

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Edgard Varèse

Born December 22, 1883, Paris, France.

Died November 6, 1965, New York City.

Ionisation

Varèse began *Ionisation* in 1929 and completed it in 1931. The first performance was given on March 6, 1933, in Carnegie Hall. It is scored exclusively for percussion instruments: crash cymbal, bass drums, concerros [muffled cow bells struck with a drum stick], high and low tam-tams, gong, bongos, side drum, high and low sirens, slapstick, güiros, woodblocks, claves, triangles, snare drums, maracas, tarole [a high pitched drum], suspended cymbals, sleigh bells, tubular chimes, cymbals, castanets, celesta, tambourine, anvils, and piano. Performance time is approximately eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's only previous performances of Varèse's *Ionisation* were given on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on December 7, 8, 9, and 12, 1995, with Pierre Boulez conducting.

On December 18, 1915, Edgard Varèse boarded the *S.S. Rochambeau* and sailed from Paris for New York City with eighty dollars in his pocket and a stack of letters of introduction in his suitcase. (An accomplished pianist, he played two pieces by Debussy at a shipboard concert.) Varèse had planned on a short visit, but he stayed nearly a half century, took an American wife, and became a U.S. citizen.

In Europe, Varèse had started to attract attention as a composer and conductor and to move in impressive musical circles. At the age of twenty-three he left Paris, his hometown, for Berlin, where he looked up Ferruccio Busoni, whose recently published *Sketch of a New Musical Esthetic* ignited his appetite for adventure and his enthusiasm for the new. On a return trip to Paris, he met Debussy and introduced him to Schoenberg's atonal music.

Varèse left behind a European musical establishment that had recently been rocked by the radical work of a new generation of composers: in 1912 and 1913 alone, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Debussy's *Jeux*, and Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra and *Pierrot lunaire* had been performed for the first time, and each had shaken the foundations of music. Varèse had not played a role in that revolution, but he came to the United States poised to start his own.

Varèse welcomed a clean break with his European past--a liberation accelerated by the news that most of the music he had composed before arriving in New York was destroyed in a Berlin warehouse fire. It is surely no coincidence that the first new score he began in the United States was named *Amériques*--a title that was not meant as "purely geographic but as symbolic of discoveries--new worlds on earth, in the sky, or in the minds of men." Shortly after arriving in New York, Varèse revealed the scope of his vision in an interview with the *New York Telegraph*:

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. I have always felt the need for new mediums of expression in my work. I refuse to submit myself only to sounds that have already been heard. What I am looking for are new technical mediums which can lend themselves to every expression of thought and can keep up with thought.

It would be nearly forty years before Varèse would emerge from semiretirement to fulfill his dream and write music for the electronic sounds of a technology he had long awaited; both *Déserts* (completed in 1954) and the *Poème électronique*, designed for Le Corbusier's pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958, became instant classics in this new world. In the meantime, however, Varèse found surprisingly fresh methods of expression with the materials at hand. (He did not give up his dream, however. Over the years, he regularly attempted to interest scientists in developing new instruments; in the early 1930s, he applied, without success, for research grants to the Bell Telephone Company and the Guggenheim Foundation.)

Varèse wrote all of his major compositions in this country, most of them in the 1920s, when Stravinsky, Bartók, and Schoenberg were making musical headlines in Europe. Varèse's work pointed in yet another direction and, as Paul Griffiths has noted, it immediately transferred the center of radical new music to the United States. In just a handful of scores, most of them lasting only a few minutes, Varèse elevated rhythm to a new prominence, granted percussion instruments a role of unforeseen importance (and complexity), and developed a new sound world, dependent not on melody and harmony, but on timbre, texture, and dynamics.

Varèse began *Amériques* not long after settling in New York City. "For the first time," he later recalled, "with my physical ears I heard a sound that kept recurring in my dreams as a boy--a high whistling C-sharp. It came to me as I worked in my Westside apartment, where I could hear all the river sounds--the lonely foghorns, the shrill peremptory whistles--the whole wonderful river symphony which moved me more than anything ever had before." *Amériques* is Varèse's new world symphony--a love song for a wondrous and stimulating new urban environment and a glorious shout of liberation.

Varèse recognized *Amériques* as a major step forward; with this work, he later explained to his American wife Louise, "he had begun working in a new idiom toward which his earlier scores had only been groping." Today, in light of his subsequent music in this new idiom, *Amériques* sounds like his most traditional score. It calls for a very large orchestra--except for its massive percussion section, this is the orchestra of the late romantic composers--in contrast to the spiky, smaller ensembles of his later works. Varèse's materials, too, appear conventional at first--the sinuous opening solo for alto flute over the tinkling of the harps lures the listener into the world of Debussy. But those assumptions are quickly shattered--literally, by the *fff* roar of the brass--and Varèse proceeds by drawing new patterns on familiar ground. Yet, like Webern's op. 1, the Passacaglia for Orchestra, *Amériques* is Varèse's first important step and at the same time the last piece of its kind to come from his pen.

Varèse realized that percussion was the only section of the traditional orchestra that remained unexplored. In *Amériques*, he calls for a percussion battery of unprecedented size and uses a number of exotic instruments (the siren and the lion's roar, for example) that were foreign to symphonic music. Percussion is given an active and sometimes dominant role in *Amériques*; at certain moments, the section even plays alone. This luxuriance of new timbres--and of nonpitched sounds--opened a new chapter in music.

If percussion plays a role of unforeseen importance in *Amériques*, in *Ionisation*, completed a decade later, it takes over completely. This extraordinary score, just a few minutes long, can, without risk of overstatement, be called a landmark. In its bracing sonorities, to take a line Schoenberg pointedly set to music more than two decades before, we breathe the air of a new planet.

Ionisation is scored for some three dozen percussion instruments, of which only three--chimes, celesta, and piano--are capable of playing notes in the equal-tempered scale. Composition based on the preeminence of pitch here gives way to a music of timbres and rhythms. As the first of many all-percussion scores written in this century, *Ionisation* is remarkably subtle in its use of those instruments. The form is articulated by changing sonorities--a passage scored only for metal instruments; a fleeting duet for drums and maracas; a hair-raising moment (the first sustained loud point in the score) when several players have the same triplet figure (a *rhythmic* unison); the first high, Morse-code clanging of the anvils, more than midway through. The grand and sonorous coda is marked by the entrance of the piano, celesta, and chimes--the three instruments of definite pitch. Varèse once defined his mission as the "liberation of sound" (just as Schoenberg promised the "emancipation of dissonance.") *Ionisation* is the

purest demonstration of his success, and of his eventual influence. It is the work of both a pioneer and a master.

From the beginning, Varèse's music posed unusual challenges for both performers and listeners. Leopold Stokowski devoted sixteen rehearsals exclusively to the preparation of *Amériques* in 1926. The Philadelphia performances provoked laughter, hisses, and boos--"And he dared call it *America!*" a patron muttered as she abandoned the Friday matinee--and one critic could not resist ridiculing Varèse's trenchant and pioneering use of a siren (a "symphonic genuflection to the Fire Department and the Pneumatic Riveters' Union," he called it). But the freshness and force of Varèse's musical ideas, and the genuine originality of his sound world quickly gained respect, and the composer was regarded as a prophet (and later became something of a cult figure). Although he was forever labeled an experimental composer--"My experiments end up in the wastebasket, not the score," he once countered--even a composer as homespun as Virgil Thomson found Varèse's works "absorbing, convincing, beautiful, and in every way grand. . . . I know it is great music."

In the months before the premiere of *Amériques*, Varèse worried that his music would be "doomed to sleep forever at the bottom of a drawer." It has never been performed regularly--thus is only the second time the Chicago Symphony has programmed either *Ionisation* or *Amériques*--but his work is now regarded as fundamental, and it continues to sound fresh and invigorating, timeless, and utterly unique, even though it has inspired and influenced so many pieces written since.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Varèse's *Ionisation* and *Amériques* in 1995 under Pierre Boulez for Deutsche Grammophon.

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