

“Poème Électronique”—Edgard Varese (1958)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Alan Crayson (guest post)*



Edgard Varese

An unlikely mouthpiece through which word about Edgard Varèse would spread to a wider world, an expressionless fourteen-year-old mooched along the sidewalk of a lugubrious conurbation on the edge of Northern California’s desert regions. Delivered on 21 December 1940, the celebrated Frank Zappa all but shared the same birthday as the composer who was to be the idol of his youth after he entered a parochial store where “I noticed a strange-looking black-and-white album with a guy on it who had frizzy grey hair and looked like a mad scientist.” Following impassioned haggling, Zappa bought a shop-soiled “The Complete Works Of Edgard Varèse: Volume One.”

At school, he became quite preachy about “the world’s greatest composer”—and, for his 16th birthday, was permitted to make a long-distance call to Varèse, feeling odd disappointment on finding his hero’s New York number wasn’t ex-directory. Moreover, Frank was able to chat only to Mrs. Varèse, who explained that Edgard had just left for Belgium for discussions about involvement in “Expo 58: The World’s Fair in Brussels”—where the construction of the site had commenced two years ago.

Varese had been approached by Charles Eduard Jeanneret, known to posterity as “Le Corbusier,” who’d attended the première in Paris of Varèse’s “Déserts,” which juxtaposed “episodes” on orthodox orchestral instruments with interludes of treated sound on pre-recorded tape. A Christopher Wren of his day, Le Corbusier’s mark on town planning is evident today in ruthlessly austere tower blocks, churches that resemble dental surgeries, and right-angled grids of inner distribution roads. The Swiss architect was also a tireless self-publicist, then full of a work-in-progress, namely his “Poème Électronique” and the vessel that will contain it.

The opportunity to realize this had presented itself when Philips, one of Europe’s key record companies, sought to make maximum impact at “Expo 58” via an exhibit scheduled for the 2nd of May, that, hopefully, would be different from the usual trade stalls for promenading entrepreneurs. Thus Le Corbusier was contracted to mastermind “a work capable of profoundly affecting the human sensibility by audio-visual means. I had an obscure sense that something could be done using electronics: speed, number, colour, sound, noise, unlimited power. Immediately, I thought of Varèse—and would not undertake this task except on condition he should create the music.”

In collusion with former pupil Yannis Xenakis, Le Corbusier's insistence on Varèse obliged Philips to dismiss its own choice, Sir William Walton, and grant the newcomer *carte blanche* to record an eight-minute opus as the essence of the main event. The multi-faceted Xenakis would attend to intermission music, and be in charge of the supervisory donkey-work with regard to the erection of the impressive parabolic folly of a pavilion to be demolished soon after Varèse was heard there, and Le Corbusier's flickering mélange of patterns and images were projected onto its inner walls.

Having taken on “Poème Électronique,” Varèse's preparations included receiving practical instructions about general principals at the University of Columbia's Electronic Music Laboratory, where Chou Wen-Chung, his most outstanding protégé, was employed as chief technical assistant. When sufficiently schooled in the sonic possibilities of professional equipment as opposed to the paraphernalia in his New York work room, Varèse spent several months in Eindhoven, commuting between lodgings and Philips' three-track complex whose technicians had been placed at his beck-and-call.

Assembled second by second, the “Poème Électronique” music evolved over block-booked hours punctuated by spats when murmured head-to-head arguments about, say, degree of reverberation on a particular edit would scale such a height of stand-up vexation and cross-purpose that a white-jacketed underling would slope off for an embarrassed coffee break while defiance, hesitation, defiance again and final agreement chased across the face of either the composer or the chief engineer. Yet during the interminable re-running of each taped mile, the technicians would be astounded constantly by the visitor's learned recommendations about amplitude, track allocation, stereo placement, degeneration, et.al., though correct terminology would defer sometimes to *zzzzt*, *woop-woop*, *bap-bap-bap-bap*... like snatches from a Dada poem.

Now and then, one would want to collapse with laughter, but kept himself in check as the piece began to assume sharper definition. Nevertheless, if Philips' executive body had envisaged a Walton-esque hybrid of Elgar and Britten, it was to be dismayed.

The montage of sound did contain, however, a *plink-plonk* element characteristic of Walton's lighter offerings, though it bore a closer affinity to Cage's “Fontana Mix,” a classic of its kind, then nearing completion in Milan's Studio di Fonologia. Yet the similarity is superficial because “Poème Électronique” relied on a determinacy that Cage avoided. Indeed, extraneous noise is an unwanted distraction when listening on compact disc to “Poème Électronique,” a careful Mondrian-like arrangement of cleanly-recorded samples modified only to enhance clarity and stereo shift.

Bells, sirens, woodblocks, bel canto warbling, silence, female sighs and electronic signals informs a contradiction of hysterical gravity in keeping with Le Corbusier's visual array of fish, masks, skeletons, cities mushroom clouds, birds, animals, reptiles, idols and women, naked and clothed. Moreover, the tape was to be fed through 350 speakers. While annoyed that the sound system wasn't quite perfect on the day, Varèse, at age 74, accomplished with a vengeance the “sound moving through space” notion of which he'd been speaking for nigh on 20 years.

The effects of the “Poème Électronique” experience varied from person to person, but, overall, it would probably be described as “psychedelic” nowadays. Though Xenakis and

Jeanneret's pavilion is no more, the music is still available, usually on "Complete Works" collections for documentary rather than recreational reasons.

Back in the Big Apple, news of Varèse's activities in the Netherlands had preceded him, and local plans were being made for the first of several attempts to re-create the sensation of "Expo 58." My own feeling, however, is that you had to have been there. Varèse's "Poème Électronique" was meant to be heard only in the context of Xanakis's building and Le Corbusier's light-show on that particular day during 1958's rainy spring.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.