THE MUSIC OF EDGAR VARESE

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THIS article is no attempt to present Varese's music as seen by the composer. Although I have heard Varese discuss the mathematical basis which is his own theoretical foundation for this music, I do not understand his viewpoint sufficiently to write of it. Nor is it my purpose to appraise the value of his work. This interests me greatly, but I have already seen too many reviews either berating his music without showing the reason why, or praising without telling wherein its excellence lies.

What I have not seen, and wish to attempt, is an examination and analysis of the actual musical materials employed by Varese in some of his characteristic works, from the standpoint of the modern usages of melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.

It is obvious that an analysis by the familiar rules of harmony as taught in schoolbooks would not only be unfair, but literally impossible. The conventional study of harmony does not deal with the combinations handled by Varese. The formal musician may say that Varese breaks every rule of harmony but this is not true, because there are no recognized rules governing the type of dissonant combinations Varese uses; also one must understand that music as conceived by Varese in his works is a different art from the music arrived at by the text-book.

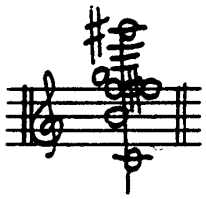
In making his music Varese breaks no rules of ordinary harmony; they do not come into consideration at all, as they do not pertain to that different art which is his aim. This does not mean, however, that he follows no rules. To attain his ends, he is forced into certain limitations which one might call rules of his own making, as will be seen.

In order to make technical references, it is necessary here to expand the meaning of certain musical terms. Let us assume that the word melody refers to any succession of single tones, without reference to whether it is immediately pleasing, follows

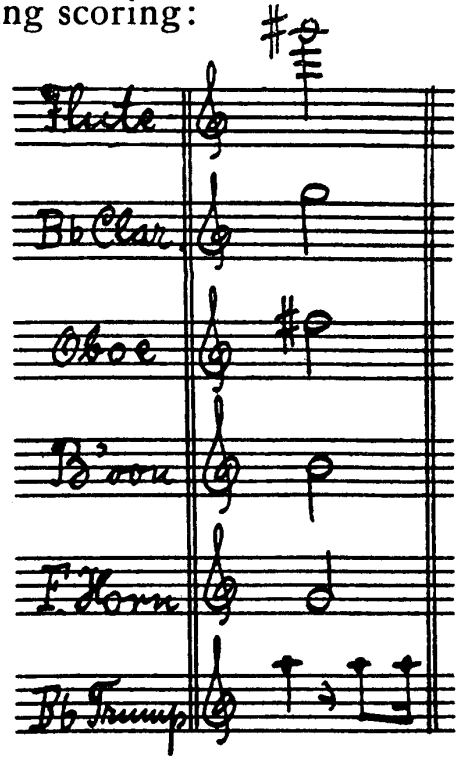
certain curves or is contained within a key. The word harmony will refer to any group of tones played simultaneously; and any succession of accents, note-values or rates of speed will be considered as rhythm.

One key to a comprehension of Varese's music is the fact that he is more interested in finding a note that will sound a certain way in a certain instrument and will "sound" in the orchestral fabric, than he is in just what position the note occupies in the harmony; except, of course, in so far as its harmonic position will pertain to its "coming out" in the scoring.

One must consider that besides the harmony of notes, which with Varese is somewhat secondary, there is at any given time also a harmony of tone-qualities, each of which is calculated to sound out through the orchestra. For example in *Octandre,* page three, the following chord occurs:



Superimposed upon this chord, and more important than the harmony itself to Varese, is the harmony resultant from the tone qualities of the instruments owing to their particular sound in the register in which he scores each; so that while the above chord might be found in many a modern composer's work it assumes a character found only in Varese when we see it in the following scoring:

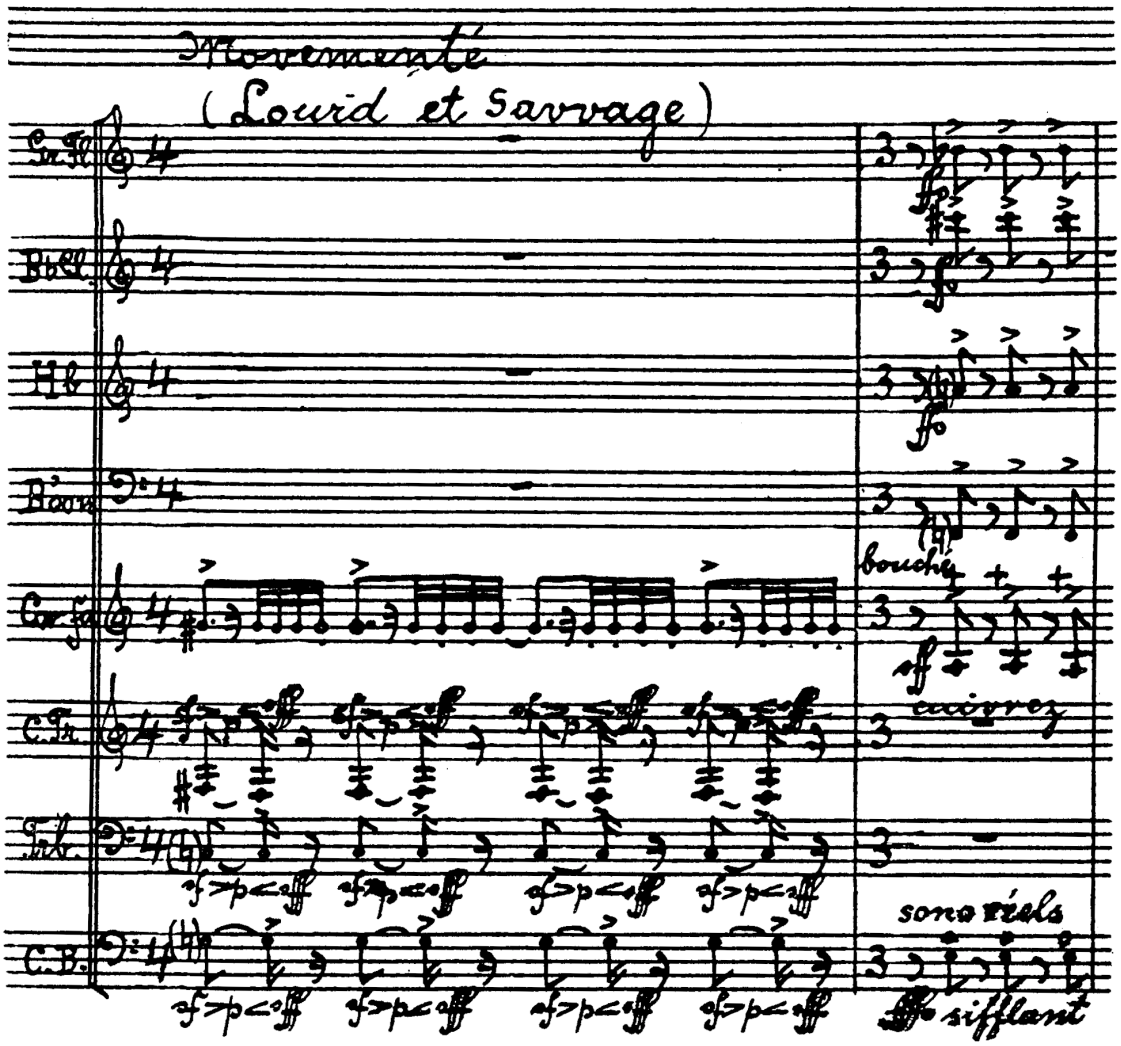


(I have frequently noticed that when Varese examines a new score, he is more interested in the orchestration than in the musical content, although no amount of brilliant scoring will interest him in a work in old-fashioned style.)

Just as harmonic combinations of sound qualities are emphasized above harmony itself by Varese, one finds that dynamic nuances on the same note, or repeated tones, often take the place of melody. He very frequently does away with melody entirely by having only re-

peated tones for certain passages. Removing from the listener's ear that which it is accustomed to follow most closely, sometimes almost to the exclusion of everything else, naturally induces a keener awareness of other musical elements such as rhythm and dynamics.

Varese is always careful to supply the ear with subtleties of dynamic change which take the place of melody in certain passages. In the following three measures from *Octandre,** page four, there is no melody in any part, since there are only repeated tones; note the unusually large number of dynamic changes, to offset this:



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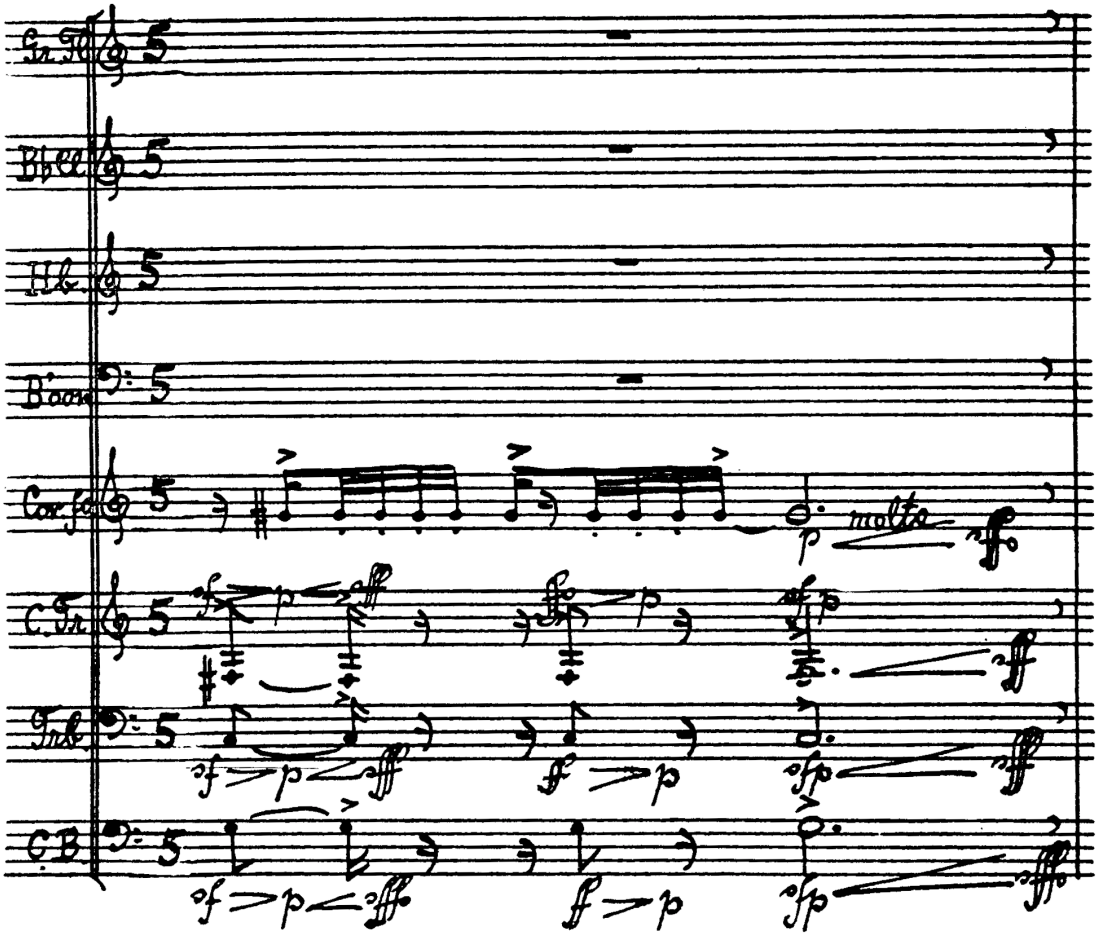
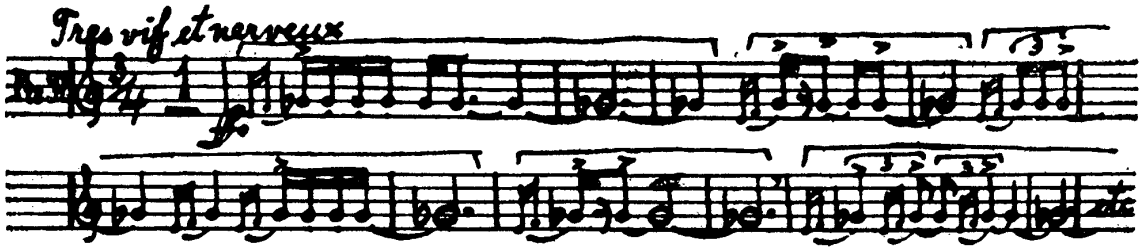


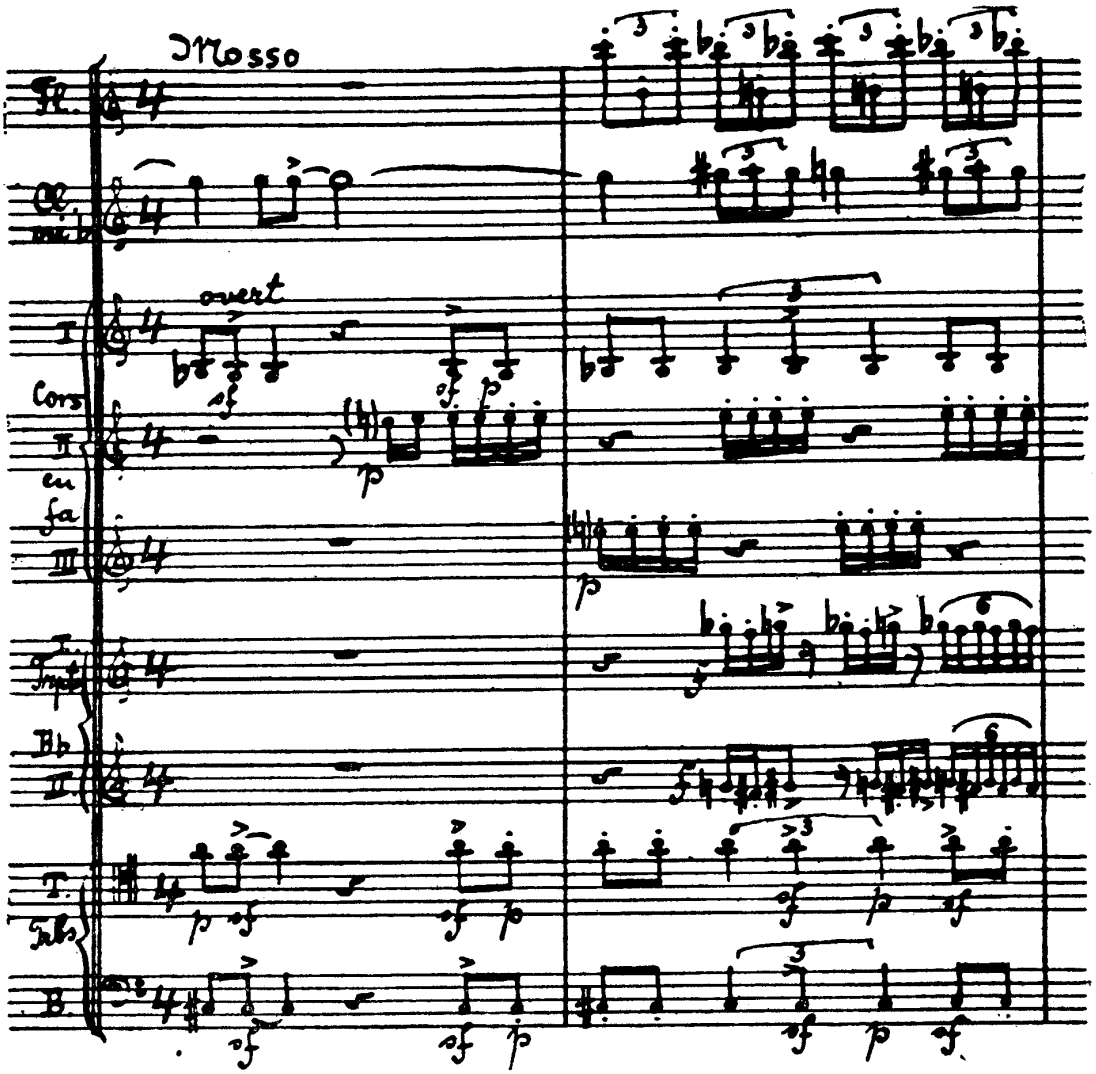
Owing to his reliance on specific tone-qualities and dynamics for the very essence of his music, there are dynamic markings and directions as to quality applying to nearly every note in Varese's scores. Sometimes a single note will have a number of signs, as for instance the first note in the trumpet in the above example which is marked *sf, diminuendo, p, crescendo sfff.* I have heard Varese express great contempt for composers who do not indicate many expression marks. "They do not know how they wish their music to sound," he says.

Sometimes Varese cuts out melody to call attention to the rhythm rather than dynamics. The opening of the second movement of *Octandre* is a long flute solo, of a type which would ordinarily contain a long melodic curve. Varese uses only repeated tones, with two or three grace notes to relieve the monotony of pitch. This introduction is in the form of five

rhythmical phrases, all different, and separated by longer notes. Each phrase is marked by a bracket:



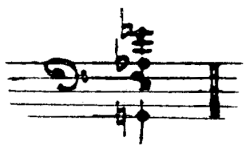
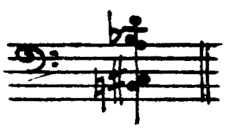
In *Hyperprism,* page ten, we find a good example of the discontinuance of the melody (partly by repeated tones and partly, as in the flute and trumpets, by continued repetition of a figure) for the purpose of calling attention to the cross-rhythm between the parts.



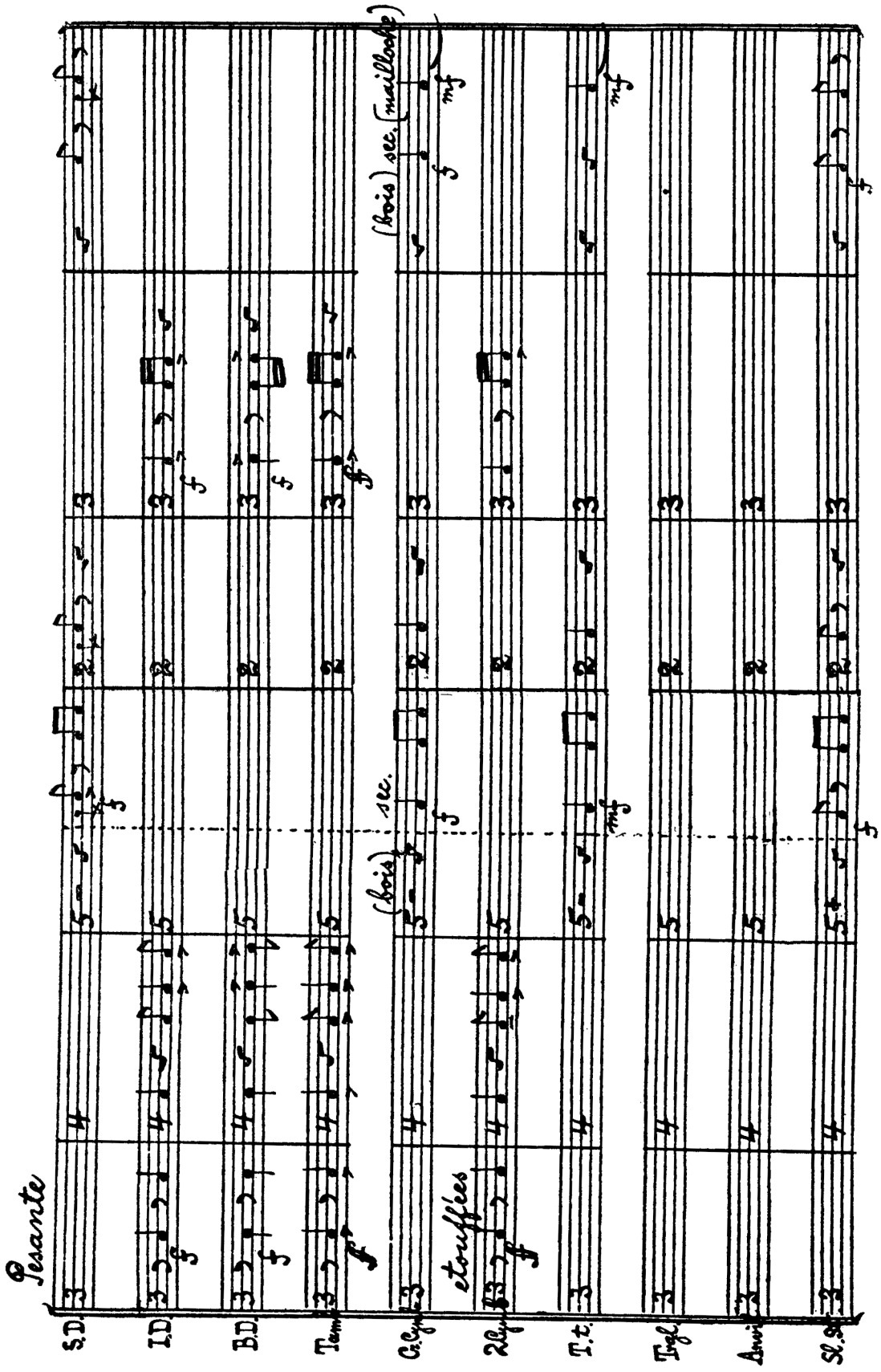
There is a combination of two, three and four against each other, and in the centre of the last measure a quarter-note triplet of particular interest, since it begins and ends on a weak beat, running through the strong beat; the second note, being accented, almost but not quite coincides with the third beat of the measure in an extremely unusual manner. Varese evidently realized that these rhythmical subtleties would be lost on the listener, were his attention to be diverted by melodic interest or harmonic change.

It is perhaps this desire to focus the interest on harmonies of sound-quality alone—without the distraction of harmonies of pitch—or on chords of rhythms, that has led Varese to develop his emphasis on the percussion instruments. He probably uses more such instruments, proportionately, than any other composer. For example in *Hyperprism* there are seventeen percussion as against nine melodic instruments. Sometimes he uses percussion passages alone, (as on page seven, measures three and four) but more often the percussion is in connection with some of the other instruments.

In *Hyperprism,* page eight,* there is a good illustration of a simple chord combination of tone-qualities. First a chord composed of the qualities of Indian drum, bass drum, tambourine and cymbal against each other moves to a chord of snare drum, crash-cymbal, tam-tam and slap-stick, which in turn progresses back to the first combination; a sort of four-part harmony.

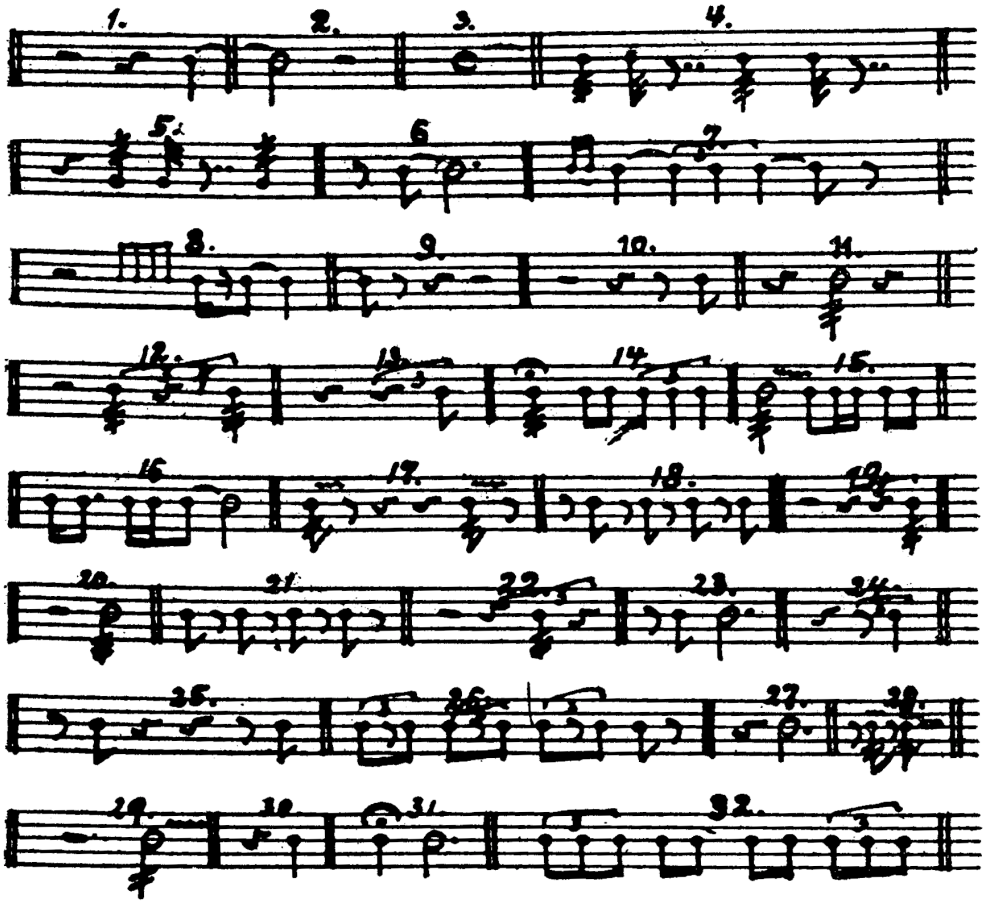
It is interesting to note Varese's sense of the exact harmonic value of these tone-qualities, since, whenever the first percussion chord occurs, this tonal chord is correlated with it in the other instruments:  While this chord: always accompanies the second percussion chord. It will  be seen that the rhythm of each of the instruments in the percussion chord is the same, and that consequently no harmony of rhythm is formed. On page sixteen, measure two, of *Hyperprism* there is an example of rhythmic harmony, as each instrument has an independent rhythm. An analysis of the rhythms throughout

* See opposite page.



From HYPERPRISM, page eight.

the parts reveals a great variety of rhythmic figures. In *Hyperprism* on the first page alone there are thirty-two different rhythmical manners of filling a measure.

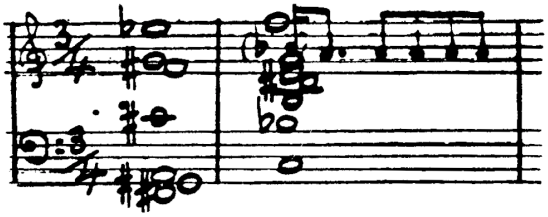


Through the whole work there are surprisingly few rhythmical duplications. It has been said by those who perceive a minimum of tonal, melodic and harmonic changes in his music, that Varese lacks invention; yet undoubtedly for the development of so many different figures of rhythm one must concede as great inventive fertility as is usually recognized in the field of pitch.

Varese does not ignore melody and harmony, but merely does away with them on occasion. He limits himself almost exclusively to harmonies containing strong dissonances, i.e. minor seconds or ninths, and major sevenths. One may therefore say that he has developed for himself a rule that such dissonant intervals are requisite for the harmonic fabric he desires. To introduce a consonant harmony would remove the sense of implacable, resilient hardness, and create a weak link in the chain; the let-down

would be so great that the whole composition might fall to pieces.

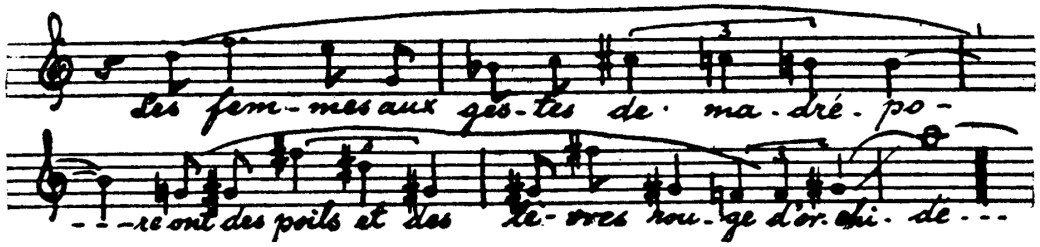
Here is a chord succession from *Octandre* on page eleven.



In the first chord there are two minor seconds, one augmented octave and one minor ninth; altogether four strong discords. There are two diminished sevenths, two diminished fifths, two minor sevenths, one major second, and one diminished tenth; altogether eight milder dissonances. There are nine different concordant intervals in the same chord, which proceeds to one containing five strong discords, ten mild dissonances, and twelve concords. The second harmony contains more intervals all told, but the proportion between dissonant and consonant intervals is very similar to the first chord. The same general balance between disharmonies and concords, not gravitating too far on either side, will be found throughout. Varese's chords are obviously not haphazard, but belong to a special category in which he is careful to have certain general proportions of different sorts of intervals.

Melody, when Varese uses it, is often characterized by wide skips, broken sometimes by chromatic passages as in this example (*Hyperprism,* flute part, page five):

Sometimes the wide skips are broken by repeated tones, as in the voice part of *La Croix du Sud,* page three, from *Offrandes*†:



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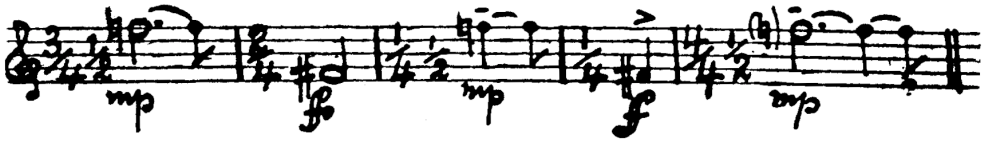
One rhythmical innovation of Varese is his metrical marking of 3/4 and a half, 1/4 and a half, 4/4 and a half, etc. as shown by the flute part of *Octandre*, page twelve:



The extra one half represents in each case an added half beat, or eighth note, at the end of the measure. Some musicians claim that 1/4 and a half time is really the same as 3/8 time, since it contains the same number of eighth notes in a measure. There is, however, a great distinction in the rhythmical feeling between these two signatures, as 3/8 is smooth flowing, and is conducted in three movements of the baton, while 1/4 and a half is irregular, and is led by one longer followed by one shorter stroke of the conductor's stick.

There are many other elements in Varese's music which deserve consideration; but it would be somewhat outside the province of a short exposition to go further into detail. If it has been suggested to students of modern music that there is interesting material for analysis in Varese, the aim of this article has been accomplished.

EDGAR VARESE

Portrait by
STEFAN HIRSCH