

### **Edgard Varèse: Intégrales**

*Intégrales* was composed in 1925, almost ten years after the composer's arrival to New York, and it's representative of Varèse's mature style, clearly influenced by his move to the new world, and his vision of breaking away from the European tradition. This quest for a new soundworld finds a great home in the wind ensemble medium, which is a solution that several composers of his generation resulted to for a fresh palette. Like Stravinsky, Varèse shows an avoidance of strings for their association with the expressive features of nineteenth century, and a preference for the crisp, percussive nature of winds and percussion, more suited to the reflection of the "hard-edged intensity of modern urban landscapes and industrial technologies" (Morgan, 308).

Varèse's modernist notion of individuality is apparent right away from the choice of instrumentation. Aware of the problem of mid-register congestion in wind ensemble music, he avoids instruments that would present such issues. His alto and tenor instruments are numbered. A single horn, a clarinet, a tenor trombone and an oboe are hardly capable of causing such a problem, and even those are scored at their extreme registers most of the time. On the other hand, the high and low registers are abundant with both mass and sound color choices. 2 piccolos, and an Eb clarinet, with the support of 2 high trumpets are very powerful on the high end, and a bass trombone, with an unusually scored for contrabass trombone add a very powerful bottom end to the ensemble.

It should come as no surprise that the percussion section is so large, both in the number of players, which outnumbers every other family of instruments, and in the

amount of time it's being employed. This is, after all, the composer that gave us *Ionisation* and who explored percussion more than probably any other composer in his generation, both by inventing new ways of using the standard instruments, and in introducing new and exotic ones into standard ensembles, the latter with varied success. Morgan argues that: "Varèse saw the percussion as the only component of the standard orchestra that still offered opportunities for significant expansion and for the introduction of fresh timbral resources. Moreover, whereas traditional Western music used percussion to support and emphasize accentual patterns associated with the pitched events produced by the other orchestral families, Varèse gave them essentially independent parts. They no longer "double" pitched elements but provide a separate orchestral strand, interacting with the pitched elements, coloring them and, in turn, being colored by them." (Morgan, 308)

This choice is integrated into the compositional process of the piece, which doesn't follow the harmonic or pitch choice conventions of traditional Western practice. Like many composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Varèse doesn't employ tonal structures, but constructs harmonic sonorities free of teleological functions. Throughout the piece the percussion play an especially significant role in constantly transforming the mostly static pitch structure in two ways. Firstly, acting as a separate layer, rhythmically, timbrally and structurally independent that acts as an interlude to the permutations of the pitched material, unfolding in its own, independent way; a sort of counterpoint to the winds and brass. Secondly, in a dynamically changing timbral association with the pitched material as they combine in different ways in passing, offering a reinterpretation of the stationary pitched events. In addition, the percussion fulfill their more traditional functions, namely

to: a) shape individual wind or brass timbres by offering their fixed decay to modify their sound envelope at either the attack or the T3, and b) mark structurally the form of the piece, a function mostly left to the lion's roar, which does just that consistently.

This is not just a quest for new timbral possibilities, but a new attitude towards pitch, conventionally considered as the most important element. The focus of activity is centered on several independently controlled parameters, such as rhythm, registration, dynamics, thickness of texture and pitch density, as well as pitch itself. Consequently, the logic of the composition shifts from the teleological function of tonal and modal music towards the structuring of these elements in time. This doesn't mean that pitch is neglected or treated with less care. In fact, the harmonies, which seem to be chosen based on the composer's ear, are very interesting. They have to be so, of course, because a single chord will usually occupy a whole section of the piece with very little harmonic motion, if any. The listener is then kept harmonically engaged by two means: either by rearranging of parts of the chord horizontally or vertically, or by change of spacing within a single chord. In fact, the use of musical space by the composer is incredible. In the attached sheet, I have mapped out the chords as they occur in the piece, and one can see how incredibly well the space is used, especially considering the dissonant nature of the chords. The composer has a very precise sense of where the weight of the chord lies, and it's never in the middle register. Moreover, he follows the harmonic series' natural way of spacing notes vertically, and he avoids overcrowding of dissonance by offsetting closed-space chord tones by octaves, thus having them clash against higher partials, as opposed to the fundamental. This works great with winds, whose overtones resonate in different ways on each instrument and as a result, the texture is extremely transparent,

and one can hear every note clearly, at the same time. This also allows the percussion layer to occupy its own space without overpowering the winds.

Conceived in a single movement, *Intégrales* is comprised of several small sections, in which the composer presents different ways of interaction between the three principal pitch-oriented units of material: one melodic unit presented by the Eb clarinet, and two chordal units presented by the high winds and trombones respectively (mm 5-6). These make up the pitch/motivic material for the entire section, and remain essentially unchanged in pitch structure, treated more like stationary objects changing only in the way in which they're combined or juxtaposed. In fact, development is entirely based on these relationships between the elements and not in transformation of the elements themselves. There is, however, rhythmic transformation within each cell. Each time the melodic unit comes back it's extended and gains activity and shifts between instruments. Likewise, the chordal units are activated by constant re-attacking (as at reh. 12) following rhythmic patterns that have been introduced previously by the percussion interludes.

Another notable technique that Varèse uses is the way he uses time in a spatial way. One notices that even though the score page might look more crowded than expected, listening will reveal that pitch density is treated very carefully, and it actually shapes the form of the piece. The best way to describe that would be that it sounds like a spring coiling through time, each time growing. It reminded me of the equations turned into music by Xenakis, only this seems to be based entirely on Varèse's ear and incredible sense of musical proportions.

Morgan sums up the composers overall approach: "there is no clear distinction between melody and accompaniment and the individual notes are often not conceived as

parts or lines or harmonies, but as constituents of what the composer called 'sound masses', whole configurations of notes that work together to produce a generalized sonic character. Thus, the opening of *Intégrales* can be viewed as a 'counterpoint of masses', in which multiple planes of musical activity interact with one another in varying combinations. The composer's own terms for the various techniques of combining and opposing such materials are revealing 'collision', 'penetration', repulsion, transmutation etc" (312). This notion of conceiving musical material as pure sound was to be followed and explored by many later 20<sup>th</sup> century composers as a fresh approach to composition that helped shape the music of today.

## REFERENCES

Morgan, Robert P. *Twentieth Century Music*. W,W, Norton & Co, Inc. New York, NY  
1991.