

## Morton Feldman: Remarks on Varèse

*The following remarks by Feldman, from a programme on Edgard Varèse entitled "A Martyr for the Cause" presented by Roger Wright on BBC Radio 3 on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1986, were transcribed by Chris Villars from a tape recording of the broadcast made by Tudor Wright.*

Artistically, [Varèse's] great legacy is a marriage between timbre and pitch that was absolutely uncanny. It's a great harmony lesson in orchestration, or instrumentation, as harmony, and not conceptually arrived at. He really mixed them a way that the Germans do not mix, probably more out of Debussy.

You had to be a very secure musician to have a sense of [Varèse's] stature. And I noticed that, through the years, even some of my own students effectively couldn't really ascertain any *strong* systematic approach. This took away some kind of credibility that he possibly might be a great composer. The kids felt a little better when I explained, for example, that *Arcana* was an eleven note passacaglia, or that *Deserts* is a twelve-tone piece of sorts. It's not really... I mean, I don't know what you call it! I see no function for the twelve-tone [method].

There's a marvellous story about Duchamp which might relate to Varèse. It is that, someone came in and they saw Duchamp squirting paint with a cheap water pistol. And they said, "Marcel, why don't you go to the hardware store and get a sophisticated gun?" And he said, "I thought of it," he said, "but the more *inferior* the material, the greater the aim." And that's saying, in a sense, that he's dealing with inferior point of view by being, say, less involved in the construction of a piece, say than Schoenberg. But I feel that there is elements of knowing that if you're not using something, you have to compensate it with something else. If Stravinsky compensated the loss of harmony with rhythm, I would say that Varèse compensated the loss of the things that he loved with orchestration as harmony.

I suppose that a young composer in New York in those times was very much like female composers now who I teach. Like they're in search of a model. We didn't have any models. We wanted a flesh and blood model. No-one should want to be an artist just by seeing some dead music on the page. That's no justification for being a composer. I want to see who *did* it. And the people that did it at high school - my friends - just didn't give me any confidence in the sense that I would like to be a composer. Really, I mean it! I'm not kidding! Stefan Wolpe had a... He was on fire, he had a face. And Varèse had a face. The face was alive with the subject. And to me that was very, very important. He made the chain complete, giving me a sense of... that I would not be wasting my life writing music. Very important; the face, and then the personality.

I would say that to me, and to maybe others in America, [Varèse] was *to me* what perhaps Webern was to Boulez, of more or less the same generation. More so than Ives, though but you put Ives in the same situation. I mean, if one is always trying to recruit figures in history that present your own point of view, you know at least there is Varèse in America! That is, [of] the less systematic type of composer.