

# ***VARÈSE AND THE MUSIC OF FIRE***

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**There is a cave somewhere in Java** amidst the volcanic ranges, where the traveler is led to an orifice which opens directly upon the hollow of the roaring furnace. With great precaution the heads of the visitors are brought near the cavity and the tremendous frenzy of the elemental forces stirs the breast of the listeners. The hissing of fire, the thundering of metallic convulsions, the orgiastic force of the flames lashing the walls of the caves, the rumbling of fiery avalanches, the demoniac urge of the molten lava to reach towards the, burning sun above — the convulsion of noise grips the heart and tells of a world unknown and awe-inspiring, a world where things are being made, where matter is being forged, where beginnings cry out amongst molecular parturitions.

Then the traveler leaves the caves; and perhaps the time of the monsoon has come. The earth has been parched for months by the relentless sun. Suddenly the storm is unleashed. The rain beats madly upon the soil, which gasps and swallows. The forests tremble, shaken by the cyclone. Night comes, and the orgy of life bursts forth. In the silence you can hear the growth of things. Plants explode into blossoms, immense and gorgeous, and the scents of the flowers choke the nostrils.

These are the elemental orgies of Nature. They survive from bygone ages when colossal forces were playing upon our pubescent globe. They are the pale memories of heroic periods when continents were bursting forth out of the depths of the boiling seas, and exploding under the terrific pressure of the central fire. Earth today has grown old and well-behaved, especially in our respectable latitudes. But the human spirit has brought forth its inner fire to compensate for the abatement of natural orgies. The crude fire of Earth has cooled off, but the psychic fire of man is beginning slowly to assert its creative power, its titanic energy. This is the great revolution which is convulsing mankind. It is the birth of the soul-fire, the birth of the great power within man, whose name was held most sacred by the ancient sages who felt its intensity. But today the vanguard of humanity is slowly learning for itself — individually at first, then collectively — to deal with these great powers. This means that the "fiery body" of the human spirit is being slowly constituted; and the tragedy and glory of its parturition is stirring up the souls of those who, whether they are consciously or not the pioneers of a new manhood, feel within themselves the urge to voice the tremendous conflagrations that shake their very being.

The Romanticists were the first to feel the signs of the fiery growth; and the result was a chaotic, emotional condition which has found expression mainly in the works of the great musicians: Berlioz, Chopin, Liszt, Wagner, and before them, though in a quite different direction, Beethoven. But the romantic passion as yet was too much mixed with elements from the past. It has a dark red flame, engrossed with material desires, sullied by sentimentalism and theatrics. Such was romanticism, the keynote of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century has a greater mission to fulfill, a purer urge to express. The dark red fire has to become more ardent, till it takes on the red-orange glow of overheated steel, till it becomes white, dazzling with light: pure fire. This is the great alchemical transmutation.

The elemental birth of the soul-fire, this is what the music of today is beginning to express. What the natural frenzy of sound and light — which is the soul of the tropical life - is to the physical realm of the cosmos, the new music of power is to the mental and spiritual realm of the same cosmos. For humanity is the mind of the cosmos, a very young mind indeed; yet, we have now come to what might be called its pubescent stage, and the musical turmoil of these last fifteen years indicates the momentous character of the change.

This new "music of power," or music of fire, was born in Russia. Its mother was Scriabin; its father Stravinsky. Both these composers incarnate the two aspects of this human fire; the **psychic** and the **mental** aspects — one might say its two polarities. Scriabin was psychic, (in the highest sense of the word) in that he represented more the love-aspect of this soul-fire, the transcendental, devotional ecstasy of it. Stravinsky, in the "Sacre du Printemps, — perhaps his only master work-is mental in the sense that he expresses more the power aspect of the fire, this aspect which is polarized towards matter, which fashions matter, the demiurgic, the magical element. Scriabin aspires towards the pure spirit, away from matter. He does not strive for the building of matter, but at the subtilization and re-integration of the material souls into the spiritual ocean, where all forms commune. He synthesizes by dissolution; Stravinsky builds by compression. And this difference of tendencies gives the key to the understanding of the technique and modal conception of these two great creators.

The "Sacre du Printemps," when it was produced in Paris, gave a terrible blow to the decadent music of the day, lost in voluptuous dreams and sensuous researches. Stravinsky was unable to stand the shock of his own creation and for days after remained between life and death, racked with fever. Since then, his music has changed entirely. It has turned toward Schönberg, the destroyer, Schönberg, the painter of sonorities, the tonal anarchist. It lost most of the power of its cosmic fire; it pursued most interesting researches, very valuable but relatively lifeless. Thus a composer was needed who could take music at the stage of development where the "Sacre du Printemps" had left it and bring it to a higher stage, to a more definite point of completion, of sonorous and instrumental, as well as spiritual perfection. We have such a composer in Edgar Varèse.

The great orchestral work of Varèse, entitled "Ameriques" — a deeply significant title which came intuitively to its author — is the work which we were waiting for since 1913, the year of the "Sacre." It towers above all the musical productions which have appeared during the last 10 years, with the exception of the last works of Scriabin.

The music of "Ameriques" is difficult to analyze, especially as it has not yet been performed. It is fundamentally orchestral; the very idea of a piano reduction of it would be inept. It is based on the cosmic essence of sound and lives by the evolution of sonorous mass-relationships generated by a continuous process of interfusion and opposition. This music is built in the manner of living organisms. It is essentially Bergsonian in its principle of continuous unfolding. It has a tremendous "vital impetus," which refuses to become rigid, but keeps ever transforming, in a state of fluid becoming, of tonal and instrumental oscillation, equilibrium being sought for in the balance of sonorous volumes.

And here we come to a very interesting point. Such a type of organization is not unlike impressionism, as far as technique goes. There is a formal similitude between "Iberia" and "Ameriques," in the sense that both works are constituted by ever-moving balances of tonal values regardless of monodic succession, and independently of the intellectual form-development. They both are essentially vital. The difference is this: Debussy sees but the sensorial, superficial glittering of life — whereas Varèse reveals its depths, its voluminal, intrinsic energy. Debussy is an impressionist. Varèse is what might be called: an intrinsicalist. "Ameriques" is to some extent the synthesis of musical impressionism and of cubism. It accepts the vital, fluidic becoming of the first, but deepens it, intrinsicalizes it with the help of the architectonic mental grasp of the latter. Works like the "Sacre," and, infinitely more, "Ameriques" reveal the meaning of cubism. They legitimate cubism, which as a means for plastic expression fails to bring out the vital element, because of the static quality of the medium used. Music alone — until the time comes when we shall have real symphonies of moving plastic forms — can be intrinsical and voluminal in its principle of organization and yet retain the continuity of the "living flesh," the color atmosphere of impressionism. This is because it possesses a sort of vital fluid, that is, a continuous medium of cellular interchange, which runs throughout the entire organism, and establishes a fourth-dimensional coherence out of which springs the sense of organic unity. Rudolph Steiner would call it: the power of organization. The "Sacre du Printemps" did not reach such a stage of organization, because it was hampered by the plastic idea of the ballet, and, perhaps, because of Stravinsky's inability to come at once to it.

Varèse bases his music on the so-called "duodecuple system," using the twelve notes of the octave un-trammeled by any feeling of tonality. But he has perceived unconsciously the only philosophical justification of such a system and thus appears as an heir to the old Chinese musicians who built their scales with material derived from an ascending succession of fifths. The initial theme of Varèse's work (may I say its thread-like quality, as it is truly like Ariadne's thread running throughout the mazes of the work), shows this most plainly, as it is built exclusively upon the 6 first fifths (C, G, D, A, E, B.) These six first fifth form the hexachord, which was in use in all occult musical systems of old, representing as it does the six cosmic types, or rays, the higher and lower triads of human principles, or natures—the seventh one being the octave note of the first. The *fa* did not belong to the scale because it was the keynote of physical nature, the fourth below.

This hexachordal system is an essentially joyous one, because it has a powerful intrinsical ascension-ality; thus it is a fit basis for a work which is essentially Dionysiac, and full of the intoxicating power of life. It is not exuberant; it is not emotional; nor has it the human appeal of "Tristan and Isolde," for instance. It is cosmic, in that it is essentially a force that gloriously goes on, and on, with the serene certitude and joy of simply being. It is not "mental" in the sense that it expresses the tragedies and struggles of mind. It is mental only in that it controls life and is not immersed in it. A better word would be "magical," in the highest sense of the word, and the work might be called "Creation" — because it really expresses the inner glory and fecundity of the creators moulding cosmic matter, of the

sculptor modeling the heavy, inner rich clay, organizing volumes according to the rhythmical impulse of his inner life-energy.

And that is truly the expression of the great power which is the fire of the creative soul, the power that gives birth, that is sex, below and above conscious self-recreation, the crude fire of Martian emotion and the pure fire of Uranian intuition.

"Ameriques" expresses the first days of the Creation, the creation of matter, the birth of cosmic, human, racial nebulae; thus the title is fitting as America is the nebula, the chaos out of which a new racial entity will be evolved. We may say that "Ameriques" is the first intrinsically American musical work produced, the first symphony in which we truly hear the voice of America today. Later, works will be created which will express more the soul, the spiritual individuality, of the twentieth century, which will harmonize the creative power of Stravinsky and the subtle spiritualizing fire of Scriabin. They are bound to come, and it does not make any difference who will write them. Such things as "Ameriques" and the creations to come, do not belong to any one man. They are the collective expressions of this century.