

The Other Frank Zappa, Chamber Music Composer



Members of the Fireworks Ensemble playing works by Frank Zappa

Erin Baiano for The New York Times

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Frank Zappa was a kind of Rev. Howard Finster of music: an outsider artist eventually discovered and embraced by the establishment without ever losing his outsider cachet. A brilliant self-taught musician, Zappa needed to justify what he did as serious music at a time when rock was not seen as serious, and he produced a string of “classical” pieces that were taken up by European luminaries like [Pierre Boulez](#) and the Ensemble Modern.

The pieces are fiendishly difficult to execute, with lots of surface complexity to dazzle the ear, as was demonstrated at the composer portrait devoted to Zappa at the Miller Theater on Friday night, two weeks after another concert devoted to one of his idols, Edgar Varèse.

The program had three parts. First came music for smaller chamber ensembles, played by Zephyros Winds and a string quintet, including music originally written for the Aspen Wind Quintet (“Times Beach II” and “Times Beach III”) and the Kronos Quartet (“None of the Above”). Then came music for chamber orchestra, conducted by Jeffrey Milarsky, some of it, like “The Girl With the Magnesium Dress,” arranged from pieces Zappa wrote on an instrument called the Synclavier. Finally there were arrangements of music for rock ensemble — including “G-Spot Tornado” — performed by the Fireworks Ensemble, the eight-member group that set up the whole concert.

Despite the program-note allegations that these pieces were equally just plain music, the sense that rock had to assume some kind of classical mantle to gain respect still lingered around the first two parts of the program, which felt like a dinner jacket pulled out of mothballs for a formal occasion, not least because the players seemed on their best, slightly subdued behavior. And while the music was filled with striking gestures — breathtakingly fast unison passages, moments when the supporting instruments held a note while a flute scampered off on a rapid phrase, plenty of adroit quotations echoing other composers — its complexities didn’t weave together to make a coherent statement. Epitomizing this tendency was “The Perfect Stranger,” Zappa’s longest work for chamber ensemble, an illustrative piece about a door-to-door vacuum-cleaner salesman (opening with the doorbell’s ring) that disintegrated into a pile of isolated individual moments. Like an ornate frieze adorning a simple one-room house, the decoration was more sophisticated than the architecture.

But with the change of nomenclature and mood in the rock part of the show, a whole new feeling came into the auditorium, as if, formalities now concluded, everyone could kick off shoes and dance till dawn. Brian Coughlin, Fireworks’ director and bass player, produced some hell-for-leather arrangements that the players, now relaxed and grooving, played the heck out of, down to show-stopping solos in “The Purple Lagoon/Approximate.” Finally labels did indeed cease to matter: this was just music, and it sounded like music to keep.