

FRANK ZAPPA AND THE HOLLAND FESTIVAL

by Simon Prentis (programme notes for the Holland Festival, June 2000)

For a man who believed that time is a spherical constant where everything is happening all the time, the idea of a commemorative event presumes an altogether too linear perspective: the ultimate memorial barbecue for Frank Zappa being, of course, the vast body of work that he leaves behind (not to mention forwards, and even sideways) to confute those who still feel constrained to perform retro prophetic posturings of the interpretive persuasion. That said, the decision by the Holland Festival to feature his work in this year's presentation is nonetheless a welcome opportunity for celebration, if only of the enduring fondness that his music and his memory continues to inspire.

Because Frank Zappa was not just another late 20th century icon who died too young; he held in his hands the drawstrings of almost every musical tradition that his time was heir to, and wove them into an extraordinary art in an environment that, even as the aeons close in an exponential blur of convergence, remains distinctly hostile to dreamers. The breadth of reference in his work clearly places him in a tradition that includes not only Stravinsky, Webern and Varese, but also R&B, blues and doo wop except that his is not so much a continuance as a summation, a mighty technicolor bisque of ingredients that defies all attempts at classification.

But wait a minute. Isn't this the guy who ate shit on stage, and got thrown out of the Royal Albert Hall for obscenity? Isn't this the guy who went out of his way to offend almost every special interest group invented since the sixties, in a positive orgy of sexist, homophobic, racist and politically incorrect invective?

Well, no, actually, since you ask. The only shit that got near the stage was in the reviews that appeared in the papers. The allegation of obscenity behind the cancellation of the Albert Hall concerts was not subsequently upheld in court. And as for the special interest groups, any offense that was taken can be safely attributed to over indulgence in an irony deficient diet. As noted in the album Joe's Garage, Zappa was neither the Packard Goose (a severely redundant species of hood ornament) nor on the other side of the critical coin the Ronald McDonald of the nouveau abstruse (go figure). And if it seems hard to focus on what he actually was, that's at least in part because he was doing cross over, fusion, multi media and all the current staples of post modern eclectica before the terms that now evoke them had even been thought of.

How do you describe the work of a man who trained his bands to be able to deliver the raunchiest of rock and roll and then turn around and play chamber music? How do you describe music that subverts the very traditions it affirms, that never allows you more than the briefest nod of recognition before whisking out the carpet from under your feet, challenging almost every assumption about how it should or could be played? For there is no one certainly among his contemporaries who has even attempted such a sexy, suave and sophisticated fusion of classical refinement and populist balls, let alone supplied it with such style.

Perhaps one day there will be a word for it, although it is likely to have his name on it in the same way that Shakespeare can still only really be described as

'Shakespearian'. But in the meantime we will have to content ourselves with the opportunities that festivals such as this present for his music to be heard with new ears, in performances that reveal something more of the constant pre figuring and post figuring of themes in his work demonstrating that the famous 'conceptual continuity' is more than just a matter of poodles.

As composer, conductor and performer for the man was also a guitarist of frighteningly expressive power and ingenuity Zappa both demanded and inspired the kind of devotion from his bands that most musicians can only dream of. He also commanded the technical expertise and the artistic freedom necessary to produce albums that will remain a benchmark for the attitude and style that is such a crucial part of the performances.

In a final twist, he was also a master wordsmith, displaying in lyrics, articles and interviews a wit and articulacy that stands up in the company of George Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain or Oscar Wilde. One of my favorite quotes dates back to the late sixties: "I keep hoping that one day I'm going to wake up and discover that a sufficient number of people have decided: 'These guys are great!'. And I'm going to agree with them. I'm not even going to bother to say 'What took you so long?'".

With any luck the events at the Holland Festival will do something to help the rest of us catch up.

The Program

This is the second major program of Zappa music that the Ensemble Modern has presented. The first, the *Yellow Shark*, was performed in 1992 under the personal supervision of the composer, who later released an edited version of the material on CD. Pronouncing himself pleased with the results of this collaboration, Zappa called the Ensemble back to work with him the following year, despite his poor health, on the as-yet unreleased *The Rage and The Fury* - a definitive recording of the work of Edgar Varese, one of the great musical idols of his youth. But sadly, his untimely death later that year meant that planned future collaborations never took place; and as the last group of musicians Zappa was able to work extensively with to creatively express his musical ideas, the Ensemble Modern can in effect be considered to have been his last band.

This is important, because unlike other ensembles around the world who may feature Zappa's work in their programs with as much of an eye to the business of getting bums on seats as to rendering an accurate performance, the Ensemble Modern have not only worked directly with the composer, they voluntarily subjected themselves to long periods of intensive rehearsal with him in the same manner as his previous bands. Not that they necessarily needed to work so much on their musical chops, as they even persuaded Zappa to let them work on compositions that he had previously considered beyond the capacity of merely human reflexes: it was more a question of learning how to add what Zappa termed the "eyebrows" - and comprehending the whole attitude toward performance that is such a hallmark of his work. And they evidently passed the test - you hear none of the disparaging comments he used to make about the disappointing results of working with other orchestras.

That said, the fact of the matter is that although a few of the arrangements you will hear for the first time tonight were worked on to some extent with the composer himself, the majority were not; indeed many of the pieces have hitherto only existed as 'rock band' versions, and most of the others were both written and realised using the Synclavier, Zappa's compositional tool of choice in his later years. This of course raises the question of authenticity: if the composer never wrote them to be performed this way, and was not around to supervise them, how does tonight's program differ - except in degree - from the sad spectacle of the King's Singers gentrifying the Beatles at the Proms, the Kronos Quartet messing with Purple Haze, or those cheezoid versions of faded sixties hits droozling unseen from your favourite airport lounge or hotel elevator?

The first answer lies in Ali N. Askin, the man who - with the indispensable help of Todd Yvega, stalwart transcriber of the Synclavier files - is responsible for creating the arrangements of the pieces selected for tonight's performance. As the person whose demanding task it was to prepare the arrangements for the *Yellow Shark* project, he worked closely with the composer to create approved scores for the Ensemble. Ali is thus as well placed as anyone to understand Zappa's preferences not only in terms of instrumentation, but also with respect to the more subtle aromas that need to be considered when translating his music to an orchestral medium.

The second answer lies in the nature of the music itself: just because a piece was written for - or first performed with - a particular line-up does not necessarily mean that this was the form in which it was originally conceived, or even if it was, that this was the form in which it was intended to remain. Amongst the many other manifestations of his shrewd intellect, Zappa was nothing if not pragmatic, and he was both willing and able to work with whatever was at hand to realise the "merchandizable portions" of his imagination - be it with the studio band on the Steve Allen show, Jimmy Carl Black, or the Ensemble Modern. He himself reworked numerous pieces throughout his career as and when the opportunity arose - so there is plenty of precedent in his own oeuvre, even without citing tradition, for his principle that the *when* will determine the *what*.

The third point is that Zappa's love affair with orchestral music goes back a long way: the first music he ever wrote was for an orchestra (however much influenced by visual considerations) and he was able to finance the purchase of his first studio - the famous Studio Z - with the money he eventually received for scoring the orchestral soundtrack for a low-budget cowboy movie, *Run Home Slow*, composed when he was just 19. He often referred to the orchestra as "the ultimate instrument", and despite the temptation to see his music as the sorely-needed missing link between the Dionysian spirit of rock 'n' roll and the anal self-penetration of much modern 'classical' music - which it also is - he used to say that he would never have written a rock and roll song if he had been able to make a living composing the music he wanted to hear played by an orchestra.

So if home is where the heart is, there is plenty of justification for arranging Zappa's music for an ensemble, especially when it is the Ensemble Modern. After all, we are not talking Carl Davis working up Sir Paul McCartney's melodies for the Liverpool Philharmonic here: this is one of the premier orchestral ensembles of our time actively choosing to play the music of the man who will eventually be recognised as *the* premier composer of the latter part of the twentieth century, a giant whose all-embracing musical vision dominates his era - if we did but know it - in the same way

that Stravinsky straddles his. And yet: I still detect a note of alarm amongst a portion of you.

For it is whispered amongst radicals - speak it softly - that as we embark on the twenty-first century, orchestral music does not merely smell funny, it is almost literally dead: an outmoded means of production killed by the very technology that is about to make it possible for recorded music from all eras and in all styles to be downloadable on demand from cyberspace - a process uncannily foreseen, long before anyone had heard of the internet, by Zappa himself in the *Real Frank Zappa Book*. But even if no one cries, so what if the classical tradition of orchestral music turns out to be a mere 400-year blip in the 80,000 year (at least) time-span over which man has made music? So what if Zappa turns out to be its last composer? For the aeons - and the genres - are indeed closing, and Zappa, standing at the cusp of this process, was not only more aware of it than most, he was one of its foremost exemplars: and if Music has died, then long live music.

In any case, as Zappa was fond of pointing out, "it's all entertainment" - the guiding precept being, of course, the principle of "anything, anytime, anywhere, for no reason at all". So before we start to take ourselves entirely too seriously, let us bring to mind another key element of his philosophy: "IT IS, IN SPITE OF ALL EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY, THEORETICALLY POSSIBLE TO BE 'HEAVY' AND STILL HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR." And if the Ensemble Modern can bring that spirit to their performance tonight, it will be the real deal.

The Pieces

1. Dental Hygiene Dilemma (from 'I'm Stealing the Room')

As the cartoon that goes with this piece in the film *200 Motels* has nothing whatever to do with dentistry, the title most likely derives from a characteristic phonetic mutation: Jeff's dilemma as he wrestles with his conscience being much more a crisis of 'mental hygiene' - a perennial Zappa theme. Be that as it may, like the other fine orchestral selections languishing unappreciated in the soundtrack, this delightfully scatty evocation of the film's thesis that "touring can make you crazy, ladies and gentlemen" disappoints only in its brevity. But the extraordinary thing is that Zappa was able to pull it off at all: actually persuading the members of the Royal Philharmonic to play music within the set of a prison camp designed to parody their normal working circumstances (an extension of the concept he had employed several years earlier in arranging for a small group of BBC musicians to play on stage at the Festival Hall dressed as robots) yet performing some of the most challenging and least regimented music they had probably ever been presented with.

2. The Black Page / The Black Page No 1

Tuplet city. The story of how this piece (originally constructed as a drum solo) came to be named for the "statistical density" of the notes on the page is a Zappa legend. But these complex rhythms simply oozed out of him: it wasn't that he was deliberately composing awkward material - you can see the same complexity at work

in the guitar improvisations so painstakingly transcribed by Steve Vai in the *Frank Zappa Guitar Book*. The moment the polyrhythmic percussive skeleton bursts into the widescreen technicolour of the instrumental arrangement is irresistibly gorgeous.

3. Envelopes

This is a tune that exists in two utterly different incarnations, the exuberantly hyperactive rock band version heard on *Ship Arriving Too Late To Save A Drowning Witch*, and the comparatively sedate orchestral version that now appears on *London Symphony Orchestra Vol 2* - which Zappa subsequently described as being more like a "high-class demo" of what he had originally intended. A classic case of the 'when' determining the 'what': tonight's performance, based on the LSO arrangement, will be an instructive comparison.

4. Dupree's Paradise

Named for "a bar on Avalon Boulevard in Watts at 6.00 AM on a Sunday in 1964", this piece was a standard Zappa vehicle for extended improvisatory madness long before (and also after) the orchestral arrangement he produced for the Ensemble Intercontemporain twenty years later (on which tonight's performance is based). Expressive of whatever it was about the bar's customers - "winos, musicians, degenerates and policemen" - that "set them apart from the rest of society", it is a *tour de force* of rhythmic and tonal diversity that left Pierre Boulez' musicians with "sweat squirting out of their foreheads" - as Zappa later disapprovingly noted.

5. The Dangerous Kitchen

Originally performed live as a freeform 'meltdown' event, the tune was first released on *Man From Utopia*. Here, though, the tortuous line of Zappa's semi-improvised *sprechstimme* had been miraculously doubled on the guitar by Steve Vai, who not only meticulously transcribed but also reproduced (all within the space of 24 hours) the tiniest idiosyncrasies of Zappa's vocal delivery, including his scratchy smoker's laugh - conferring a shimmering edge of hyper-reality to this carefully-crafted audio junk sculpture. Interestingly, it was one of the first pieces that Zappa gave the Ensemble to sight-read at their first rehearsals for the *Yellow Shark*, and although the piece was later dropped, it gave him a taste for Hermann Kretzschmar's distinctive reading voice.

6. Moggio

Also first released on the *Man From Utopia*, the title apparently comes from a dream that Zappa's youngest daughter Diva once told him about in which "she had a tiny little father named Moggio who lived under a pillow" - and indeed there is a distinct munchkin overtone to the frenetic convolutions of the manic doubled runs and the glittering percussion effects that seem to float over the pulsating bass.

7. Put a Motor in Yourself

The opening instrumental on *Civilization Phaze III*, Zappa's posthumously released magnum opus. His liner notes are characteristically graphic: "A yuppie precision drill team dresses for work in motorized uniforms, eventually engaging in a dance routine

featuring ladder climbing, ass-kissing, karate chopping, self-hugging, eventually leading to politics and murder.”

8. Revised Music For Low Budget Orchestra

Premiered on *King Kong*, Jean-Luc Ponty's 1970 album of Zappa arrangements (when it featured Ponty's solo violin and a 10-piece band instead of the 97-piece ensemble Zappa had originally requested), the revised version first appeared on *Studio Tan* - albeit intended for the ill-fated *Läther* project - this time built around a guitar solo. The arrangement played tonight was first worked on by Ali Askin under Zappa's supervision as part of the preparations for the *Yellow Shark* programme, but was eventually excluded from the final selection.

9. The Adventures of Greggery Peccary

A masterpiece of studio wizardry in its original form (it was intended to be the musical and conceptual culmination of the monumental *Läther* album) the wealth of material crammed into this extraordinary composition is quite breathtaking. Greggery Peccary - the very name is a multiple pun which collapses into a single phrase the various nuances implied by gregariousness, the Gregorian calendar, Gregory Peck, the 'pecker' (penis) and peccaries - is a porcine advertising executive who comes up with the idea of the calendar as a suitable 'trend' with which to bamboozle a new generation of consumers. A stinging satire both on the fatal human susceptibility to fashion and the artificial constraints of chronological time, the subtly-drawn cartoon complexities of the music are a wonderfully graphic illustration of Zappa's concept of music as 'a movie for your ears'. In order to score this arrangement for the Ensemble Modern, Ali Askin had to scour the vaults at UMRK for the original scores and transcripts, uncovering in the process a quantity of extra music which has been incorporated into this arrangement for the first time.

10. Night School

Night School was the name of a late-night TV show that was to have been hosted by Zappa on the ABC network, offering alternative analysis and comment on current events with musical and dramatic illustration provided by a studio band. Unsurprisingly, the network ultimately decided to pass on the opportunity of presenting a program which would "deal with reality, using easy to understand colloquial American language"- but whether or not intended as the theme tune for this show, Night School, the opening track on *Jazz From Hell*, manages to strike a tone that is simultaneously catchy and sombre, providing the perfect backdrop for a melody line that eerily mimics the distinctive ambience of a Zappa guitar solo.

11. A Pig With Wings

Pigs and ponies ("The pigs run the city, the ponies run the TV station") are central characters both in the unfolding drama of *Civilization Phaze III* and in its earlier incarnation, *Lumpy Gravy*. The spacious, quasi-oriental resonances of the music evoke an odd sense of pathos: "While JESUS pretends to produce a guitar-like sound by manually strumming the giant piano strings, the left tableau (also reset to the Christmas position) is lit once again. Emerging from behind the tree like an ornamental angel, we see a large sow-like creature with angel wings, dancing clumsily."

12. X-Mas Values

Another composition from *Civilization Phaze III*, and a piece originally considered for the *Yellow Shark*, only dropped due to the lack of suitable software (since remedied) for transferring its complex structure to a MIDI format. Though defiantly abstract in appearance, since the entire work is designed as an 'opera-pantomime', it should be remembered that there is a visual corollary to the structure of each piece. "Lights come up on the left and right tableau sets, each featuring a Christmas tree. The left set shows the yuppie dancers mutating into pigs. The right set has them mutating into ponies. As the transformations are completed, the two groups leave home and smash into each other in the third tableau (shopping mall) area."

13. Naval Aviation In Art?

First recorded in 1975 (but despite its inclusion in *Läther*, not released until the 1979 *Orchestral Favorites*), Zappa subsequently scored a different arrangement for Pierre Boulez, which was released on *The Perfect Stranger*. The title is taken from an article in a magazine that had caught Zappa's attention by its sheer absurdity, and he notes wryly that the piece "shows a sailor-artist, standing before his easel, squinting through a porthole for inspiration, while wiser men sleep in hammocks around him." Whatever the attractions of this image as a metaphor for Zappa's own art, the collision of essential essences in this spare and elegant piece suffuses it with a strangely satisfying tension.

14. Amnerika

Its hauntingly wistful melody lurching across the musical landscape with all the poignancy of some magnificent wounded beast, Amnerika - also from *Civilization Phaze III* - was actually performed as part of the *Yellow Shark* program to a score prepared by Zappa with the assistance of Todd Yvega, albeit ultimately omitted from the CD. There are no liner notes to guide an interpretation, but the apparent juxtaposition of 'amnesia' and 'America' in the title (with that extra little twist of crassness lurking in the penultimate 'k') suggests - particularly in the context of Zappa's insistence on the importance of exercising one's constitutional rights - a comment on America's long lost vision of itself.

15. The Beltway Bandits

A reference to the treacherous cretins of the 'beltway' - the seamless channel of sleaze and corruption operating like a revolving door between those in power and those who would influence them - this is another piece taken from *Jazz From Hell*, Zappa's first fully-fledged album of Synclavier compositions. As such, it was not originally intended to be played - or even expected to be playable - by merely human hands, though the extraordinary twists and loops of the melody line deftly mimic the devious chicanery of politicians seeking, as ever, to justify the unjustifiable.