Americans in Paris: Music and the Interrogation of Transatlantic Modernisms

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The luminaries of contemporary American art music could not agree. Aaron Copland, Marc Blitzstein, Walter Piston, and six other composers had met at the Yaddo artists colony in Saratoga Springs in 1932 to discuss the future of American music. "It seems evident that there is a collective impulse in American music," Blitzstein observed optimistically as he opened the discussion.[1] He might have had reason for optimism. All but three of the composers gathered that afternoon had studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris – as had nine of the eighteen composers whose works had been featured in the festival held over the previous weekend. Yet the collective impulse was fleeting, if it had ever been there at all. Few at the conference – indeed, no one apart from Blitzstein – could agree on whether they *should* agree.[2] His optimism shattered by the end of the afternoon, Blitzstein diplomatically withdrew his comments. There would be little agreement or unanimity – not even among friends and students of the same teacher.

The differences expressed at the First American Composers' Conference and the vast divergences in style and practice they illustrate, present a problem for the dominant narratives of modern American music, and of modernism broadly. While scholars have begun to address the nuances in modern visual arts and literature, historians, musicologists, and music critics continue to deploy "modern music" as a coherent, intelligible category and period in the taxonomy of music history. Such periodization has a vital pedagogical value, but it elides historical complexity and diversity. It is a technology of hindsight, disciplining the past into the master narratives of the present. As Fredric Jameson notes, it produces "an individual 'period' in which

[1] "Composers' Conferences – Yaddo, May 2 and 3, 1932," Conference Minutes, typescript, 2 May 1932, 1, Marc Blitzstein Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Madison, WI, Reel 7.
[2] "Composers' Conferences – Yaddo, May 2 and 3, 1932," Conference Minutes, 14.

everything becomes so seamlessly interrelated that we confront either a total system or an idealistic 'concept' of a period."[3]

What characterized the style and practice of inter-war American composers – even those who studied in Paris during the 1920s – was not their similarity, but their differences. I argue that the modernisms of American composers in Paris – specifically Copland, Blitzstein, Piston, George Antheil, and Roger Sessions – were rooted in rootlessness. They were produced in conversation with a cosmopolitan modernity always, as Rebecca Walkowitz notes, involved in "a negotiation between distance and proximity."[4] What these Americans found in Paris was not a style or guidance in the ways of modernism, but release from parochial cultural and social restrictions. This paper will suggest that a study of the divergent practices and idioms of American composers of the period, in conversation with each other, as discrete instances of subject production, and in interrogation with European modernisms in which they had no national stake, reveals a far richer, detailed, and nuanced narrative of early-20th century modernism.

The cohort of young Americans who studied in Paris in the 1920s represents a defining style of modernism in American musical historiography. The conventional truism of American interwar art music that its practitioners were divided into "two rival camps" –West-coast ultramodernists, and Francophilic neoclassicists – retains considerable power.[5] That was certainly the opinion of ultramodernist Henry Cowell, who noted in 1933 a sharp division among American composers, "between those who regard music as something for the purpose of amusement, and those who regard it as a medium for expressing greater depths of feeling. The

[3] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 28.
[4] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmpolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 4.
[5] Carole J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179.

former group, that work together closely, is composed of men who have studied for the most part in Paris, and have become distinctly influenced by certain modern French philosophical trends."[6]

Copland, by then recognized as the dean of America modernists, observed in 1936 that "the most important generation of composers America had yet produced" shared the experience of "student days before and during the war years [and] European contacts made soon after 1919."[7] While one might suspect the articulation of ego and self-promotion in this notion – Copland was describing his own experience – the importance of American neoclassicism is a rarely-interrogated historiographical commonplace. It remains taken as read that the American composers in interwar Paris produced their modernism out of shared experience and a "self-conscious affiliation with things French, often in express opposition to things German."[8] It all came down, the story goes, to a simple choice between Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg.

If only it was that simple! While an argument can be made for the superficial stylistic similarity in *some* of the works of the leading American composers in Paris in the 1920s – while they were studying with Boulanger – closer examination reveals diversity rather than uniformity, and the kind of often rancorous disagreement on display at the Yaddo conference. Rather than a group of mature artists drawing on the model of French neoclassicism to collectively create a common American modernism, we find a fractious group of young men engaged in singular acts of self-fashioning, producing subjective creative identities in contests for status in a small expatriate community.

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[6] Cowell, "American Composers," Proceedings of the Ohio State Educational Conference 1932, MSS 26, The Carl Ruggles Papers in the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library of Yale University, New Haven, CT, Box 1, Folder 17.
[7] Aaron Copland, "The Younger Generation of American Composers," *Aaron Copland, A Reader: Selected Writings, 1923-1972,* edited by Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1977.
[8] Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 132. See also R. James Tobin, *Neoclassical Music in America: Voices of Clarity and Restraint* (New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

Even the term "modernism" is problematic, and it would be a serious error to assume that the Americans in Paris understood it to be the same thing that scholars write about today. While most of these composers, at some point in their careers, subscribed and contributed to *Modern Music*, as the League of Composers journal was known after 1925, they virtually never referred to their own work *as* modern. "Modern" was a vague and fluid category in the 1920s that might involve the "development of new forms of melody," and the employment of "extreme discords," but also encompassed the works of Richard Wagner and Modest Mussorgsky (both of whom had died in the 1880s), Edvard Grieg, and Frederick Delius as well as Arnold Schoenberg.[9]

The category certainly had great cultural cachet and power, but in America in 1920, it often signified scandal rather than content or style. Writing from Europe in 1912, a New York critic described Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* as "the greatest musical monstrosity that has been perpetrated during the present generation." Otto Taubmann wrote that "if this is the music of the future, then I pray my creator not to let me live to hear it again."[10] The next year, the music critic James Huneker penned a full-page diatribe in the *New York Times* against "Schoenberg, the musical anarchist." Huneker "loathed" *Pierrot*, which he heard in Berlin the previous December. It was the "very ecstasy of the hideous!"[11] American audiences had to live another eleven years to hear the monstrosity in its New York premiere.[12]

Stravinsky, the Russian-born standard-bearer of French modernism, was just as talked-about and just as obscure. The riot at the premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps* at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in 1913was the stuff of legend, but the music would not be performed in the United States until 1924. Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes brought the scent, if not the reality of

[9] R. Dunstan, "'Futurist' and 'Modernist' Composers," *The Musical Herald*, 1 August 1919, 268. Paul Rosenfeld, *Musical Portraits: Interpretations of Twenty Modern Composers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 11, 70.
[10] J.H.G. Baughan, "Comments and Opinions," *The Musical Standard,* 30 November 1912 (pp 335-336), 335.
[11] James Huneker, "Schoenberg, Musical Anarchist Who Has Upset Europe," *New York Times*, 19 January 1913, SM9.
[12] Aldrich, "Music," *New York Times*, 5 February 1923, 18.

scandal to America during its residence at the Metropolitan Opera in 1916, but their New York programs featured much tamer fare: *Lakmé, Les Sylphides, L'Après-midi d'un faune,* even Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, but not *Le Sacre.* There was never a musical equivalent of New York's 1913 Armory Show, dramatically introducing modernism to America. Despite a handful of recitals given by Leo Ornstein in 1915, few Americans had had the opportunity to hear modern music; Boulanger's students came to her as blank slates.

They would not even have had much opportunity to read new European compositions in print. It is difficult to determine the extent to which scores of European modern music were in circulation in the United States at the time, but the indications are that they were rare, if they were here at all. The earliest edition of Schoenberg's 1909 composition *Five Pieces for Orchestra,* Op. 16 in any academic or public library in the United States dates to 1922. The earliest score of *Le Sacre* is from 1923. It is not possible to say how many editions might have been in private hands, but American composers and music critics regularly complained about the difficulties they faced acquiring them.

Virgil Thomson was the only one of his contemporaries who had had any direct exposure to European modernism prior to his studies with Boulanger, having met her during the Harvard Glee Club's successful tour of Europe in his junior year.[13] For most Americans, the musical scandals of Paris were little more than a faint, delicious rumor of heresy. "As far as I can remember no one ever told me about 'modern music,'" Copland later recalled. "It was [his New York composition teacher Rubin] Goldmark, a convinced conservative in musical matters, who

[13] Virgil Thomson to William G. Dakin, 30 April 1955, The Papers of Virgil Thomson in the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library of Yale University, New Haven, CT, MSS 29, Box 48, Folder 3.

first actively discouraged this commerce with the 'moderns.' That was enough to whet any young man's appetite."[14]

They came to Europe with radically different goals and intentions. For Antheil, it was the place to build a reputation as a piano virtuoso. Playing the warhorses of the classical repertoire as well as a few his own works in European music capitals before arriving in Paris, Antheil did achieve a certain level of notoriety. The French music press took notice. A little more than a week before his Paris debut, *Le Ménestrel* reported "G. Antheil's music is extremist" and listed the Futurist-inspired titles of compositions that owed more to Franz Liszt and Ferruccio Busoni than Futurism.[15] His patron, Mary-Louise Curtis Bok was not impressed. "If you go on, with the developing of a piano technique as your only *work*, I shall be disappointed," she wrote to her wayward protégé from Philadelphia, "for you'll be failing, as a human being & a man." [16]

Blitzstein breathed the air of personal and sexual liberation from the suffocating restrictions of Philadelphia Main Line society in Paris. "For the moment I was completely in the new mood," he wrote to a confidante, "I wanted nothing of America."[17] Copland, a Brooklyn shopkeeper's son, found music that he had never heard before. The first two pages of his journal are crammed with a list of all of the concerts he attended in Paris in 1921-1922. His handwriting gets smaller and more cramped as he runs out of space: Saint-Saens at the Hotel Majestic, Berlioz at l'Orchestre de Paris, Milhaud at Le Théâtre de Vieux-Colombier… Copland's nights were filled with a quantity and variety of music unlike anything he had heard before.[18] He had come abroad to *become* a composer, and arrived at the right time. The Ecole Normale de

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[14] Aaron Copland, "Composer from Brooklyn: An Autobiographical Sketch," in *Aaron Copland: A Reader, Selected Writings 1923-1972,* ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2004), xx-xxi.
[15] "Le Mouvement musical à l'Etranger," *Le Ménestrel*, 21 September 1923, 394.
[16] Mary Louise Curtis Bok to George Antheil, 19 March 1923, George Antheil Correspondence with Mary Louise Curtis Bok, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 1, Folder 4.
[17] Blitzstein to Berenice Skidelski, 24 October 1926, Marc Blitzstein Collection, reel 1.
[18] Copland, Journal of European Trip 1921-1922, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 243, Folder 5.

Musique had just opened an American Conservatory in a wing of Fontainebleau Palace in order to cash in on the young Bohemians who thronged Paris in search of adventure and cheap rent.[19] Boulanger was on the faculty and Copland was in the first class. "I arrived, fresh out of Brooklyn, aged twenty, and all agog at the prospect of studying composition in the country that had produced Debussy and Ravel," Copland later recalled. "A fellow-student told me about Mademoiselle Boulanger and convinced me that a look-in on her harmony class would be worth my while."[20]

Boulanger had had an illustrious career as a concert pianist, conductor and composer, winning the Prix de Rome in 1908.[21] She began taking on her more talented students from Fontainebleau for private instruction shortly after joining the faculty. Copland was soon joined by Thomson and Walter Piston in joined what they called *La Boulangerie.* Sessions, Blitzstein and many others would follow over the years, cementing Boulanger's reputation as the pre-eminent European mentor of American composers.[22] Despite a fluid membership, the Paris music press called them "the American Six," a reference to the *Les Six* that seemed to confer an aura of French-ness on the expatriate composers.[23]

It was not Boulanger's compositional skill as much as her close association with Stravinsky that sealed her reputation as the ideal composition teacher for young American composers. She was an ardent French nationalist whose pedagogy was self-consciously modernist but emphasized "the roots of French classicism in the Ancien Regime… stressing

[19] "The American Music School at Fontainebleau," *The Outlook,* 3 August 1921, 523.
[20] Copland, "The Teacher: Nadia Boulanger," in *Copland on Music*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1960), 83-84.
[21] "Nouvelles Diverses," *Le Ménestrel*, 11 July 1908, 223.
[22] "La Boulanger," *Time,* 31 March 1947, 55.
[23] Georges Auric, Arthur Honneger, Darius Milhaud, Germaine Tailleferre, Francis Poulenc, and Louis Durey were dubbed *Les Six* in 1920 by composer and nationalist music critic Henri Collet. Jane F. Fulcher, *The Composer as Intellectual: Music and Ideology in France, 1914-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168.

proportion and balance."[24] Her classes invariably focused on an analysis of the works of French composers, to exclusion of all else.[25] Of half-Russian parentage herself, she championed the Russian Stravinsky as the "paragon of Frenchness," whose work articulated a "restrained modernity, a socially conservative but aesthetically liberal stance" in opposition to Germanic modernists.[26] Not simply an aesthetic preference, it was a strong political position. In the chauvinistic cultural politics of inter-war France, an inclination to French over German modernism was less a question of style than an existential choice.

Some of Boulanger's students made that choice enthusiastically, and their student work invariably bore the imprint of her aesthetic and cultural investments. "I heard Piston's piece for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon at Harvard the other day," Nicolas Slonimsky wryly wrote to Copland in 1927. "Rather clever: he reduced Stravinsky's Octet to a Trio most successfully!"[27] Both Thomson and Copland eagerly sought their teacher's approval. Thomson's voluminous letters to Boulanger after his return to Harvard regularly beg her to comment on and offer revisions to his work.[28] Boulanger responded to those students whose work most conformed to her aesthetic opinions – with outpourings of maternal affection.[29]

Copland, Thomson, and Piston were Boulanger's enthusiastic neoclassical acolytes but many of their colleagues enjoyed brittle, often attenuated relationships with their teacher. As the Conservatory's 1927 winter session began, Blitzstein made an unexpected pilgrimage to Berlin

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[24] Fulcher, 117.
[25] Léonie Rosenstiel, *Nadia Boulanger: A Life in Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 208.
[26] Fulcher, 170.
[27] Nicolas Slonimsky to Copland, n.d. (probably 1927), Aaron Copland Collection, Box 262, Folder 33.
[28] Thomson to Boulanger, 25 April 1923, Collection Nadia Boulanger, Site Richelieu-Louvois, Bibliothèque National de France, Microfilm VM-BOB 28217.
[29] "This piece for string quartet is a masterpiece – so moving, so deep, so simple, this 'you' I love the most, as well as I love the others, because there is a quality of... music which is at the same time personal & impersonal – I mean music out of the musician, music of to-day, but of ever, modern, but classic music." Boulanger to Copland, 13 September 1928, Aaron Copland Collection, Box 248, Folder 8.

to study with Schoenberg.[30] He returned to Berlin in 1928 to continue his studies. The following year, Blitzstein toured the German opera capitals of to arouse interest in a production of his one-act opera *Triple-Sec,* which had been tepidly received by French concert promoters. With the exception of Darmstadt music director Karl Böhm, Blitzstein found that the German opera companies were far more excited about his work. [31]

Sessions was even less inclined to toe the party line. He had come to the American Conservatory in 1925 but found the atmosphere stifling. In 1927, he wrote to Copland that he had become particularly enamored of the music of German Paul Hindemith. As for the darlings of French neoclassicism "Honneger & Milhaud – and Poulenc: They have disappeared from my world..."[32] A few months later, he irritably complained that "neither I or, I am sure, Nadia, ever dreamed of my being her disciple."[33] Indeed, in a "Profession of Faith," included in an autobiographical note he provided for Slonimsky's *Music Since 1900* in the 1930s, Sessions explicitly rejected "any kind of dogma or platform. I am not trying to write 'modern', 'American' or 'neo-classic' music," he wrote.[34] By the late-1940s he had, in fact, become one of the leading exponents of a serial composition idiom deeply indebted to Schoenberg. For all of his testiness, Sessions remained an active participant in the community of American expatriate composers, emerging as its most prominent leader, second only to Copland himself.

Status within the community had much more to do with egos and personal alliances than with style or theory. For example, although Antheil's music was noisy, percussive and, by 1926, owed much to Futurism and Stravinsky's early works like *Le Sacre* and *Les Noces*, he found a

[30] Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 26.
[31] Blitzstein to Eva Goldbeck, 13 September 1929, Marc Blitzstein Papers, reel 1.
[32] Sessions to Copland, 26 June 1928, Aaron Copland Collection, Box 262, Folder 16.
[33] Sessions to Copland, 8-9 November 1928, Aaron Copland Collection, Box 262, Folder 16.
[34] Roger Sessions Autobiographical Note, nd., Nicolas Slonimsky Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 158, Folder 45.

valuable ally in Thomson, a committed neoclassicist.[35] Style never stood in the way of personal alliances.

Hierarchy was determined by celebrity or notoriety earned in the concerts organized by the Conservatory, and Parisian contemporary music societies, and reported in the music press in America. Antheil had acquired considerable notoriety in a series of self-promoted recitals, culminating in a riot at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in 1923 that echoed the reception of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* there a decade earlier.[36] In 1926, his *Ballet Mécanique,* a typically percussive work composed for an experimental film by Dudley Moore, Fernand Leger, and Man Ray "proceeded to out-sack the *Sacre*," Copland commented with more than a trace of sarcasm, and "brought forth the usual near-riot and everyone went home content."[37]

Although Antheil never studied with Boulanger, they were friendly, and Parisians widely considered Antheil to be one of "The American Six." He was, for a time, the most celebrated American composer in Paris, and a figure of great status. However his celebrity and his tenuous connection with Boulanger provoked the animus of some of his fellow expatriates. Although they publicly deferred to Antheil, Copland and Sessions were particularly rankled by his celebrity and status within the community. Briefly returned to America in 1925, Copland had used his access to the New York audiences and music press to cut his rival off at the knees. He noted in *Modern Music* that Antheil "sees himself as a modern Mozart, experimenting in disjointed rhythms and ear-splitting dissonances, hopelessly misunderstood by the music critics of Berlin, Paris and London."[38] He went on to note that, although Antheil had composed a great number of infamous works, "few of them withstand close examination."[39]

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[35] Antheil to Bok, 1 June 1926, GAC, box 1.
[36] "Courrier des Théâtres," *Le Figaro,* 2 October 1923, 6.
[37] Copland, Letter to Israel Citkowitz, July 12, 1926, in *Aaron Copland: A Reader,* 311-312.
[38] Copland, "George Antheil," *League of Composers Review,* January 1925, 26.
[39] Copland, "George Antheil," 27.

Antheil was outraged once news of the article – and of a League of Composers concert featuring two of his early works – reached Paris. "He pretended to be a friend of mine when he was here," Antheil wrote to Boulanger. Hastily scribbled in the margin of the letter he added: "this man is *dishonest* – because he insinuated this *was* my work, and the rest like it." Antheil was insulted that Copland had based his criticism on early works "NEVER performed in public, which I had shown him in fun, and in the sanctity of friendship."[40]

Under pressure to conform as Copland's celebrity began to rise, Antheil had already made an abrupt stylistic shift to a more polished neoclassicism with his second string quartet late in 1926. Sessions damned it with faint praise, in *Modern Music.*[41] None of this could have helped *Ballet Mécanique's* disastrous New York premiere in 1927,[42] and although Antheil would remain in Europe until the Great Depression and dwindling resources forced him to seek his livelihood back in America, his status and reputation were shattered. In 1928, a self-consciously magnanimous Sessions suggested to Copland that they "have a try at resuscitating the fortunes of George Antheil. Paris seemed to have forgotten him completely last spring."[43]

After Copland had returned to the United States full-time in 1928, he and Sessions consolidated their dominance in American music by sponsoring the Copland-Sessions concert series in New York to "to stimulate composers to more prolific activity and to develop a stronger sense of solidarity among the creators of a growing American music." [44] By this time, Copland had established himself as the recognized leader of the transatlantic modernists, using his teaching position at the New School, frequent articles in the *New York Times*, and his close friendship with *Modern Music* editor Minna Lederman to set modern tastes. Copland and

[40] Antheil to Boulanger, 1926, Collection Nadia Boulanger, microfilm VM-BOB 26310.
[41] Roger Sessions, "An American Evening Abroad," *Modern Music,* November-December, 1926, 25.
[42] "Antheil Art Bursts Startled Ears," *New York Times*, 11 April 1927, 23.
[43] Sessions to Copland, 8-9 November 1928.
[44] Program, Copland-Session Concerts of Contemporary Music, 22 April 1928, and 6 May 1928, Edyth Totten Theatre, New York, NY, Aaron Copland Collection, Box 337, Folder 4.

Sessions became the magazine's most frequent contributors, and were invited joined the League's Board in 1928 – the only composers of their generation to be so honored.[45]

Sessions remained in the United States briefly, returning to Europe in the summer of 1928. He left Copland solely in charge of their project to develop solidarity in American music. Most of the composers whose work featured in the first two Copland-Sessions Concerts season were former or current students of Boulanger's. Subsequent seasons broadened the palette marginally, but rooted in New York, if not in Paris, as the publicly-recognized exemplar of modernism, Copland was well positioned to define the content of *American* modernism, for American audiences.

Yet Copland's dominance, and his debt to Boulanger and French neoclassicism, were misleading. There was never unanimity among American composers, or even agreement on what modernism was. To the extent that we can identify an American modernism at all, it was a cosmopolitan modernism. The music composed by the Americans in Paris resonated from the production of discrete creative subjectivities in conversation with European modernism and, above all, the community of composers in Europe – the America they had brought with them, and the United States to which they remained connected for validation and prestige.

[45] Copland to Sessions, 15 April 1928, in Andrea Olmstead, ed., *The Correspondence of Roger Sessions* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 105.

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