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 22nd 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.