The Script for Poème Électronique: Traces from a Pioneer

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Abstract

The Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities in Los Angeles houses a relatively unknown but outstanding collection of items relating to the Corbu/Varèse collaboration Poème Électronique. Procured by the Center for its significance to the history of architecture, the Phillips Pavilion paper's musicological value has yet to be explored. Extant items include: a 140 page script for the performance with annotations and markings added by Le Corbusier; approximately 190 items of correspondence, primarily from Le Corbusier, Kalff, Varèse, and Xenakis; notes relating to the performance; and many related items including photographs, slides, plates, and architectural drawings. Seeing Varèse's first tape project with equally limitless financial and technical support, Poème Électronique represents a milestone not only in the composer's career but also in the history of electronic music.

Having studied these documents, I have drawn several conclusions concerning Varèse's compositional process, aesthetic predilections, and contributions to the field. Though the whole work of art will never again be presented (the pavilion was demolished shortly after the fact), the script and related materials in the Getty archives are the key to preserving and understanding a pioneering work in electronic music.

The Early Letters

Correspondence from 1955 until 1958 outlines the creation of Poème Électronique from selection of the artists to the audio engineers' final preparations. In tandem with Le Corbusier's script, these letters lend insight to the piece as conceived by the artists and the struggle to realize their intentions. Although early letters among Philipp's personnel quickly agree to the appointment of Le Corbusier as chief architect, the selection of a composer remains a point of conflict well into December of 1957. Early in 1956 Louis Christiaan Kalff, general director at Philips, suggests appointment of Benjamin Britten as composer. In Kalff's first documented conversation with Le Corbusier, however, Le Corbusier is quick to name Varèse. An office memo states, "He [Varèse] does more remarkable things than Britten and consequently, he [Le Corbusier] had more point in him."

Is the months that follow Le Corbusier begins to conceive of Poème Électronique as a multi-media project, speaking in terms borrowed from film: rédaction, minutage, découpage. Kalff and Le Corbusier agree that Varèse should work in close contact with Le Corbusier, following the demands of a script. However, Kalff repeatedly expresses doubts about Varèse's work, asking for "symphonic passages," coming up with alternate composers, and worrying about Varèse's alleged reputation as a composer of electronic music. Kalff writes to Le Corbusier:

The news that we have had thus far concerning the subject of the work of Mr. Varèse is not very engaging to us. It seems that more and more Mr. Varèse concentrates on musique concrète and therefore avoids all traditional instruments in his compositions. This is exactly what we would have liked to avoid. We wish naturally to respect your desire to collaborate with Mr. Varèse but we still reserve the right to decide upon this subject until we have heard the latest works of Mr. Varèse on disk and we therefore wish to make a decision on this subject after meeting with Mr. Varèse and you in Paris.

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Kalff's ambivalence continues as late as December 12, 1957 when he suggests to Le Corbusier that an alternate composer may yet be commissioned. At this point Le Corbusier threatens to quit the project. He writes, "There cannot be a question of giving up on Varèse. If that were done, I would myself pull out of the affair. It's very serious. My reputation is as much involved as that of Philips."

Seemingly unaware of his tenuous position in Eindhoven, Varèse corresponds confidently with Le Corbusier and Kalff. Le Corbusier sends sequence boards to Varèse and writes, "I have decided on one thing--your music is free, my script is free...each on its own runway and only making contact in the silence of #19."

Varèse writes to Kalff, sending an article written in 1940 outlining his ideas for combining light and sound. Kalff returns Varèse's letter citing advances the engineers are making with regard to "sound and space, sound and movement, directionality, reverberation, and echo."

The Script

Most probably, the sequence boards which Le Corbusier sends to Varèse are a preliminary version of the script. The Getty archive contains the complete script in the form of a small hand-painted booklet. On each even numbered page Le Corbusier copied the shape of the building and vividly painted the interior of the shape with stripes. These colors represent proposed lighting effects. At the top of the page Le Corbusier lists the sequence number, the title of the sequence, the duration of the sequence, the ambiance number, and the ambiance duration. The opening sequence on page 12, for example, contains the following information:

Sequence No. 1
Geneve
Durée 60", "De 0" à 60"
Ambiance no 1 Durée 11"

On the odd numbered pages Le Corbusier describes extra visual and aura activities. For example, slides of monkeys, skeletons, geometric shapes, and children are projected on the interior walls. On the odd pages of sequence number six and seven Le Corbusier writes short portions of a poem to be recited by him during the presentation. Presumably, the music finishes and the following words are spoken:

Tout s'accomplira subitement:
a une civilisation nouvelle...
Homme, rétablit autour de lui, les conditions de nature
Dans ton corps et dans ton âme
soleil espace verdure
Construis les routes
D'Europe, les routes du monde
pour rendre la terre
Accessible, productive et matERNELLE!
Et reconnais cette maison ouverte,
la main ouverte dressée comme
un signe de réconciliation ouverte
pour recevoir
ouverte pour donner...Univers
mathématique
Sans bornes bornes humaines
...sans bornes....
Le Corbusier writes to Kalff concerning the poem, "I have told you that in the sixth and seventh sequence, a few seconds of spoken words of mine will either be layered over the music of Varèse or surgically inserted into the music."

A few months later a memo is issued at Philips indicating difficulty with the insertion of Le Corbusier's poem. It seems that Varèse had already finished his composition and left no "hole" in it for the poem. They consider the possibility of cutting Varèse's tape and inserting 40 seconds of recitation. Page 80 of the script indicates the end of the music. Our present recording of Varèse's music lasts 491 seconds. The script cites the end of the work as 481 seconds. Presumably, the music was not cut for the poem and even lasted an extra 10 seconds.

Final Preparations

Following the 481 plus seconds of Poème Électronique, Le Corbusier directed Xenakis to compose two or three minutes of innocuous exit music. The final letters in the archive outline Xenakis's struggle to create an artistically viable interlude which would complement but not compete with Varèse's music. Le Corbusier wants exit announcements, a "carnival proclamation," and "a great deal of wit and quality capable of holding a mob inattentive by definition." In addition Xenakis is initially denied time to experiment with the equipment which Varèse needs during the performance. It is through a letter denying Xenakis access that we learn of the variety of equipment available to Varèse. Kalff directs Xenakis to plan for only one of the 15 tape machines and 100 of the speakers. However, Xenakis is later granted use of the entire system by the audio engineer, Tak. Tak writes to Xenakis with the details:

There will be 500-400 loudspeakers the length of the horizontal lines of the room, in the three culminating points and concentrated on the two parts of the walls. The three tapes will command the loudspeakers ad libitum. The acoustical possibilities are rather widespread. Some particulars: intensity and density of the sound will be variable. The sound will be able to run the length of the walls and frolic in the space. The speed will be 15 meters per second at the maximum— at the same time we will be able to take three routes. We'll have the possibility of making the sound disappear towards a very distant point and naturally vice-versa and we'll have also this effect aided by artificial reverberation. The sound will be able to jump, repeat and echo, etc.

Conclusion

The completed work, Poème Électronique, must have been an impressive event. Even by today's standards the complexity of the presentation and the venue available to Varèse would be difficult to surpass. Varèse was able for the first time to hear his music literally projected into space. Any significant analysis of Poème Électronique must consider this spatial aspect in addition to the linear-temporal aspects of the work. Varèse often spoke of sound masses growing, colliding, and repelling against each other, sound projected in space and in time. Though the music itself has aged well and stands sufficiently on its own, the remnants of the collective project inspire us with the philosophical as well as practical possibilities of the multi-media work.

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