

Amériques

Edgard Victor Achille Charles Varèse was born in Paris on December 22, 1883, and died in New York City on November 6, 1965. His given name was Edgard, but he used (or at least sanctioned) the spelling “Edgar” for the published scores of most of his works. Nevertheless, he seems to have remained largely ambivalent about the spelling, and he reverted to the use of the original “Edgard” in about 1940. He began composing *Amériques* in 1918 and appears to have completed it in 1921 (though the finished score bears the date of 1922). It was published by the London firm of J. Curwen & Sons in 1925 and was premiered on April 9, 1926, by the Philadelphia Orchestra, with Leopold Stokowski conducting. Varèse reconsidered certain aspects of the piece following that run of performances and revised *Amériques* in 1927. The new version, which was about thirteen minutes shorter and used seventeen fewer players, was first played in Paris by the *Orchestre des Concerts Poulet*, conducted by Gaston Poulet, on May 30, 1929 (with the newly invented *ondes martenot* replacing the siren in the percussion section). Following that, the piece went unplayed until 1965, the year its composer died. The original published editions of both versions were replete with errors. In 1973, the composer and Varèse acolyte Chou Wen-chung prepared a new edition that rectified the errors while adhering to the basic text of the revised version. The edition being played at these concerts was published in 1973 by Ricordi in Milan. The San Francisco Symphony’s first performances of *Amériques* were given in April 1984, with Jahja Ling conducting. The most recent subscription performances, in October 2010, were conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. The score calls for an elephantine orchestra comprising two piccolos, two flutes, and alto flute; three oboes, English horn, and heckelphone; three clarinets, E-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet; three bassoons and two contrabassoons; eight horns; six trumpets; three tenor trombones, bass trombone, and contrabass trombone; tuba and contrabass tuba; two harps; two sets of timpani; an enormous percussion section; and sometimes-divided strings. Varèse calls for nine players in the percussion section (not counting the two timpanists) and is specific in assigning the allocation of instruments to each, with several of the instruments played alternately by two or three musicians. (Though there is no strong aesthetic reason to follow the composer’s instructions in this regard, his percussion assignments make good practical sense and are largely respected in performance.) Percussionist One plays xylophone, chimes, triangle, sleigh bells, and low rattle; Percussionist Two plays glockenspiel, lion’s roar (a drum with strings attached), low rattle, and whip; Percussionist Three plays tambourine, whip, and gong; Percussionist Four plays celesta, bass drum (with its head extremely tightened), triangle, and gong; Percussionist Five plays two bass drums, crash cymbal, and triangle; Percussionist Six plays castanets, sleigh bells, and gong; Percussionist Seven plays the siren and sleigh bells; Percussionist Eight plays cymbals (both suspended and struck); and Percussionist Nine plays snare drum. Duration: about twenty-two minutes.

If you ask a musical friend to name the most influential “classical” composers of the twentieth century, you are likely to receive a reply that includes (but may not exceed) Debussy, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartók. Ives and Webern might surface on a few lists, and possibly Boulez, but not one music-lover in fifty is likely to cite Edgard Varèse. To a large extent, Varèse is the overlooked pioneer of modern music. His influence was

not widely felt until long after his pieces were written, and (when it finally was) his most profound lessons were picked up by composers of electronic music (and Frank Zappa), which many listeners viewed with suspicion. “An artist,” Varèse observed, “is never *ahead* of his time, but most people are *behind* their own time.”

Nothing in Varèse’s early life suggested the pioneering route he would travel. His musical training reads like a résumé for any number of properly trained French musicians at the turn of the twentieth century: He studied at the conservative Schola Cantorum in Paris with Albert Rouse, Charles Bordes, and Vincent d’Indy before transferring to the Paris Conservatory to hone his skills as a composer under the eminent organist Charles-Marie Widor. In 1907, however, Varèse left Paris for Berlin, where he fell under the spell of the visionary Ferruccio Busoni and eagerly followed the developments of Schoenberg. He returned to Paris in 1913 and started hanging out with Apollinaire, Satie, and Cocteau (all of whom were then flirting with Surrealism), as well as with the Futurist noise-theorist Luigi Russolo. He was called for military service at the outbreak of World War I but promptly released due to a lung ailment.

In December 1915, Varèse sailed for New York. By that time his catalogue included a couple of Strauss-sized symphonic poems and an incomplete opera (on the Oedipus myth) to a libretto by Hugo von Hoffmansthal. He had left most of his early manuscripts in Berlin, where they disappeared in a fire of mysterious origin. Apart from one early song (to a text by Verlaine), Varèse’s output comprises thirteen works, all of which date from his maturity. *Amériques* marks the composer’s rupture from the mainstream of European tradition and the beginning of his idiosyncratic modernism.

The piece came into being during Varèse’s first years in the United States, a period marked by both hope and frustration—and invariably by financial duress. He entered into a relationship with the writer Louise Norton (they would marry in 1921) and patched together a modest living by working as a conductor and piano salesman. Easing the burden slightly were steady contributions from two anonymous patrons (one was later identified as Gertrude Vanderbilt). In 1921 he co-founded the International Composers Guild, which in its six years of existence would sponsor the premieres of his *Offrandes*, *Hyperprism*, *Octandre*, and *Intégrales*. In 1926 he was naturalized as a United States citizen.

Varèse was busily bringing pieces to completion throughout the period in which he struggled to get *Amériques* performed. The principal problem was the practical one: *Amériques* requires such gigantic forces that its occasional airings still remain rare. But the 125 performers required in Varèse’s revised version already represent a considerable reduction from what he called for in the original score: Its 142 instrumentalists included seven extra woodwinds, eight more brasses, and several percussion instruments. The logistics of coordinating such a group is daunting--and let’s not even think about the budget!

Late in 1922, Varèse sent a copy of *Amériques* to Leopold Stokowski, who was then the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra. “I am eager to study it,” Stokowski wrote, “as soon as I am less busy.” Stokowski continued to be busy, however, and ignored a

follow-up letter from Varèse. By August, Varèse was writing to a friend: “Stokowski, the swine, hasn’t answered my letter. I don’t think I have a chance with him.” On November 17, Stokowski finally broke the grim news: “I fear it will be a long time before I shall be able to come to your work. . . . Personally I regret this very deeply but the Committee is not able to give me a free hand in this matter for financial reasons.”

To Varèse’s surprise, it turned out that this was not a mere brush-off (unlike the rejection he received from Wilhelm Furtwängler in Berlin). Stokowski did not let the matter rest, and kept in touch occasionally as the calendar advanced. Still, Varèse was characteristically gloomy in his outlook. “I wish Stokowski would do it,” he wrote to his wife, “but it’s funny. I have never really had any hope. For me it’s a work doomed to sleep forever at the bottom of a drawer. If after a few years it’s brought out—it will be too late. It will have lost all significance and importance. Anyway, I think that’s the fate of my music. Experience has taught me not to give a damn—and if I had to play politics to be performed—it would disgust me with writing music.” Three-and-a-half years later Stokowski finally proved the constancy of his support when he unveiled *Amériques* with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The concern “the Committee” had voiced proved to have been reasonable: Preparing the 142 musicians for the premiere required sixteen full-length rehearsals.

Amériques was introduced at a Friday matinee, which in Philadelphia meant one of the most conservative audiences on the East Coast. “It is indeed a powerful piece of music which can cause a Friday afternoon audience to indulge in hisses and catcalls,” reported one critic. The Saturday evening concert was better received, however, and Varèse, who had remained invisible the day before, even ventured onto the stage for three bows. On April 13 the forces reinstalled themselves at Carnegie Hall, for a performance that left the New York audience and critics divided. A choice comment came from the pianist and music appreciationist Olga Samaroff, writing in the *New York Post*: “Mr. Stokowski, who has a distinguished record in the matter of introducing important new works, could scarcely have done anything more detrimental to the cause of modern music than to produce a composition like *Amériques*.” (She apparently felt no need to recuse herself from reviewing merely because she was the former Mrs. Stokowski.) Others sensed that something notable was afloat. Paul Rosenfeld, writing in *Dial*, ventured, “It is possible that in Edgard Varèse we have another virtuoso genius with the orchestra in his veins.”

Even at the distance of eighty-five years, one can feel sympathy for the audience confronting such a profoundly revolutionary piece. Some listeners and commentators latched on to the sound of the siren (a prominent member of the work’s battery) and decided that *Amériques* was a depiction of the bustling city of the new America. Indeed, the work’s original title was *Amériques: Americas, New Worlds*, but Varèse himself objected to any such interpretation, protesting that the name was not to be understood as “purely geographic but as symbolic of discoveries—new worlds on earth, in the sky, or in the minds of men.”

In *Music Since 1900*, the encyclopedist Nicolas Slonimsky, famous for his ability to compress much meaning into few words, summed up *Amériques* by remarking that it was “titled in the plural to embrace all Americas, abstract and concrete, present and future,

scored for a huge orchestra and set in dissonant harmonic counterpoint built of functional thematic molecules, proceeding by successive crystallizations in the sonorous mass of organized sound.”

That seems a very fair description of a massively complicated piece. The instrumentation of the opening is as shocking as anything: In the midst of such a gigantic assemblage, a languorous theme is announced, only *mezzo-forte*, by a single alto flute (inevitably recalling the solo-bassoon opening of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*). After a measure on its own, the alto flute is joined by two harps and little interjections from a bassoon—all in all, a texture that sounds like one of Debussy’s gentler moments. But Varèse soon shows his own colors when larger instrumental groups, sometimes operating as if they were unaware of each other’s existence, juxtapose their own material over the flute theme. Sonorities are often brash, and instruments show the strain of playing at the extremes of their registers and dynamics. *Amériques* proceeds with a generally sectional, almost arbitrary, flavor; or, better said, it displays little of the traditional structure, the trajectory towards a climax, that listeners of 1926 would have expected of a symphonic work. At the end, however, everything does come together into a single body of sound to yield what is one of the most exciting, Dionysian, and potentially deafening spans in the entire orchestral literature.—**James M. Keller**

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