

It would be easy to begin by observing that the starting-point of Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5*, itself the genesis of Claire Chase's twenty-four-year commissioning project for solo flute, is a three-note motif. But that would be disingenuous. That F-E-F# isn't some mere lump of musical material, a mute object to slap a label on so that it can be usefully mined and manipulated by a musician, or a musicologist, or a listener, or anyone else. And the piece doesn't just begin, either. It comes to life, and those three notes are its first stirrings.

No sooner does the nascent F sound than it's on the move: a leftward flick to the E, a quick whip back to the F sharp. This sonic wriggle is the rippling of a sinew, the twitching of a tail, the flutter of an eyelid blinking open for the first time. And with it, or rather through it, dawns something like a musical consciousness, an awareness that is of a world — the austere sonic landscape into which the figure has been thrown — but also of itself: in seeing, it sees that it is seeing.

High and dry on the F sharp, the newborn idea stretches an experimental toe downward, feeling for the C sharp below, once, twice. There, made secure by that anchoring fourth, it would be prudent to stay. But the little thought is curious. It wants to explore. And so it slides off its narrow ledge into the cloudy waters of the G natural where, shocked at the cold and at its own audacity, it finds itself suddenly afraid. The rest of the piece oscillates continually between comfort and loneliness, confidence and self-doubt, as the music seeks security, finds it, and finds itself dissatisfied.

But all this activity is only possible if, as Varèse himself put it, the music first “pulsates with life.” And *Density 21.5* does. It glows with an inner heat, an *élan vital*, a throbbing insistence at its core without which the tones sounded by the flute would be mere wind. An aortic tug-o-war powers *Density 21.5*. One end of the rope is manned by the tritone, the first of which is that initial hesitant, groping climb from C sharp to G. And straining at the other end of the rope is the three-note idea. Again and again, in different registers, that ‘da-da-dah’ digs in its heels, resisting the pull of the tritone, sending blood surging through the arteries of the piece, push-pull, push-pull. That stubborn little turnabout is the engine not just of Varèse's four minutes, nor just of the first six years of *Density 2036*, but of the entire span of Chase's project.

The genetic traces of *Density 21.5* are everywhere in *Density 2036*, part vi. The generative polarity at its core has a close counterpart in Olga Neuwirth's *Magic Flu-idity*, itself an elastic and at times antagonistic dance between typewriter and flute: over and over again, the typewriter delicately insists on grace and decorum as, overhead, the flute ducks and dives, swoops and whirls in a dizzying display of diabolical whimsy. The stirrings of life audible in the Varèse are almost tangible in Phyllis Chen's *Roots of Interior*, which portrays the dawning of consciousness not from the outside, but from the inside, in the shifting, liquid depths of the human body. Varèse's three-note flourish is quoted directly in Pamela Z's *Louder Warmer Denser*, before being stretched thin to the point of disintegration. And Sarah Hennies' transcendent *Reservoir 2* returns us once more to the beginning of things. The bass flute's microtone-inflected C-B-C# — itself a primordial premonition of Varèse's three-note motif — casts a dim, warm light in a chamber far

underground, where things too subtle for the crude mesh of consciousness live their quiet, unseen lives.

Three little notes. Three mere flickers, really, from which flow not four minutes of music, but thirty years of it. F, E and F sharp is a far cry from the Urlinie, the three-two-one countdown to the tonic that Heinrich Schenker argued lay at the heart of every piece of Western tonal music. But like the Urlinie, this little fragment is the Keim, the germ, the nucleus from which, as for Schenker, a profusion of music grows, "... as man, animal and plant are figurations of the smallest seed..." It, too, stirs with a life that is its own and, like all living things, it strives not just to exist, not just to stay alive, but to grow, to change, to thrive.

—JENNY JUDGE