

Raimondo Puccinelli's recollections of Edgar Varèse in San Francisco

I do not wish to make either criticism or biography in this short essay. The ideas expressed are generalities and rather anecdotal; things seen and felt without any special chronological sense.

I first met Varèse in New Mexico in 1936 while I was on a trip in the Indian country. He had said that the fine air of this high altitude was a help for his lungs, damaged in the war in 1915.

I had already known his music "Ionization" as I had been present at many rehearsals before its presentation in San Francisco, directed by Henry Cowell. My brother was one of the musicians. I believe this was the first production of Varèse in San Francisco (1933 or 1934). I spoke of this and Varèse seemed quite pleased.

I went on to New York, returning to San Francisco in 1937, where I met him again, seemingly more sad than he was on our first meeting. He missed his wife, Louise, and he felt nostalgic for his friends in Europe and in New York. San Francisco seemed indifferent to his work. Varèse had hoped that Henry Cowell or Monteux would be of assistance in getting his music played before a San Francisco public. But, after residing for a short time in that city, he began to feel that it seemed useless.

He came practically every day to my studio on the edge of Chinatown. In this atmosphere of my workshop, we talked about everything. But he did keep on with his ups and downs. I came to learn that, when "down", a good walk through Chinatown would help. It always helped me too. Chinatown had so many things to offer on the social and human plane of values: a world for an artist. Another time we would walk down the street to a near-by artist's studio, especially to the young, gifted George Harris or to Hilaire Hiler, an excellent decorator who had lived in Paris and in New York. Hiler's sense of Rabelasian humour was very special and usually unexpected, with fewer of the inhibitions of the ordinary citizen and it brought our much laughter from us.

I believe that Varèse really loved everything – everything except mediocrity. When he said "mediocre" it was with a tone of real disgust. Mediocrity, which is nothingness: this was a filthy word.

One evening when asked by a well-meaning admirer "Are you of the left wing or the right wing?" Varèse answered, "I fly with my own wings: both the one to the left and the one to the right".

Some people in San Francisco couldn't bear either one of us. They said we were too frankly critical. Varèse was a master of irony which made San Franciscans uncomfortable, as, with their usual sense of self-complacency and well-being, they did not like to be disturbed into thinking too deeply: a provincial quality, no doubt.

We continued our many walks around San Francisco, day and night. It was wonderful for me as I too found myself very alone as Esther was at the time visiting with relatives in Sweden where she was learning the technique of weaving. On these walks Varèse not only looked in every direction but listened to every sound. His curiosity was endless. He was infatuated with things which ordinary citizens take freely for granted: the lapping waves on the waterfront; the rhythms of the various sounds of workers unloading crates; the squeak of a wheel or a brake; an auto horn; a whistle; a church bell. All of these were music's raw material.

Sometimes we spoke English, sometimes French, sometimes Italian and sometimes Spanish. Varèse also spoke German well and some Russian. We once had had the idea that in Russia we might find a place: but then we learned that not even in Russia was there hope for an actively creative artist at that time.

At this time San Francisco consisted of Chinese, Japanese, Italian and Spanish-speaking districts. We explored the Spanish-Mexican quarter, dining often in a Spanish-Basque restaurant which served excellent food, but never overindulged. One day at lunch, while we were discussing art, poetry, music, etc., a bourgeois type of successful man of business at the table nearby was "politely" stretching over to listen. Varèse, noting his anxiety, said, "Well, if you want to listen, move your chair over". And so he did. At our table we had a bottle of strong Spanish wine but neither of us imbibed enough to make a difference. We offered this fellow the wine, which he accepted, finishing the entire contents; enough for him to reveal to us all about the inner workings of a much advertised cheese company with which he had an important position. "Well, it's called a cheese company", he told us, " but it's a manufactured product and the ingredients were several, including some cheese, thereby adding great profits to the Company". Undoubtedly this "Cheese" executive was trying to free his conscience. For us, it was amusing and instructive.

Varèse and I had a way of drawing thoughts out of people which they would never otherwise revealed. This was only one of the occasions in which people revealed themselves to us.

As well as in Italian, French and Spanish restaurants we often ate in Chinese restaurants, selecting the simpler and very healthful dishes. The sound of many Chinese talking together, the rattling of dishes and chopsticks, often accompanied by Chinese music, was wonderful. As I often dined with the noted Chinese artist Dong Kingman and his family, Varèse accompanied me on a number of occasions. They offered us luxurious Chinese banquets as only the Chinese can offer. Afterwards there was much Chinese music sung and played by the three Kingman brothers: Dong, Ming and Tim. Varèse loved these rare evenings as these brothers really had a deep Chinese culture. I always introduced Varèse to the Chinese as a musician who loved Chinese music and this became an open door. Dong Kingman's brother Tim was an excellent Chinese musician. He played for us a number of times in my studio. Varèse had him repeat, asking questions; but the musician couldn't always answer, as his English was very limited.

Varèse was enthusiastic about the Chinese Theatre, where all of the elements of "theatre" are in coordination. A march by Wagner isn't the answer to every dramatic situation. In the

oriental theatre the dance, pantomime, music, song, speech, in magnificent rhythm – the entire inner movement – all are integrated. An actress isn't picked up in a night club to do Juliette just because she looks like some famous heroine. The Chinese think in terms of "image"; true in their speech, in their writing and in their painting and poetry. Their music is thought and felt more in the "mass" than just in "line". These and other factors pleased Varèse. Dong Kingman often accompanied us to the theatre and explained some of the factors, as Dong and his brothers had an excellent background of the Chinese Theatre as well as its music. I had numerous Chinese recordings, as well as Flamenco, which I often played during my work hours. Varèse loved these. He sat with his head held by both hands and listened, while I went on with my work. Through experiences such as these I felt Varèse was beginning to re-find himself. Later, with the help of Dong Kingman, we obtained from China some especially good Chinese instruments and gongs for Varèse, which later became an important addition to his New York studio.

In the transplanting of the different ethnical groups the Chinese did the best job. They remained Chinese, maintaining their integrity. Their ideal was not that of the Yankees. Nor were the Mexicans hero-worshippers in this sense. The Italians were intermediate. The influence of the Afro-American people interested us. Together we went to some Afro-American church "spiritual" meetings. It was genuine and, compared to the contemporary commercial music heard everywhere, was creative. In fact the Afro-American did not aspire to all this rigorous Americanism. Varèse, at this time, became interested in getting Afro-Americans to sing some of his music. I introduced him to a friend, Kenneth Spencer, a very fine coloured basso. They met again in New York.

On some of our "excursions" we went to the Japanese quarter to hear Japanese music and on one occasion we heard some Japanese Temple music, which was a rarity!!!

With Varèse I met the French Consul in San Francisco. I liked him, a competent poet who loaned me a book of his poems, which I enjoyed. He had great respect for Varèse and was most interested in listening to his great ideas. We three took a number of walks together, I remember, up the very steep San Francisco hills – and, in spite of a lameness, the French Consul did very well with the aid of his cane. When the war came on and France was invaded, the French Consul joined hands with the "Free French".

Varèse was infatuated with poetry and from time to time in my studio he or I would recite or read aloud. Dong came also and recited poetry in Chinese for us. Varèse was well acquainted with Dante and other classics as well as modern works. I often recited for him in Spanish from "La Vida es Sueno" of Calderon de la Barca and also from Garcia y Lorca. He made me repeat many lines, and each time I'd vary the intonations and accents, which he liked. We shared a great love for the Spanish language and for the Spanish people.

The Spanish civil war had a deep effect upon us. With the help of the Catholic Church Varèse had collected a large sum for the Loyalists while he was in Santa Fé. I had been working with the American art group project "Milk for the Spanish Children". The invasion of Spain by Franco brought misery and sadness to a great country. We often played my many Spanish Flamenco records while Varèse listened. Often he would take the Flamenco stance, clapping his hands with the rhythm.

Franklin Roosevelt struck Republican Spain's death blow when he ordered the "Spanish Embargo". Everyone knew that the Nazi-fascists wouldn't follow suit. We saw a bigger war ahead and Varèse had had enough of war. Although I have heard it denied by others, he told me at this time, that gas had affected his lungs while at the front in 1915, gassed by people for whom he felt no hate!!!! In fact, he obviously loved to talk about Paris, Apollinaire, etc. but also about his life and friendships in Berlin, Prague, etc. as well as his youth in Italy: Torino and the Ligurian coast where he spent vacations with Paul Valéry.

San Francisco may have been a moment of silence for Varèse. He had a "low point" but he pulled out of it and this was significantly important. I was just a working artist, yet Varèse found great preference in my company. I say this in order to bring out the humanistic quality in him. Although he basically seemed to be a "lone wolf", he was also capable of being very sociable. He spoke with the waiters and the cooks in the restaurants. He loved to go into shops and chat with the shop-keepers, especially in Chinatown and in the adjoining Italian quarter. They too loved him.

Contrarily he would still become depressed. On several occasions he revealed a certain feeling of guilt: that he might have driven his young daughter into a convent! He spoke with pride of her musicianship. And now, San Francisco seemed indifferent to him. I felt certain qualities in common with him. During my stay in New York I had learned rather recently something about psychology from my friend, Dr. Alfred Adler. I was secretly attempting to put some of these theories into practise. Adler had said that work without acknowledgment was a frustration hard to cope with...that man needs "successful achievement" ...socially as well as for himself.

Varèse's depressions continued and on several occasions he said that he might as well do away with himself. I told him that all artists and especially great ones have felt this from time to time – but that he should wait for the time when his music would be played everywhere, when sections would be stolen for radio advertising and for the time that every dilettante would be influenced by him. This would be a real reason for suicide!!!!!! His sense of humour returned through these conversations, lightly presented, and seemed to help him even more than I had expected. He may have even half believed this fairy tale which I related to him from time to time. I don't know. However it is a sad reality that it has come true.

I told Varèse that he wanted to destroy himself just in order to begin all over again. To this he agreed. I said, "Well, begin all over now!" I also said that many of the composers who will imitate your work are not yet born. His answer: "Poor things; they'll just be imitators, like so many composers of the present time".

It seems that Varèse and I filled up a great vacuum for one another during a crisis in both of our lives. Recently I had been to New York and, from the gallery viewpoint, had been successful; but not so financially. With my similar problem, I was able to work on Varèse in one direction: "courage" and "patience". "Blind can lead Blind"

With so many thoughts in common, sympathies as well as antipathies, his great love for sculpture and mine for music, cemented this friendship. Conversations regarding art and its various interrelationships were interesting and inspiring for me and my horizons were extended.

He had quite an admiration for the French sculptor Despiau and often spoke of him and their friendship. I also admired Rodin, but Varèse, at an early age, had known him and quarrelled with him. Often, during our long friendship he would say, out of a silence, (for instance, on a walk), "Do you really think Rodin was great?" I said, "Yes, in spite of any of his faults". A short silence – no answer.

We had many discussions on painting and sculpture. Visual art, whether it be abstract or not, is a rhythm of images. He liked Despiau's portraits, who, though French, was of Italian descent, the name being changed from Despione, a name from Piedmont, where Varèse had spent many of his earlier days. He liked Braque, his structure, his use of the image, his lack of "description", his "suggestion" which arouses the imagination, i.e. the image. Varèse and I had many conversations on figurative and non-figurative: image and abstract. I felt that all sculpture of all time has been figurative as well as abstract and, if not figurative, it became mere decoration. To Varèse, Braque is always of the image, much more so than a Picasso. Varèse once called Picasso a "fabricator of masterpieces". We both liked Giacometti, whose figurative imagery was revolutionary. Figurative in this case means man's identification with himself and his world; but never descriptive! These conversations greatly aided my formation.

On a similar plane we discussed old musical instruments. I had some fine illustrations of ancient instruments which Varèse loved. I knew something about the viol family, having in my youth carved some scrolls for violins. I learned a great deal about ancient instruments from Varèse, still much more about music, much about the visual arts, much about everything. Yes, he was a hard, tough critic and this I appreciated. Criticism can clarify vision. I even learned some English words of malediction; or rather re-learned them with a new accent and accentuation!!

One of the first things he obtained for his little apartment on Washington Street was a piano. He wasn't a concert pianist in any usual sense of the word but I loved his sure musicianship on the piano. There were times in which he would try out a new idea which he had been thinking about. All of a sudden he would stop and I could not persuade him to play more on that day.

Here was an artist who wasn't a mere man of commerce. Nor did he knock out more and more of the same old thing. Each work was a colossal, titanic effort in which the entire being lived and breathed. With no desire to "épater le bourgeois" as so many so-called artists hope to do, (and unfortunately with success in these times) he only wanted to constantly enrich his work and to become more and more profound, to enter depths of the mind which had never been reached before. He lit up from within when he gave forth his ideas and theories on music. He often said that very few notes in proper relationship were far preferable to the numerous notes which are sprinkled about by so many lesser composers. "Study the ancients, live in one's time and be one's self!"

I have often heard people say that Varèse was narrow-minded regarding music but one had to know him to know that the opposite was true. He criticized much Mozart and other composers; but criticism within an artist's mind is also self-clarification. In fact, he admired much music and his enthusiastic appreciation was vast. Varèse and I attended a performance of Verdi's Requiem directed by my friend and former teacher, the fine Italian musician, Giulio Silva. Varèse, who knew every note of the work, asked for an introduction. We went back stage and Varèse immediately offered his congratulations telling him how deeply moved he was by the performance. Varèse's musical memory was beyond credence. He had followed every note of this work with me.

In speaking of Lully, who Varèse cut to pieces one evening, he ended by saying "music is not mere entertainment for 'le roi bourgeois'". He loved very much, on the other hand, Buxtehude and Monteverdi.

He had good ideas for sound for the motion pictures. We discussed the films and the awful music which accompanies them, both agreeing that the music accompaniment of the film was so banal that it shattered the usually already stupid visual aspects of bad montage, etc. rendering them impossible. The films had little or no "sound sense". He had been deeply impressed by his recent stay in New Mexico and at this time he talked of a film of the desert which he had in mind. Sound and film in counterpoint....the seeds of his later masterwork "Déserts".

A comment on a motion picture which we viewed together but left in disappointment: "Charming garbage! Fanciful and foolish frames seeking to surprise with unusual angles. Merde for such trivialities. Goddammit, have they no senses?" I replied, "No, did you hear anyone cry out in protest?" "No, they were nearly asleep".

A particular hero in common was Leonardo da Vinci, whose multiple personality fascinated us. An artist cannot be a complete artist and be one-sided. "Il pittore dev'essere universale" had long been my motto which I borrowed from Leonardo when I was a youth. If the artist is "universale" why can't he also be contradictory? And often Varèse would contradict himself. Some people did not like this characteristic in him; but I liked it. To me this showed that he was always alive and thinking and not bound to any set formula. That is: he was non-professorial.

Stories about his earlier days were rich and fascinating. His precise use of language made him a masterly story-teller. His quick wit, his sharp sense of the humourously absurd, as well as the tragic, were fascinating characteristics.

In fact, like many artists, Varèse had some mixed feeling about music and art in general. He was an enthusiastic critic of all music. I once was present during a discussion in which Schoenberg spoke about his twelve-tone system. Varèse called it "another system of limitations". "Why the limitation?" It was an interesting conversation in which two opposite masters respected one another, but disagreed. Not many years later, I was with Varèse in his Sullivan Street studio in New York, when he received a telephone call telling of the death of

Schoenberg in California. Varèse became nearly speechless. I helped him write a telegram of condolence to Schoenberg's wife. It was a sad moment as he was a genuine personality of great value and integrity.

I introduced Carmen de Obarrio, an accomplished pianist, to Varèse. She asked to study with him. The result was remarkable. Her playing now turned into an unusual mastery of the piano. She later made some recording of Debussy – renderings of a particular excellence. The best possible interpretations of this master of whom Varèse often spoke.

One Sunday morning Varèse and I had breakfast together with our young painter friend, George Harris. He also knew "Ionization". We talked all morning and finally George and I made the decision to get together a petition signed by San Francisco's most noted citizens, asking that music of Varèse be played by the San Francisco Symphony. We worked hard and in a short period we had several hundred signatures of music lovers and symphony patrons. But to no avail. No Varèse for the San Francisco Symphony. It was still useless with Monteux, who, I believe, felt that he knew that he wouldn't be able to do the music justice....anyhow, he said that his audiences would not accept this music. I am sure that this was not because he did not hold Varèse in great esteem, as he enjoyed discussing music with him.

Not much later, while Varèse was on his back in the hospital, Monteux came to consult him regarding some piano concertos of Brahms and Beethoven. As a director of orchestra and choral Varèse was non-plus-ultra. My mother and I were visiting Varèse on this day and he asked us to stay while he went over each note and phrase with Monteux, marking and correcting various accents, etc. Monteux said little and I listened intently for a couple of hours as this was a great lesson in accents and in music. Monteux was an excellent and steadfast director. After this little episode I admired him more than I had previously, as he was wise enough to listen and to discuss with a great master. A few days later I went to hear him direct Brahms (in which I had felt previously he was a bit monotonous). It was transformed – a marvellous performance!

However the petition did do a service: Varèse met, at this time, an elderly Italian director, Giulio Minetti, who was acquainted with the petition. He became very interested. Minetti, a modest, hard working musician, had really never gone beyond the "usual" repertoire. However, he decided to place an important Varèse work on his next programme. And so on February 15th, 1938 his Sinfonietta performed "Offrandes" at the San Francisco Community Playhouse.

Varèse and Minetti worked hard together as Minetti was not a "modern"...However, with Varèse's guidance during the rehearsals he managed to do a marvellous job. Result: sensational. The theatre was sold out. the whole audience stood up and clapped and clapped: a real standing ovation. "Encore" and "Bis" were shouted until Minetti finally gave in and gave a repetition of a large section of the work. And thus San Francisco was spared the shame of having completely turned down Varèse.

After this performance Varèse began to come back to his real life. He spoke of future works, of the silent poetry of the great American desert, of the constellations, of ideas and works yet to be born.

Varèse's leonine head had a fascination for me. I even liked his "ups and downs", his moods. His mop of black hair was a sculptural mass. Force and determination were written throughout his entire being.

During these days in San Francisco Varèse and I decided that I would do his head in sculpture. In all, I have made six portraits of him: one destroyed: one now with Louise Varèse; two in my own collection (one in terracotta and another in bronze); one in granite at Columbia University; and one in later years that is not quite completed. It was not only his inner personality which fascinated and held me but the outer aspects were of equal interest. I started by doing some ink sketches of him. Then I made several trials in clay but it was always very difficult to see him in the round. He always remained face to face with me and would turn toward me if I went around him. In other personages that I have portrayed I've been able to move around the model. In this case I finally gave up and did only his mask.

After recovering from his illness Varèse decided to leave San Francisco for a warmer climate and, en route to Los Angeles, stopped off at Santa Barbara for a short stay with the music lover and composer of sorts named Eichem. Varèse wrote to me several times from Los Angeles. The move South evidently was a good change as he seemed quite happy in his new environments. When we visited him there we could see that he had improved in health and in spirit.

During this transitional period, Esther returned from Sweden and set herself at the loom. Varèse was enthusiastic about the quality of her work and so one fine day Esther presented him with a necktie. Later, on a trip to Los Angeles, she brought him enough tweed wool material for a coat. This coat he wore for many years. On the same warp a similar material was woven for me (1939). I still wear that coat (1971).

Raimondo Puccinelli - Florence, Italy - 1971

Appendix to: Puccinelli about Edgar Varese

(Some extra pages)

We often discussed doing his portrait in granite but the portrait was postponed with only a few quick sketches accomplished because Varèse suddenly fell quite ill and spent some time in the hospital. I now made the friendship of Louise, Varèse's wonderful wife, who came West to be with him.

In order to recuperate in a warmer climate, Varèse went to Santa Barbara and then on to Los Angeles. There, on a visit, I met Arnold Schoenberg in his company. Schoenberg was, during this period, conducting his music in San Francisco. I attended the rehearsals, which were most interesting to follow, as well as the performance. Schoenberg, during the rehearsal wore an old sweater with very revealing holes at the elbows. A close friend of Varèse. Touma

Bouchard, a producer of distinguished documentary art films, also came to California. Bouchard stayed with me for a while, leading to a friendship which has lasted for years.

Varèse was soon to return to New York, where I made numerous trips during the coming years. I worked on his portrait at every possible opportunity. Sitting with him while he worked on his music, I slowly made progress. Later, working out of doors at Napa, California, I carved directly the over-life-size portrait in pink Scottish granite, which was later acquired by Columbia University Music Library in New York for its section dedicated to Varèse. There also exist two versions in terracotta and another in bronze.

Finally, in 1948, I established my studio on Brooklyn Heights over-looking New York City. Varèse and I saw each other frequently either in his home or in mine. We attended various concerts of music and dance: a series of Beethoven concerts by the great French pianist, Loyonnet, who I found to be a fine human being; concerts of Varèse's own music: dance concerts of Escudero.... An evening invitation to Varèse's home would usually renew acquaintances with friends such as Kurt Seligmann; Chou Wen Chung, the composer; his brother, Chou Wen Tsing, the physicist who collaborated with Einstein; Carlos Salzedo, the harpist; Touma Bouchard; Alexander Calder; Hanya Holm; Marc Chagall; Quintanilla, the Spanish artist; the architect Breuer; and countless others.

Having met Raoul Dufy with Varèse, we together attended the reception given in his honour during a retrospective exhibition of Dufy's paintings. Raoul Dufy was a witty conversationalist and, in spite of being crippled with arthritis, he was the life of the party. He was one of the happiest artists I ever met.

Varèse and I both liked to take walks both in San Francisco and New York. In Greenwich Village (New York's Latin Quarter) we would continuously stop, observing store windows, watching Italians play at Bocce ball or cards, often joining them in their conversations. Not far from Varèse's house was a famous Italian violin maker (liutaio) whom we often stopped in to visit; visits that were enjoyable. String instruments of all kinds (mostly antique) covered the walls, benches, floors of the shop. On the way back, we would stop in a tiny Italian coffee shop, take a coffee or a lemonade and talk with the proprietor, who was a real character. All of these Italian craftsmen and shop keepers were among Varèse's as well as mine, favourite people. Several times we met Dylan Thomas, the Welsh poet, characterful and amusing, who had a rich Celtic accent. Later, one evening I met Dylan Thomas again with a group of writer friends with whom theories of art, of the theatre, of motion pictures were discussed. I kept quiet as I thought little of such word gymnastics. Dylan Thomas thought the whole discussion foolish, laden with absurd theories. Three days later we had the news that Thomas was dead: a great loss not only to his wife and two children but to all of us. A few years later his wife Catlin with son and daughter spent a full day at my sculpture and drawing exhibition at the Schneider Gallery in Rome.

Varèse was beginning to get the recognition which he deserved. Gatherings at his home were slowly flooded with admirers, many young people. Through Le Corbusier, the architect, he received the commission from Philips to do the electronic music for their pavilion at the Brussel's World Fair. He went to Eindhoven, Holland, to work on this. My work carried me to Italy where I worked on various commissions in marble and in bronze. I went to and from New York for several years. When I showed the bronze portrait of Varèse at a one-man

exhibition in New York, he was very enthusiastic. While I was in Italy we corresponded frequently. He often wrote that I should not forget New York and looked forward to my return. In November 1965 I received the telephone call from New York with the news that Varèse was dead.

As I remember I never saw him after Eindhoven.

Varèse often said: "A man is culpable in the eyes of society when he escapes from the jurisdiction of mediocrity".