

Density 21.5:

An Introductory Lesson

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Edgard Varèse

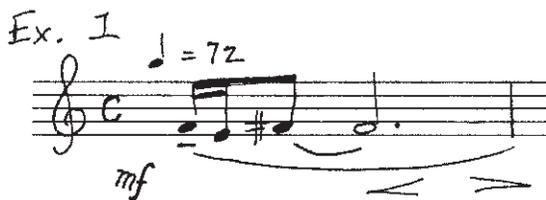
Even the most cursory view of the exciting flute repertoire of the twentieth century will immediately recognize Varèse's short masterpiece, *Density 21.5*, as a seminal work having a far-reaching effect on later repertoire. Three aspects of the work stand out in this regard:

- It contains the first use of key clicks—pitched, drum-like sounds made by slapping the keys while playing a soft staccato note in the low register. The wealth of key click sounds and other extended techniques now found in our repertoire can be traced to this innocent beginning in 1936.
- Varèse's extended use of the extreme upper register, demonstrating the possibilities of Georges Barrère's new platinum flute, was undreamed of at the time.
- *Density 21.5* is not a "flute piece" but rather a *Varèse* piece. The dramatic impact of the work redefined the flute as an instrument capable of a powerful musical intensity.

How was this accomplished? And how can a flutist working on this piece heighten his or her awareness of the work's dramatic structure, thereby bringing listeners into the excitement? This article will attempt to present a few initial answers to these questions.

Structural explorations

Let's begin with the beginning:



A distinctive, memorable motive. Many have observed its relation to the opening three notes of Debussy's *Syrinx*—a half-step down, whole step up, but in "reverse" rhythm. Partly because of the rhythmic reversal, the *Density* motive leads us *upward*, whereas *Syrinx* immediately falls into a downward line consistent with the grieving quality of that piece. In *Density* we feel two upward pulls in the first bar, from the opening F to the long F#, and from the E to the same F#. The performer can enhance the sense of upward pull by leaning on the *tenuto* F, and by practicing F–F#, then E–F#, warmly slurred, to feel the upward magnetism. Vibrato can be delayed either until the peak of the crescendo, at the end of the first bar, or until the second phrase (m3, last beat), allowing the pitch motion to have a stronger impact in the opening.

The compelling upward drive continues through the first third of the piece. The G in m2, suddenly soft (after the little trumpet call, C#–F#–C#) feels like a new plane of existence arising from the previous F#. The second phrase (end of m3 through m5) reaffirms this upward motion against a low C# "anchor." The G then proceeds still further upward, in m6, to an A and B, then to C in m8. In m9 we find a wonderful, classic example of *prolongation*. The motive and rhythm lead us to expect



since that would be like the beginning. However, Varèse refuses at first to give us the D-natural, keeping us waiting for two measures during which we hear only the D♭ and C alternation. Because we've been wishing for it for two full bars, the D-natural (the next upward step in our ascent) has a powerful impact and gives a sense of release. Perhaps this release triggers the outburst of tritones (G#–D–G#), sequencing to the next upward step, D#. Excitement continues to build, and the upward line breaks into the upper register with the E in m13. Though the next phrase (m15) is softer and lower, seemingly giving a break in the upward intensity, the rising line continues to F in m15, F# in m16, and the intensity returns full force with the high G in m17.

The "B" phrases

After this exhilarating chromatic ascent to the high G, Varèse creates a break in the upward linear intensity. Initiated by the "B" phrases, the next section contains the riveting key clicks, quite a lot of dramatic silence, a tempo change combined with a downward variant of the opening motif, four bars of trumpeting B–F#–A figures in the high register, and a dramatic transition phrase leading us back to a reminiscence of the opening, in m41, that initiates the third and final section of the piece.

A detailed discussion of all of these elements would be beyond the scope of this introductory article. However, the "B" phrases and the famous misprint in m23 can be briefly included. Three little phrases centering on B are found in m18, m20 (with the pickup) and m22 (with pickup). The centrality of these phrases is new, since up until now we have had dynamic upward motion. The B itself is also new—Varèse skipped B in the first section's upward climb, moving from B♭ to C in m8. The first little "B" phrase, remaining soft for a bar-and-a-half (with perhaps only a gentle crescendo in m19) is startling in its softness, its registral containment after the preceding big skips, and in its downward motion. The melodic

