The Impact of Edgard Varèse’s “Ionisation” on the Percussion Ensemble
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Ideas and Findings

When I was selected to participate in a performance of Ionisation with the SFA Percussion Ensemble, the conductor Dr. Meyer explained the compositional process Edgard Varèse went through in order to write the piece. Hearing this inspired me to dig deeper into the composition to discover how much Ionisation impacted the world of percussion. After finding out it was the first true percussion ensemble piece ever written, I was inspired to see how it shaped the world of percussion after its debut.

I found Ionisation’s impact and influence has been monumental! This piece has left its stamp on the percussion world with its inventive orchestration techniques, simple phrase endings, and innovative uses of percussion instruments that are still used today.

Methodology

Researching Ionisation was fairly simple. I studied the score extensively and made notes about fascinating things I noticed, and then I found other percussion ensemble pieces that came after it and compared different aspects, such as textures, orchestrations, and concepts. Lastly, I made side-by-side comparisons of Ionisation and the compositions I believe it directly influenced.

Varèse utilized polyrhythms wisely, specifically when using them across multiple instruments and timbres. For this project, I took a simple hemiola (two pulses again three pulses in the same length of time) Varèse used and compared it to one in John Cage’s Imaginary Landscapes No. 3. As seen in Example 2a, Varèse has a mixture of polyrhythms working across multiple instruments to create a quarter-note triplet over a somewhat duple feel. Cage takes the idea of a hemiola across multiple instruments, as seen in Example 2c, but simplifies it. He has straight eighth notes playing in one part, while the other augments a three-note motive to create a 3-over-4 beat hemiola. Varèse inverts and diminishes his rhythms to create his hemiola as seen in Example 2b.

Conclusion

While there are still a plethora of things to say about this piece, it is clear how much of an impact Ionisation has had on percussion music since it was written. From the way percussion instruments are used to the way writing for percussion has evolved, this composition is a clear genesis for percussion ensemble repertoire.