble here, I consider my Ballet Mécanique a mad youthful prank! It is a completely sincere, although possibly youthful, work, but utterly representative of a very interesting period in the world’s history. It has had a tremendous success in Paris, aroused the enthusiasm of an entire artistic generation, among them Jean Cocteau, Virgil Thomson, Erik Satie, even James Joyce . . . It has also been in bad repute in America only because it once endured a wrongly advertised and badly presented performance in Carnegie Hall. In short, it became something else than what it really is, a myth.

I think my Ballet Mécanique has been misunderstood here not because of its music, which few people here have ever heard (I am not even counting all of the three thousand people who were at Carnegie Hall; they came to see, not to hear), but because of its title and its still more unfortunate publicity. Its title, for instance, seems to imply that it is a “mechanical dance,” a ballet of mechanism, machinery, possibly to illustrate the interior of a factory. But it must be remembered that 1924 was the beginning of the day of titles without connection. If one wrote a book then, for instance, one usually gave it a name as far removed from the contents as possible: as, for example, the titles of Hemingway’s or Ford Maddox Ford’s novels were hardly connected with their contents. (This has even continued to be the style!) I called my musical piece “Ballet Mécanique,” but I really do not remember why.

My original title for the work (given on the manuscript started in Germany) was Message to Mars. Considered from the purely euphonic point of view, it is, of course, a much worse one than Ballet Mécanique: moreover it implies all kinds of moralistic and mystic things which would certainly be allergic to the ice blocks of its music. The words “Ballet Mécanique” were brutal, contemporary, hard-boiled, symbolic of the spiritual exhaustion, the superathletic, non-sentimental period commencing “The Long Armistice.”

My original idea in writing the work was to both synthesize and expand the piano sonatas. Also to eliminate whatever effect [Stravinsky’s] “Les Noces” might have made upon me through the first movement of the First Violin Sonata—all this in a work of sufficient size that the public could, so to speak, see it better. The Ballet Mécanique strictly followed “the dream”; it had nothing whatsoever to do with the actual description of factories, machinery—and if this has been misunderstood by others, Honegger, Mossolov included, it is not my fault; had they considered it purely as music (as, being musicians, they should have), they might have found it rather a “mechanistic” dance of life, or even a signal of these troubled and war-potential 1924 times placed in a rocket and shot to Mars.

But certainly not a mundane piece of machinery!

It is true that at the time I did consider machines very beautiful, and I had even advised aesthetes to have a good look at them; still, I repeat again and again, even frantically, I had no idea (as did Honegger and Mossolov, for example) of copying a machine directly down
into music, so to speak. My idea, rather, was to warn the age in which I was living of the simultaneous beauty and danger of its own unconscious mechanistic philosophy, aesthetic.

As I saw it, my Ballet Mécanique (properly played!) was streamlined, glistening, cold, often as “musically silent” as interplanetary space, and also often as hot as an electric furnace, but always attempting at least to operate on new principles of construction beyond the normal fixed (since Beethoven’s Ninth and Bruckner) boundaries.

I was not successful en toto, but it was a “try” towards a new form, new musical conception, extending, I think, into the future.

A JAZZ SYMPHONY (1925) was premiered April 10, 1927, at Carnegie Hall by the W.C. Handy Orchestra, conducted by Allie Ross. The work is scored for two oboes, two clarinets, soprano/alto/tenor saxophone, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion, two banjos, three pianos, and a full string section.

Ballet pour instruments mécaniques et percussion (1924) was originally written to accompany a Dadaist film of the same name, directed by Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger. It was premiered in a reduced orchestration June 19, 1926, at the Théâtre Champs-Élysées, Paris, France, conducted by Vladimir Golschmann. The original orchestration premiered November 18, 1999, at Durgin Hall, Lowell, Massachusetts, by the University of Massachusetts Lowell Percussion Ensemble, conducted by Jeffrey Fischer. The work is scored for sixteen player pianos in four parts, two regular pianos, three xylophones, seven electric bells, three propellers, a siren, four bass drums, and one tam-tam.

**By Paul D. Lehrman**

My Ballet Mécanique comes out of the first and principle stuff of music...TIME-SPACE....Now I hope to present you not with an explosion, but the FOURTH DIMENSION...THE FIRST PHYSICAL REALIZATION OF THE FOURTH DIMENSION. I am not presenting you with an abstraction. I am presenting you with a PHYSICALITY LIKE SEXUAL INTERCOURSE.

—George Antheil, De Stijl, May, 1925

In 1924, George Antheil (1900–1959) was a brash young American pianist and composer living in post-World War I Paris at the heart of the expatriate community. His performances of his “ultra-modern” piano compositions were drawing sold-out crowds and causing fistfights all over the continent. He was for a time the most famous American musician in Europe, and counted among his friends Joyce, Picasso, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Virgil Thomson, and Ezra Pound. Although he had never written for a large ensemble before, early that year he began working on *Ballet Mécanique*.

It was a massive undertaking: the piece is 1240 measures long, with over 600 time-signature changes, and is filled with complex, blazing-fast rhythmic figures, atonal arpeggios, and huge block chords. It is relentlessly loud and cacophonous, with snatches of melody occasionally bubbling up, only to be subsumed by the sheer wall of sound. Parts are reminiscent of Stravinsky’s *Les noces*, but taken to extremes, and it incorporates elements of jazz and ragtime, as well as snippets of Rimsky-Korsakov. And after twenty minutes of aural assault, Antheil introduces a completely new element to musical composition: total silence. In several sections near the end, some as long as twenty seconds, which Antheil calls “time-space,” absolutely nothing happens.

The instrumentation was just as radical, combining massive percussion with industrial sound effects, but the most outrageous addition to the ensemble was sixteen synchronized pianolas. The pianola, a close cousin of the player piano, was a device that attached to the keyboard of a conventional piano. Complex pneumatics reading holes in a paper roll operated mechanical fingers that pushed down the keys. Pianolas and player pianos had been popular in homes and entertainment venues since the 1890s. A number of composers including Stravinsky, Toch, Ravel, Grainger, and Hindemith had written or arranged pieces for them. Stravinsky was the first to entertain the idea of combining multiple pianolas while he was working on *Les noces* (for which he also considered mechanically-controlled cimbaloms and harmonium), but he abandoned it as impractical. Antheil, who had befriended Stravinsky when the two met in Berlin in 1922, was the first composer to attempt to see it through. Antheil’s handwritten scores for the piece (he wrote it out twice, once with the percussion parts and once without) contain parts for four pianolas, but his articles and letters show clearly that he envisioned using sixteen such instruments, four on a part.
But there was a problem: synchronizing multiple pianolas was simply not possible. Although several such instruments could be started together, and set to the same nominal tempo, there was no way to prevent minute mechanical inconsistencies in the rolls and the mechanisms from causing them to drift apart over time. Given the complex and precise rhythms in Antheil’s score, this would have been disastrous.

Antheil was working closely with Pleyel, the largest piano manufacturer in France, who created the pianola rolls for Ballet Mécanique. In 1923, Pleyel filed a patent for a system for synchronizing multiple mechanical devices such as pianolas and film projectors, using electric motors and a sophisticated speed-adjusting system. But their design was neither complete nor practical, and they never came close to building a working model. Nor did Pleyel’s patent bear any resemblance to Antheil’s own conception of how multiple pianolas could be synchronized. In his writings he described an all-electric system, in which the instruments were operated from a “common control,” using a “switchboard” to direct which instruments were playing which parts.

Unbeknownst to Pleyel, however, there was a player piano manufacturer who made instruments that conceivably could have been adapted to this purpose: the Tel-Electric company of Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Tel-Electric’s pianos used a standalone control unit, which connected over electrical wires to a mechanism mounted under the piano keyboard, which contained electromagnets that pulled down the keys. Modifying the system so that a single control unit could address multiple pianos would not have been beyond the capabilities of a clever electrical engineer of the time. Antheil, who grew up in New Jersey and studied in Philadelphia and New York, might well have encountered one of these instruments during his youth, and the concept stuck with him.

But the Tel-Electric company went out of business in 1917, a victim of the metal shortages brought on by the war. Their pianos were only sold in the northeast United States—they were completely unknown in Europe. Not being an engineer, Antheil might not have real-
ized that Pleyel, and indeed every other pianola maker, used technology that operated on entirely different principles.

When he finally realized he was not going to get his multiple pianolas, Antheil had Pleyel re-cut the pianola rolls so they could be played on a single instrument. He also realized that the piece was too long to fit on a single roll, so he marked two breaks in the score where the pianolist could change rolls, a process that takes at least 60 seconds. At the same time, he decided that the live piano parts should be played on multiple instruments—as many as ten.

This was how Ballet Mécanique was premiered in Paris, and it was a true succès de scandale: Aaron Copland declared that Antheil “outsacked the Sacre” and Virgil Thomson wrote that he “turned Paris on its ear.”

The composer’s celebrity, however, was short-lived. In 1927 a New York book publisher who dabbled in concert promotion decided to bring Antheil back to America, and scheduled two dates at Carnegie Hall. The program included both A Jazz Symphony and Ballet Mécanique, as well as a string quartet and a violin (with drum) sonata. But the publisher ludicrously over-hyped the event, promising riots which never occurred and hiring “provocateurs” who were laughed at. On opening night, technical blunders abounded: fans being used to create the propeller sounds blew directly at the audience, causing programs, handkerchiefs, and even toupées to fly about, and the climactic siren wail near the end was delayed by over a minute, so that it finally sounded after the piece was over and the audience was on its way out the doors.

The reviews were devastating, and the second performance was cancelled. Antheil’s reputation suffered a blow it would never recover from, and Ballet Mécanique was not heard again during his lifetime.

In the late 1940s, after a period of obscurity, Antheil re-emerged as a composer both of (much more mainstream) concert music and of Hollywood film scores. In 1954 he re-wrote Ballet Mécanique, drastically reorganizing and shortening the piece, adding more pianos and percussion, and dispensing with the pianola. Although this version, which is played with some regularity, uses much of the same thematic material as the original, it is in reality a totally different composition.

The first revival of the 1924 Ballet Mécanique took place in 1989, when conductor Maurice Peress re-created the 1927 Carnegie Hall concert, in Carnegie Hall, and subsequently recorded it for the Musical Heritage Society. By the late 1990s, the technology to accurately link multiple player pianos was available, thanks to the Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI), and MIDI-compatible computer-controlled player pianos like Yamaha’s Disklavers and QRS Music’s Pianomation. Antheil’s original vision for the piece—one uninterrupted movement and many pianolas—could be achieved.

The first performance of the original Ballet Mécanique to take advantage of this new technology took place in July 1996 in Trossingen, Germany. Two grand pianos custom-modified by player-piano enthusiast Jürgen Hocker played a MIDI sequence file which Hocker had created by running a copy of the Pleyel rolls through an optical scanner. The percussion ensemble of the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik was conducted by Franz Lang. All told, Hocker’s instruments were used in fourteen performances of the piece over the next six years.

In 1998, publisher G. Schirmer, who had taken over Antheil’s catalog, commissioned this writer to create the MIDI sequence files for a publishable edition of Ballet Mécanique. The MIDI sequence was hand-coded from Antheil’s score to ensure maximum accuracy, and optimized for Yamaha’s and QRS’s instruments. I also created digital samples of propellers, bells, and a siren, built a MIDI-controlled “bell box” containing seven different-sized electric bells, and designed a custom click track that a conductor could listen to over headphones, to keep the automated and human-played instruments together. Schirmer published the MIDI sequences and samples on a CD-ROM, which is distributed with the score and parts.

The Schirmer edition of Ballet Mécanique received its world premiere in November 1999 in Lowell, Massachusetts, using 16 Disklavers. A recording was released on CD by the
Electronic Music Foundation in 2000. Since then it has been performed over 30 times in the United States, Canada, and Europe, and many more times by an all-robotic ensemble designed by the League of Electronic Musical Urban Robots that was installed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and at venues in Miami and New York City.

The tempos of the various performances have varied widely, mostly because Antheil’s score is not very clear—or practical—in that regard. His sole tempo marking is “Pianola=85,” which according to several player-piano experts means the piano roll is to scroll at 8.5 feet per minute. By measuring the distances between notes on the original roles, one can calculate that this translates to a tempo of about MM=152. Unfortunately, this is much faster than any humans or even any player pianos are capable of playing the piece. The Lowell performance and recording were at a tempo of MM=100.

However, Peter Rundel, another conductor who had worked with Jürgen Hocker, 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. When Gil Rose and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project first performed the piece in May 2001 at Boston’s Symphony Hall, they adopted this idea. Rose was able to perform the rest of the piece at MM=120, shortening it a bit, but adding significantly to its energy. All performances of Ballet Mécanique since 2001 have incorporated this tempo adjustment.

BMOP performed the piece again on November 13, 2009, across the street in Jordan Hall. The recording took place the following day. In place of the siren sample, a real electric siren was used, played by this writer through a MIDI-controlled light dimmer using a Nintendo Wiimote. Although only eight disklaviers could fit onto the Jordan hall stage, the effect on the listener, whether in the hall or at home, is hardly diminished.

While Ballet Mécanique represented the “time–space” side of Antheil’s 1920s output, there was another, very different side to his compositions which he called “synthesized jazz.” His major work in this idiom, A Jazz Symphony, was commissioned in 1925 by Paul Whiteman for his second “Experiment in Modern Music” concert at Carnegie Hall, the first of which had introduced the world to Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue. However, either Antheil did not finish the piece in time, or Whiteman chose not to perform it, so instead it was premiered by W.C. Handy’s orchestra, with Antheil as the piano soloist, at the ill-fated Carnegie Hall concert of 1927.

When Handy started working on the score, he realized its complexities were beyond his abilities as a conductor, and so he hired Allie Ross, conductor of the New Amsterdam Symphonic Orchestra, to take over. Ross and the “all–Negro” ensemble had the luxury of 25 rehearsals to learn the piece, which apparently paid off: it received an ovation at its premiere and was unanimously praised by critics and other musicians.

As in most Antheil compositions of the period, his influences are obvious, and even blatantly appropriated. Quotations from Stravinsky and Scott Joplin abound, as well as snippets of what sound like popular songs of the day, now long forgotten, and the piece incongruously winds up with a full-blown Viennese waltz. There are virtuoso parts for trumpet and piano, and the piece is great fun both to play and to listen to.

The harsh reception received by Ballet Mécanique overshadowed A Jazz Symphony, and despite its appeal, the latter fell into obscurity. It was revived by Maurice Peress in 1986 at New York’s 92nd Street Y, and played again at his Carnegie Hall concert in 1989. Like Ballet Mécanique, Antheil re-wrote A Jazz Symphony in the 1950s, reducing the instrumental forces and cutting its length by half. Schirmer now publishes both versions. For more information, visit www.antheil.org.

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Paul D. Lehrman, PhD, is the Director of the Music Engineering program at Tufts University, and the producer of an award-winning film about Ballet Mécanique, Bad Boy Made Good.
GEORGE ANTHEIL was born on July 8, 1900, in Trenton, New Jersey, and began his professional career in Europe, where he was friends with, among many others, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Ernest Hemingway, Eric Satie, and Igor Stravinsky. In the early 1920s, he lived at the literal center of English-language culture in Europe: above Sylvia Beach’s legendary Shakespeare & Co. bookstore on the Rue de l’Odeon, in Paris’s Latin Quarter. (Beach was the original publisher of Joyce’s controversial and groundbreaking Ulysses.)

Antheil wrote over 300 musical works in all major genres, including symphonies, chamber works, film music, and operas. He was extremely outspoken and articulate, and wrote numerous articles, as well as an autobiography, Bad Boy of Music, which is still in print.

As a young composer, he considered himself to be quite the revolutionary, and his music, especially in his early career, employed many unusual sound sources and combinations of instruments. In many ways, both musical and technical, he was far ahead of his time. His concerts routinely caused riots all over Europe, which at the time was considered a sign of genius.

Besides composing, Antheil was an excellent writer, an inventor, and a student of many disciplines, including endocrinology, criminal justice, and military history. He was co-holder of a remarkable patent (with actress Hedy Lamarr) for a “secret communications system” which is today in wide use and known as “spread-spectrum technology”—although neither he nor Lamarr ever received a dime for it.

Antheil left Paris in the late 20s and went to Berlin, and then as German society began to fall under the influence of the Nazis, returned permanently to America. He settled in Hollywood, where he enjoyed a reasonably successful career as a composer for film and television. He died in 1959.
Elena Ruehr’s *Toussaint Before the Spirits*, the New England premiere of Thomas Ades’s *Powder Her Face*, as well as the revival of John Harbison’s *Full Moon in March*, and the North American premiere of Péter Eötvös’s *Angels in America*.

Mr. Rose and BMOP recently partnered with the American Repertory Theater, Chicago Opera Theater, and the MIT Media Lab to create the world premiere of composer Tod Machover’s *Death and the Powers* (a runner-up for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in Music). He conducted this seminal multimedia work at its world premiere at the Opera Garnier in Monte Carlo, Monaco, in September 2010, and also led its United States premiere in Boston and a subsequent performance at Chicago Opera Theater.

An active recording artist, Gil Rose serves as the executive producer of the BMOP/sound recording label. His extensive discography includes world premiere recordings of music by John Cage, Lukas Foss, Charles Fussell, Michael Gandolfi, Tod Machover, Steven Mackey, Evan Ziporyn, and many others on such labels as Albany, Arsis, Chandos, ECM, Naxos, New World, and BMOP/sound.

In 2012 he was appointed Artistic Director of the Monadnock Music Festival in historic Peterborough, NH, and led this longstanding summer festival through its 47th season conducting several premieres and making his opera stage directing debut in two revivals of operas by Dominick Argento.

As an educator Mr. Rose served five years as director of Orchestral Activities at Tufts University and in 2012 he joined the faculty of Northeastern University as Artist-in-Residence and returned to his alma mater Carnegie Mellon University to lead the Opera Studio in a revival of Copland’s *The Tender Land*. In 2007, Mr. Rose was awarded Columbia University’s prestigious Ditson Award as well as an ASCAP Concert Music Award for his exemplary commitment to new American music. He is a three-time Grammy Award nominee.

Gil Rose is a conductor helping to shape the future of classical music. His dynamic performances and many recordings have garnered international critical praise.

In 1996, Mr. Rose founded the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP), the foremost professional orchestra dedicated exclusively to performing and recording symphonic music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Under his leadership, BMOP’s unique programming and high performance standards have attracted critical acclaim and earned the orchestra fourteen ASCAP awards for adventurous programming as well as the John S. Edwards Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music.

Mr. Rose maintains a busy schedule as a guest conductor on both the opera and symphonic platforms. He made his Tanglewood debut in 2002 and in 2003 he debuted with the Netherlands Radio Symphony at the Holland Festival. He has led the American Composers Orchestra, Warsaw Philharmonic, National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana, and National Orchestra of Porto.

Over the past decade, Mr. Rose has also built a reputation as one of the country’s most inventive and versatile opera conductors. He joined Opera Boston as its music director in 2003, and in 2010 was appointed the company’s first artistic director. Mr. Rose led Opera Boston in several American and New England premieres including: Shostakovich’s *The Nose*, Weber’s *Der Freischütz*, and Hindemith’s *Cardillac*. In 2009, Mr. Rose led the world premiere of Zhou Long’s *Madame White Snake*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2011.

Mr. Rose also served as the artistic director of Opera Unlimited, a contemporary opera festival associated with Opera Boston. With Opera Unlimited, he led the world premiere of
The **Boston Modern Orchestra Project** (Bmop) is widely recognized as the leading orchestra in the United States dedicated exclusively to performing new music, and its signature record label, Bmop/sound, is the nation’s foremost label launched by an orchestra and solely devoted to new music recordings.

Founded in 1996 by Artistic Director Gil Rose, Bmop affirms its mission to illuminate the connections that exist naturally between contemporary music and contemporary society by reuniting composers and audiences in a shared concert experience. In its first twelve seasons, Bmop established a track record that includes more than eighty performances, over seventy world premieres (including thirty commissioned works), two Opera Unlimited festivals with Opera Boston, the inaugural Ditson Festival of Contemporary Music with the ICA/Boston, and thirty-two commercial recordings, including twelve CDs from Bmop/sound. In March 2008, Bmop launched its signature record label, Bmop/sound, with the release of John Harbison’s ballet *Ulysses*. Its composer-centric releases focus on orchestral works that are otherwise unavailable in recorded form. The response to the label was immediate and celebratory; its five inaugural releases appeared on the “Best of 2008” lists of the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, National Public Radio, *Downbeat*, and *American Record Guide*, among others. Bmop/sound is the recipient of five Grammy Award nominations: in 2009 for Charles Fussell: *Wilde*; in 2010 for Derek Bermel: *Voices*; and three nominations in 2011 for its recording of Steven Mackey: *Dreamhouse* (including Best Classical Album). The *New York Times* proclaimed, “Bmop/sound is an example of everything done right.” Additional Bmop recordings are available from Albany, Arsis, Cantaloupe, Centaur, Chandos, Ecm, Innova, Naxos, New World, and Oxingale.

In Boston, Bmop performs at Jordan Hall and Symphony Hall, and the orchestra has also performed in New York at Miller Theater, the Winter Garden, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, and The Lyceum in Brooklyn. A perennial winner of the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming of Orchestral Music and 2006 winner of the John S. Edwards Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music, Bmop has appeared at the Bank of America Celebrity Series (Boston, MA), Tanglewood, the Boston Cyberarts Festival, the Festival of New American Music (Sacramento, CA), and Music on the Edge (Pittsburgh, PA). In April 2008, Bmop headlined the 10th Annual MATA Festival in New York.

Bmop’s greatest strength is the artistic distinction of its musicians and performances. Each season, Gil Rose, recipient of Columbia University’s prestigious Ditson Conductor’s Award as well as an ASCAP Concert Music Award for his extraordinary contribution to new music, gathers together an outstanding orchestra of dynamic and talented young performers, and presents some of the world’s top vocal and instrumental soloists. The *Boston Globe* claims, “Gil Rose is some kind of genius; his concerts are wildly entertaining, intellectually rigorous, and meaningful.” Of Bmop performances, the *New York Times* says: “Mr. Rose and his team filled the music with rich, decisive ensemble colors and magnificent solos. These musicians were rapturous—superb instrumentalists at work and play.”
George Antheil
A Jazz Symphony
Ballet pour Instruments Mécaniques et Percussion

Producer: Gil Rose
Recording: Joel Gordon
Editing: Joel Gordon, Paul Lehrman, Gil Rose and Tina Tallon

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Ballet Mécanique was recorded on November 14, 2009, in Jordan Hall at New England Conservatory.

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