

The Music of Frank Zappa Avery Fisher Hall/ New York

Last year's celebration of Frank Zappa's music (*Zappa's Universe*, held at New York's premier rock palace, the Ritz)

was a wildly extravagant affair. With surreal sets, hanging mobiles, a troupe of spandex-clad dancers, and guest appearances by doo-woppers Rockapella and the Persuasions along with metal-thrash shredders Steve Vai and Dweezil Zappa, it was an appropriately bizarre rock circus that spanned FZ's career from 1966's *Freak Out* to '88's *Broadway The Hard Way*. It also included fully orchestrated



Serious fun: Joel Thome directs the Orchestra of Our Time in a celebration of Zappa's classical bent

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versions of Zappa's modern classical pieces and a tribute to composer Erik Satie that had many Zappa freaks shifting uneasily in their seats and calling out for "I Am The Slime" and "Dinah Moe Hum."

By contrast, *The Music of Frank Zappa*, held in stately Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, was a more somber affair. The program focused on Zappa's more "serious," composerly side, featuring the American premiere of *The Perfect Stranger*, his ambitious modern classical album from 1984 that bears the unmistakable stamp of the iconoclastic Edgard Varese.

Three works—"Love Story," "The Girl In The Magnesium Dress," and "Jonestown"—were humanly impossible Synclavier-generated performances (referred to in the program as the Barking Pumpkin Digital Gratification Consort). The other four—"Perfect Stranger," "Outside Now, Again," "Naval Aviation In Art?," and "Dupree's Paradise"—were executed brilliantly by the 28-piece Orchestra of Our Time under the direction of Joel Thome and co-directed by percussionist Jonathan Hass and trumpeter Neil Balm. As a tribute to Zappa's boyhood hero, the orchestra also performed a full version of Varese's "Deserts," a very dissonant, somewhat disturbing piece of music written in 1954 that utilized taped episodes and grating electronic interludes.

The Orchestra was joined by guitarist Mike Keneally, drummer Morgan Agren, bassist Scott Thunes, and keyboardist Mats Oberg for super-charged renditions of Zappa's "Black Page," "Nite School," and "Inca Roads." Oberg, a phenomenally talented musician from Sweden who has been sightless from birth, earned one of the loudest ovations for his solo-piano version of Zappa's "Ruth Is Sleeping."

—Bill Milkowski