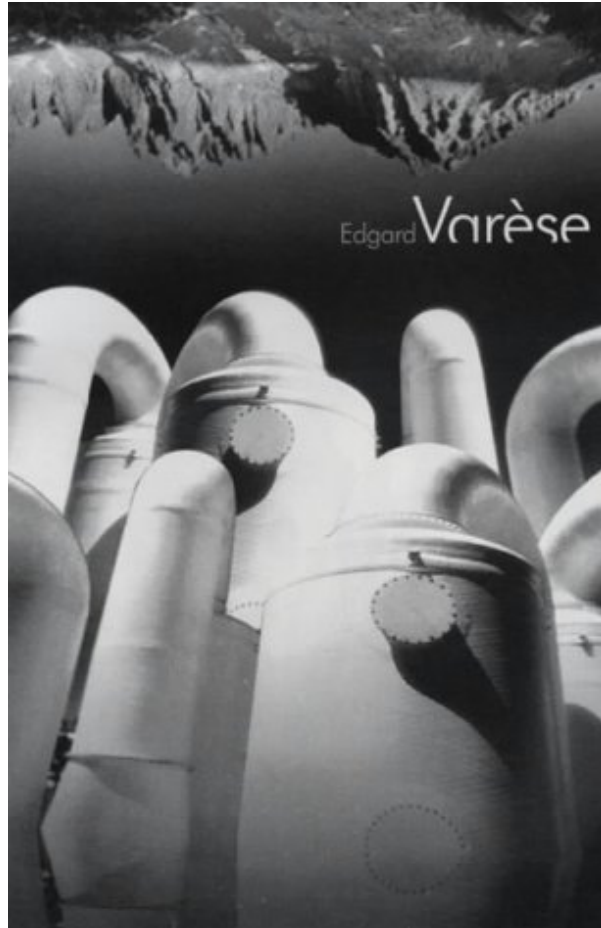
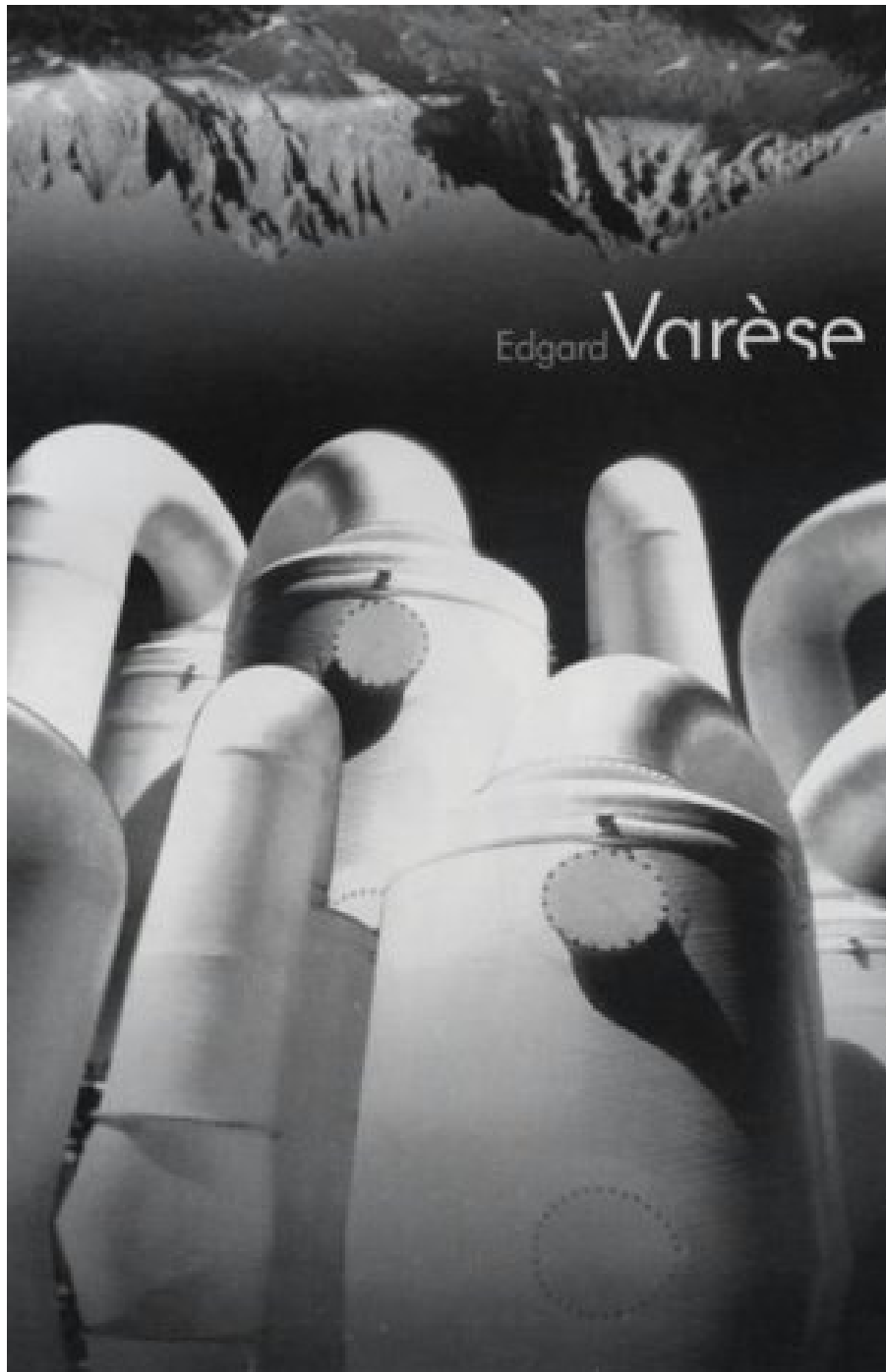


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French born New Yorker Edgard Varese sound-tracked industrial society just as Debussy had more pastoral settings.

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Long-Awaited, Important, But Flawed

By Red J. Comb

Edgard Varese was one of the most important and influential composers of the 20th century, but somehow no English-language biography of this titan was ever published, until now. I have been awaiting this publishing event for more than 25 years. That this book fills such a major void accounts for most of the 3 stars I gave it. Alan Clawson is generally known as a rock historian, and his style is probably better suited to that. He gives us the details of Varese's life as well as some glimpses of the private man, and does a decent enough job of it. There is also adequate description of Varese's too-infrequent published compositions. But he refers to himself much too often for the biography of a man he never met - and mostly of the "Yeah, I remember listening to the Beatles on my car radio" variety, transferred onto the avant-garde composer. And such flippant words and phrases as "kinda", "feller", and "Oh, Gawd" serve as a jarring distraction from the subject and call still more unneeded attention to the author. There is also a chapter and a half devoted to Frank Zappa, an admirer of Varese. Nothing wrong with that per se, I guess, but I fail to see how Zappa's arrest on a morals charge falls within the scope of this book. There is virtually nothing on how Varese's influence can be heard in Zappa's music. If you like Varese and have wanted to learn more about him, go ahead and get the book. But if you've waited a quarter-century as I have, you may not find it entirely worth the wait.

22 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

I'm Still Waiting for a Varese Biography!!!

By Christopher Forbes

The English-speaking music world has been waiting for a comprehensive biography of musical maverick Edgard Varese for nearly a century. Varese is probably the only important contemporary composer who has never been the recipient of scholarly attention. So imagine my delight when I picked up this book on a recent

trip to St. Louis. Finally, the English biography of the elusive composer that I'd been waiting for! Unfortunately, after reading the book, I'm still waiting for a good book on the composer.

This book, written by rock biographer Alan Clayson, is the single worst musical biography I've ever read. Clayson is better known for his tomes on the Beatles, including the popular *Backbeat*, which told the story of the Beatles' early years in Germany. Unfortunately, he brings the same gossipy qualities and rock-magazine journalist prose to this enterprise and the results are really poor. The facts of Varese's life are basically not very exciting. Like most composers, Varese's profession was solitary and, in his case, marked by extended periods of inaction. Clayson is reduced to creating imaginative scenes and undocumented reactions in an effort to "spice" up the biographical skeleton. He also injects his own opinions into the narrative liberally, ascribing to Varese contempt for more popular composers like Copland that is not borne out by the facts. And he reserves a chapter and a half for Frank Zappa, a figure that, though he was indeed a great proponent of the composer, never met the man.

All of this would be merely annoying but could be justified if Clayson had anything of interest to say about Varese's compositions. After all, the most interesting thing about a composer is always the music. But Clayson is mind-numbingly braindead when it comes to speaking about music. There is no analysis of the works in question. Rather, Clayson is given to speaking in purple prose about his dubious impressions of the compositions. *Ameriques* in particular is subjected to ridiculous treatment, as Clayson blathers on about "the otherworldly deliberation of a dream's slow motion in its paranormal and fragmented mindscapes of frontier forts and wide white spaces on a map of emptiness." Often, Clayson seems proud of his musical ignorance, as he ridicules theorists subjecting works like *Density 21.5* to analysis, as if the desire to study a seminal modern score is somehow base.

The shame of it is that Varese is a composer that is endlessly fascinating, even given his very small surviving output. No follower of the "isms" of the 20th century, Varese made his own way, and indeed proved prophetic. He was an early and enthusiastic pioneer in electronic music and predicted the day when performers would be replaced by machines capable of directly communicating a composer's thought to an audience, something that, for better or worse, is increasingly common in these days of MIDI. And his attitude toward music as organized sound has had wide-ranging influence in the world of 20th century composition and even experimental rock. All of this makes the composer a fruitful subject for a comprehensive biography. Someday, someone with ability will attempt the biography I've been waiting for. Until that day, Clayson's book is all we've got. My suggestion is to be patient and don't waste your money on this drivel.

16 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

Varese deserves better

By Amazon Kunde

Varese urgently deserves a decent and independent biography and an approachable analysis of his musical works.

Clayson is not up to either task. This book is poorly written, full of historical inaccuracies and/or misunderstandings, and devoid of any substantial musical analysis.

I truly regret having spent money on this.

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