

The Intelligence of Sound:
Matters of Ethos and Style in the Wind Music of Edgard Varese, 1922-1925

Abstract

The task of a conductor is, whenever possible, to interpret a composer's intent from what exists on a score. Beyond the printed score, a composer's own words can provide insight into their musical world. While preparing the music of Edgard Varèse, reconciling the composer's descriptions of what he wanted to create, with his compositional practice is a unique challenge. Specifically, connecting explanations of his "sound masses" with his practical applications of this phenomenon can be especially problematic.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a lens through which a performer can view the early wind music of Varèse, his *Hyperprism*, *Octandre*, and *Integrales*, in an effort to align the lofty (sometimes celestial) ideals of his descriptive language with the practical task of performing his musical language. First, this paper investigates the general ethos of this singular composer. Gaining a better understanding of his aural and visual conceptual universe is the key to understanding his compositional style. Second, within this framework, these sound masses are categorized, and it is observed how they present themselves in the score, behave, interact, and the possible intended effects of these interactions.

When considering his ethos as a composer- that he designs his sounds to appear intelligent- it is clear that overall form is determined by the behavior and interaction of sound masses. Varèse wants to create shapes and objects with dimension, which can appear to move freely and interact. Toward this effect, Varèse manipulates texture, rhythm, pitch, and dynamics, to alter the shape, distance, composition, and interactions of his sound masses. As a result of these moment-to-moment behaviors, formal ebb and flow emerges.

This presentation will discuss this system for defining and categorizing Varese's sound masses. It will also present a survey of their behavioral styles, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the composer's style, and what he refers to as "the intelligence that is in sound".