

# The Alchemical Crucible: Edgard Varèse & the Radical Transformation of American Music (1917–1927)

## *NEW MUSIC Reports audio playlist*

<https://soundcloud.com/cliff-crego/sets/new-music-reports-fighting-for>

URL for this Report: <http://www.picture-poems.com/pdfs/varese-radical-decade.pdf>

AUDIO summary on Soundcloud *NEW MUSIC Reports, Mirrors made of sound & the loss of sympathetic resonance*

<https://soundcloud.com/cliff-crego/new-music-reports-edgard-var>

Composed with **GEMINI AI...** by **Cliff CREGO** crego@picture-poems.com V.16.2026

### **THINKING LIKE A STONEPINE**

In both Music and Poetry, what is important is not just what we think of as style or aesthetics, but rather the quality of energy which manifests in a piece as we bring it to life in performance.

What makes Music or Poetry relevant or new, regardless of when it was composed, who is playing or saying it, or from which world culture it originates, is the strength of resonance its energy has with the repertoire of metaphysical urgencies of the present moment.

WHITEBARK PINE COUNTRY (Pinus albicaulis), Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon, great Nestor of the PNW, threatened with collapse by the little-understood effects of Climate BREAKDOWN at higher altitudes.

Cliff CREGO, The **WALLOWAS, OREGON**

# The Wild & amazing first decade of Edgard Varèse in NYC.



1918 NEW SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA.



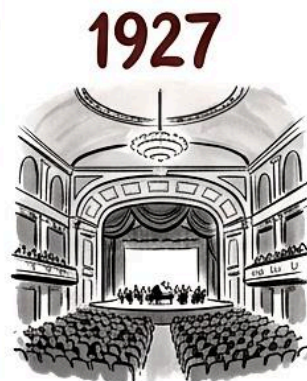
1921

ICG

10 world-famous concerts.



1923 HYPERPRISM scandal.



Aeolian Theater.

ARCANA Premiere w/ Philadelphia Orchestra.



Varèse shocks, disbands ICG.

The history of Western art music is often delineated by slow, evolutionary shifts, yet the arrival of Edgard Varèse in New York City in 1915 triggered a tectonic rupture that remains the most extraordinary decade in the annals of new music. This period, spanning from his entry into the American landscape as a thirty-three-year-old immigrant to the abrupt dissolution of the International Composers' Guild in 1927, represents a total re-evaluation of the sonic universe.

Varèse did not merely introduce new techniques; he challenged the fundamental ontology of sound, the economic structures of the orchestra, and the social role of the contemporary composer. By introducing the idea of "*sound as living movement*" and rejecting what he called "*our poor and illogical*" musical alphabet, Varèse transformed New York into the global laboratory for a machine-age modernism that was as intellectually rigorous as it was viscerally shocking.

## The Transatlantic Passage: A Thirty-Two-Year-Old Catalyst (1915)

*In* December 1915, Edgard Varèse stepped off a steamship into the vertical landscape of Manhattan. At age thirty-two, he was already a veteran of the European progressive Art music scene, yet he arrived with a desperate need to discard the weight of his own history. His education at the *Schola Cantorum* and the *Paris Conservatoire*, under mentors like Vincent d'Indy and Charles-Marie Widor, had provided him with a profound technical foundation that he paradoxically came to view as a burden. Varèse's early career in Berlin and Paris had been marked by proximity to the giants of the era—Debussy, Satie, Busoni, and Strauss—but his fierce self-criticism led him to believe that his early works revealed an "unresolved conflict" and a "subordinacy to the past".

New York City presented a "new-found land," a location 6,000 kilometers from the stifling traditions of Paris where he could "begin his new work with an uncluttered mind". For Varèse, the American metropolis was not just a refuge from the devastation of World War I, but a sonic environment that matched his burgeoning aesthetic of "power and speed". He viewed the existing musical alphabet—the traditional scales, harmonies, and temperaments of the nineteenth century—as an archaic prison. "*Our musical alphabet is poor and illogical. Music, which should pulse with life, needs new means of expression, and only science can infuse it with youthful vigor.*" (First published in 1917 in the Dadaist journal, 391. Later published as *The Liberation of Sound*.) In his view, the "dead govern us," and the only way to escape their shadow was to immerse himself in the "machine-driven radicalism" of the New World.

Upon his arrival, Varèse found his footing in the bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village. He became a fixture at *Romany Marie's café, a vital intersection for the city's intellectual and artistic elite*. [More on Romany Marie's café below.] It was here that Varèse's vision began to crystallize, fueled by interactions with poets like José Juan Tablada and Vicente Huidobro, and a burgeoning fascination with the raw energy of jazz. This environment reinforced his conviction that music must be redefined as "organized sound," a concept that transcended the boundaries of traditional melody and harmony.

## The New Symphony Orchestra and the Radical Labor Model (1918–1919)

*By* 1918, Varèse's ambition to revitalize the American musical scene took a concrete and highly provocative institutional form: the *New Symphony Orchestra* (NSO). This venture was intended to be the antithesis of the established, donor-heavy institutions like the New York

Philharmonic. Varèse's NSO was founded on a "cooperative" or "socialist" economic model that remains radically progressive even by twenty-first-century standards.

## The Cooperative Economic Architecture

**I**n the NSO, the net income at the conclusion of the season was distributed with absolute equality among all active members, from the first-chair violinist to the lowliest percussionist. Varèse, acting as the conductor and artistic visionary, insisted on a clause that was unthinkable to his peers: he was to be paid exactly the same fee as the members of his orchestra. This was a direct assault on the **heroic, autocratic model of the conductor as general** that had dominated Western music since the mid-nineteenth century.

The orchestra was designed as a self-governing body where new members were admitted only by the democratic vote of the existing ensemble. This structure sought to eliminate the exploitative dynamics of the "permanent" orchestra, where musicians were often *treated as interchangeable parts* in a corporate machine. Varèse's insistence on this model was not merely a political statement; it was an artistic necessity. He believed that for music to be truly "new," the social relations of its production had to be equally revolutionary.

## The 1919 Concert: *A Requiem for the Living and the Dead*

**T**he first concert Varèse conducted for the NSO in April 1919 was a monumental event that also, tellingly, served as his last. The program featured Hector Berlioz's *Grande Messe des morts* (Requiem), a choice that underscored Varèse's connection to the "monumental" tradition of French music even as he sought to explode it. Varèse's performance was **dedicated to "all the dead"** of the Great War, an insistence that the work be played as a universal act of mourning that transcended nationalistic boundaries.

The technical demands of the Berlioz Requiem—with its four brass bands and massive percussion section—prefigured the sonic masses Varèse would soon create in his own works. However, the radical nature of his demands extended to the rehearsal process. Varèse's uncompromising focus on modern sonorities and his refusal to program "safe" standard repertoire alienated both the musicians and the public. The NSO members, despite their cooperative status, eventually prioritized economic stability over artistic radicalism. After a single performance, Varèse was replaced by Artur Bodanzky, and the NSO transitioned toward a more conventional programming model.



Labor Attribute		Traditional New York Model (c. 1919)
New Symphony Orchestra (1919)		Traditional New York Model (c. 1919)
Salary Structure	Equal distribution net income.	Tiered scales (Principal vs. Rank-and-File)
Conductor's Pay	Equal to orchestra members	Substantially higher (Star/Executive pay)
Governance	Democratic vote by musicians	Appointed by Board/Management
Repertoire Focus	Exclusively modern/innovative	Blend of Classics and Romantic standards
Membership	Voluntary/Self-selecting cooperative	Contractual employment (Union-based)

## The International Composers' Guild: "New Ears for New Music" (1921–1927)

The failure of the NSO to sustain its radical mission led Varèse to conclude that the existing orchestral structure was perhaps irredeemable. In 1921, alongside the harpist Carlos Salzedo, he founded the **International Composers' Guild (ICG)**, the first organization in America dedicated specifically and exclusively to the performance of contemporary music. Funded largely by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the ICG operated under a manifesto that was as uncompromising as Varèse himself: "The International Composers' Guild refuses to admit any imitation... recognizes only the individual".

### The Manifesto and the "No Repeat" Rule

Varèse instituted a strict operational policy that would eventually lead to the Guild's fracture: except for an immediate encore at the time of performance, no musical piece was to be scheduled twice by the ICG. This "no repeat" rule was designed to ensure that the Guild remained a vehicle for the "new" rather than a curator of a "modernist canon." This decision eventually alienated executive secretary Claire Raphael Reis, who argued that complex works like Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* required multiple hearings for the audience to grasp their significance. This internal friction resulted in the 1923 secession of several members to found the League of Composers, an organization that took a more moderate, audience-friendly

approach to modernism.

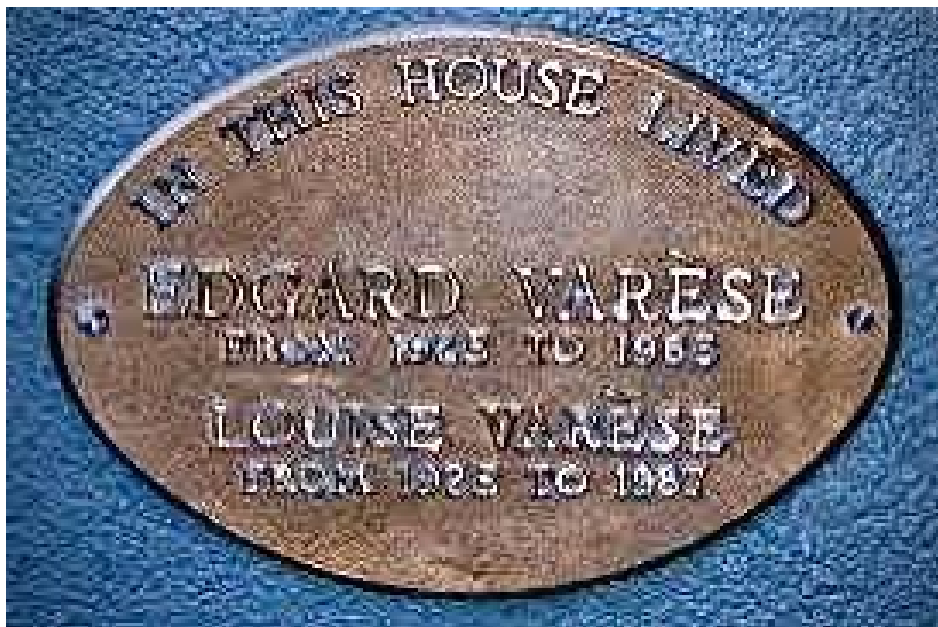
## A Decade of Sonic Milestones: *The Ten Concerts (1921–1927)*

While the ICG technically organized six seasons with three concerts each (eighteen in total), the narrative of its "ten world-famous concerts" reflects the core series of premieres that redefined American music history. These performances, held at venues ranging from the Greenwich Village Theatre to Aeolian Hall, represented a sustained assault on traditional aesthetics.

### 1. The Inaugural Season (February–April 1922)

The Guild's first season established its credentials by featuring works by Satie, Bartók, and the premiere of Varèse's *Offrandes* on April 23, 1922. *Offrandes*, scored for soprano and chamber orchestra, showcased Varèse's early "intimate" style while introducing the "unusual chamber orchestra" configurations—including a prominent role for the harp and percussion—that would become his signature.

It should also be noted here that Varèse first met the French translator Louise Varèse (born Louise Norton) at a dinner party on Gramercy Park in 1920. The couple married in 1922 and quickly became central figures in the Village's avant-garde community. Unfortunately, *Romany Marie's* no longer exists. It went through in the Varèse Decade famously 11 reincarnations; they would simply hang up a sign, "**The caravan has moved.**" with the new address. But the townhouse where Edgard and Louise Varèse lived and worked from 1925 until the end of their lives still stands. It is located at 188 *Sullivan Street, New York, NY 10012* and features a historic plaque commemorating their residency.)



## 2. The US Premiere of *Pierrot Lunaire* (February 1923)

The second season saw the American premiere of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* at the Klaw Theatre. This event was a watershed moment for American modernism, introducing the "Sprechstimme" technique and the idea of the "Pierrot ensemble" to a New York public that was both fascinated and repulsed by Schoenberg's atonal expressionism.

## 3. The *Hyperprism* Scandal (March 1923)

Perhaps the most legendary event in the ICG's history was the premiere of Varèse's *Hyperprism*. Scored for nine winds and a massive battery of percussion, *Hyperprism* was a radical departure from traditional musical structures. The performance at the Klaw Theatre famously descended into chaos; as the music "shrieked and rattled," the audience broke into a riot of hissing, whistling, and physical altercations. For Varèse, this "uproar" was proof that his music was successfully engaging with the raw material of reality.

To José Juan and Nena Tablada

# HYPERPRISM

Edgard Varèse

Moderato poco Allegro

The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes woodwinds and strings: Flûte, Petite Flûte, Clarinet en mi b, Cors en fa (1, 2, 3), Trompettes en ut (1, 2), Tenor, Trombone, and Bass. The second system includes a massive percussion battery: Snare drum, Indian drum, Bass drum, Tambourine, Crash Cymbal, 2 Cymbals, Tamtam, Triangle, Anvil, Slap Stick, high and low Chinese blocks, Lion Roar, Rattle, Big Rattle, Sleigh Bells, and Siren. The score is marked with various dynamics (pp, ff, sf, mf, mp, p, f, sfz, sfz sfz) and performance instructions such as 'attaca pp subito molto', 'Sord.', 'gliss.', 'muffled', 'sourdement', 'long', 'paourd.', 'L.V. et s'étaladra', 'L.V. et s'étaladra', 'L.V.', 'frottées l'une contre l'autre', and 'signe grave'. The tempo is 'Moderato poco Allegro'.

#### 4. The Premiere of *Octandre* (January 1924)

Held at the Vanderbilt Theatre during the third season, the premiere of *Octandre* demonstrated Varèse's increasing mastery of wind sonorities. This work, for seven winds and double bass, moved beyond from the primal sound complexes of *Hyperprism* toward a more crystalline, powerfully rhythmic, intensely vocal, geometric form of organized sound.

#### 5. *Intégrales* and Spatial Music (March 1925)

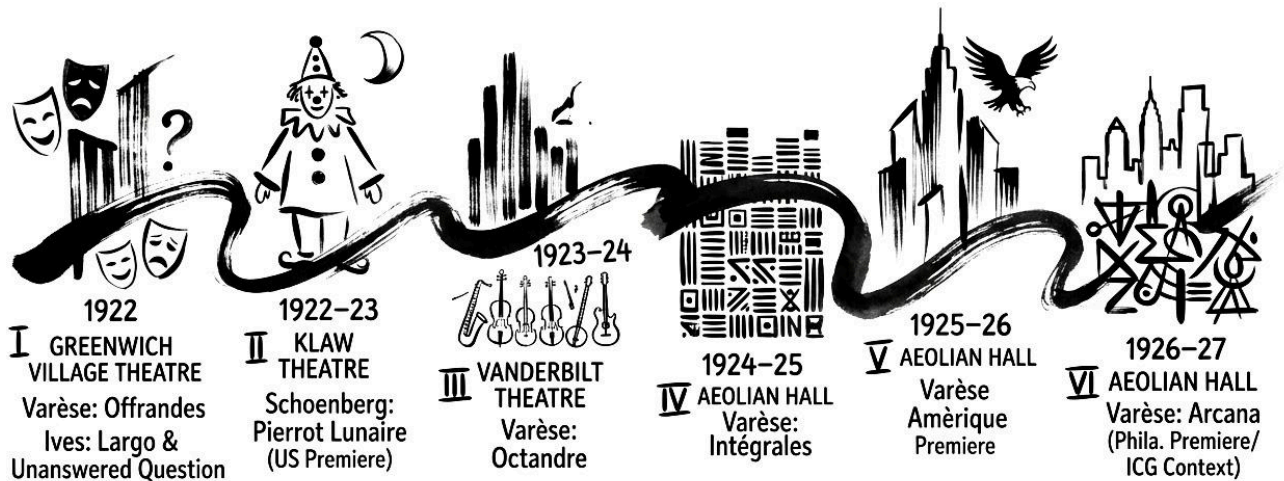
By the fourth season, the ICG had moved to Aeolian Hall. The premiere of *Intégrales* on March 1, 1925, was a milestone in the development of "spatial music". Varèse utilized his wind and percussion forces to create "blocks" of sound that seemed to move through the physical space of the hall, prefiguring the electronic experiments of his later career.

#### 6–10. The Later Seasons and the Influence of Ruggles and Webern

The final seasons of the ICG (1925–1927) at Aeolian Hall featured a relentless stream of innovation, including works by Carl Ruggles, Anton Webern, and Henry Cowell. These concerts introduced American audiences to the "dissonant counterpoint" of Ruggles and the "tone clusters" of Cowell, solidifying the ICG's role as the epicenter of global modernism.

## VARÈSE IN NYC: THE ICG SEASONS

MINIMALIST ENCOUNTERS 1922-1927



# The Masterwork: *Arcana* & the Alchemy of the Cosmos (1927)

The ultimate achievement of Varèse's NYC decade was the creation of *Arcana*, a symphonic poem of such colossal scale and complexity that it remains a benchmark for orchestral difficulty. Composed between 1925 and 1927, *Arcana* was Varèse's "magnum opus," a work that synthesized his experiments in "organized sound" into a vast, eighteen-minute cosmic narrative.

## Philosophical and Alchemical Foundations

Varèse prefaced the score of *Arcana* with a quote from Paracelsus, the Renaissance alchemist and physician.

Scitum nimirum est, astrum unum existere reliques omnibus superius. Hoc est astrum apolypticum, secundum astrum est ascendentis. Tertium est elementorum, quorum sunt quatuor. Ita astra sex constituuntur. Praeter haec adhuc aliud est astrum, imaginatio, quae novum astrum et novum coelum gignit.

—PARACELUS

One star exists, higher than all the rest. This is the apocalyptic star. The second star is that of the ascendant. The third is that of the elements—of these there are four, so that six stars are established. Besides these there is still another star, imagination, which begets a new star and a new heaven.

—PARACELUS

Une étoile existe, plus haut que tout le reste. Celle-ci est l'étoile de l'Apocalypse. La deuxième est celle de l'ascendant. La troisième est celle des éléments, qui sont quatre; il y a donc six étoiles établies. Outre celles-ci il y a encore une autre étoile, l'imagination, qui donne naissance à une nouvelle étoile et un nouveau ciel.

—PARACELUS

This connection was not merely decorative; Varèse viewed the act of composition as an alchemical process—the transformation of base sound into the "philosophical stone" of art. He was convinced that art originates in the unconscious, noting in his letters that the core motifs of *Arcana* were born from a dream he had in October 1925. The title itself refers to the "arcanum" or secret knowledge of the alchemists, and Varèse used the orchestra to explore what he termed the "stars of the Apocalypse" and the "very heart of matter".

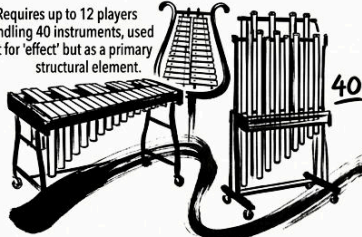
## Technical Specifications: *The 120 Player Orchestra*

While the premiere of *Arcana* utilized approximately 120 players. The instrumentation was a radical expansion of the traditional orchestral palette, requiring a wind section that included a heckelphone, a contrabass clarinet, and two contrabass tubas. One of defining features of *Arcana* is its percussion section. Requiring up to twelve players handling forty instruments, the percussion battery was not used for mere "effect" but as a primary structural element.

# THE PERCUSSION ARCHITECT: VARÈSE'S ARCANAS BATTERY

## EXPLORING THE 40-INSTRUMENT SOUND WORLD

Requires up to 12 players handling 40 instruments, used not for 'effect' but as a primary structural element.



Requires up to 12 players handling 40 instruments, either as a primary structural element.

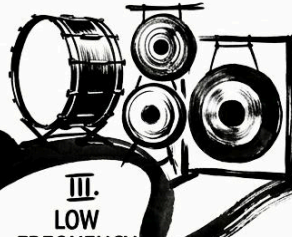
### THE ARCANAS PERIOD

**Group:** I Pitched  
**Key Instruments:** Xylophone, Glockenspiel, Tubular Bells  
**Sound Quality:** Crystalline, Metallic



### II. THE ULTIMATE BATTERY

**Group:** II Unpitched High  
**Key Instruments:** Triangle, Chinese Blocks, Slapstick  
**Sound Quality:** Piercing, Rhythmic



### III. LOW FREQUENCY GIANTS

1925-27

**Group:** III Unpitched Low  
**Key Instruments:** Bass Drum, Tam-tams, Gong  
**Sound Quality:** Subterranean, Ominous



### IV. THE EXOTIC ELEMENTS

**Group:** IV Exotic/Industrial  
**Key Instruments:** Lion's Roar (String Drum), Coconuts, Sirens  
**Sound Quality:** Animalistic, Mechanical



# The Premiere: *Music as Movement*

The premiere of *Arcana* took place on April 8, 1927, at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, with Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra. The reception was a climax of the decade's hostility toward Varèse. Critics described the music as having "no mercy in its disharmony" and "no pity in its succession of screaming, clashing discords". One newspaper famously decried the performance as a "Desecration of the Sacred Hall!". Yet, for Varèse, the closing bars represented the demonstration in living symphonic sound of his alchemical mission—the moment when the gold finally "shines in the crucible" before returning to the silence of the galaxies.

**Arcana** Edgard Varèse

The score is for the piece *Arcana* by Edgard Varèse. It is in 3/8 time with a tempo marking of  $J = 132$ . The score is divided into several sections of instruments:

- Piccolos:** 1, 2
- Flûtes:** 1, 2
- Hautbois:** 1, 2, 3
- Cor Anglais:** 1
- Heckelphone:** 1
- Clarinettes Mi<sup>b</sup>:** 1, 2
- Clarinettes Si<sup>b</sup>:** 1, 2
- Cl. contrebasse Si<sup>b</sup>:** 1
- Bassons:** 1, 2, 3
- Contrebasses:** 1, 2
- Cornes en E<sup>b</sup>:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
- Trompettes:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
- Trombones:** 1, 2, 3, 4
- Tuba:** 1
- Contrebasse Tuba:** 1
- Timbales:** 1
- Other Percussion:** 1 (Cymbale chinoise, 1<sup>re</sup> Grosse caisse, 1<sup>er</sup> Tam-tam grave, 1<sup>er</sup> Cymbale), 2 (Caisse claire, 1<sup>er</sup> Bâton chinois), 3 (Caisse roulante, 1<sup>er</sup> Cymbale bascuante), 4 (Cymbale suspendue, 1<sup>er</sup> Tambour à cordes), 5 (Xylophone, Glockenspiel, 2 Blocs chinois, Circelle), 6
- Violons:** 1, 2
- Altos:** 1
- Violoncelles:** 1
- Contrebasses:** 1

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## The Abrupt Conclusion: "*It Was Over*" (1927)

Just as Varèse reached this creative and institutional peak, the era ended with startling finality. In 1927, the International Composers' Guild was disbanded. Varèse, ever the visionary, felt that the Guild had accomplished its revolutionary task and refused to let it settle into a predictable maturity. He famously declared that "the Guild is dead" and shortly thereafter departed New York to return to France.

The closure of the ICG in 1927 marked the end of the "most amazing decade in new music history." For Varèse personally, the end of the decade also heralded a period of artistic crisis. He had pushed the acoustic orchestra to its absolute physical limits in *Arcana* and *Amériques*, and he found himself waiting for a technology—electronic synthesis—that did not yet exist to fulfill his future *Liberation of Sound*.

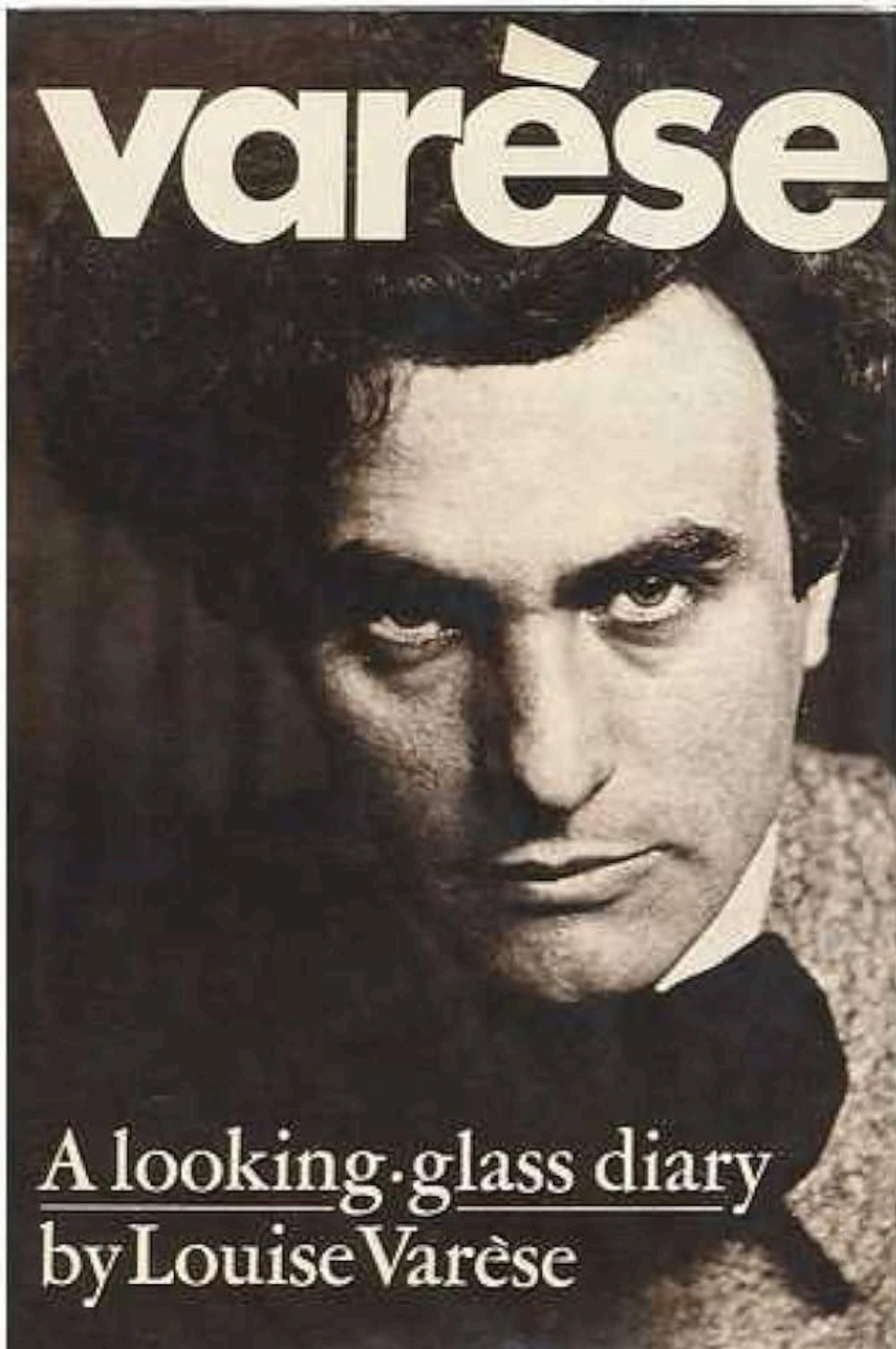
## The Enduring Impact of the Varèse Decade

The decade from 1917 to 1927 transformed New York City from a provincial outpost of European Romanticism—we might think of the traditional Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg who was working with the Philharmonic at the time—into the vanguard of the global avant-garde. Varèse's legacy during these years was a fundamental redefinition of the composer's role: from a creator of melodies to an "engineer of sound".

The influence of this period can be traced through the subsequent work of composers like Henry Cowell, Carlos Chávez, and Charles Ives, all of whom were championed by Varèse through the ICG and the later Pan American Association of Composers. Even more significantly, Varèse's focus on timbre and "organized sound" became the cornerstone for the development of electronic music in the 1950s and 1960s, inspiring a lineage of musicians that extends from John Cage to Frank Zappa.

The radically progressive ideas Varèse introduced—equal pay for conductors, democratic orchestral governance, and a refusal to repeat works for the sake of easily filling programs—remain a challenge to the contemporary musical establishment. In those twelve years, Varèse proved that music could be a "scientific construct of sounds," a laboratory for the soul that is as vast as the galaxies he invoked in *Arcana*. When the era ended in 1927, it was not because the energy had run out, but because Varèse had successfully demonstrated a possible answer to the perennial question, "*What makes music and its performance radically alive, truly relevant and new*"?

FOR FURTHER READING, see notes below, and especially recommended is VARÈSE: A looking-glass diary, Louise Varèse, 1971, unfortunately, still not available as ebook.



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23. **INTEGRALES--Edgard Varèse, for 11 winds & 4 percussionists, Cliff CREGO, conducting the ASKO Ensemble** <https://soundcloud.com/cliff-crego/integrales-crego-conducts>

24. **THE LIBERATION OF SOUND** (1966) [http://www.picture-poems.com/pdfs/varese\\_liberation-of-sound.pdf](http://www.picture-poems.com/pdfs/varese_liberation-of-sound.pdf)

25. **DESERTS, by Edgar Varèse, for small orchestra & tape (part 2), conducted by Cliff Crego with the ASKO Ensemble** <https://soundcloud.com/cliff-crego/deserts-by-edgard-var-se-part>

26. **IONIZATION, by Edgard Varèse, conducted CLIFF CREGO with the Circle ENSEMBLE & SLAGWERK DEN HAAG** <https://soundcloud.com/cliff-crego/ionization-crego-conducts-var>



**Aeolian Hall**  
 Sunday Evening, March 15, 1925, at 8.30 o'clock.

**International Composers' Guild, Inc.**  
*founded 1921*  
**Fourth Season**  
 Third Concert  
**NEW MUSIC**  
 presented by  
 an Ensemble composed of  
 JOHN BARCLAY  
 and  
 The Leading Players of the Philadelphia Orchestra  
 conducted by  
**LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI**  
*(by special permission of the Board of Directors of the  
 Philadelphia Orchestra)*

**PROGRAM**

I. Serenade ..... *Arnold Schönberg*  
 (first time in America) (1924)

1. March
2. Minuet
3. Variations
4. Sonnet by Petrarca
5. Dance Scene
6. Song without words
7. Finale

*Program continued on next page*

Program of the first American performance of Schoenberg's *Serenade*  
 by the International Composers' Guild



**Aeolian Hall**

Sunday Evening, February 14, 1926, at 8.30 o'clock

**International Composers' Guild, Inc.**

*founded by Edgar Varèse, 1921*

**FIFTH SEASON OF NEW MUSIC**

Third Concert

PROGRAM

1

***Les Noces* . . . . . Igor Stravinsky**  
(first time in America) (1917)

FOR FOUR SOLO VOICES, FOUR PIANOS,  
MIXED CHORUS AND PERCUSSION

conducted by

**LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI**

*(by courtesy of the Board of Directors of the  
Philadelphia Orchestra)*

SOLO VOICES

MADAME CAHIER                      MARGUERITE RINGO  
RICHARD HALE                        COLIN O'MORE

PIANOS

GERMAINE TAILLEFERRE    ALFREDO CASELLA  
GEORGES ENESCO                CARLOS SALZEDO

MIXED CHORUS OF TWENTY-FOUR SOLO VOICES  
SELECTED BY THE FRANCIS BROWN MARSH MGT.  
PERCUSSION PLAYERS FROM THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA

Voices (Soli and Chorus) prepared by  
**CARLOS SALZEDO**

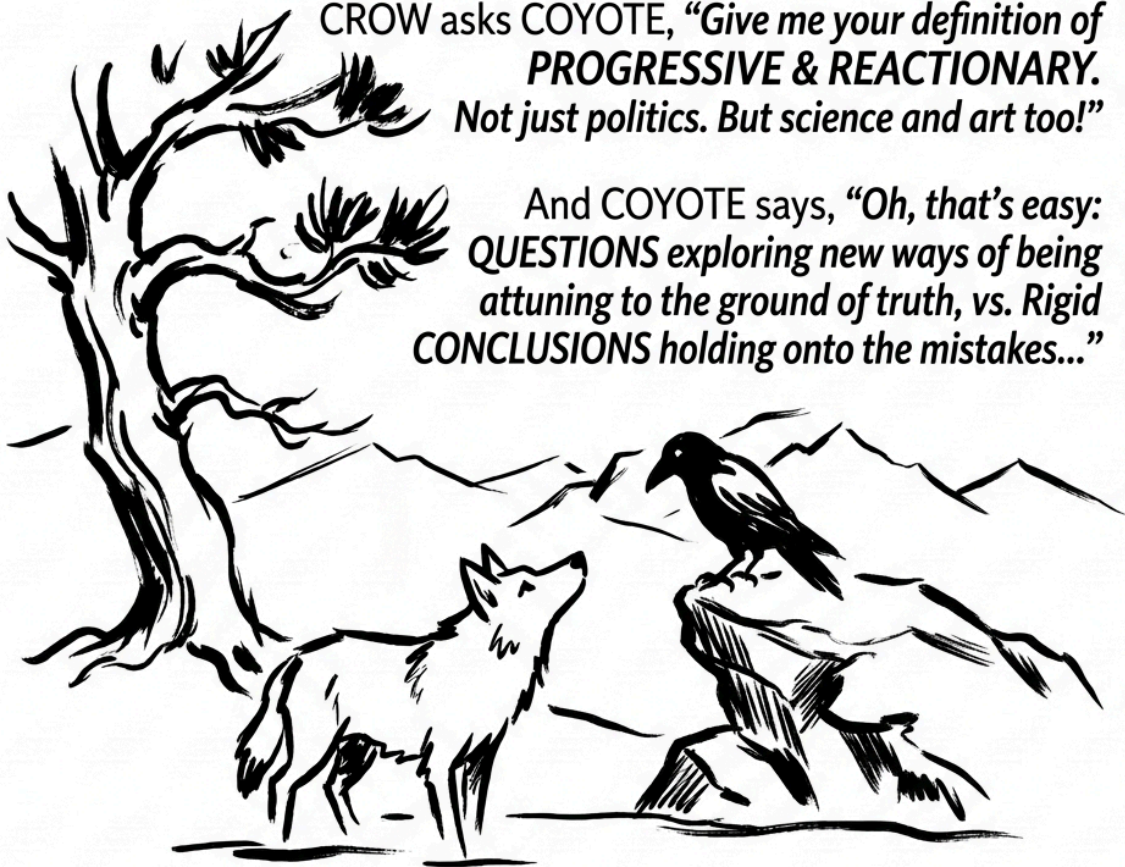
*Program continued on next page*

Program of the first American performance of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*  
by the International Composers' Guild

# **PROGRESSIVE vs. REACTIONARY?**

CROW asks COYOTE, "Give me your definition of **PROGRESSIVE & REACTIONARY.**  
Not just politics. But science and art too!"

And COYOTE says, "Oh, that's easy:  
**QUESTIONS** exploring new ways of being  
attuning to the ground of truth, vs. **Rigid**  
**CONCLUSIONS** holding onto the mistakes..."



**....of the past.**

