

VIEWS & REVIEWS



Scoring the D Train

FREDERIC V. GRUNFELD

EDGARD VARESE was always something of a mystery man. I remember that when Aaron Copland nominated him for a New York *Times* list of the five (or ten) most influential contemporary composers, people wrote in letters to the editors saying, the others we know, but who is Varèse? Whereupon the paper ran an explanatory one-column picture of him as though it were introducing, for the first time, a young Ditson winner or a Guggenheim Fellow. That was a dozen years ago, when he was almost seventy and had already achieved most of the glorious work with which he proposed to overthrow the existing order of music. In the subsequent decade, which coincided with the advent of electronics in every branch of music-making, Varèse's name began to be heard with increasing frequency and amplitude on the modernist circuit. And before he died last November 6, at the age of eighty-one, he had at least been able to enjoy some of the pleasures of belated recognition—the satisfaction of seeing the light of comprehension going on here and there—at the avant-garde festivals, the European radio stations, and the recording studios of New York. For the apostles of *musique concrète* in Paris and Darmstadt, Varèse became the prophet and patriarch of a whole new dimension in music: “Webern liberated silence, but Varèse emancipated noise,” writes Heinz-Klaus

Metzger in the *Darmstädter Beiträge zur neuen Musik*.

Varèse, as any photo of him will attest, was easily the most extraordinary-looking composer since Hector Berlioz. With beetle brows, a shock of wavy hair that rose straight up from his forehead, and a fiercely benevolent-belligerent gaze, he seemed to be the personification of what people in the 1920's called an “anarch of the arts.” He used to laugh about his troubles with the musical Establishment (“Laughter,” he liked to say, “is the only internal massage man has at his disposal”), but nothing could reconcile him to the red-plush world of Fifty-seventh Street. “When I see and hear some of the things that are done in the name of music, I don’t want to be known as a musician. Call me rather a worker in intensities, frequencies, and rhythms.”

I REMEMBER with what Olympian scorn he used to speak about his neoclassical colleagues, who still found it necessary to write for such “anachronisms” as violins and cellos. “We find it necessary to replace obsolete tools by others that are required by new needs,” he told his students at a Columbia University summer session in 1948, “and we find that Boulder Dam expresses us better than the Egyptian pyramids or Gothic cathedrals. But in music a composer must still be satisfied with instruments which, like the strings,

had already attained perfection two centuries ago. Although for daily use human ingenuity has found something more convenient than the hand pump, we continue to blow into a complicated and obsolete mechanism of tubes, while an inadequate system of notation does not permit us to notate even the sounds that these instruments can produce.” He himself always preferred instruments that were struck instead of stroked, beaten rather than bowed. In the days before the tape recorder enabled him to work directly on tape, his scores called for instruments that most people thought of as noisemakers: sirens, chains, anvils, ratchets, *clavé* sticks, maracas, cowbells, desiccated calabashes, and even the so-called lion-roar, or *xambomba*, used by Mediterranean children to make ear-splitting noises at fiesta time. He had a decided aversion to strings, and soon after he came to America from France, at the end of the First World War, he virtually gave up using them.

Percussion was his natural element, not only because it was most expressive of the machine age but also because the sound of it was in no way compromised by classical allusions. When he composed the now classic *Ionization* (1931), in which thirteen players manipulate a total of thirty-seven percussion instruments, he was, in effect, producing “electronic” music before the electronic means for it had been in-

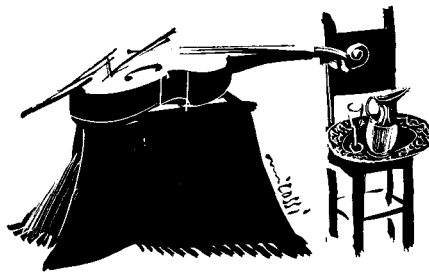
vented. (A century earlier, Peter Cooper made provision for an elevator shaft in the Cooper Union building, on the assumption that sooner or later an elevator would be invented to fit it.) When I first met Varèse in Greenwich Village nearly twenty years ago, he used to carry in his pocket a slip of paper with an admonitory quotation from Einstein that he would declaim at appropriate moments: "Our actual situation cannot be compared to anything in the past. We must radically change our way of thinking, our method of action."

BUT even the most radical new music is not born in a vacuum; it proceeds from a base in the known past toward some dimly perceived future. "A new sound," says Schoenberg in his *Harmonielehre*, "is an unintentionally discovered symbol which proclaims the new man who utters it." At the same time, however, the new man is the equally unintentional heir to an old oral tradition by which musical lore is passed from generation to generation—a slightly occult science, too inflexible to be wholly committed to paper. Which explains why the first question musicians ask of each other is, "Who was your teacher?"

Varèse, no less than Schoenberg, was molded and tempered by the music he heard as a student and by the men who taught it to him—though he maintained that Vincent d'Indy had taught him, by example, chiefly what not to do. Born in Paris on December 22, 1883, Varèse came from a Corsican family that had been raised to the minor nobility at about the same time as had the Buonapartes; musically he could trace his descent through d'Indy and Charles Widor back to César Franck, Luigi Cherubini, Franz Liszt, and Hector Berlioz. For all his insistence on radical new methods, Varèse was very conscious of what he possessed in that remarkable legacy; he could look back as well as forward, and refused to be one of those dreary Januses of one face, the futurist with his eye fixed on tomorrow's headlines. Several times when I accompanied him on his morning constitutional south of Washington Square, he talked about what it was like to have been Debussy's protégé and

Massenet's friend, and what the former had told him about the comings and goings at Mallarmé's Tuesdays.

Mallarmé's Tuesdays? That, if the truth be known, was the intellectual starting point for Varèse's machine-age aesthetics, just as the Vienna Sezession was the jumping-off place for Schoenberg & Co. Debussy had taken his cue from Mallarmé to search for a new, crystalline, and obscure language in the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune*, Varèse continued the quest with one of his earliest pieces, the *Prélude à la Fin d'un Jour* (presumably after a Sunday afternoon on the island of Grand-Jatte). It is said, too, that the young composer was one of the real-life models whom Romain Rolland used for his composite musician-hero, Jean-Christophe, and this surmise is borne out by a letter that Rolland



wrote to Varèse when the composer left Paris at twenty-two for an extended visit to Germany. "*Puisez dans vos passions*," Rolland advises. "You are a master of your musical language. . . . Don't be too objective. And don't be afraid to unbutton, as Strauss does in the first page of *Ein Heldenleben*. You will never lose your French clarity. . . ."

AS IT turned out, Varèse never did learn the art of unbuttoning, à la *Heldenleben*, although Strauss took an active interest in his work. Varèse's style is too terse, too taciturn, to lend itself to rhapsodic outpourings. He insists on maintaining the tightest possible control over the complex rhythms, the incredibly refined timbres of his pieces. And almost every one of his works is a sort of teaching piece, a demonstration of applied principles. Like Thomas Mann's fictional composer, Adrian Leverkühn in *Doctor Faustus*, Varèse believed that "Art would like to stop being pretense and play; it would like to become knowledge."

In later years he wrote fewer and fewer things, and what he had to say in them became more and more condensed. Anton Webern, to whom he felt "antipodally related," spent a whole lifetime producing just enough music to fill four LP records. The total of Varèse's mature output is not much greater; in fact, nine of his fourteen most important works are comfortably accommodated on the two LP records thus far issued in Columbia's "Music of Varèse" project. Both of these discs (ML 5478 and ML 5762) were recorded by various ensembles conducted by Robert Craft, and the sessions were supervised by Varèse, who also contributed two tapes of "organized sound" that he made in his own studio.

The earliest works in the set are the *Deux Offrandes* for soprano and chamber orchestra. One of these is an "offering" to his American wife, Louise, a noted translator of St.-John Perse, Baudelaire, Stendhal, *et al.* The songs date from the early 1920's and continue the sensuous, exotic line taken by Ravel in the *Shéhérazade* cycle. With *Octandre*, of 1924, he moves off in a violently dissonant direction. Scored for seven wind players and a solitary string bass, it lasts for six minutes and forty-seven seconds and seems to have, as the sign in the shop window has it, "no connection with any other store." It used to strike me as the last word in metallic discord when I first heard it on 78-r.p.m. records conducted by Nicolas Slonimsky, but it has mellowed with age, so that it now emerges as a sort of anti-pastorale—a twentieth-century counterploy to the Schubert *Octet*.

Hyperprism, of 1924, is a confrontation between winds and percussion lasting three minutes and fifty seconds; a peculiar, restless stirring in the percussion section heralds the day when the non-melody instruments will break away and set up an autonomous régime patterned on the institution of the Balinese gamelan. *Intégrales*, of 1926, lives up to its name by constantly shifting its integral metrical units: 5, 4, 3, 2, and 6 and 7 (occasionally 2½ or 3½, but never 8) beats to the bar. Eleven winds, including a contrabass trombone, are arrayed against seventeen percussion instruments divided among four players, and the result-

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ing dialogue lasts nine minutes and forty-one seconds.

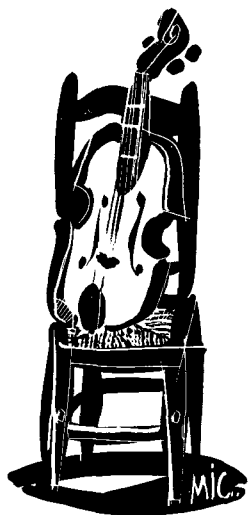
Arcana, which had its first performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski in 1927, requires an outsize orchestra: seventy strings, forty-two winds, and eight percussionists wielding forty instruments. It is a nonobjective tone poem, constructed of chrome steel in a style now faintly passé (like the sculptures of Gabo and Pevsner). But Paul Rosenfeld, one of Varèse's few admirers among the critics, was not far from right when he called it "the first piece of music harmonious with the *Weltanschauung* of modern mathematical physics, and corresponding with science's newest sensations about matter." *Ionisation*, completed during a visit to Paris in 1931, is a tour de force of not quite five minutes' duration. The sound of its thirty-seven "instruments of percussion, friction and sibilation, of indeterminate pitch" (as Slonimsky catalogues them) is anything but heavy-handed; on the contrary, the tone and texture of this masterpiece are as fragile as frost flowers on a windowpane, and twice as transparent.

Density 21.5 was written in 1936 "at the request of Georges Barrère for the inauguration of his platinum flute." 21.5 is the atomic density of platinum, but the specific gravity of this four-minute piece is closer to that of Debussy's Grecian flute solo, *Syrinx*, and probably represents the ultimate of French Impressionism.

Déserts, completed in 1954, lasts nearly twenty-five minutes and calls for a combination of live musicians, playing winds and percussion instruments, and a set of taped sound tracks inserted between the live sections. It marks the postwar transition to magnetic tape, when Varèse no longer had to depend on other people playing from an "antiquated system of notation" and could cook up his own devil's brew of tone in the basement of his house on Sullivan Street. The results are spectacular—the whole gamut of industrial civilization, extracted from carborundum wheels, drill presses, and fever dreams. I remember that when the score had its American premiere, in a National Guard armory in Bennington, Vermont, an audience mainly of college girls gave it a

standing ovation of ten minutes; then *Déserts* had to be repeated. It had something to do with many sorts of deserts, Varèse explained: "all physical deserts (of sand, sea, snow, of outer space, of empty city streets), but also the deserts in the mind of man; not only those stripped aspects of nature that suggest bareness, aloofness, timelessness, but also that remote inner space no telescope can reach, where man is alone, a world of mystery and essential loneliness." It was, in other words, the most explicit chapter of his autobiography.

Poème Electronique does away with human intermediaries altogether. Composed on tape for Le Corbusier's parabolic Philips pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, it was designed to sweep in continuous



arcs of sound through something like four hundred loudspeakers. Its essential connection to Debussy will become more apparent with time; it is a piece of extraordinary lyric beauty, related to the ethereal voices which we are sometimes privileged to hear on long-distance telephone circuits, and compounded of the most fascinating elements—bleached bones of sound, washed up on the white sands of silence for eight minutes and five seconds.

THE music critics, with very few exceptions, were always relentlessly negative about what Varèse was trying to do, but as journalists they welcomed some splendid opportunities for vivid metaphors. Olin Downes about *Hyperprism*: "election night, a menagerie or two and a catastrophe in a boiler factory."

Ernest Newman about *Intégrales*: "early morning in the Mott Haven freight yards, feeding time at the zoo and a Sixth Avenue trolley rounding a curve, with an intoxicated woodpecker thrown in for good measure." Samuel Chotzinoff about *Amériques*: "the progress of a terrible fire in one of our larger zoos."

Somewhere in all this balderdash is the key to Varèse's greatness as a composer. More than any musician of his generation, he was aware of what it meant to live in a new time, amid sounds and rhythms that had never been heard before in the history of mankind: the pocketa-pocketa of our Ford's flivver; the squeal of the D train on the curved track between Fifth Street and Columbus Circle, "Horst Wessel" played over loudspeakers, the riveting gun, the fragmentation bomb, the Geiger counter. Varèse did not work with these materials per se, nor was he ever concerned with "tape recording the sound of New York City," as Stravinsky says rather condescendingly in his *Memories and Commentaries*. But he did understand their implications: as a modern composer, living in the din of New York, he could not possibly go on organizing sounds with the same techniques that Beethoven had used while he was living beside the bubbling brooks of Heiligenstadt.

Hyperprism, therefore, is not a description of election night, a menagerie, and a boiler factory, but it does contain an artist's response to such things—the agitations of experience recollected in classical tranquillity. Sometimes there is even a piece of old-fashioned program music that manages to filter through. In *Hyperprism*, reported Rosenfeld in the *Dial* forty years ago, "there is a reiterated very shrill high C-sharp, and during the performance of the work, it brought convulsive laughter out of the audience; but when the composer returned to his home on Eighth Street that evening, and sat awake working, he heard from over the city somewhere a very familiar sound, a siren, and suddenly realized that he had been hearing it for many nights, over six months, during the time he composed *Hyperprism*, and that the tone was exactly a very shrill high C-sharp."

The Romantic of Olana

HENNIG COHEN

FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH was an American landscape painter with a flair for the dramatic, a taste for the exotic, and a tendency toward the symbolic. The last and best of the Hudson River School, he was a great success in the mid-nineteenth century, but by the time of his death in 1900 he had been more or less forgotten. At the moment three events are drawing attention to Church and promise to provide the reconsideration he deserves.

The first is Braziller's publication of David C. Huntington's introductory study of his life and works, a well-designed book notable for its sensitivity to Church's symbolic inclinations and to his place in the cultural context of his time. The second is a comprehensive exhibition mounted by the Smithsonian Institution. (It will travel to the Albany Institute this month and to New York's Knoedler Gallery in June.) This is a matter of consequence because although the paintings have begun to emerge from the storerooms, the last Church exhibit was a memorial held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art the year of his death. The third is the approaching culmination of a campaign to obtain Olana, the house on the Hudson River designed by Church in the 1870's, as a museum. Olana was the focal point of Church's aesthetic—perhaps even spiritual—energies for the final thirty years of his life, and as an artistic achievement and historical document it may fairly be spoken of in the same breath as was Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut (the city that happens to be Church's birth and burial place), or even Jefferson's Monticello.

CHURCH was an American romantic, as much a part of that first great cresting of creativity in the decade or so before the Civil War as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, or the historians Prescott and Parkman. With these writers he shared Emerson's intuition that "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spir-

itual fact," and for this reason he chose to paint natural history, the landscape, rather than the human history and allegory of his teacher, Thomas Cole. Like Thoreau, who carefully measured the surface of Walden Pond and plumbed its depths, and Melville, whose whales rendered both oil and metaphysics, Church took infinite pains to portray nature realistically. His public was often so beguiled by the natural fact (as were the readers of Thoreau and Melville) that they missed the spiritual fact. He was also a typically American romantic in his prophetic vision of the New World as a land of possibility, though he always remained sensible to a cosmic unity with other times and places.

Church is not an easy man to shape up for either a monograph or an exhibition. Simple chronology is no help because he tended to recreate landscapes in the studio from sketches made many years before. A geographical arrangement is also difficult, for he traveled widely and frequently, sometimes returning years later to the same or similar settings. The Smithsonian exhibition (which includes forty-three paintings, fifty-seven oil studies, eighty-one drawings and sketches, plus engravings, chromoliths, notebooks, and a model of Olana) is a hodgepodge, and the attempt to impose order under headings like "North America," "The Tropics," and "Imaginary Subjects" amounts to an admission of defeat. By focusing sharply on about a dozen of Church's most significant paintings and treating them both as icon and art, natural fact and spiritual fact, and by using biography and history as a matrix for the paintings, David Huntington has been much more successful.

An early landscape, "Mount Ktaadn" (1853), reveals Church's blend of drama and Edenic repose. A pastoral scene with grazing cattle, a winding country road, and a farmstead sheltered by trees occupies the foreground. In the middle distance are a lake and woodland, and against

the horizon, slate-gray foothills and a towering mountain. All of this would be quite routine if it were not for the dazzling use of color. The sky shimmers with rose and gold. The trees are a rich, dark green. The lake and even the tiny panes of glass in the farm buildings reflect and intensify the golden light that comes from behind the mountains. It is the light of sunset, but it might well be the light of dawn.

"Twilight in the Wilderness" (1860) is equally auroral and an even more remarkable tour de force. Piles of rose-red cloud are banked against a blue sky streaked with apple green. A narrow band of gold at the horizon backlights the bare branches of trees and blasted stumps in the foreground. The polished surface of a river and jagged boulders on its banks glow with the color they have absorbed. There is no evidence of man. He has not yet been created or he has vanished from the face of the earth.

"Niagara" (1857) was an immense success because Church had managed the difficult feat of dramatizing realistically the power and action of a natural wonder that had become a national symbol. Niagara Falls had been described and painted more than any other topographical feature of the American continent. Somehow it seemed to suggest the dimensions of the American dream, and it was this mystical aura that Church was able to impart. The beholder is at the edge of the chasm and almost swept down by the flood. The panoramic proportions of the picture (it is three and a half by seven and a half feet) the breadth of the falls emphasized by parallel stretches of cloud above, the hard edge of the precipice that divides the firmament from the waters and the rainbow arching upward to link them, the suggestion of the curve of the horizon—all convey the expansiveness of a new world and the possibility of a new beginning. It is Genesis at the moment of Creation and Noah viewing the Earth after the deluge. The curvature of the Earth becomes an arc of the circle of eternity.

A desire to confirm what he saw in the American landscape, a sense of the oneness within the complexity of nature, and the search for subjects that lent themselves to sym-