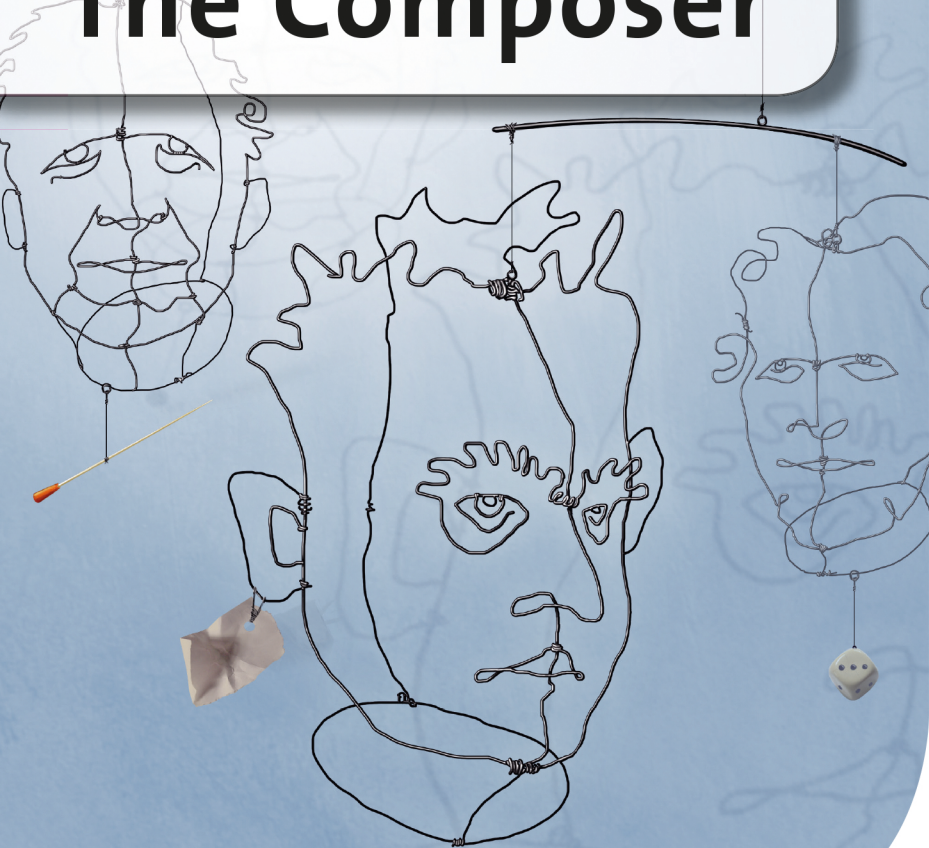




Daniel Schröder

Frank Zappa – The Composer



büchner

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Daniel Schröder (*1977) studied musicology in Marburg, Germany, and Jazz in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His profound interest in contemporary music evolved as a result of his intensive studies of the bass clarinet with Wolfgang Styri (*Ensemble Modern*). With his band *Dasch2*, Daniel himself embarks on a fantastic journey into zappaesque realms (*quadratisch-rekords.de*).

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1 Introduction

Almost two decades since his death, Frank Zappa is only now being awarded the rightful place in the world of contemporary classical music, never before accorded to him at this level during his lifetime: Pieces like *Revised Music For Low Budget Orchestra*, *Bob in Dacron* or *G-Spot Tornado* can regularly be found on repertoires. And even the more complex projects, such as *The Adventures of Greggery Peccary*, are being meticulously performed by accomplished ensembles with devotion, and not only at Zappa festivals of the kind staged in 2010 in the London *Roundhouse* to celebrate the composer's 70th birthday. Having found his way into the ›normal‹ concert circuit, audiences nowadays are no longer frightened off by Zappa's New Music or perceive it to be extreme. On the contrary, it fits very well into a program devoted, for example, to representatives of ›classical modernism‹ such as Stravinsky or Schoenberg.

In the early stages of his career, Zappa had already cherished the desire to be ›taken seriously‹ as a composer. He underscored this ambition at a prominent point in the ›relevant quotes‹ from *Freak Out!* with his famous sentence based on the manifesto of the *International Composers' Guild* (ICG), a cooperative co-founded in 1921 by the composer Edgard Varèse who had emigrated to New York some years earlier: »The present-day composer refuses to die.« Over the years, the reference to Varèse is to become crucial for understanding Zappa's works. All his life, Zappa never ceased to claim a spiritual affinity with Varèse in interviews and autobiographical statements, almost likening him in his narrations to a kind of musical ›mentor‹. Even if the two composers never became personally acquainted, Varèse is un-

doubtedly the one person to have had the most profound influence on Zappa's compositional work. However, the veneration was not merely restricted to an imaginary teacher-pupil relationship. Varèse crops up most frequently when Zappa is defining his own artistic position, his self-perception as a composer and the way he thinks and talks about music.

Varèse will therefore be a crucial point of reference in this analysis of Zappa's work. The examination will focus above all on the extent to which Varèse actually did exert an influence on Zappa. For in the steadily accumulating literature on the musician there is a tendency to view Zappa's own statements on his works as definitive, with evidently very few analysts actually in possession of a score to verify his claims. By highlighting musical similarities with and divergences from Varèse's works, my intention is not merely to explain typical elements of Zappa's New Music. The insight thus gained is also to be used to identify the extent to which, at the compositional level, Zappa was to have so emphatically built up a Varèse myth.

The starting point of my examination will be a large number of Zappa's statements on his music, on other composers who influenced him as well as technical and structural details elaborated by Zappa in interviews. The implied question behind this will always be: If there's something that inspired Zappa, to what extent was it actually expressed in his work? What set of rules define the works of these greatly-admired composers, and can any of these be identified in Zappa's scores? If not, how can Zappa's pieces be said to function?

In addition to the composers much admired by Zappa, I shall also deal with those from whom Zappa chose to distance himself – mostly polemically – and those whose concepts he might not have understood as well as those whose mindset might unknowingly have flowed into his work. In order to pinpoint Zappa, the composer, on the map of contemporary music, the perspective will be widened at various points through comparative reference to composers and trends considered to belong to the musical vanguard of the 20th century. I hope that the following brief analogy with the technique of drawing will illustrate my approach: If you want to sketch the image

of a certain object and use the image itself as the starting point, only one image from your repertoire of already stored images can ever be produced. Thus, to prevent a mere reproduction of someone's own personal perception, it is important to record everything ›revolving around‹ the object, in other words place it in relation to everything else. Only in this way can the real contours of that object come to light.

In other words, I will allow my hand to be guided by the similarities, differences and points of contact with the concepts of other contemporary composers so that I can draw at least a rough sketch of the musical face of the composer Frank Zappa. Given the expanse and diversity of the overall context (unlike the restricted scope of this book), the term ›sketch‹ must be taken literally. Back to my allegory: My Zappa portrait will be left in black and white for the most part, with some shades of grey. The vast number of references will, however, prevent any garishly-colored details. Another possibility is that Zappa's nose might turn out rather large, a risk I'm prepared to take in the course of sketching my overall portrait. But the last thing I want is to first explore the nose and then use the insight gained from this as the basis for drawing the ears.

In terms of quantity, Zappa's music is exceptional – six contemporary classical music albums recorded by Zappa as producer alongside a good eighty publications belonging more to the rock, pop and jazz genre, i. e. the popular music genre. Despite this, Zappa's New Music cannot be extracted from the overall compositional context due to the frequent reflection of Zappa-typical elements of musical material found time and again in the more than thirty year-long period of the composer's creativity. That's why it is especially important to include Zappa's works from the early days with the *Mothers of Invention* in so far as they are of relevance for the formulation of his compositional aesthetic.

The process of placing the musical currents of the 20th century in relation to each other along with the composers who left their mark on this era or who were associated with these trends is not entirely unproblematic since it presupposes dealings with musical topoi: For

example, when examining the theme of ›aleatoric and indeterminacy‹, I will primarily examine the ideas of John Cage and treat these as representative. Needless to say, this does little justice to the individual manifestations of the works of other composers such as Pierre Boulez or Karlheinz Stockhausen. For practical reasons, though, there is much to argue for this approach since Cage's works of the late 1950s can be viewed as the most extreme manifestation of this thematic area, offering an effective and efficient position to define Zappa's compositional approach without simply making a ›worst case‹ comparison. What's more, Zappa in particular deliberately used musical clichés and mannerisms in many places when referring to other composers. Hence, my focusing on musical platitudes can therefore claim to do justice to his approach.

The composers, compositional techniques and musical currents used for comparison can be categorized as follows:

1. Those directly referred to by Zappa himself as influences: e.g. Edgar Varèse, Igor Stravinsky, or mentioned by him at least in laudatory terms: Pierre Boulez and Conlon Nancarrow¹;
2. Those dismissed by Zappa: *dodecaphony*, the ›minimalists‹ Philip Glass and Steve Reich, *serialism* (in this case also: Pierre Boulez), Karlheinz Stockhausen;
3. Those who can be linked to Zappa due to similar or diverging approaches: Earle Brown, John Cage, György Ligeti, Butch Morris, Wolfgang Rihm, Arnold Schönberg, *aleatoric music*, *directed improvisation*, *post-modern music*.

In any consideration of Zappa's work, it is also important to focus on the technical possibilities that were open to him in the early days of the digital age (the early 1980s) and the consequences these had for the musical production process and Zappa's work aesthetic.

To what degree and in what form can Zappa justify the status of contemporary composer or, conversely, what can or cannot be

¹ Unfortunately Anton Webern's influence will have to be dealt with elsewhere.

termed contemporary in his works? This is the central question I aim to answer with this book. It should always be borne in mind that Zappa was, so to speak, an ›auditive‹ eclecticist, seeking to integrate what he perceived to be the good elements of his venerated masters into his compositions without the backing of a university education and with the technical means at his disposal. Was there anything innovative about this? What was already starting to appear strange during his lifetime? And has Zappa really refused to die?

2 Dancing About The Whole Work of Art: Literature on Zappa

Writing about music is like dancing about architecture...²

Although the academic debate on Zappa's works has vastly increased over the past two decades, the corresponding portion of music literature in the German language has remained very small. Apart from a large number of interviews, record reviews, posthumous appraisals and short notes in music magazines and the daily press, I am aware of merely three articles that lay claim to being scientific: First, there is the essay of Sieghart Döhring³, which is still very worthwhile reading and analyzes the stage performances of *Mothers of Invention* from a musical drama perspective. Second, there is a study of Zappa's collage technique by Ronald Hitzler⁴ (possibly centering a little too much on Zappa's subversive spirit), followed finally by the recently published and highly-commendable text by Matthias Kassel⁵, who takes a direct approach regarding Zappa's relationship to Varèse, and whose publication of a magnificent miscellany on Varèse also highlights Zappa's significance and acceptance in the field of contemporary music.

2 Elvis Costello in an interview with Timothy White (1983), in: *A Man out of Time Beats the Clock*. Musician Magazine No. 60, p. 52.

3 Döhring, Sieghart (1977): *Popmusik und Gegenkultur – Untersuchungen zu Frank Zappa*, in: Brinkmann, Reinhold (ed.): *Avantgarde. Jazz. Pop. Tendenzen zwischen Tonalität und Atonalität*. Mainz, pp. 107–119.

4 Hitzler, Ronald (1983): *Collagen eines Schelms. Zum ästhetischen Stil des Francis Vincent Zappa*, in: *Jazzforschung/jazz research*, vol. 17, Basel, pp. 111–133.

5 Kassel, Matthias (2006): *Frank Zappa and the Idol of His Youth*, in: Meyer/Zimmermann: *Edgard Varèse. Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary*, pp. 443–451.