

## PROGRAMME NOTES FOR THE LONDON SINFONIETTA

### 'The Perfect Stranger' and 'Dupree's Paradise' by Frank Zappa

*(conducted by John Adams at Queen Elizabeth Hall, September 19, 1996)*

Though often characterised as 'the wild man of rock', the first music that Frank Zappa wrote (at the age of fourteen) was for an orchestra. Initially attracted by the graphic aspects of written music, up until his collision with R&B a few years later his main interest lay in composing serial music and absorbing himself in the avant-garde world of Edgar Varese. Later, as he attempted to make a career out of music, he worked for a while as a guitarist in a lounge band, churning out pseudo-jazz numbers and cabaret muzak (a world nostalgically revisited in *Dupree's Paradise*). But it soon became obvious that the only way to make a living and continue composing would be to appeal to an audience on the fringes of the burgeoning youth scene on the West Coast. Thus was born the Mothers of Invention, a bar band lifted to legendary status in the late sixties through Zappa's unique blend of rock & roll, Stravinsky and almost every other musical influence he had been exposed to - not to mention an uncompromising attitude to the hypocrisies of society expressed through scabrous and satirical lyrics.

It was this latter trait that resulted in him being banned from the Albert Hall in 1971 (for alleged obscenity), and has fed a reputation for weirdness which still precedes any serious attention to his music. This is unfortunate, since not only does his work represent some of the most challenging, evocative and genuinely eclectic music of any contemporary composer, his lyrics include some of the sharpest and funniest barbs concocted in the English language since the days of Jonathan Swift.

The problem with Zappa is that he is so difficult to categorise, not least because he took such delight in evading categorization. The range of styles across which he habitually composed exceeds the bounds of most people's listening habits, and yet his skill in both mastering and parodying any given genre is indicated by the long list of accomplished performers from all fields who have played with him over the years. Indeed, *The Perfect Stranger* was actually commissioned by Pierre Boulez, an eloquent testimony to his estimation of Zappa's talent.

According to Zappa's original sleeve notes, the pieces you will hear tonight are "for entertainment purposes only, and should not be confused with any other form of artistic expression." Whilst acknowledging that what he did was artistic, Zappa nonetheless had a horror of the kind of posturing so often associated with 'art', and his quirky descriptions of the background to the compositions give a flavour of the mischievous spirit with which he liked to sabotage an audience's preconceptions. These chamber works (which are, incidentally, intended as 'dance' pieces) show him handling an orchestra with the same deft mixture of 'heavy' and 'humour' displayed in his more familiar compositions. A genius by anyone's standards, Frank Zappa deserves a far greater hearing than he generally receives.

Simon Prentis

FZ notes:

"In 'THE PERFECT STRANGER', a door-to-door salesman, accompanied by his faithful gypsy-mutant industrial vacuum cleaner, cavorts licentiously with a slovenly housewife. We hear the door bell, the housewife's eyebrows going up and down as she spies the nozzle through the ruffled curtain, the sound of the little bag of 'demonstration dirt' being sprinkled on the rug, and assorted

bombastic interjections representing the spiritual qualities of *chrome*, *rubber*, *electricity* and *household tidiness*. The entire transaction is being viewed from a safe distance by Patricia, the dog in the high chair.

'DUPREE'S PARADISE' is about a bar on Avalon Boulevard in Watts at 6.00 a.m. on a Sunday in 1964, during the early morning jam session. For about seven minutes, the customers (winos, musicians, degenerates and policemen) do the things that set them apart from the rest of society."