EDUCATING AMERICAN AUDIENCES: CLAIRE REIS AND THE DEVELOPMENT 
OF MODERN MUSIC INSTITUTIONS, 1912-1930

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The creation of institutions devoted to promoting and supporting modern music in the United States during the 1920s made it possible for American composers to develop an identity distinct from that of European modernists. These institutions were thus a critical part of the process of modernization that began in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. There is substantial scholarship on these musical institutions of modern music, such as the International Composers’ Guild and the League of Composers; but little to no work has been done on the progressive musical institutions of the 1910s, such as the Music League of the People’s Music Institute of New York, which was founded by Claire Reis. This thesis addresses the questions of how and why American musical modernism came to be as it was in the 1920s through an examination of the various stages of Reis’s career. The first chapter is an extensive study of primary source material gathered from the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library, which relates to Reis’s work with the PML in the 1910s. The second chapter uses the conclusions of the first chapter to shine new light on an old subject: the 1923 schism within the ICG that led Reis and others to form the League. The traditional view that the schism was the result of a conflict in idea of style is called into question, and the role that gender and power structure played in the break are explored.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The above photograph of Claire Raphael Reis with her children, taken sometime during the early 1920s, conveys the two passions of her life: music education and her family. Her devotion to education was in part the result of her upbringing. She was born into a Jewish family on August 4, 1888 in Brownsville, Texas, which is located in the southernmost tip of the state on the northern bank of the Río Grande. Her father, Gabriel M. Raphael, was

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1 Copy of a photograph from the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.
a successful banker. After his death in 1898, her mother, Eugenie Salamon Raphael, moved the family to New York to better their education. Reis began studying piano with Bertha Feiring Tapper, a prominent teacher in the city, in 1906. She also spent several years in her early life studying music in France and Germany.

Reis’s mother wanted her daughter to become a society lady who played for charity events and for her own edification at home. But beginning around 1910 Reis began to feel called to social work. In her memoir, *Composers, Conductors, and Critics* (1955), Reis remembered her mother’s reaction to one of her early projects, a children’s school that she founded with her colleague Margaret Naumburg in 1914:

My mother’s ambition to make me a good pianist was primarily for ‘home consumption’ or at most to ‘do good’ by playing at charity affairs. Happily I often satisfied her hopes in this direction… My new project, a children’s school, was, however, a complete negation of my mother’s strongest ideas about my life. I always believed, nevertheless, that when young people showed real determination to live their own lives, the older generation would fall in line.\(^2\)

Her determination to continue a career in music education in the face of her mother’s disapproval was an early sign of her strength in the face of obstacles. As an ambitious and talented woman, she encountered opposition from different fronts throughout her career.

Another challenge came in finding a balance between her personal and professional lives. On December 20, 1915, she married Arthur M. Reis, the president of Robert Reis and Company. Soon, the couple had two children. Reis remembered the challenges of keeping her personal life separate from her professional life in her memoir. The passage reminds us that Reis was in many ways a modern woman:

[Arthur and I] agreed that, as his business day ended at a specified time, so my life outside the home would also cease at five o’clock or at least no later than six. Then we withdrew to private life with our children and friends, leaving for the next day the problems of musicians and manufacturers. The waking and working hours of businessman and artist are on opposite sides of the clock, and I found I had to train

many composers never to call me in the late afternoon, which, in effect, was their morning. Sometimes I found it necessary to exercise a bit of bribery; if they wouldn’t call me after hours, I wouldn’t wake them with early-morning telephone calls!3

The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of great change in America. There was a new desire to bring an end to the social, economic, and educational inequalities among citizens, as well as an effort to better the position of the poor and immigrants—a movement that is often referred to as Progressivism. Women also came to hold a more prominent position in American political life, a trend that culminated in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18, 1920, giving all Americans the right to vote regardless of gender. Reis’s career reflects these changes in the American political and social landscapes. Her desire to hold a prominent position in the modern music institutions of the 1920s put her at odds with figures such as Edgard Varèse, who, though thoroughly modern in his musical tastes, was more conservative in his ideas about what women could and could not do.

Reis’s focus on education set her apart from Varèse and other figures associated with the musical institutions of the 1910s and 1920s; and the literature and achievements of the organizations she worked with—the People’s Music League during the 1910s and the League of composers beginning in 1923—demonstrate this aim. This thesis draws out the educational elements of her work with the PML and the LOC. In doing this, I argue that her zeal for educating audiences helped to foster the process of modernizing musical life in the United States. A close analysis of the programs, policies, and achievements of the PML and the League of Composers, diverse as the aims of the two organizations were in many respects, reveals a common thread: Reis’s desire to educate and modernize American audiences and composers.

3 Ibid., 27.
In the Shadow of European Modernism

The creation of institutions devoted to promoting and supporting modern music in the United States during the 1920s made it possible for American composers to develop an identity distinct from that of European modernists. These institutions were thus a critical part of the process of modernization that began in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. Throughout the 1920s, institutions such as the League of Composers, which was under the direction of Reis, and Varèse's International Composers’ Guild commissioned new works by emerging American composers. Late in his life, the pre-eminent American composer Aaron Copland reflected on the role that these institutions had played in his career: “It was never far from my mind that in order to make the musical public of America know about the young music you had to do it in a group way…It never occurred to me that you could do it all by yourself. You see, this was a thing that a group of people had to organize in order to accomplish.”4 In addition to commissioning and performing new works by Americans, these groups also staged performances of seminal works of European modernism for American audiences. Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg had a special significance in the programs of these organizations; these two composers were to have the strongest impact on American composers in the decade before the Great Depression.

The role that these institutions played in the process of modernization went beyond fostering the growth of young composers; modern music groups were foundational in the cultivation of an American style in the 1920s. Their concerts and literature, and the criticism that followed in their wake, all left an imprint on the style of American modernism that emerged in the decade leading up to the Great Depression. Their programming of the

modernist masterpieces of Europe, such as Schoenberg’s \textit{Pierrot lunaire} and Stravinsky’s \textit{Le Sacre du printemps}, set an example for young American composers. The seemingly contradictory aims of these groups, which at once set up European master works as ideals for American composers and encouraged Americans to develop an identity distinct from that of European composers, reveal a “paradox,” described by Carol Oja in her book \textit{Making Music Modern}, at the heart of the style of American modernism that developed between World War I and the Depression.\footnote{Carol Oja, \textit{Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).}

Up to the early 1930s, the type of modernism the League of Composers espoused reflected many of the broader trends of the movement. Indeed, the League had a longer life than its rival institutions. Varèse’s ICG dissolved after only six seasons. The following year, he founded another organization for modern music, the Pan American Association of Composers, with the financial backing of Charles Ives. But this organization was also short-lived, and dissolved in 1934. The League, however, functioned until 1954 when it merged with the International Society for Contemporary Music—an organization established in Salzburg in 1922 and still functioning today.

But the League’s relevance in New York’s modern-music scene was due to more than just its viability as an organization. The publication of its journal, \textit{The League of Composers’ Review}, beginning in February 1924—a journal that would later become \textit{Modern Music} under the editor Minna Lederman—provided emerging American composers and critics such as Copland, Virgil Thomson, Charles Seeger, and Roger Sessions with a forum to discuss their art and ideas. At the same time, articles by European intellectuals and composers such as André Coeuroy and Alfred Einstein also appeared in its pages. This mixing of Europeans
and Americans was evident in the League's concerts. The majority of its performances included new works by Americans programed beside those by Europeans.

The relationship between European and American modernism was similar to that of parent and child. Like a child coming of age, American modernism had an uneasy relationship with European modernism. This uneasiness is evident in the writings about contemporary music from the period. Many prominent critics of the late 1910s and 1920s demanded that American modernists model themselves after European modernists, especially Schoenberg and Stravinsky. At the same time they disparaged American composers whom they saw as epigones of Europeans.

One prominent critic of this period, Paul Rosenfeld (1890-1946), wrote books and essays devoted to the music of the American modernist movement. His writings touch on many of the recurring themes in the criticism of the day. In his book *An Hour with American Music* (1929), Rosenfeld praises Roger Sessions as the most important American composer of the time. As Rosenfeld saw him, Sessions was an “eclectic” composer. Here he adopts a word often used to describe artists that were too European and therefore inauthentic. For Rosenfeld, however, Sessions’s eclecticism was emblematic of his strength rather than his weakness; Sessions was an American of the “oldest Puritan New England stock” who worked in the “shadow of Stravinsky.” Without apparently noticing any contradiction, Rosenfeld saw him as at once eclectic and authentically American.

But Rosenfeld is quick to point out that Sessions was not merely copying Stravinsky: “Not that this young old New Englander has duplicated Strawinsky, or made literature of

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6 Rosenfeld is perhaps most often remembered for his translations of Robert Schumann’s critical essays. These were published in 1946—the year of Rosenfeld's death—under the title *On Music and Musicians.*

7 Sessions's family could trace its lineage back to important figures in the American Revolution. The focus on his heritage and “race” was important in that it separated him from immigrant composers such as Varèse and Leo Ornstein: Rosenfeld, *An Hour with American Music* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1929), 79.
him.”

In this respect, Sessions differs from George Antheil, whose *Ballet mécanique* (1924) Rosenfeld dismisses as “a skyscraper built of girders synthesized from *Les Noces*, *Le Sacre* and *Petrushka*.”

The distinction he drew between Antheil as an epigone and Sessions as authentically American reveals one of his criteria for modernism in the United States: an American must work in the shadow of the great Europeans, and yet not be completely eclipsed by their achievements.

Rosenfeld’s vision of American modernism accords with that of Reis and the League of Composers. In her memoir, *Composers, Conductors, and Critics*, Reis explains the predominance of Stravinsky and Schoenberg in the League’s concerts: “Stravinsky and Schoenberg were becoming the guidons of two separate and distinct camps.”

Leopold Stokowski, the prominent English-born conductor and composer, and a member of the executive board of the League of Composers, adopted this line of reasoning in a speech given after the League’s performance of Schoenberg’s *Die glückliche Hand* and Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre* on April 22, 1930.

As Olin Downes (1886-1955) reported in the *New York Times*, Stokowski stood in front of the curtain after the concert and said “he and a certain number of his colleagues were working in artistic directions which the compositions of Schoenberg and Stravinsky typified. These directions…were to eventuate, it was hoped, in an American

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8 Ibid., 81.
9 Ibid.
10 These composers were two of the most frequently programmed composers in the League’s concerts. Twenty-six of the sixty-five concerts the League of Composers programmed between 1923 and 1935 included pieces by Stravinsky or Schoenberg. The League even planned an evening concert entirely devoted to Schoenberg in 1933 and another to Stravinsky in 1935. Quotation from Reis, *Composers, Conductors, and Critics*, 38.
11 This performance was the American stage premiere of *Le Sacre*. The emerging artist Martha Graham danced as the sacrificial virgin; the setting and costumes were designed by Nicholas Roerich, who had designed the set and costumes for the original production by the Ballet Russes at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1913; and Leonide Massine was the director of choreography.
form of art.” These European giants were again seen as providing an example for American modernism.

Apart from factors of lineage—Sessions’s Puritan ancestry—it is unclear what exactly critics and musicians expected the “American” component of American modernism to be. For Rosenfeld and others, recourse to vernacular styles of music such as jazz was impermissible. They saw jazz as a lowbrow form of popular music that was not to be taken seriously, and they associated popular music with the political movement called populism (a foul word among modernists in the 1910s and 1920s). An Hour with American Music opens with the claim that “American music is not jazz. Jazz is not music.” Rosenfeld viewed the rising star George Gershwin as a “gifted composer of the lower, unpretentious order,” questioning whether Gershwin’s “vision permits him an association with the artists.” From this negative definition, Rosenfeld went on to claim that good music is that of “Bach and Beethoven, Mozart, Wagner and Brahms”—or as Stravinsky later put it, “the German stem.” Throughout his career, Rosenfeld consistently used the European greats as a measuring stick for American composers. His underlying criticism of jazz and Gershwin was that they were not coming out of the European musical tradition.

Another prominent critic who expressed this idea was Downes. In an article published in the New York Times titled “How America’s Composers Fare with Internationals,” Downes took the position that new compositions by Americans were in general mere “imitations of imitations of recent examples of European musical sensationalism.” (“Sensational” was a byword used to describe music of bad taste, especially that which was held to be more about effect than content; Antheil’s Ballet mécanique, for

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13 Rosenfeld, An Hour with American Music, 1.
instance, was frequently described as “sensational” by critics.) Downes’s negative perspective on modern music in America is consistent throughout the article. He accuses Americans of epigonism and dilettantism, traits that he finds inconsistent with the essentially American spirit of individualism and self-reliance:

> Our musicians of the rising generation, in an age bursting with new ideas, continue the sophistications and pretensions of European musical cliques, and seem to fear that if they fail to show their knowledge of the latest examples of atonalism and the like they will be adjudged naïve and ignorant people...Americans, believed to be uncommonly endowed with initiative, self-reliance, and a wholesome freedom of conventions, turn to the Milhauds, Stravinskys, or even Marinettis, for guides, philosophers and friends.\(^{15}\)

Like Rosenfeld, Downes also finds popular American artists such as Gershwin to be nothing more than talented provincials. He spoke of such composers in terms that, though somewhat warmer than those used by Rosenfeld, still seem condescending: “The reward of those who do not fear to be themselves is already evident, though on a limited and superficial scale, in the production of certain of our composers of popular music...They have written music which in some cases is rich in vitality, humor, and certain qualities of the people because they wrote it naturally, without affection, or pretending to be something they were not...But the day is yet to come for the American composer as a type to discover himself and his country in his art.” Though he recognizes certain noble qualities in popular music, he ultimately passes the same verdict as Rosenfeld. Jazz is not music; thus an American modernist style could not rise out of this indigenous type of music.

Downes’s diagnosis of American modernism resembles Rosenfeld’s in that he sees it as too European. And yet, he also feels that it is not European enough. This seemingly contradictory perspective reveals itself in Downes’s prescription of a healthy diet of Beethoven to young American composers: “The budding composer” he writes, “exhibits the

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attitude, very common today, of ignorant, arrogant contempt of what the great masters of
his art have created for posterity…He does not even know that the score of a Beethoven
symphony holds incalculable treasure for a sincere and adventurous spirit. But these scores
[sic] will not yield their secrets to poseurs or dilettantes. They are there for the man who is
not afraid to bow the knee to greatness.” (To be sure, Downes’s taste in music was
conservative in comparison to Rosenfeld’s, a fact suggested by the moniker “Sibelius’s
Apostle,” which Downes earned through his tireless promotion of the Finnish composer.)

As noted above, Stokowski claimed that he and some of his colleagues “were
working in artistic directions which the compositions of Schoenberg and Stravinsky
typified,” directions that he hoped would eventually lead to a distinctly American style of
modernism. Yet he also expressed a desire for American autonomy from European
influence, as the following excerpt from a letter he wrote to Reis demonstrates: “We are at
the start of a great development in music all over the United States… We shall free ourselves
from the influence of other countries, and express our own life-rhythms in our own way.”
Despite all its apparent contradictions, the idea that American composers could establish
their autonomy from Europe by reconnecting with Beethoven and the great European
masters of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries was commonly held at the
time.

Soon after the onset of the Great Depression in 1933, modernism and populism
began to converge, and the type of modernism espoused by the League of Composers and
the critics of the 1920s fell out of favor. The convergence of the two styles, which up until

16 For instance, in an article entitled “Critical Scales Show Changing Valuations” printed in the New York Times
on May 3, 1925, Downes wrote: “Let the modernists prate as they will of their Schönbergs, Casellas and what
not. There are pages in Sibelius’s Fourth symphony and in certain of his tone-poems that outmodernize them
all.” One rightly wonders what he expected from modern music.
17 Letter from Stokowski to Reis, dated 1947.
that point had existed in opposition to each other, exemplifies the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*, or “sublation.”¹⁸ As the music historian Richard Crawford writes in his book *America’s Musical Life*, “depression-era adversity…fostered an environment of stylistic conservatism and an emphasis in art and music on regional and national subjects.”¹⁹ Composers sought to create music that came out of the European art music tradition and had a broader appeal to the public. Writing music for a small, select audience was no longer a financially viable option for composers; therefore they simplified their style—a trend noticeable in the evolving style of Copland’s music during the 1930s. The shift gave rise to a new generation of critics more accepting of jazz and other styles of popular music, a generation that was as enthusiastic about the music of Gershwin, Paul Whiteman, and Duke Ellington as it was about the “Americana” style of Copland. With this development, the early period in American modernism drew to a close.

Reis’s Role in the Genesis of the Paradox of American Modernism

In *Making Music Modern*, Oja describes the dialectical nature of American modernism in the 1920s as “the paradox of American modernism.”²⁰ Critics in that period largely rejected music that showed too much influence of native styles, such as Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). At the same time they were critical of music styled too closely after European music, such as Antheil’s previously mentioned *Ballet mécanique* (or for Downes almost any modern American composition). The problem for the American composer was to strike a

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¹⁸ The dialectical relationship of modernism and mass culture was first described by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), and expanded by Huyssen in *After the Great Divide* (1986): as Adorno wrote in a letter to his friend and colleague Walter Benjamin: “Both [modernism and mass culture] are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up.”


balance between these two extremes and to achieve a kind of “positive eclecticism,” as Rosenfeld saw it.21

Oja’s interpretation of American modernism as paradoxical makes sense from the vantage point of the historian. The paradox was not, however, perceived as such by contemporary critics and composers. Consequently, while Oja’s “paradox” may provide insight into American modernism of the 1920s, it does not explain how the movement came to be that way or why the critics of the period did not write about it in those terms. A deeper problem is at stake here, one that “pertains to the relationship of modernism to the matrix of modernization which gave birth to it and nurtured it through its various stages,” as the German literary critic Andreas Huyssen writes in his book After the Great Divide (1986).22

In the United States, the role in shaping culture—which in Europe often fell to the national government, at times to disastrous ends—was left to private organizations.23 The process of modernization thus began with the progressive institutions of the early twentieth century. And so, it is logical that the affinity between American musical modernism and Europe has its roots in these organizations. One of the most prominent of the progressive

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21 It is interesting to note that post-1933 American modernism was stylistically eclectic. In that respect, Rosenfeld was right in his predictions about modern music in America. Yet his unwillingness to accept popular styles of music as a part of this eclecticism is what separates him from the newer generation of critics.

22 The context of Huyssen’s statement is somewhat different from the context here. It appears at the conclusion of a chapter on the feminine nature of mass culture as perceived by modernists. The statement, however, reflects one of the foundational ideas of the book, which is that the dialectical relationship between modernism and mass culture—a relationship that he sees, following Adorno, as “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which…they do not add up”—has its roots in the process of modernization that began in the middle of the nineteenth century. (Huyssen, After the Great Divide, 55-56.)

Huyssen’s definition of modernism is broader than the one used in this study. For him, an artist of the modern world necessarily confronted the problems of how the individual functions in a post-industrialist society: thus his inclusion of Baudelaire, Flaubert, and (more surprisingly) Wagner. Musical modernism is usually seen as arising somewhat later, specifically around the turn of the century in Europe with Mahler and Schoenberg and in the 1920s in America. Some scholars, for instance Carl Dahlhaus, note a first wave of European musical modernism beginning in 1889 with the performances of Richard Strauss’s Don Juan and Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 1.

23 In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville had observed in his book Democracy in America that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations…If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association” (Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1835).
musical institutions was the Music League of the People’s Institute of New York, which was founded by Reis. The People’s Institute itself was founded in 1897 by Charles Sprague Smith, a professor at Columbia University, as a means to educate the underprivileged of the city. It gave weekly courses in philosophy, literature, elocution, and other subjects to large groups of poor men and women and immigrants. The People’s Music League extended the didactic aims of the People’s Institute into the realm of music.

Over the next decade, Reis’s organization brought European art music to hundreds of thousands of people throughout New York City. It also provided opportunities for the less fortunate residents in the city to perform the music of the great composers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in amateur orchestras, bands, and choirs. The work that the League did in the 1910s set the tone for the critics and institutions of American modernism during the 1920s.

How did the paradox that Oja writes about come to be? Why did contemporary critics and musicians not perceive the contradiction? The second chapter of this thesis, “Paving the Way for American Modernism,” explores these questions through an extensive study of primary source material gathered from documents in the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library. These materials, which include program notes, letters, lecture notes, newspaper clippings, photographs, annual reports, and many other types of documents regarding the People’s Music League are cross-referenced with passages from Reis’s Composers, Conductors, and Critics to provide a detailed view of how the organization was managed and funded. I use the primary source

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24 With the increase of immigration during World War I, the People’s Institute opened two night schools to “Americanize” immigrants. Smith’s organization embodied the progressive spirit of the early twentieth century. As Smith said in an interview in 1906, the People’s Institute recognized “fraternity as the fundamental truth, democracy as its highest known form of human government, and national worth as dependent upon individual worth.” It functioned until 1934. (“What Is the ‘People’s Institute’? Its Works Explained,” New York Times, 22 April 1906.)

25 I gathered most of the primary source material in this study during a trip to New York in August 2012.
documents to show what the organization did and how it functioned, while Reis’s memoir is crucial to understanding why it was that way. The chapter follows the first decade of Reis’s career, from 1912 to 1922, which included work with Rosenfeld and Ornstein on a concert series of modern piano music in 1916.

The third chapter, “A Re-evaluation of the Schism between the League of Composers and the ICG,” provides an extensive review of the literature and programming of the two modern music institutions of the 1920s, positing a new view on the conflict between Varèse and Reis that led to the schism. The chapter uses interviews with the composer, articles published from the period by and about Varèse and his organization, as well as Louise Varèse’s memoir *Varèse: A Looking Glass Diary*, to show that Varèse’s animosity toward Reis stemmed from a deeply rooted distrust of women in positions of power, as well as a conflicting idea between Varèse and Reis regarding the relationship between composer and audience. Reis’s vocation as an educator and organizer, which I developed in the second chapter, is shown to be at the heart of the conflict that led to the creation of the League of Composers.
CHAPTER II

PAVING THE WAY FOR AMERICAN MODERNISM

Reis’s involvement in the community goes back long before her work with the League of Composers to the early 1910s. She began her career as an educator in the public schools of New York. Her ideas about education were greatly influenced by the educational methods recently developed by the Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870-1952). The tenets of the Montessori’s teachings, which focused on inspiring students through their interaction with the classroom environment, allowing the students freedom to pursue individual lines of study, and cultivating a spirit of spontaneity in the teaching curriculum, were not well received by the older generation of educators in the United States. Thus her embrace of Montessori’s alternative educational methods created trouble for Reis when she sought her teaching certification. The head of music in the public-school system of New York, Dr. Frank Rix, acknowledged that Reis was overqualified to teach music to kindergarteners; but he denied her certification on the basis that “her theories [were] not legitimate.”26 The assistant director, Dr. George Gartlan, came to Reis’s aid and overturned the director’s decision.

Her troubles with the public schools in New York continued after the event. She soon felt the need to start her own school based on her ideas of progressive education. With her colleague Margaret Naumburg (1890-1983), a psychologist and educator who had studied under Montessori in Italy, she opened the Children’s School at 17 East 60th Street in the fall of 1914. The school later became known as the Walden School of New York City and functioned until 1988. Reis and Naumburg positioned themselves against the traditional,

26 Reis, Composers, Conductors, and Critics, 25-26.
test-based model of education that had been dominant for the past half century. As Naumburg put it, the aim of the school was “not merely the acquisition of knowledge by children,” but “the development of their capacities.”

The biggest achievement of Reis’s early career, however, was the establishment of the Music League of the People’s Institute of New York in November 1912. The idea for the organization had been in Reis’s mind since 1909, when she accompanied the young violinist Max Rosen in a concert at Cooper Union before an audience of European immigrants. There she was confronted with a group of people who needed to be included in American life. For her, education and music were opportunities to bring these immigrants into the fold of American culture:

The need of music was as great in their lives as their need to find a new life in America, for they had come from homelands where even the smallest village supported ensemble groups or band concerts in the public squares.

Until that evening at Cooper Union I had never seen such a large gathering of people hungry for music. In New York in wintertime there were few free concerts. The various settlements occasionally presented concerts, as did also the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But few free concert tickets were distributed to music lovers of the foreign population. For days after the Cooper Union program the memory of that audience troubled me. It proved to be the means of bringing a new and preoccupying experience into my life.

After the Cooper Union concert, she met with the director of the People’s Institute, Dr. Frederick C. Howe. She explained to him that, though it provided free courses in philosophy, literature, elocution, and other academic subjects to immigrants and others of the lower classes, the institute was lacking the means to reach these people through music.

The People’s Music League would do just that, giving free concerts for the less privileged.

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28 Reis, Composers, Conductors, and Critics, 23.
29 It is clear from the passages of Reis’s memoir Composers, Conductors, and Critics that she means the less-privileged immigrants that entered the country during the pre-war years. The pairing of “immigrants” and the “lower classes” is consistent in the text, and should by no means lead the reader to believe that all immigrants were in need of education and Americanization.
citizens of New York. Howe approved of the idea immediately and Reis became the chair of the new project.

Howe’s quick approval of the Music League is a testament to the strength of Reis’s idea; but it also testifies to Reis’s persuasiveness, as well as her charm. From her early career, her skills in organization, in motivating her colleagues, raising money, and securing performers and audiences for concerts, were apparent—and these were all crucial traits in the creation and success of a musical institution. Even in the most disparaging accounts of her work (notably that in Louise Varèse’s A Looking Glass Diary), Reis comes across as a charming woman who had a strong sense for business and organization.

Like the Walden School, the People’s Music League was founded on the principles of progressivism. It provided the less privileged citizens of New York with a foundational musical education, an aim evident in its two-fold mission statement: the PML sought “[to furnish], to people of limited means, opportunities for hearing good music and [to cultivate] a taste for good music in the general public.”30 During the decade of Reis’s work with the People’s Music League, the group organized several thousand concerts of “good music” in public schools and performance venues around the city, all of which it offered at affordable prices or free of charge. The League also established several volunteer orchestras, bands, and choirs made up of amateur musicians, giving the people of New York the opportunity not only to hear the great music of Europe but also to perform it.

It is evident that education was at the core of the League’s mission. Yet for Reis, an educated populace was a means rather than an end in itself. Just as Charles Sprague Smith, the founder of the People’s Institute, believed that informed citizens were necessary to sustain a healthy democracy, so Reis believed that a musically informed public was essential

30 From an article printed in the Journal of the People’s Institute of New York in 1917.
in the creation of an American musical style. Reis’s “end,” and the ultimate goal of the People’s Music League, as set forth in the literature and pamphlets published by the group, was to foster a distinctly American style of music. The PML’s ambition, coupled with that of American composers, critics, conductors and musicians of the period, resulted in the paradox of American modernism of the 1920s that Oja describes. The complex relationship that American modernism had with European music and the skepticism toward popular styles of music are an outgrowth of the programs, policies, and achievements of the People’s Music League and other progressive musical institutions.

This statement places much weight on the PML and Reis’s impact. The point, however, is not that she and her organization were the most prominent contributors to American modernism of the 1920s. To be sure, Reis and the PML had an enormous impact on the American musical scene during the 1910s and 1920s, as will be demonstrated below. Rather, the emphasis is placed on Reis because she can be seen as a kind of bridge between the “pre-modern”—or perhaps more accurately “proto-modern”—musical scene of the 1910s and the modernism of the 1920s. She was at the center of a movement that stretched from her early career into the 1930s. Exploring the programs, policies, and achievements of the PML makes it possible to trace the lines of Oja’s paradox back into the previous decade.

Claire Reis and the PML: The Early Years

The wide impact of the People’s Music League was apparent in its first three seasons. Both the number of concerts it gave and the size of the audience for them grew each of these years. In its first season, it gave twenty-seven concerts in nine different schools throughout New York City. It claimed to have reached thirty thousand people in the opening season, a number that makes the average attendance of the concerts roughly 1,100

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31 Smith’s motivations for founding the People’s Institute are outlined in the above-mentioned article: “What Is the ‘People’s Institute?’ Its Works Explained.”
people. It doubled its efforts in the second season, giving seventy-three concerts in thirteen schools to a total audience of fifty thousand. In its third season, it gave 158 concerts in twenty-three different schools. The total attendance for the third season was around one hundred thousand. In each of its first three seasons, the League doubled in size. After the third season, the number of concerts and total attendance began to plateau gradually as the League established a firm and consistent base of support.\(^3\)2

The average cost per concert to the League was about thirty dollars. Since most of its performances were free to the public, the League relied on donations to defray the expenses. By 1919, there were seventeen individuals that each contributed at least a thousand dollars to the group and many others that gave smaller donations (an “Annual Membership” cost $2.00, an “Associate Membership” $5.00, a “Membership” $10.00, a “Sustaining Membership” $25.00, a “Fellowship” $100.00, and a “Patron” membership $1,000.00).\(^3\)3 For expenses that went beyond the provisions of its donors, the League depended upon the returns from several concerts each season for which it charged a moderate admission fee. The price was only ten cents per person, and the profit from one of these concerts was enough to provide one month’s salary for an orchestra director.\(^3\)4 Whenever there was a deficit in the League’s budget Reis turned to the generous patron John W. Frothingham, who provided the money.\(^3\)5

As the organization’s growth plateaued, it turned its attention toward other projects. As described above, Reis was not satisfied for the people of New York merely to hear art music at the League’s concerts; she also wanted the people to be involved in its creation. She

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\(^3\)2 These figures are taken from the annual reports published by the People’s Music League.
\(^3\)3 Those who contributed at the “Patron” level were listed in a concert program for the Stadium Symphony Orchestra’s performance on the opening night of the summer concert series on June 30, 1919. The levels of donations are taken from the Annual Report of the PML’s sixth season. Both of these documents are kept in the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.
\(^3\)4 Numbers taken from a document titled “Mission Statement” from 1917-1918.
\(^3\)5 Reis, *Composers, Conductors, and Critics*, 30.
believed that the League’s many concerts each season were not enough to foster a sustained desire or a discriminating audience for art music; the creation of an enduring interest depended upon the people’s direct involvement with the music. To achieve this aim, Reis and other members of the League’s executive board turned their attention to Europe for a model.36 Since the early nineteenth century, a growing number of amateur orchestras, chamber music ensembles, and choral societies had contributed to the rich musical life of European cities. These groups provided an infrastructure that promoted a general interest in art music in the population—especially among the middle classes, the main participants in these ensembles. They also sustained the high quality of musical production in those centers, as a public knowledgeable about good music of the past, it was assumed, would naturally demand the same quality from contemporary composers. Reis saw the creation of such groups in America as a project for the PML. The group explicitly cited European models for such an infrastructure in its annual reports:

The movements for popular opera and popular concerts go a long way toward genuine musical education, but they reach only a small percentage of the people and it is necessary for the future support of such movements to create and encourage a still larger audience of music-lovers than has thus far been reached. It is our hope to see ultimately, as in the cities of Europe, splendid municipal orchestras which will play in public halls, school buildings and parks throughout the year. But before this vision can be realized the musical foundations must be laid.37

By its second season, the League had organized two community orchestras and one brass band. By the fourth season, there were five full orchestras, a brass band, and a chorus. The largest orchestra was “The Beethoven.” It consisted of one hundred members who met at 16 St. Mark’s Place in Manhattan for rehearsals once a week. Two of the orchestras were titled similarly: “The Schubert” (formerly known as “The Cloakmakers” because it was

36 European precedence for the PML’s policy and programs is a subject that will be taken up at length below.
37 Annual report from the third season (italics mine).
composed of members of the Cloak Makers’ Union) and “The Mozart.”\textsuperscript{38} Each orchestra rehearsed weekly and gave free concerts in local schools and public spaces (see Figure 2). Chamber ensembles made up of members from these orchestras also gave concerts around New York for special events and fundraisers. The League’s brass band met once a week at Public School 17 on West 46\textsuperscript{th} Street. It was composed of adults from the middle west side of Manhattan. The “Poale Zion Singing Society,” a chorus consisting of seventy-five voices, gave fifteen concerts of Jewish folk music and classical music for events at the Educational Alliance Center and Ellis Island during the League’s fourth season. In 1918, the League organized a second chorus led by the Swiss composer and conductor Ernest Bloch. This second chorus met at DeWitt Clinton High School. Bloch’s group sang music that he had brought from Europe in 1916. They performed works by Orlando de Lasso, Josquin des Prés, and other Renaissance composers. Reis remembered Bloch telling her that if the members of the choir “can read parts, they can sing Palestrina just as easily as ‘My Old Kentucky Home’.”\textsuperscript{39} The group was thus called “Palestrina on Twenty-second Street.”

Each member of the orchestras, band, and chorus paid a fee of five cents per week. The fee went toward the expansion of the PML’s music library and the cost of sheet music. The group provided its members with instruments, which it purchased with the proceeds of occasional benefit concerts and contributions from donors. A bulletin printed during the League’s sixth season claimed that the volunteer orchestras were its greatest achievement: “Probably none of the Music League undertakings has proved a more genuine source of culture and enjoyment than have the volunteer orchestras.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} Henry Lefkowitch (1891-1959) directed the Beethoven, the Schubert, the Mozart, and the Cooper Union Orchestra, which was made up of graduates and students of Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. He also led the “Poale Zion Singing Society.” The fifth orchestra was called the West Harlem Symphony Orchestra and was directed by Jacques Gottlieb.

\textsuperscript{39} Reis, \textit{Composers, Conductors, and Critics}, 28.

\textsuperscript{40} From a document titled “Mission Statement” from 1917-1918.
Figure 2. A photograph taken during a concert in a public school auditorium, probably in 1918. Henry Lefkowitz, who stands above the orchestra and faces the camera, leads “The Beethoven” in front of an audience of more than a thousand people. The orchestra was made up of community members of all ages, from young children to retired factory workers: notice especially the two children and the adolescent boy in the orchestra sitting nearest to the camera.\textsuperscript{41}

The response to the concerts of these amateur groups was positive. They even seemed to engage the public in a way beyond the League’s initial hopes. Because of the concerts given by the “Poale Zion Singing Society,” several “Singing Groups” composed of singers unaffiliated with the League sprang up around New York. One of these groups numbered up to 450 singers. A bulletin printed by the League during its 1917-1918 season recorded this phenomenon, championing it as a success in the long-term goal of getting the public of New York more interested in serious music:

Under the head of vocal music stimulated by the Music League the “Singing Groups,” which have sprung almost spontaneously from the concert audiences in certain neighborhoods, deserve attention. Such a group of four hundred and fifty men and women has been developed at the Grove Street School in the Greenwich district. At a concert given there in December, 1916, the audience somewhat tentatively responded to an invitation to sing under a volunteer director. At each subsequent concert the audience has manifested an increasing willingness to

\textsuperscript{41} Photograph taken from the \textit{Journal of the People’s Institute of New York}, published in 1919.
participate in the program, until now the Greenwich Village Community Chorus gives a concert each week at the school, assisted only by a vocal or instrumental soloist contributed by the Music League [sic].

With the end of World War I late in 1918, the League increased its activities. An article published in the New York Times in December of that year records the change:

The People’s Music League of the People’s Institute, which for years has directed energetic campaigns toward interesting Americans in choral music and in musical evenings with the best artists, as well as those whose reputations were not yet established, finds its work greatly increased since the war. Now that peace is about to bring a new task of reconstruction for the United States in the Americanization of its foreign-born peoples, it is believed that music will continue to play an important part in instilling patriotism and ideals of democracy.

The change is especially noticeable in the increased scope of the League’s concerts. The group continued the concerts in public schools and lecture halls that it had given during its first six seasons; but Reis also began to look toward larger venues. In 1918, she found the right location for such large-scale concerts: the newly built Lewisohn Stadium (1915) at the College of the City of New York. This open-air stadium, which could seat as many as twenty thousand people, was an ideal space for the League’s concerts. The architect Arnold Brunner modeled it after the Greek amphitheater with tiered seating arranged in a semicircular formation around a central performance area. An imposing colonnade in Doric style backed the audience (see Figure 3).

Built entirely of concrete, the very architecture of Lewisohn Stadium represented a point of intersection between high and low society. It was ornate, classical, high-minded, and yet made of the same stuff as the roads and sidewalks of the city around it. As one writer for the New York Times saw it, Lewisohn Stadium was “an outdoor Carnegie Hall, with the

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42 From a document titled “Mission Statement” from 1917-1918.
patrons in shirtsleeves and work pants.” This image of accessibility—which was more than just a figure of speech—fit perfectly with the mission of the People’s Music League. In the summer of 1918, the group gave a two-week run of orchestral concerts at the stadium as a part of an out-door concert series run by Minnie Guggenheim. The turnout for the League’s concert series was tremendous: a total of one hundred thousand people attended the concerts. The response was so great that the PML’s involvement in the series was extended from two to seven weeks.

The following summer, the League repeated the concert series. This time it planned for fifty-six concerts over an eight-week period that began in June. Each evening Arnold Volpe led the Stadium Symphony Orchestra—which was composed of members of the New York Philharmonic—in the performance of symphonies, operas, and chamber works in the open air of Lewisohn Stadium. The concerts featured the music of Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, César Franck, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov, Borodin,

45 Figures taken from the program notes to the opening night of the open-air concert series that began in June 1919.
46 Photograph taken from a brochure published by the People’s Institute in 1919.
Berlioz, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Liszt, and many other composers. As with all its concerts, the intended audience was ordinary citizens, those who might have otherwise been interested in activities such as baseball and fishing.

In keeping with the first part of the League’s creed, which was “[to furnish], to people of limited means, opportunities for hearing good music,” affordable ticket prices were one of the chief aims for the series. Tickets to the concerts ranged from $0.25 to $1.00, which, though a bit higher than the $0.10 fee the League had charged at its other concerts, was roughly equivalent to the price of tickets to a baseball game in the 1920s. Adolph Lewisohn, a wealthy industrialist and art collector who donated the money for the stadium, advocated for the civic value of the concerts in an article on the series. Perhaps even more than for their content, Lewisohn’s statements are interesting for their tone and for the way in which they idealize American past-times such as baseball and fishing:

I believe that this music in the open air…will have a distinct civic value…A lot more people have forgotten about music in the open air. They have been taught to believe that music is the exclusive property of the super-heated opera houses and the concert halls, and to millions of these people the open air means largely a matter of baseball or fishing. If baseball and fishing are good in the open air, then music is also good out of doors…We believe that in taking 8,000 people out into the open air, away from their hot homes, and giving them the world’s finest music played by a large symphony orchestra with the solos sung by the finest opera artists available, at a reasonable admission, we are doing something definite to make New York a pleasanter place in which to live and work.

Reis remembered the PML’s stadium concerts during a lecture later in life. In her account, she sums up the spirit of the concerts: they brought together disparate factions of the city that would otherwise not have come together for cultural events. She also brings up the immense pressure that was building on her and the PML in the pursuit of their various projects: “I had felt uncomfortable about having this project [the stadium concerts] suddenly

47 From the article “Open-Air Concerts: Their Civic Value,” included in the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.
ours, for we were still working to give the masses community projects, and the stadium was combining the social whirl of evening dress at front tables with the neighborhood gangs who climbed on fences and roofs, applauded and also whistled.”\textsuperscript{48} The image Reis gives of a “social whirl of evening dress…and neighborhood gangs” sums up the inclusive and democratic spirit of the concerts.

In addition to the open-air concerts of 1918 and 1919, the League also organized a series of fifteen concerts called “Six Centuries of Folk Songs of Europe and North America” between January and April of 1919 at the Great Hall of Cooper Union. Max Merz directed the concerts. Each performance showcased different nationalities: there was a concert of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Romanian music on February 4; a concert of Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, and Icelandic music that took place on March 18; a concert of Balkan and Hebrew music on April 22; and one of North American music on April 29. Each performance was given in the native tongue of the region, and the program notes focused on the way in which folk song revealed a region’s culture and history. The theme and global vision of the series along with the massive size of the open-air concerts show the League’s expanded scope in its seventh and eighth season.

As in the Cities of Europe: The PML and “Good Music”

The second part of the creed of the People’s Music League was “[to cultivate] a taste for good music in the general public.” Besides reflecting the progressive spirit of Reis’s early career, the statement also raises the question: what is “good music”?\textsuperscript{48}

In their annual reports, program notes, and bulletins, the League provides examples of what was not good: the popular music of the day. The notes for “Fifteen Concerts: Six Centuries of Folk Songs of Europe and North America” rail against “superficial and

\textsuperscript{48} Reis, Outline for a Lecture, undated.
unconscientious composers” of popular music. The author even goes so far as to compare the music of such composers to a “poisonous germ” that “infects” the city. “Every year” the author claims, “this poison sinks deeper and deeper into the souls of the people.”

In the same spirit, the League’s annual reports beginning in its third season list as one of its achievements that it had “proved that ragtime is not the measure of musical appreciation in New York City.” A bulletin published after the League’s fifth season describes the success of the organization in these terms: “At the end of five years [the PML] begins to see the results of its work in the building up of a cultivated, discriminating musical audience in neighborhoods formerly given over exclusively to ragtime and cheap vaudeville and in the awakening, through the great common language of music, of a new and finer community spirit.” The language here imagines ragtime and jazz spreading through neighborhoods like crime and violence, and like a social disease that can only be cleansed with the medicinal music of Beethoven and Brahms. These statements foreshadow the idea that opens Rosenfeld’s An Hour with American Music (“American music is not jazz. Jazz is not music”).49 As in Rosenfeld’s book, the League began its definition of “good music” with a description of what it is not.50

What constitutes good music is not so clear. In all its literature and annual reports, the League never supplied a definition of this category. Instead, we must look at the music that the League programmed in its concerts to understand what “good music” was to it. At one of the League’s concert given on December 12, 1913 at Public School 17 in Manhattan, there were performances of Irish and Scottish folk songs arranged by L.P. Lawrendeau, of

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49 Rosenfeld, An Hour with American Music, 1.
50 That the PML considered folk music acceptable and jazz unacceptable is most likely the result of its narrow conception of national identity.
band music of Hermann Baumann by the Huyler Band of Public School 20 in Manhattan, and of the “Pilgrim’s Chorus and March” from Tannhäuser by Wagner.

On December 16, 1913 at Public School 95 on Houston Street, the League’s largest orchestra, “the Beethoven,” gave a concert featuring Max Rosen, the young virtuoso whom Reis had accompanied in 1909, on violin. It programmed an orchestral arrangement of one of Schubert’s Marches militaires, a Prelude and Intermezzo from Pietro Mascagni’s Cavalleria rusticana, Pablo de Sarasate’s Caprice basque for violin and piano, the “Anvil” chorus and other selections from Verdi’s opera Il trovatore, the Overture to the Queen of Autumn by the British composer Carl Bigge, and Humoresque for solo violin and cello by Dvořák.

On January 20, 1914, the League gave a concert featuring young soloists accompanied by John W. Frothingham, the most important patron of the PML during its first decade. The pieces on the program were as follows: a Nocturne by Chopin, a Hungarian Dance by Johannes Brahms and Joseph Joachim, Berceuse by Fauré, and a Rondo by Henri Vieuxtemps, all played by the young violinist Alix Young; an aria from Puccini’s Tosca, The Pearl of Brazil by Félicien-César David, and Song with Flute Obligato [sic] by Charmant Oiseau, all performed by the soprano Mamia Adelle Hays; a Minuet and Arabesque by Debussy, a Romance by Saint-Saëns, and a Scherzo by the French composer Charles-Marie Widor played by the flutist William M. Kincaid.

Skipping forward several seasons, the League gave a concert on November 15, 1919 in Seward Park School Auditorium featuring the Overture to the opera Oberon by Weber, Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5, the symphonic poem Les Préludes by Liszt, the Prelude to La Deluge by Saint-Saëns, and two parts of the ballet Sylvia by Léo Delibes.51

51 The information on the concerts comes from the programs included in League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.
From the above selection of a few of the League’s programs, as well as the list of some of the composers programmed in the open-air concert series of 1919, it is apparent that “good music” was for the most part that of nineteenth-century Europe. In nearly all of the League’s concerts, these composers represent the core of the performance repertoire (and the exceptions—Mozart, Haydn, J.S. Bach, Handel—are hardly surprising). By exposing the less fortunate of New York to the art music of Europe, Reis hoped to provide them with a foundation of musical appreciation much like that provided in the great cities of Europe. This aim was made explicit in the PML’s annual reports in language that recalls their desire to emulate European amateur music ensembles. The first item under the section entitled “Origin and Purpose” (which was the only section in these reports that did not vary in language from season to season) read as follows:

To stimulate musical knowledge and appreciation among the people of New York who have little opportunity to hear good music, except at a prohibitive cost, and to make its enjoyment an integral part of the lives of the people, as it is in the cities of Europe.\(^{52}\)

Several years later, the composer Louis Gruenberg, a close friend of Reis and a fellow member of the executive board of the League of Composers, wrote about the recurring phrase “good music” in a letter to Reis. Gruenberg argued that no one can promise “good music” to an audience, only good performances: “No organization can guarantee good works—it can only give adequate representations. Good compositions lie outside of the realm of even composers—as they occur like all miracles—miraculously. So don’t worry over matters you cannot change—we are doing our best with the material … composers offer us—that must suffice.”\(^{53}\) His argument is cogent and he appears to be responding to the aura surrounding the term throughout the previous two decades.

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\(^{52}\) Annual Report from the second season (italics mine).

\(^{53}\) Gruenberg, dated April 15, 1927 (emphasis his).
As discussed above, the League promoted the values and ideas surrounding European music. An example of this can be seen in the program notes for a series of ten concerts of chamber music that took place in its eighth season. The author echoes the traditional idea of chamber music as “rational conversation among equals” expressed by Goethe among others. Chamber music, the notes claim, “is like the free and unreserved conversation of a small group of intimate friends. It may be sober or gay, solemn or animated, calm or even heated, but it is ever a heart to heart utterance.”\textsuperscript{54}

Indeed, in the literature by and about the PML there is one phrase that stands as a kind of slogan for its various aims and achievements: “as in the cities of Europe.” The expression appears time and again in the League’s annual reports, in the brochures it published, and in articles and journals published by the People’s Institute of New York:\textsuperscript{55} European art music, the social infrastructure that supported it, and the cultural values that sustained it were all seen as desirable models for American musical life. The League felt that by emulating European musical education and institutions, it could cultivate an American style similar to but distinct from that in Europe.

This idea that New York should be “like” a European city without actually being a European city prefigures the paradoxical state in which modernist composers found themselves in during the 1920s. The uneven and problematic relationship that American modernism had with European modernism can be traced to the League’s project to modernize American audiences. American modernism has its roots in the process of modernization enacted in the programs of the People’s Music League, in its literature, and in

\textsuperscript{54} From the program to “Ten Chamber Music Concerts” from the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.

\textsuperscript{55} The expression occurs twice in every edition of the annual reports, first in the opening sentence of the section “Origin and Purpose” and again in the section “Outlook for the Future.” It appears two times in an article published about the Music League in 1917 by the \textit{Journal of the People’s Institute of New York}, and again in a bulletin printed by the People’s Institute of New York in 1919 that discusses the aims and achievements of the Music League.
private concerts like the Ornstein series of 1916—the topic of the next section here. In other words, American musical modernism perhaps inevitably was conceived, carried, and born in the shadow of European music.

Reis and the “Ornstein Course” of 1916

With as much as she accomplished during the 1910s with the People’s Music League, it is hard to imagine that Reis had time for other projects. And yet in 1916 she helped to organize an educational series of private concerts with Rosenfeld and the pianist and composer Leo Ornstein. The idea for the series can be traced back to a series of letters exchanged between Reis and Rosenfeld late in the summer of 1915. In a passage from one of these letters, Rosenfeld first mentions the idea of a concert series to Reis:

I’ve been discussing with Leo his plans for the winter, and we’ve decided to consult you. The project under consideration is a series of six Sunday night recitals, at $10 the series, to be given during the months of December, January and February. Leo thinks he can get Steinway Hall for very little. I suggest giving a comprehensive course in modern piano music—semi-private, the audience limited to sixty or seventy. After each recital, a general discussion.

Such an idea would have had an obvious appeal to Reis, who cared deeply about the musical education of American audiences. Moreover, she and Ornstein were well acquainted with each other: both had studied piano under Bertha Feiring Tapper between the fall of 1906 and 1913. The result of this exchange was a series of four, not six, concerts given

56 Reis’s Making Music Modern begins with a chapter on Ornstein and the series of concerts of 1916.
57 Their relationship began sometime between 1906 and 1910. In her memoir, Reis recalls that once a week during this period, she would play chamber music with Walter Kramer—a young composer, violinist, and music critic—and Waldo Frank—a cellist and author. Rosenfeld, whom she remembers as “a sensitive young student of music just graduated from Yale,” would “lie folded up on the sofa...like some royal personage, with a private trio” playing just for him. After each evening, they would talk about music: “Paul would make discriminating remarks about such American composers as Horatio Parker and Charles Ives, about whom in those days we knew very little.” She remembers him telling her that “those evenings marked the beginning of [his] interest in becoming a music critic” (Reis, Composers, Conductors, and Critics, 21-22).
58 Rosenfeld, dated August 6, 1915, from the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.
59 Although Reis stopped studying soon after she founded the People’s Music League, Ornstein continued to study piano with Tapper until her death late in 1915. In one of Rosenfeld’s letters, he relates Ornstein’s account of her declining health to Reis (Rosenfeld, July 25, 1915).
every other week from March 5 to April 16, 1916. The venue of the concerts was Reis’s music room, which she often opened up for rehearsals and private concerts such as these. In these concerts, Ornstein performed new piano music by preeminent European composers, much of which he had obtained during his first solo concert tour of Europe the previous year. He also gave performances of several of his own compositions in the concerts. As it was with the concerts of the People’s Music League, the aim of the Ornstein concerts was to educate its audience. The program notes that accompanied the concerts clarify the intent. They refer to the series as a “course,” and specify that there would be a lecture and open discussion after each performance:

This course has been organized by a group of music-lovers with the purpose of permitting an audience of not over fifty professionals and amateurs to hear in intimate surroundings the music of the piano that has been composed during our day, and for it. At the close of each recital, there will be an informal discussion, a thing impossible in a concert-hall, during which Mr. Ornstein will be glad to comment on the music just performed.61

With its focus on education, the Ornstein course can be looked at as a kind of extension of the work to modernize the American public that began with the People’s Music League.62 One can even imagine the program of a League concert dovetailing into the first program of the Ornstein series. The course began as a League concert might have begun: Ornstein opened with a set consisting of Liszt’s Liebestraum, No. 3 (1850), Anton Rubinstein’s Valse caprice (1870), two chorales by Modest Mussorgsky, and César Franck’s virtuosic Prelude, chorale et fugue (1884). He then played works that had been composed around the turn of the century: several preludes, an etude, and a sonata by Alexander Scriabin and a

60 In the documents that Reis left to the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center, the dates that were printed on the program are all scratched through and moved up two weeks.
61 Program notes to “Four Informal Recitals by Leo Ornstein,” 1916.
62 The idea that American audiences had to be informed of the musical events that led up to modernism in order to understand modernist music may seem natural enough; and yet, there are many composers, critics, and thinkers from the period—especially those of the musical avant-garde such as Varèse—who would have opposed such a notion.
few smaller works of Debussy. The subsequent concerts featured only music by twentieth-century composers, such as Stravinsky, Ravel, Schoenberg, d'Indy, Debussy, Casella, Busoni, and Ornstein himself.

Reis, Rosenfeld, and Ornstein saw the series as a way to combat the ignorance of modern music prevalent among American audiences. In one passage from the program notes, the author takes the optimistic position that this ignorance was due to the geographic separation of America and Europe:

The programs have been made by Mr. Ornstein to illustrate the steps by which piano-music moved away from the art forms that culminated in the works of the romantic composers toward the expressions it has taken today. Because of the suddenness with which the new music reached us, but a year or two ago, there has been distinct need of a course of this sort, calculated to show the logical developments that this music has undergone. Had it reached us in natural course, as it was being composed, the logic of the developments would have been evident enough to those who are still bewildered by the apparently radical nature of the departures.63

Rosenfeld's letters, however, take a less gracious stance toward the ignorance of American audiences. He felt that their ignorance was not just the result of a geographic separation, but that it was self-willed by the “sluggish conservatism” of musical circles in the United States. The Ornstein course was an attempt to confront this conservatism head-on. Rosenfeld acknowledges this aim in a passage from one of his letters to Reis:

In the back of my mind, there is a desire to help organize a Modern Music Club, — an association which will have performed for it each year the new chamber music, and I wonder whether an audience gotten together for Leo's recital couldn't help form a nucleus for such a society? There’s really a crying need for such an organization to make headway against the sluggish conservatism in musical circles...You remember speaking of a similar matter, don’t you, during one of our talks last spring?64

For the moment, we must postpone a discussion of the idea for a “Modern Music Club” that opens this passage, and instead point out that there is not one direct mention of

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63 From the program notes to “Four Informal Recitals by Leo Ornstein.”
64 Rosenfeld, August 6, 1915.
Europe in the program notes for the Ornstein course. The effect that the absence of the words “Europe” or “European” has on the reader is similar to the failure of Rosenfeld or the People’s Music League to formulate a clear, simple definition for “good music”: the author takes for granted that the audience knows that when he or she writes the word “music,” “the tradition of European art music” is meant. The unspoken nature of this idea demonstrates how deeply rooted the idea that an American style of modern music would necessarily be European was, even in 1916.

For all that Rosenfeld and Reis had in common, there are some obvious differences in their outlooks. Up until the Ornstein recitals, Reis seems to have had little interest in modern music.65 The concerts for the PML, as shown above, were full of the symphonies of Beethoven and Mozart; scenes from the operas of Verdi, Wagner, and Weber; the piano music of Brahms and Chopin; et cetera. In a way, the People’s Music League was a part of this current of “sluggish conservatism” that Rosenfeld perceived in American musical circles. Though Rosenfeld obviously had great respect for Reis and her project, his own work was focused almost entirely on modern music and literature.66 Where their projects did overlap, however, was in their intent to develop an enlightened and discriminating audience: “I dream of a great liberating art for our century,” Rosenfeld writes in one letter, “something akin to the healing power of nature.”67 The person whom art liberates and heals is not the artist but

65 That is to say Reis’s interest in modern music was not evident in her professional work with the PML. She did, however, show an interest in modern music in the aforementioned evenings she spent with Waldo Frank, Walter Kramer, and Paul Rosenfeld playing chamber music. In Composers, Conductors, and Critics, she recalls that “many of the works [they] read were by composers whose names were unknown in this country at the time,” and that “together [they] made up an avant-garde, exploring a new world in the universe of music” (21).
66 Rosenfeld’s first two articles published in the New Republic were entitled “The Tragedy of Gustav Mahler” (April 8, 1916) and “Ornstein” (May 27, 1916); in the latter article, he even goes so far as to say that the music of Schoenberg was by that time “a trifle vieux jeu”—or “old hat.” Schoenberg himself lamented this line of criticism. He witnessed his work, once referred to as the “music of the future” by adverse critics, become the “music of the past,” without ever being the “music of today”.
67 Rosenfeld, July 25, 1915.
the audience. In the same letter, Rosenfeld describes the ideal artist as a person who is “free and brave and generous.” He presents Ornstein as an example of such a person:

[Leo] has thrown “art” over, and given back to life, and to nature, and the song of the winds and the birds, and the beating of his own heart, as the only truth. Energy, energy, is his continual cry. And so his hatred of concerts, and to much art etc., and his one desire to awake the spirit to individual expression, and to seeing the world through its own eyes. I think to Leo the creation of beauty is far less important than the sensing of that beauty, and that his art aspire not to the making of fine music, but to the making of fine people. Only in that sense does “All service rank the same with God” if it has love at heart. And that love casts out self in the artist.\(^6^8\)

In their separate projects—Rosenfeld’s in criticism, Reis’s in philanthropy—these two Americans sought to enlighten the uninitiated “philistines,” and to awaken all people to the world around them; as Rosenfeld claimed, art should be not about the making of fine art, but rather “the making of fine people.”\(^6^9\) It was this conception of art’s function in society that motivated the Ornstein course of 1916. It was also the idea that motivated all of Reis’s efforts of her early career, from her work with the People’s Music League to the founding of the Walden School. And in 1923, it was with this conception of art’s purpose, and this desire to give back to the people, that Reis founded the League of Composers.

A New Direction for Reis and the PML

During the 1910s, Reis refined what she hoped to accomplish with her career. She began to show an increasing interest in supporting modern music, a shift that is reflected in the programming and literature of the League. As demonstrated above, the League had aimed at the re-creation of European musical infrastructure and musical culture throughout the 1910s. In the latter half of the 1910s and early 1920s, however, Reis began to program more modern music, including works by young American composers. The rhetoric of its

\(^6^8\) Ibid.

\(^6^9\) In one of his undated letters to Reis, Rosenfeld uses the word “philistine” in this context, where it is reminiscent of the criticism of Robert Schumann, whose Davidsbündler, or “band of David” fought the ignorance and arrogance of uninformed musicians and audiences. It is noteworthy that in 1946—the year of Rosenfeld’s death—his translation of much of Schumann’s writing and criticism was published under the title On Music and Musicians.
literature also evolved during the period. In some of its programs, the League began to write about creating a “national art form” of the United States.

The shift was first evident in the language that it used to express its goals. An example of this change in language is the program notes to the above-mentioned concert series “Fifteen Concerts: Six Centuries of Folk Songs of Europe and North America.” In these notes, the author writes: “We are approaching the dawn of a new day,” in which the League’s enterprise “will prove a contribution towards purifying and ennobling the musical life of this country and a stimulus towards the creation of a truly national art.” The League’s expressed intent up to this point had been to cultivate a discriminating audience and to provide a musical education to those less fortunate citizens of New York. The desire to stimulate an American musical style reveals a subtle shift in the group’s aim.

The shift in rhetoric was accompanied by a change in programming. The League began to feature more modern music in its concerts. The most notable example of this change took place in Reis’s final year of work with the People’s Music League. On February 12, 1922, the League gave a concert for its ten-year anniversary featuring young American composers. The event took place in the Great Hall of Cooper Union just a few blocks south of Union Square. The concert featured works for various chamber ensembles by Rebecca Clarke, Louis Gruenberg, Frederick Jacobi, Walter Kramer, Lazare Saminsky, and Deems Taylor. In each work, the composer participated by conducting or playing the piano. It was the first and last concert of such music in the PML’s history. (And it is worth noting that half of the composers on the bill were to be on the Executive Board of the League of Composers in its early years.)

70 Though Reis stopped working with the Music League of the People’s Institute in 1922, the organization functioned until 1927, seven years before the collapse of the People’s Institute.
The event was of great importance to Reis. In a lecture later in life, she emphasized the impact that it had on her career: “My reputation with the Cooper Union Composers’ concert led me into the next phase of music—this time with a feeling of service to composers…My sympathy for the masses and for music seemed to begin a new chapter; sympathy for composers. I had not lost sight of the masses entirely, but they were now transformed into the concert-going public, and for them the goal I quickly realized involved EDUCATION.” Even as she re-oriented her sympathies from “the masses” to composers, her desire to be an educator was steadfast. She underscored this apparent shift in interests in her memoir:

I felt compelled to find new and better ways to help with the development of contemporary music. Something told me that now my activities of the last ten years had served the purpose, but had reached their logical end. It is my belief when it comes time to shut the door on anything there should be no vacillation. It should be shut quickly. With this in mind, I turned to the new interest I had taken in helping living composers.

71 Reis, outline for a lecture, undated (emphasis hers).
72 Reis, Composers, Conductors, and Critics, 31.
CHAPTER III
A RE-EVALUATION OF THE SCHISM BETWEEN
THE LEAGUE OF COMPOSERS AND THE ICG

Much ink has been spilled about the schism within the International Composers’ Guild that led to the creation of the League of Composers.\(^73\) A brief explanation of the circumstances that led to the break will suffice. In 1921, Edgard Varèse and Carlos Salzedo founded the Guild. Varèse, a staunch modernist composer, drew up the Guild’s charter. His idea was that the organization would perform only the most modern compositions. One of the bylaws in the charter ensured this aim by permitting the group to give only premiere performances: either New York or American premieres were acceptable, but Varèse preferred world premieres.\(^74\) Reis began to work with the Guild at the beginning of its second season, acting as the chairperson of its executive committee on the recommendation of Louis Gruenberg. (Reis’s position was also described as “Executive Director,” and at times “Executive Secretary”; Louise Varèse uses the latter designation pejoratively to assert that Reis overstepped her position in trying to influence the musical decisions of the organization.)\(^75\) According to Louise Varèse, Reis was an “indefatigable” promoter of the Guild and a woman with “enough energy to split atoms.”\(^76\) Her work ensured that the ICG’s

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\(^74\) A work could, however, be repeated immediately after a premiere at the audience’s demand. This was the case with several pieces, such as Carl Ruggles’s *Angels* (1922) at a concert on December 17, 1922 and Stravinsky’s *Renard* (1916) at a concert on December 2, 1923.

\(^75\) Varèse, *Varèse: A Looking-Glass Diary*, 187.

\(^76\) Varèse, *A Looking-Glass Diary*, 177, 188.
concerts were well attended and received critical attention from the major publications. She also opened up the music room of her home to the Guild as a rehearsal space.

From the beginning of her work with the ICG, there appear to have been tensions between Reis and Varèse. These were mostly due to Varèse’s managerial style. The decision of which pieces the Guild would program in its concerts fell almost entirely on Varèse; he had started the organization and felt that the musical choices were his prerogative. Reis’s background with the PML had accustomed her to working in a democratic fashion, whereby decisions were made as a group and disagreements were solved through conversation.

After a Guild performance of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire* on February 4, 1923, tensions came to a head in the organization. Gruenberg conducted the work at the Klaw Theatre in New York with Greta Torpadie as the soloist. (Gruenberg was perhaps the best-suited American musician to conduct the work at that time, as he had been present at several rehearsals and a performance of the work with the composer as conductor in Berlin the previous season.) Although the audience’s reaction to the music was split—as one critic later reflected, the concert “disrupted families” and “severed life-long friendships”—the concert attracted a great deal of attention from critics and the musically informed public. Klaw Theatre was sold out that evening and several hundred people were sent away at the door. Reis and a few other members of the Guild’s executive board, including Gruenberg, felt that a repeat of the concert would give those who were unable to attend an opportunity

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77 As stated above, it was Gruenberg who suggested that Reis be appointed executive secretary of the Guild at the beginning of its second season. She assumed control of the business aspects of the ICG, which gave Salzedo and Varèse more time to focus on the musical side. Reis secured the Klaw Theatre on 251 West 45th St.—a good uptown theater—as the new location for the Guild’s concerts. For more on her contributions and the workings of the Guild in its early years, see: Lott, “New Music for New Ears,” 272; Louise Varèse, *Looking Glass Diary*, 177; and Reis, *Composers, Conductors, and Critics*.

78 All of the rehearsals for the 1923 performance of *Pierrot lunaire* took place in Reis’s home. See: Varèse, *Looking-Glass Diary*, 186.

to experience the music and those who wanted to hear the work again the opportunity to do so. The dissenting group also cited the Guild’s financial state as a reason to repeat the concert: the ICG was young and in need of money. By ensuring that all the concerts of the Guild’s second season were given to a full house, Reis had enabled the organization to pay back all its debts; she had even secured a small surplus for future engagements. 80 A repeat performance of *Pierrot* would have been a practical move since the immense interest that had generated around the premiere virtually guaranteed a full house. 81

Varèse, however, felt that *Pierrot* should not be performed again, and cited the bylaw in the Guild's charter that forbade any repetition of a work. 82 The argument that ensued between Varèse, Salzedo, and Carl Ruggles on one side and Reis and Gruenberg on the other was full of phrases such as “compromise”—a dirty word within Varèse’s circle of friends—“commercialism,” and “catering to the public” from the one side and desperate pleas for reasonable debate from the other. 83 In the end, however, Varèse refused to have the issue “argued coolly in parliamentary style.” 84 Reis called for a meeting of the board without Varèse in the art gallery of her friend and fellow member of the executive board Stephen Bourgeois. Varèse caught wind of the meeting and ended the conflict with a letter from one of the Guild’s attorneys. The document claimed that the ICG’s executive board was defunct because of a legal technicality:

At no time was there a meeting of the incorporators, which should have been done immediately after the filing of the Certificate of Incorporation with the Secretary of

80 Reis, *Composers, Conductors, and Critics*, 14.
82 As Reis writes in her memoir, she had overlooked the bylaw. In one passage, she laments the logic behind the law: “True, it had seemed important in the early days to stress the ‘first’ performance. As we all know, ‘It’s a first’ was to become part of the American idiom. Perhaps the time will come when we may say, with equal effect, ‘It’s a second.’…” Nevertheless a definite vogue does remain for the *première*, and it is still difficult to achieve the second performance of a contemporary work” (Reis, *Composers, Conductors, and Critics*, 14).
84 Ibid.
State in Albany and with the County Clerk in New York County, as required under the Membership Corporation Law of the State of New York.

That every act done or performed until this day has been entirely unauthorized, unwarranted and unsupported by the Membership Corporation Law, as I am advised [sic].

In short, the letter consolidated Varèse’s power over all musical decisions made by the Guild and claimed that the organization’s executive board had never actually existed. The letter gave him the power to choose members of a new executive board that would be in charge only of the business decisions for the group. After the incident, Reis and five other members of the ICG’s board, no less than three-fourths of its members, left to form the League of Composers. Reis became the “Executive Director”—elsewhere she was described as the “Chairman of the Executive Board”—of the new group, and the League gave its first concert later that same year. As for the Guild, Louise Varèse remembered the circumstances after Reis and the others left the board in her memoir, A Looking-Glass Diary: “There was much rejoicing among us. The whip of the law had restored homogeneous peace to the ICG.”

It is apparent from the description of the circumstances surrounding the 1923 performance of Pierrot that the event was a catalyst. The conflict that followed in the wake of the performance was the result of tensions that had been building up within the Guild from its inception. Reis, Gruenberg, and the others were upset not only by Varèse’s inflexible adherence to the bylaw, but also by his autocratic style of leadership and his firm refusal to allow democratic debate over the Guild’s musical policy. Even Varèse’s wife Louise acknowledged that he managed the Guild with the strong will of a dictator: “Varèse wanted

85 Varèse, Looking-Glass Diary, 190-191.
86 Ibid.
to run it himself, his way.”87 She regretted that Reis had broken rank by trying to influence
the musical decisions of the Guild:

It was a great pity for Varèse that she [Reis] could not have remained in the role for
which she had so great a talent. She stepped out of these prescribed limits only to
come to the defense of the composers who were her friends, being bullied by a
dictatorial chairman…Varèse, though as democratic as it is possible to be in his
human relations, was an autocrat in all musical matters. As for the ICG, Varèse in his
Zeusian pride felt that he had created a full-grown musical offspring that was in no
need of wet nurses.88

It is worth noting that Varèse eventually made exceptions to the bylaw. In the
Guild’s final concert on April 17, 1927, Stravinsky’s Octet and Varèse’s Intégrales were
performed. The works had been premiered in New York in January and March of 1925,
respectively.89 If the rule was in the end flexible, what was it that spurred him to such a
strong position about it in the 1923 conflict? It appears that we must look to other factors
that contributed to the conflict.

Reception of the Schism

Almost as interesting as the 1923 schism is the imprint the event left on scholarship
and criticism throughout the twentieth century. Many scholars and composers have looked
to the split between the two organizations as the origin of two separate factions in American
modernism. One of these is the musicologist David Nicholls. The introduction of his book
American Experimental Music, 1890-1940 (1990) describes and appraises these two opposing
parties. On the one side was a group made up of Varèse, Ruggles, Henry Cowell, Charles
Ives, George Antheil, Dane Rudhyar, Ruth Crawford, and Charles Seeger, among others.
These were composers with little connection to Europe (though several were in fact

87 Quoted in: Lott, “New Music for New Ears,” 273.
88 (Varèse, Looking-Glass Diary, 188.) The passage—and indeed most of the passages of A Looking-Glass Diary in
which Reis is involved—brings to light the troublesome role that gender played in modernist literature. The
topic will be taken up at length below.
European). They were often called the “ultra-moderns” or “experimentalists.” On the other side was the faction that consisted of Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, Marc Blitzstein, Roy Harris, Walter Piston, and Virgil Thomson, to name a few. Most of these composers had studied in Europe, often under Nadia Boulanger at the French Music School for Americans in Fontainebleau, France. With no small amount of condescension, Nicholls refers to this group as “acceptable Europeanised modernists.” They were also called the “Boulangerie” or the “neoclassicists.” The “experimentalists” were, of course, associated with the ICG while the “Boulengerie” was identified with the League of Composers.

Nicholls is not alone in his interpretation of the American modernist scene. The composer Peter Garland also divided American modernism into these categories in the early 1990s: “There is a fundamental schism in American music, one that has existed since the 1920s…This split has created a condition where there are now (and always have been) two kinds of American music: the ‘official’ and the ‘real.’” The “real” American music for both Nicholls and Garland was always the modernism of the ICG.

Although this trend in scholarship may be instructional in an examination of historical identity, it has given rise to a number of problems. First, it ignores the great overlap that existed between the programming and policies of the two organizations. In the process of polarizing the two groups, scholars have neglected a great common ground between them. The second problem, which is closely related to the first, is that scholarship in this vein imposes an anachronistic ideology onto each group. “Neoclassicism” as a musical style did not really find its place in America until after 1927 (the year that the Guild dissolved), with the introduction of works such as Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) and *Oedipus rex* (1927). And though Ives might be considered the most important

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91 Ibid.
“experimentalist,” he had no affiliation with the ICG; Ives’s collaboration with Varèse and his organization, the Pan American Association of Composers (1928-1934), must be imposed retroactively on the ICG to justify the Guild’s association with experimentalists. In other words, there is no evidence that the ICG had experimentalist leanings in its programming. The third problem is that it uncritically adopts period designations as firm categories of historiography. Indeed, there is no shortage of literature in which Cowell, Varèse, Ives, or Ruggles distance themselves from the “acceptable Europeanized” (and also “feminized”) modernists such as Copland, Blitzstein, and Sessions; but for a historian not to question what Ives or Cowell or Varèse, or any composer of the time said that he or she was is a mistake.⁹² In adopting these period designations, historians necessarily adopt the value judgments couched within them—a kind of Trojan-horse phenomenon.

Nicholls recognizes that he is adopting period designations. In his case, the choice is understandable: his book is about the American experimentalists. The problem here is that it propagates a long-standing myth that this group of composers came out of the ICG. Oja identifies this problem in Making Music Modern, calling it a “myth…of two opposing factions emerging from the ICG and League.”⁹³ There is also a problem of terminology, as the terms applied—especially those used by Garland, but to a lesser extent those by Nicholls in American Experimental Music—inherently assign values to each faction. In the following passage, Nicholls argues that the American experimentalist tradition was largely the result of the 1923 schism between the “radicals” on the one side and the “acceptable Europeanised modernists” on the other:

The PAAC, New Music and Cowell’s 1933 book American Composers on American Music all sought to promote the cause of America’s more avant-garde composers. For they, unlike the acceptable Europeanised modernists (for instance Aaron Copland, Walter

⁹³ Oja, Making Music Modern, 178.
Piston, Roger Sessions, Virgil Thompson and perhaps Roy Harris) lacked the patronage of major soloists, conductors, orchestras and publishers. This, in part, was a consequence of the fundamental split which had occurred in 1923 in the International Composers’ Guild, between Varèse’s supporters—among whom were included Ruggles and to a lesser extent Cowell—and those who left to form the League of Composers. Thus the radicals’ grouping together was essentially a conscious act, rather than being merely a convenience of retrospection…

This grouping was in fact recognized at the time both by the composers themselves and by others. As early as 1928, Pitts Sanborn of the *New York Telegram* named Ruggles, Varèse and Cowell as the radicals of the moment, while in 1931 the critic of the *Boston Post* referred to Ives, Ruggles and Cowell as “the lunatic fringe of modern music”. Finally, Cowell described himself as an “indigenous American” composer in his quasi-introductory chapter to *American Composers on American Music*; and among those he similarly tagged were Ives, Ruggles, Seeger and Crawford.94

The separation of modernism into these two categories of “real” and “official” or, put differently, “legitimate” and “illegitimate,” reduces the value of the latter group in its positive valuation of the former; in doing so, the dialectical nature of American modernism is concealed and Oja’s paradox—as described at length previously—collapses. These categories are at best convenient in their reductiveness: something complex and inconsistent becomes something easily classified and partitioned. Oja succinctly addresses this problem without smoothing the edges of her paradox: “A modernist movement divided? Perhaps, but not consistently.”95

Scholarship that propagates this myth tends to marginalize other issues that played a role in the split to focus on compositional style. Specifically, by making the schism about an “authentic” or “real” American style, the role that gender stereotypes or educational orientation played in the division is neglected or outright ignored. Oja proposes a more complex view of the schism, a view in which gender, power structure, race, and ideology rather than stylistic preferences were the predominant factors.96

96 Ibid., 186.
The “Modern Music Clubs” that Rosenfeld wrote to Reis about in 1915 were realized with the great institutions of the 1920s. The purpose of this chapter is to revisit the programs and policies of the two organizations, and in doing so re-evaluate the similarities and differences between the two organizations. From the viewpoint of the musical style that each group cultivated, the two organizations are virtually indistinguishable. I argue here that the differences between two groups lie in their approach toward management and the position they took toward the relation of the composer to the audience. As Copland remembered many years later, rather than dividing the musical landscape, the schism broadened it: “where there had been one forward-looking group, there were now two.”

Varèse’s Early Career and the ICG’s Manifesto

Varèse immigrated to the United States in 1915 after he was discharged from the French Army due to an injury. Upon his arrival, he was astonished by Americans’ lack of understanding of modern music. In an article published by the *New York Morning Telegraph* in 1919, Varèse quipped about the state of musical societies in the United States: “Too many musical organizations are Bourbons who learn nothing and forget nothing. They are mausoleums—mortuaries for musical reminiscences.” His comment appears to be in line with the observation that Paul Rosenfeld made to Reis about the “sluggish conservatism of music circles.” It is significant, however, to notice where Varèse’s opinion departs from Rosenfeld’s. The latter’s description of the musical landscape of the country does not use gendered language. For Varèse, the institutions were not only “mortuaries,” they were also run entirely by women. Later in life, he remembered his initial impression of the musical climate of his new home:

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99 Rosenfeld, August 6, 1915.
After I was discharged from the French Army, I came to America because the war conditions had really interrupted all normal musical activity. When I came here, the climate for modern music was really quite terrible. Musical organizations were run entirely by society ladies, who certainly did not want to hear any modern music. As a conductor my programs were constantly interfered with.\textsuperscript{100}

In 1919, Varèse organized the New Symphony Orchestra with the generous support of “125 prominent women of New York.”\textsuperscript{101} The orchestra’s programs mostly consisted of contemporary music, but they also included repertoire by canonical composers such as J.S. Bach. The extremely negative reaction to the group’s opening concerts on the evenings of April 11 and 12, 1919 was enough to scare the patrons and musicians. As Varèse and his wife, Louise, later remembered, the patrons feared a boycott by conservative audiences and with it, the financial collapse of the orchestra; these “prominent women” demanded that Varèse change the programs to fit American tastes. Varèse, who was always staunchly opposed to compromise, resigned the following week in answer to their pressure.

As Oja shows in her chapter devoted to Varèse in \textit{Making Music Modern}, the negative reviews of the concert had less to do with the repertoire than with Varèse’s apparently poor performance as conductor; even critics who regularly stood behind Varèse, such as Rosenfeld, who was then at the \textit{Dial}, were critical of the concerts.\textsuperscript{102} Yet this was not the way that composer remembered the event: the conflict was not about his performance at the podium, but rather his choice in programming; the conflict was not between him and the critics, but rather him and his female patrons. The event obviously left a sour taste in Varèse’s mouth and was a precursor to the 1923 conflict with Reis and her group of dissidents.

\textsuperscript{100} Gunther Schuller and Varèse, “Conversation with Varèse,” \textit{Perspectives of New Music} 3, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1965): 35.
\textsuperscript{101} “Varèse to Conduct New N.Y. Orchestra,” \textit{Musical America} 29, no. 16 (February 15, 1919): 2.
\textsuperscript{102} See: Oja, \textit{Making Music Modern}, 31-35.
Three years later, Varèse established the Guild with Salzedo as a venue for performances of new music by him and his likeminded colleagues. The manifesto drawn up for the organization uses vivid language: “Dying is the privilege of the weary,” it states; “The present day composers refuse to die. They have realized the necessity of banding together and fighting for the right of each individual to secure a fair and free presentation of his work.”¹⁰³ The purpose of the Guild is firmly established by the willful opening of its manifesto: “The composer is the only one of the creators of today who is denied direct contact with the public.” Who it was that denied the composers contact with the public is unclear; but the martial tone of the document is immediately apparent, as is its élan vital. In it, composers are imagined as soldiers striving for self-preservation and performances as battles. The manifesto mentions an audience, but only to say that its taste in modern music is limited to the weakest of modern compositions:

> It is true that in response to public demand, our official organizations occasionally place on their programs a new work surrounded by established names. But such a work is carefully chosen from the most timid and anaemic of contemporary productions, leaving absolutely unheard the composers who represent the true spirit of our time.¹⁰⁴

There is no mention of a desire to improve the tastes of American audiences, but rather only of a wish to present works “in such a way as to reveal their fundamental spirit.” New music must be forced upon audiences regardless of their willingness to listen. The document also expresses a position toward groups and movements that Varèse consistently touted throughout his career: “The International Composers’ Guild disapproves of all ‘isms’; denies the existence of schools; recognizes only the individual.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
The Literature of the League

The published literature associated with the League of Composers suggests a noticeably different spirit from that of the Guild. The new group announced its formation with a manifesto printed in March 1923 in the journal *Musical America*. In it, the League outlined the need for an organization that would present pieces based on their “merit” rather than their experimental nature. The document is worth quoting at length:

The League is being incorporated with the following objects: To encourage, support and make possible the production of music representative of the present time; to present the best of such music regardless of nationality or school of composer; to enable new composers to achieve production and publication; to further the publication of modern music; to promote cooperation among composers of all nations and encourage the formation of similar groups in other countries, and, finally, to present not for profit, concerts which shall represent and encourage the new tendencies in music.

While “first performances” are expected, by the very nature of the organization, to be a feature of the programs, there will be no exclusive dedication to such an idea. The League chooses to make its criterion one of merit rather than to rely on the more bizarre elements of experiment. Modern works which are important and in need of a hearing will be scheduled at the concerts, regardless of the number of previous auditions.\(^\text{105}\)

Other literature published by the League in its opening season adopted a similar tone to that of the article in *Musical America*. Though its publications scarcely mention the Guild by name, they are replete with oblique references to Varèse’s organization. For instance, a document titled “Foreword to the First Season” opens with a jab at the ICG (along with other modern-music organizations of the period):

The presentation in America of contemporary music is an undertaking that has rapidly outgrown the capacities of existing musical organizations. The mediums recently formed to promote modern music have been adequate only to offer a special phase of the whole movement. No organization exists today which proposes to bring the entire range of modern tendencies before the public. It is for this reason that the League of Composers has been organized.\(^\text{106}\)

At one point in the foreword, the author directly mentions the ICG:

\(^{105}\) “New League to Aid Modern Composer,” *Musical America* 37 (March 31, 1923): 2.

\(^{106}\) From a pamphlet titled “Foreword to the First Season of 1923-1924.”
Convinced, after a year's association with the Guild, that there is need for a more flexible selection of modern music than has heretofore been offered to the public, the six seceding members [of the executive board of the ICG] have undertaken the formation of the League of Composers.

In the foreword, there is also a passing mention of the way that the League’s executive board made its decisions: “All programs are chosen by unanimous decision of the board.” Though Reis was the executive director of the organization, musical decisions were made democratically.

The representation of American audiences in the League’s publications is a radical departure from that of the ICG’s manifesto. There is none of the struggle between composer and audience that the manifesto imagines. An audience is no longer a thing to be subdued through force, but rather a group of rational individuals who are open to listening to and learning about new music. There is a lingering spirit of progressivism in the group’s documents: “[The League of Composers] believes not only that the creative artist needs contact with the public, but that the public is willing to give him a hearing.”107 The stance that the new organization took toward its audience is in line with the idea that Rosenfeld expressed in one of his letters to Reis from 1915. “The creation of beauty is far less important than the sensing of that beauty,” Rosenfeld wrote to Reis; the artist should “aspire not to the making of fine music, but to the making of fine people.”108 This idea is antithetical to the position expressed in the Guild’s manifesto. At the center of the Guild’s credo was the composer; the League’s mission was not only to cultivate an American style of modernism, but also to cultivate an audience that was open to new works.

By the second season, the language of the League’s documents is noticeably less reactionary. Indeed, although many of the ideas expressed in the manifesto and foreword

107 Ibid.
108 A letter from Rosenfeld to Reis, July 25, 1915.
return in the literature of the second season, the aggressive tone of such passages is smoothed over. For instance in a pamphlet published as a preview of the second season, the author makes a reference to the group’s origin:

In the spring of 1923 a group of composers and laymen banded together to devote themselves to the promotion of music by living men. No schools or individuals were favored and in the course of three concerts and two lecture-recitals some representation was given to every outstanding influence in the modern musical world.109

The document also outlines an educational program that the League undertook in its first two seasons: “In addition to three concerts the League will present two lecture-recitals.” These lectures were given between the first and second concert and the second and third concert. The title of the first lecture-recital sounds very much in the spirit of the Ornstein courses of 1916. H.C. Colles, a notable English music critic who wrote for the British daily newspaper The Times, gave a talk titled “The Conditions of Modern European Music” on November 25, 1923. As in the Ornstein courses, there was a “brief discussion” that took place after the lecture. A short concert of music by Ravel, Honegger, Milhaud, Manuel de Falla, and other European composers also took place after the lecture. The second lecture-recital of the opening season was on the subject of popular music; three speakers gave presentations on jazz and other popular styles of music. Edward Burlingame Hill gave a talk titled “Some Considerations on Jazz,” Gilbert Seldes gave a lecture called “The Innocent Bystander,” and Vincent Lopez spoke on “Modern Popular Music.” There were also performances by Lopez and his orchestra after the lectures. (The choice of topic is curious given the animosity toward all forms of popular music on display in the literature of the People’s Music League and in the criticism of the 1910s. It makes sense, however, viewed in

109 From a pamphlet titled “The League of Composers: 1924-1925.”
the context of the gradually softening position critics and organizations took toward popular styles of music—especially jazz—during the 1920s.

The League opened its second season with a lecture-recital on Sunday, November 16, 1924 at Anderson Galleries on Park Avenue and 59th Street. The evening included a talk by Olin Downes entitled “The Younger Generation in Music” followed by music of prominent young composers: Georges Migot, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Eric Fogg, Georges Antheil, Copland, Bernard Rogers, Richard Hammond, Daniel Lazarus, Alois Haba, Ernst Krenek, and Alexander Steinert. In a pamphlet published as a preview of the second season, the author outlined the purpose of the recital: “While the League holds no brief for any of the ‘youth movements’ it finds them interesting enough to devote its first lecture to the youngest schools of every country. It will be illustrated by works representing the musical youngsters of America, England and the Continent.”

For the next few seasons, the League focused more on its increasingly grand productions of large-scale theatrical works; but the importance of cultivating an educated audience for modern music was never far from Reis’s mind. In its fifth season, the League renewed the lecture-recitals. On November 27, 1927 at the MacDowell Club, there was a series of lectures that presented the “‘cause of modern music from the point of view’ of the composer by Frederick Jacobi; of the program maker by Reis; of the editor by Minna Lederman of Modern Music; and of the critic by Marion Bauer.” These lectures were followed by works by Lazare Saminsky, Richard Hammond, and Emerson Whithorne and arrangements of “Nigro Spirituals” by Gruenberg. On January 12, 1930 at the Art Center on 65 East 56th Street, the League offered another lecture-recital. The prominent author, educator, and then president of the Julliard School Dr. John Erskine—who the following

year would write the libretto for Antheil’s opera Helen Retires (written 1931, performed 1934)—gave a lecture titled “The American Composer.” Following the lecture were performances of music by Bernard Rogers, Evelyn Berckman, Paul Hindemith, Georges Migot, and Joseph Achron. On March 2, 1930 at the Arts Center, there was another lecture-recital. Léon Vallas gave a talk titled “Internationalism and Racial Elements in Music,” which was followed by music of Douglas Moore, Nicolas Slonimsky, Vernon Duke, Joseph Schillinger, Alexander Tcherepnine, Zoltán Kodály, and Mitya Stillman. Downes gave a lecture called “The Modernist Conception of Classicism” on April 6 of the same year; it was followed with music by Harris, Crawford, Adolph Weiss, Bauer, Blitzstein, and Leo Ornstein. On January 4, 1931, the English composer and conductor Eugene Goossens gave a lecture titled “Aspects of Modern Music” that was followed by music of Paul Hindemith, Copland, and Zoltán Kodály. These lecture-recitals shine light on one of the League’s underlying purposes: the desire to cultivate an educated audience for modern music.111

In 1923, the Guild had presented a lecture in preparation for its performance of Pierrot, and Reis’s position as the chairperson of the executive committee and her background in education suggest that it was she who planned a lecture to prepare the audience. Indeed, Louise Varèse cites Reis’s influence in the decision to offer a lecture in preparation for the difficult concert: “Mrs. Reis and Miss Mina Lederman…bent all their enormous combined energies toward getting advance publicity, and succeeded; also, they arranged an ICG-sponsored preconcert lecture on the work by Carl Engel, at the time chief of the music division of the Library of Congress, with Gruenberg illustrating it on the piano, and Greta Torpadie assisting.”112

111 The information regarding the lecture-recitals is taken from the collected programs of the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.
112 Varèse, Looking-Glass Diary, 187.
In these lecture-recitals we see a link between Reis’s work with the League of Composers and her work in the 1910s with the People’s Music League and the Ornstein course on modern music: education was her vocation. In the outline for a lecture given later in life, Reis highlighted this point as she recalled the transition from her work with the PML and the modern-music institutions of the 1920s: “My reputation with the Cooper Union Composers’ concert led me into the next phase of music—this time with a feeling of service to composers…I had not lost sight of the masses entirely, but they were now transformed into the concert-going public, and for them the goal I quickly realized involved EDUCATION.”

It is worth noting as a conclusion to this section that the diverging purposes of the two groups can be perceived even in their names. A “guild” suggests an organization that has as its focus the artist; while the word “league” is suggestive of the recently formed League of Nations (1919-1946), which sought to maintain international peace through negotiation and arbitration rather than force. In other words, the name of each organization suggests its attitude toward composers and audiences. The Guild was turned inward toward the composers, while the League was turned outward toward the audience.

Programming of the League and the Guild

It is clear that there were a number of differences between the League and Varèse’s Guild. The organizations differed in their style of management, underlying purpose, and attitude toward American audiences. These differences are evident in the documents that each organization published and the projects it undertook. They also provide some evidence for the position that Nicholls and other historians have taken regarding the two

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113 Reis, outline for a lecture, undated (emphasis hers).
organizations, namely that the split between the two groups marked the beginning of two separate factions of modernism in the United States. Both organizations may have had the same goal—the creation of an American modernist style—but the way in which each group realized this aim was unique and led to different results. As noted earlier, however, the problem with this line of reasoning is that in adopting period designations, it necessarily adopts the value judgments associated with them.

Though the evidence presented above does draw some clear lines between the two organizations, it does not distinguish between the musical styles promulgated by the organizations. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the schism between the two organizations was later viewed as resulting from a conflict of musical tastes. But there are some glaringly obvious questions that such a line of reasoning leaves us with: Though the Guild and the League can be distinguished regarding the modus operandi of each, does this necessarily mean that each group promoted a distinct musical style? Do differences in management or ideology mean differences in musical taste?

To answer these questions, let us start by working in the opposite direction to that taken in the last section: by analyzing similarities between the two groups. Indeed, there are many ways in which the two organizations are virtually indistinguishable. A simple example can be found in the manifestos of the two organizations. The League’s position toward “schools,” or “isms” as Varèse cleverly called them, was exactly the same as that of the ICG. The message concerning the subject of schools of thought as expressed in the opening paragraph of the League’s manifesto (“the mediums recently formed to promote modern music have been adequate only to offer a special phase of the whole movement”) is exactly the same as that expressed in the Guild’s manifesto (“the International Composers’ Guild disapproves of all ‘isms’; denies the existence of schools; recognizes only the individual”).
Both organizations claimed that they did not hold one school or style above another, and that only pieces of merit would receive performances. So what was the criterion by which each organization judged a work as deserving of merit? This question leads us to a problem that is similar to determining what “good music” was to the People's Music League. Here, too, we need to look at the programming of the two organizations to discover what they meant by “pieces of merit” or “[the ICG] recognizes only the individual.”

In a foreword to its concert season of 1924-1925, the League elaborated on its positions toward schools. Unlike the author of the manifesto, the author of the foreword mentions specific composers:

In the spring of 1923 a group of composers and laymen banded together to devote themselves to the promotion of music by living men. No schools or individuals were favored and in the course of three concerts and two lecture-recitals some representation was given to every outstanding influence in the modern musical world. STRAVINSKY and SCHOENBERG, RAVEL and BARTOK appeared side by side on our programs. Russians as little known as Miascovsky and Gniessin were practically introduced to New York at these concerts.114

Here we see that the reactionary tone of the documents from its first season is somewhat tempered in those from its second season. Yet the League still appears to be defining its achievements and goals in terms of other institutions. The reader gets a sense that the author is making a claim about other modern-music organizations of the period, and the most likely candidate is still the ICG. The author makes these claims in the negative. If we reverse the line of reasoning here, the arguments sound something like this: other organizations favor certain schools or individuals; other organizations do not program the music of both Stravinsky and Schoenberg, or Ravel and Bartók on the same concerts; other organizations do not program works of lesser-known composers such as Nikolay Myascovsky or Mikhail Gniessin.

114 Taken from the Foreword to the Second Season. (Emphasis in the original.)
As for the last claim—that the League had “practically introduced” Myasovsky to New York—the author seems to have overstated his or her case; on April 23, 1922 at Greenwich Village Theatre, the Guild had programmed the composer’s work *To the Unsuffering Master.* And the implied claim that the League was the only institution to program “Stravinsky and Schoenberg, Ravel and Bartók” together is somewhat misleading. Not once during its opening season did any of those composers appear beside the opposed composer. So what exactly is the author trying to say about these composers? That there was a kind of even-handedness in League concerts that was absent from ICG programs? These are questions that we can answer with some assurance by analyzing the pieces programmed by the League and the Guild.

Let us start with some basic numbers regarding the programming of the two institutions. During its five seasons (1922-1927), the ICG gave altogether eighteen concerts. In total, 126 pieces were performed in its concerts with an average of seven works per program. In its first seven seasons (1923-1930), the League gave a total of thirty-three concerts. The group performed 187 works in all, with an average of 5.7 pieces per concert. If we look at how many times works by some of the most important composers were programmed and use this number to determine the percentage that composer held among the total number of pieces programmed by each group, we can get a picture of the stylistic distribution of the programming by each group (see Table 1 and Figure 4).

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See the Appendix of: Lott, “New Music for New Ears,” 282-286.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composers</th>
<th>International Composers' Guild</th>
<th>Percentage of ICG program total (126 pieces)</th>
<th>League of Composers</th>
<th>Percentage of LOC program total (187 pieces)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Béla Bartók</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marc Blitzstein</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Manuel de Falla</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Hindemith</td>
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<td>Arthur Honegger</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Arnold Schoenberg</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Edgard Varèse</td>
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Table 1 and Figure 4. In the above chart and graph, a sample of these composers is provided, along with the amount of programming space that they took up in the concerts of the Guild and the League.\textsuperscript{116}

We should first determine which composers ought to be used as a sample for the analysis. The four composers brought up in the League’s foreword to its second season are a good start. As noted above, Reis wrote in her memoir \textit{Composers, Conductors, and Critics} that “Stravinsky and Schoenberg were becoming the guidons of two separate and distinct camps.”\textsuperscript{117} So how frequently did each group program these two leading composers? In Guild concerts, Schoenberg occupied about 2.4% of the total programming space; in the League’s, 2.7%. Stravinsky’s presence in both organizations was a little bit stronger. He occupied 4% of the Guild’s programs and 5.3% of the League’s. Ravel’s presence in the

\textsuperscript{117} Reis, \textit{Composers, Conductors, and Critics}, 38.
programs of the two organizations was quite different. He occupied 3.2% of the Guild’s programs, and a mere 1.1% on the League’s. Bartók received the exact same representation in each organization’s concerts as Schoenberg: 2.4% of the Guild’s programs and 2.7% of the League’s. Aside from Ravel, we see that the presentation of these composers in each organization was roughly the same.

Next, let us examine some of the other important composers of the time. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, one of the claims made about the League has been that it promoted a “neoclassical” style. This very problematic term has been used to describe music that looks backward to the forms and styles cultivated by Baroque and Classical composers. Despite the problems surrounding this stylistic designation, it has consistently been used in scholarship to describe certain composers. These are Stravinsky (especially the works during the 1920s and early 1930s all the way to the Rake’s Progress in 1951), the later works of Maurice Ravel, and the music of Sergei Prokofiev, Ottorino Respighi, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, and Paul Hindemith to name just a few. Two of these composers have already been discussed. Let us turn to the others.

Prokofiev’s representation in both organizations is roughly equivalent: he occupied 1.1% of the League’s programs and 0.8% of the Guild’s. Not once did the League program the music of the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi; however the Guild programmed his song-cycle for soprano and small orchestra titled Dietà silvane (1917) in a concert on January 24, 1926 at Aeolian Hall (Respighi himself conducted and played piano, and his wife, Elsa, sang the vocal part). Altogether, Respighi represented 0.8% of the Guild’s total programs. Poulenc was another composer that the League did not program during its opening seven seasons. The Guild, however, programmed his Sonata for Two Clarinets during its first

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118 From: Lott, “New Music for New Ears,” 286.
season; like Respighi, Poulenc occupied 0.8% of the Guild’s total programs, while he was not programmed at all by the League. Arthur Honegger was represented in the programming of both institutions: performances of his work made up 1.6% of the Guild’s programs and 3.2% of the League’s. Works by Darius Milhaud made up 1.6% of the Guild’s programmed pieces and 1.1% of the League’s. Finally, music by Paul Hindemith occupied 2.4% of the Guild’s and 3.7% of the League’s concerts.

A third group worth examining is the group of “experimentalist” American composers, whom Nicholls associated with the ICG. These are Varèse, Cowell, Crawford, Ruggles, Ives, and to a lesser extent Ornstein. Varèse and Ruggles naturally received a strong representation in ICG programs; works by each were 4% of the total number of pieces performed—the same percentage as Stravinsky. Neither composer made it into the League’s concerts. The ICG and the League programmed Cowell once in their concerts. Each organization programmed two works by Ornstein. Crawford had a total of five pieces in the League’s programs; but she was not programmed by the ICG. Ives was not performed in any concert by the two organizations.

These figures call into question the idea that either organization championed one style of modernism over another, whether it was “experimentalist,” “neoclassicist,” or any other stylistic pigeonhole of the period. The most problematic claim in fact is that the League was a champion of neoclassicism. If anything, we might say that representation of neoclassical composers was stronger in the Guild’s programs. Ravel, Milhaud, Honegger, Respighi, and Poulenc all had a significantly stronger representation in ICG concerts, while works by Hindemith and Prokofiev were allotted roughly equivalent percentages of the programming. So if this claim does not stem from the representations of neoclassical composers in the League’s concerts, where does it come from?
It is possible that the claim stems from a concert the League gave in its fifth season. On the program, pieces by Girolamo Frescobaldi, Luca Marenzio, Claudio Monteverdi, Jan Sweelinck, and Carlo Gesualdo were counterpoised with works by Sessions and Paul Hindemith. Reis wrote in her memoir that she felt the music of these early composers was close in spirit to that of modern music: “the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music…in a certain sense seemed more akin to our times than the music of the eighteenth century.” 119

But the decision to program these works was not favored by all of the League’s board. In a letter to Reis dated April 15, 1927 from Vienna, Gruenberg expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea of programming music by early composers. With a stroke of foresight, he wrote that critics who wished to slander the League’s purpose to promote modern music would use such a concert as a “weapon.” His claims foreshadow what would eventually happen to the League:

Regarding the proposed experiment of offering a program of early music contrasted with works of today, I can only say that we should place in the hands of our friends, the critics, a very valuable weapon with which they would surely avail themselves of, to attack the very foundations of our society. As much as I would love to hear Monteverdi anywhere, I don’t believe the programs of the League should show the names of other than living composers—for that purpose we originally conceived our idea. 120

The programs between the two organizations are virtually indistinguishable: the idea that a distinct style of music emerged from either organization lacks support. Each organization may have had a different purpose—or even better, a different way of achieving a single purpose, the cultivation of American modernism—but there is demonstrably little-to-no difference in the music that they actually programmed. Any position that associates Cowell, Crawford, Ives, or Ornstein with the Guild is untenable in the face of these facts.

119 Reis, Composers, Conductors, and Critics, 28.
120 Gruenberg, April 15, 1927. (Emphasis his.)
In concluding this section, I note that with the collapse of the ICG in 1927, there was talk among members of the executive board of the League about the two organizations rejoining. In the same letter quoted above, Gruenberg gives his position on the idea:

As to the proposed amalgamation of all modern music societies into one—which one? ours? Who is to be president—Varèse? —Amalgamation is always a sign of defeat. Does the League need it? I think not. I hope not.121

The question Gruenberg poses to Reis—“Who is to be president…?”—is telling. The incompatibility between the two organizations always had to do with policy, power structure, and—perhaps most of all—personality.

The board of the League of Composers never forgot the reason for the schism of 1923. Pierrot was performed more frequently in the first decade of the League’s existence than any other piece. It was included in a concert on February 22, 1925 at the Times Square Theater alongside works by Gruenberg and Saminsky—both members of the League’s executive board who had defected from the Guild. The League staged a performance of Pierrot once more in celebration of its tenth year. On April 16, 1933, the work was given under the direction of Leopold Stokowski at Town Hall in New York (see Figure 5). This was the first staged version of the work in the United States. The well-known stage designer Robert Edmond Jones prepared the costumes and setting for the concert, and the mezzo-soprano Mina Hager performed the Sprechstimme part. Pierrot became a kind of anthem for the League, a work bound up with its sense of identity and autonomy from the ICG. And this identity had little to do with musical style.

121 Ibid.
Figure 5. Robert Edmond Jones shared a long-lived artistic relationship with Reis and the League of Composers. He began working with the group in its seventh season, designing the setting and costumes for the American premiere of Schoenberg’s melodrama *Die glückliche Hand* (1913). In his book *The Dramatic Imagination*, Jones wrote of “the livingness of light.” Light and shadow, he theorized, could be considered a character in a production. They could be used to reveal something about the characters or scenario. This sketch for the 1933 performance of *Pierrot* displays Jones’s intense contrast between light and dark on the stage. Notice also the thin lines of light that separate the different areas of the stage: light illuminates the lines of the proscenium, effectively delimiting the “frame” of the stage; light also separates a portion on the left of the stage for the musicians and conductor, leaving an open area on the right for the vocalist to explore.122

Reis and Varèse: The Role of Gender in the Schism

So if the split between the International Composers’ Guild and the League of Composers was not about musical style, what was it about? Policy and power structure no doubt played a large role in the split, but there is another factor that overshadows them: each organization developed an identity throughout its period of activity that was the guiding force moving its policies and their programs, and each organization’s identity influenced the way that decisions were made by its executive board and the style in its literature. The distinction between the groups’ identities can be formulated as follows: the Guild was a modernist institution through and through, whereas the League was an organization that promoted modernization. The former sought to provide modernist composers with opportunities for performances; the latter set out to modernize American composers and audiences. In other words, the League was imbued with the same spirit of progressivism that

122 Jones’s sketch is reproduced from the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.
inspired Reis during her work in the 1910s with the People’s Music League and the Ornstein courses. Just as the People’s Music League had been about education, so, too, was the purpose of the League the education of the audience and composers.

It would be a mistake to overlook the role that gender played in the events leading to the formation of the League of Composers (a subject that has been regrettably neglected in scholarship on the subject). Time and time again, Louise Varèse genders the opposing sides of the schism in her narrative. On the one hand, she imagines Varèse as the epitome of manliness: he is strong, virile, ever willing to take up battle with “the masses” when they come knocking at the gate. He is Zeus, the emblem of masculinity, a man who towers over Reis and wins the conflict through his brute strength. On the other hand, she associates Reis with compromise and mass culture. She refers to Reis as a “secretary” who has overstepped her position, and a “wet nurse,” at once feminizing her and delimiting her contribution to the organization. The image of the ICG as Varèse’s offspring and Reis as wet nurse that appears in one of the above quotes stems from this gendering of the debate, and also reveals a common belief of the period that only men were capable of true creation; women were given wombs for creation, while men were given intellect.

Varèse’s appraisal of the American musical landscape of the 1910s is also gendered. The “society ladies” as well as the “125 prominent women of New York” who sponsored the New Symphony Orchestra were ignorant of modern music (Louise Varèse later remembered the orchestra as having a “large Ladies’ Committee” that did “whatever ladies’ committees do”). In the end, it was the women, not the critics, who turned on Varèse and forced his resignation from the orchestra. And it is worth noting how they turned on him.

123 Oja briefly brings up gender in her discussion on the League of Composers. The subject, however, lies outside her primary argument in the chapter, and therefore undeveloped.
124 Louise Varèse in an interview with Oja, April 1, 1989.
His position was undermined by demands that he cater to the audiences. In 1923, Varèse perceived the same threat rising to take away his Guild. Again, the danger came in a female form. Indeed, the narrative of *A Looking-Glass Diary* draws a parallel between the falling-out with the orchestra and the conflict over *Pierrot*: “It seemed to him [Varèse] that the same elements that had disrupted his orchestra might once more defeat his purpose.”

We see the lines coming together: compromise, femininity, commercialism, the masses.

In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen dedicates a chapter to the role that gender played in modernist discourses. The argument of his chapter “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other” is that literature, criticism, philosophy, and almost any form of writing from the mid-nineteenth into the early-twentieth century feminizes mass culture, while delivering high art and authenticity into the keeping of men. “It is indeed striking,” Huyssen writes, “to observe how the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities.”

One of Huyssen’s main arguments in the opening chapters of his book is that there is a reactionary element of modernism. At least in part, modernism determined its identity in opposition to its other: “mass culture”—or the “culture industry” as described by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Huyssen refers to this

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123 *A Looking-Glass Diary*, p. 189.
126 Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 47.
127 Huyssen talks about the relative merits of using Adorno and Horkheimer’s term “culture industry”—taken from their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—over “mass culture,” which was the more traditional designation for the phenomenon. By using the former term, an author smooths over many of the problems associated with the latter. For instance, “mass culture” implies something that rises from the bottom up, a culture that starts in the masses and is received by institutions (one thinks of socialist realism, which in practice is neither “socialist” nor “realist”). The truth of the matter, as Adorno and Horkheimer rightfully argue, is that such culture is in fact imposed from the top down. In other words, it is a culture that is established by institutions and received by the people. Huyssen’s problem with using the designation “the culture industry,” however, is that it hides the
relationship between modernism and mass culture as “the hidden dialectic” of the twentieth century. His argument for the gender associations in the modernist/mass-culture dialectic extends into the realm of music. Though Huyssen only ventures as far as Nietzsche’s scathing criticism of Wagner in Der Fall Wagner (1888), we can see elements of the phenomenon in the conflict between Varèse and Reis. For instance, the phrases that Louise Varèse quotes Ruggles as shouting at Reis and Gruenberg during the argument—“compromise,” “commercialism,” and “catering to the public”—are all words associated with “mass culture.” And the fact that they are aimed at a threat perceived as feminine reinforces Huyssen’s thesis. Indeed, the same phrases could have been used in the 1919 conflict between Varèse and his patronesses for the New Symphony Orchestra; as in 1923, Varèse refused to “cater to the public” by changing his programs. Twice he had heard mass culture raise its voice to speak of compromise; both times, it spoke with a female voice.

Here we see Varèse, the staunch modernist, gendering the musical landscape of American modernism. There is astonishing consistency in his (and his wife’s) delegation of gender roles. The positions of patron and secretary were well suited for a woman, while the role of musical director was not. Women could work in the business side of an organization; they could raise funds, balance the books, and advertise for concerts. But suggesting musical programs was overstepping their position and was the prerogative of men. And by no means was this phenomenon unique to Varèse and his circle of friends. In an article published in the New York Tribune, the prominent music critic Lawrence Gilman wrote this passage about modern music: “Some one must be a nurse to Modernism; and it had better be an indefatigable, devoted and experienced domestic with nothing else on her mind. The

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traditional gender of the masses, which he argues is consistently portrayed as feminine. (Huyssen, After the Great Divide, 47-48.)
International Composers’ Guild perfectly fills the bill.”¹²⁸ Gilman’s gendering of the musical
landscape is strikingly consistent with that of Varèse.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

The institutions that supported and promoted modern music in the United States during the 1920s were instrumental in the creation of a style of American modernism that was distinct from that of Europe. Paradoxically, the way that critics, conductors, composers, and others thinkers of the period tried to create a distinctly American style was through familiarity and emulation of European music. Carol Oja has written about this paradox in her book, *Making Music Modern*. My thesis takes her idea as a point of departure, using it to explore the programs, policies, and achievements of one of the most influential musical institutions of the 1910s and 1920s: the People’s Music League, the International Composers’ Guild, and the League of Composers. I argue that the paradoxical nature of American modernism during the 1920s, as represented by the policies and literature of the ICG and the LOC, was the result of the process of modernization enacted by institutions such as the PML. The success of the PML was in large part the result of its indefatigable founder, Claire Reis.

Education was Claire Reis’s vocation. This underlying aim manifested itself in each of her projects. The People’s Music League was her “first satisfying experience combining music and social service in a civic project.” She thought of her work with the organization as a duty to society, and not charity. During her decade with the PML, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers attended concerts organized by the group or participated in its amateur orchestras, bands, and choirs. In Reis’s own words, the PML helped transform “the masses”
into the “concert-going public,” a public that was familiar with the great European music of 18th and 19th century.\footnote{Quotations from an outline to a lecture held in the League of Composers/ISCM Records collection at the New York Public Library.}

The Ornstein courses of 1916 represent a subtle shift in Reis’s aim. “My sympathy for the masses and for music,” she wrote in a set of lecture notes, “seemed to begin a new chapter: Sympathy for the composers.” Yet education of American audiences was still at the core of her mission.\footnote{Ibid.} The Ornstein courses, as Paul Rosenfeld observed in a letter to Reis, helped form a “nucleus” for the modern music societies of the 1920s, groups such as Varèse’s ICG and Reis’s League of Composers.

In 1922, Reis left the PML to work as the chairperson of the executive committee of the ICG. Her tenure with the ICG was fraught with problems; yet through the conflict with Varèse and his supporters, she never forgot her calling as an educator: “As I had not lost touch with my early desire to find the key note between music and its influence on the public, I had to battle with the composer who showed interest in how or when his compositions were received.”\footnote{Ibid.}

The conflict over the 1923 performance of \textit{Pierrot lunaire}, which led to the formation of the League of Composers, has been the subject of much scholarship, as has the impact the schism had on the American modernist scene. Many composers, thinkers, and critics have seen the event as the beginning of two distinct styles in American modern music: the “real”—represented by the ICG—and the “official”—which was the music promoted by the League. As I have shown in the second chapter of my thesis, the idea that each organization promoted a distinct style is untenable; the programming of the two organizations is virtually indistinguishable. The real points of conflict in the schism were the distribution of power

\footnote{Ibid.}
within the organization, the role of women in musical groups, and the relationship of a composer to the audience. Reis’s mission to educate audiences conflicted with Varèse’s militant will to produce new music.

Reis was a woman of her time, a time in which women gained stronger footing politically and socially—for instance, the Nineteenth Amendment, which prohibited citizens to be denied the right to vote based on gender, was passed in 1920. It was this spirit of progressivism that lingered in her work with the ICG and LOC, putting her at odds with Varèse. Her work with the progressive musical institutions 1910s and the modern music groups of the 1920s makes her a unique figure; she had equal footing in the process of modernization that the former undertook and the resulting modernism of the latter.
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