THE MUSIC OF EDGARD VARÈSE

Edgard Varèse was one of the most original and perceptive composers of this century. In his music he never made any concessions to public taste, and its uncompromising character frequently shocked concert audiences into hostile reactions. Throughout his life controversy surrounded his work. In 1929 the first performance in Paris of 'AMÉRIQUES' provoked a riot only comparable to that of the first performance of 'THE RITE OF SPRING'. Even the music he composed in his later years audiences found difficult to understand, and another hostile demonstration took place at the world premiere of DÉSERTS in 1954. The desire to explore new means of expression rather than use those that might become hardened into tradition is a basic feature of his character. Varèse remained an avant-garde figure all his life.

From an early age he recognised the need to overthrow those existing conventions which limited a composer's imagination rather than encouraged it. He foresaw the possibility of developing electronic devices to the point at which they could be of use in the composition of music.

'Our musical alphabet must be enriched. We also need new instruments very badly ..... Musicians should take up this question in deep earnest with the help of machinery specialists ..... What I am looking for are new technical mediums which can lend themselves to every expression of thought and can keep up with thought'.

These comments were published in the New York Telegraph in March 1916, thirty years before the tape recorder became available. One particular phrase in that interview sums up his whole attitude to composition :

'I refuse to submit myself only to sounds that have already been heard'.

For many years Varèse experimented, but without sufficient resources or technical knowledge he was unable to achieve anything. Applications for a GUGGENHEIM Fellowship to enable him to carry out the work he wanted, were rejected. The Bell Telephone Company were equally uninterested in him.

Though thwarted in the practical expression of his ideas on this kind of music because of the lack of sufficient technical advances in this field, Varèse still devoted a great deal of thought to the kind of music he could write using an instrument capable of producing any pitch and any timbre. Both HYPERPRISM and INTEGRALES can be seen as instrumental studies in the techniques of electronic composition.

Varèse had considered the possibilities of composing with electronic techniques for thirty years before the tape recorder was finally developed during the Second World War. When, at last, it became available he was the composer best prepared aesthetically to use the new medium. He had waited a long time for this chance.

All other composers were taken rather by surprise. Their early electronic works show themselves completely overwhelmed by the immense resources suddenly available. They were unprepared to use them. Varèse, however, knew exactly what he wanted to write. His electronic works DÉSERTS, and LE POEME ÉLECTRONIQUE, are the first pieces to use the new medium successfully and effectively in music of lasting quality. Varèse's works are the first to establish electronic techniques as being as equally powerful as any other means of expression open to a composer. They have a conviction much other electronic music of that period lacks, a conviction resulting from thirty years of frustrated silence suddenly being released.

Varèse could never accept domination of any kind, either personally from an individual, or artistically by composing music according to any system. This dislike of authority was partly conditioned by an unhappy childhood. His father wished his son to be an engineer like himself and Varèse was forbidden to study music and shut up in his room for many hours a day to work on scientific subjects. The relationship between his parents was not a particularly happy one. Shortly after he was born Varèse had to be sent to live with his grandparents in the country, and later in his childhood he had to witness the frequent violence of his father towards his mother. After the death of his wife Varèse's father married again. This second marriage was no happier than the first. During one quarrel Varèse intervened and fought with his father. Much of Varèse's opposition to authority whether personal or artistic arose from this home background. In 1903, at the age of twenty Varèse left his home in Turin for good and fled to Paris, the city of his birth.

In Paris Varèse studied for a short time at both the Schola Cantorum and the Conservatoire, but he was already temperamentally unsuited to being a student. He met Debussy who was much impressed with his music and encourgaged him :

'You have a right to compose what you want to, the way you want to if the music comes out and is your own. Your music comes out and is yours'. (F.M. Listener's Guide, November 1962).

From 1907 to 1913 Varèse spent most of his time in Berlin where he met and studied with Busoni. Busoni's book 'Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music' contained many phrases to which Varèse responded. Such comments as 'The function of the creative artist consists in making laws, and not following laws already made' and 'Music is born free; and to win freedom is its destiny' helped Varèse clarify his own artistic beliefs.

All of Varèse's music composed in this period has been destroyed. In 1914, just as Varèse was embarking on a conducting tour, war was declared and he was forced to return to France to join the Army. In 1915 after being invalided out of the Army, suffering from double pneumonia, Varèse decided to spend the rest of the war in the United States of America. On December 29th, 1915 Varèse arrived in New York for what he felt was a short stay, but in fact apart from some years spent travelling abroad he remained in the U.S.A. for the rest of his life.

Varèse is one of the first composers to respond to the challenge posed by the industrial society that came into existence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He responded so well to this new urban environment that eventually he felt more at home in the big cities of Turin, Paris and Berlin than in the country where he had spent his early childhood. Consequently when he arrived in New York, he felt completely at ease there.

Varèse found America stimulating his aural imagination. He wandered along the busy streets and through the factories listening to the new sounds man was creating. To him they were all part of man's experience. He began to use these new, harsher, more stringent sonorities in his music. He deliberately searched for timbres that would reflect the new age of steel and concrete, that would relate his output as a composer to the new industrial society in which the majority of the population were now living.

His musical language became both highly original, because no composers (apart from the Futurists in Italy) had explored these sounds before, and relevant to mankind's new experience. Inevitably those for whom music was merely an escapist entertainment were shocked and outraged by this new language. Even they, however, could recognise the source of his inspiration.

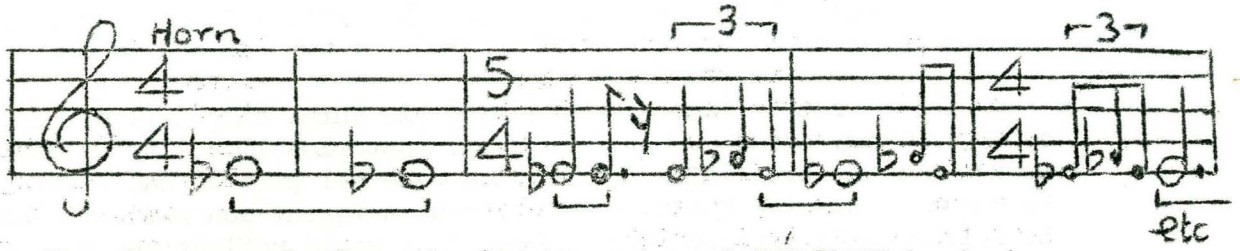
'A trolley car gong, an automobile horn and the rush of gutter water down an open manhole, blended into a sweet pure chord as we fled by. Varèse's Hyperprism was still pursuing us'. (From a review of Hyperprism, quoted, without acknowledgment, from an American newspaper, in 'Shocks for the Mus. Docs' by 'Divertimento' in the Nottingham Journal and Express, 20th June, 1924).

The music Varèse produced during the period from 1918 to 1936 falls into two main categories. Two large scale works, AMÉRIQUES and ARCANA are for full orchestras. A number of works, OFFRANDES, HYPERPRISM, OCTANDRE, INTÉGRALES, IONISATION and EQUATORIAL are for chamber ensembles. There is also a short piece for solo flute, DENSITY 21.5.

All these works use a similar style. The emphasis on hard instrumental timbres, favours the use of wind and brass rather than strings, particularly in those works for chamber ensembles. Percussion textures were expanded and developed until they became equal in status with the other sections of the orchestra. Indeed in HYPERPRISM percussion sounds tend to overwhelm the pitched instruments of the ensemble. This trend culminated in the first work in the history of music for percussion alone, IONISATION. Varèse is the composer most responsible for expanding the sonorities of the orchestra by developing its percussion section.

With this interest in percussion timbres is combined a very sophisticated rhythmic style. Varèse does not use exact repetitions of rhythmic patterns but adopts a more subtle style of continuous variation of them. Quite frequently he relies solely on rhythm to create the melodic impetus of the work. Passages like those in the second movement at figure five and in the third movement at figure two of Octandre, where harmony and melody remain static, depend entirely on rhythm for their forward movement.

Harmony and melody are very closely related in Varèse's music. The pitches of the melodic line are always of importance in determining the harmonic structure. For that reason Varèse's melody tends to use either one, two or three principle pitches (sometimes with 'grace' notes added) in its construction.



The above example from the first version of AMÉRIQUES beginning one bar before Fig. 12, opposes two pitches, E flat and F flat. The line develops further by opposing the E flat to an A natural. The tension in the melodic line is carefully controlled by the rhythmic values. By changing these slightly Varèse can create either an increase or relaxation in tension. This accounts for the non-repetitive rhythmic style.

Varèse's harmonic language is very broad because his chords conform to no single easily definable method of construction. In his chord-building he rejected any system such as tonality, serial technique, or polytonality, preferring instead to retain complete control over the individual situation, being more aware of how the note :

> "will 'sound' in the orchestral fabric , than .....
> in just what position the note occupies in the harmony"
> (Henry Cowell, The Music of Edgar (q.v.) Varèse.
> Modern Music 1928).

As a result his harmonic style is one of the most varied of all 20th century composers, using almost every possible combination of intervals available to him.

In the years between 1936 and 1949, Varèse finished little. He still continued composing but generally destroyed what he had written. The invention of the tape recorder, however, gave him fresh incentive to complete a work and he produced two important pieces for this medium, DESERTS and LE POÈME ÉLECTRONIQUE.

DÉSERTS, his third large scale work, was composed for orchestra and three interpolations of taped sound. The result is not an unintegrated sequence of ideas, but a carefully planned progression of thought, in which the electronic and instrumental sections complement and reinforce the purpose of each other. Both sections are in fact remarkably similar in character. The link between the two is partially provided by the sounds of the percussion ensemble, which also occur during the three interpolations. DÉSERTS, the kind of music that Varèse had for so long wanted to write, contains a savage authority and purpose in its use of material, which is not found in the more diletante explorations of electronic music undertaken by Schaeffer, Henry, and Stockhausen.

L Poème Électronique is purely an electronic work. It was composed in 1958 for the Philips pavilion at the Brussels World Fair. It draws on a wide range of material for its sound resources, from a fragment of classical music, an organ, the voice, through percussion sounds to noise. It is not, however, a haphazard collection of events, but a piece containing a perfectly satisfactory progression of thought.

The remaining years of Varèse's life are a story of unsuccessful attempts to complete works, unselfish assistance to young composers who came to New York to study with him, and of the gradual acceptance of his music by the concert public. He died in New York on November 6th, 1965, at the age of eighty-two. Of all the many tributes paid to him, one from Anais Nin was particularly apt :

> "If light travels faster than sound, in the case of Varèse, sound travelled much faster."

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LIST OF WORKS

NOTE. Some dates of composition are uncertain. Varèse himself took little interest in these matters. Any information he did provide was not always accurate.

Date		First Performed	
1905	Trois pièces, (for orchestra) (1)	-	
1905	La Chanson des jeunes hommes (1)	-	
1905	Souvenir (1)	-	
1905	Le Prélude à la fin d'un jour (for large orchestra) (2)	-	
1906	Rhapsodie romance (3)	-	
1908	Bourgogne (for large orchestra) (3)	Berlin	15.12.1910
1909	Gargantua (for orchestra) (3) (4)	-	
1912	Les Cycles du Nord (Opera) (3)	-	
1908-14	Oedipus und die Sphynx (Opera) (3) (4)	-	
1920-21	Ameriques (for large orchestra) Revised 1929 Further revised c. 1959	Philadelphia	9. 4.1926
1921	Offrandes (for soprano and chamber orchestra)	New York	23. 4.1922
1922-23	Hyperprism (for small orchestra)	New York	4. 3.1923
1923	Octandre (for chamber ensemble)	New York	13. 1.1924
1923-25	Intégrales (for small orchestra)	New York	1. 3.1925
1926-27	Arcana (for large orchestra)	Philadelphia	8. 4.1927
1931	Ionisation (for percussion ensemble)	New York	6. 3.1933
1934	Ecvatorial (for choir, small orchestra)	New York	24. 4.1934
1936	Densité 21.5. (for solo flute)	New York	16. 2.1936
1947	Etude for Espace (for choir, two pianos, percussion) (5)	New York	23. 2.1947

Date.		First Performed	
1950-54	Déserts (for orchestra, three electronic interpolations)	Paris	2.12.1954
1955	La Procession de Verges (electronic sounds for film music) (5)	-	-
1958	Le Poème Électronique (electronic sounds on tape)	Brussels	May to Oct.1958
1961	Nocturnal (for soprano, choir and orchestra (6)	New York	1. 5.1961
1965	Nuit (for soprano, chamber orchestra) (4) (5)	-	-

(1) Probably destroyed by Varèse.

(2) Lost.

(3) Destroyed in a warehouse fire in Berlin 1918.

(4) Unfinished.

(5) At the present time unavailable.

(6) Finished version prepared by Chou Wen Chung.

DAVID H. COX

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