

NEA



AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES

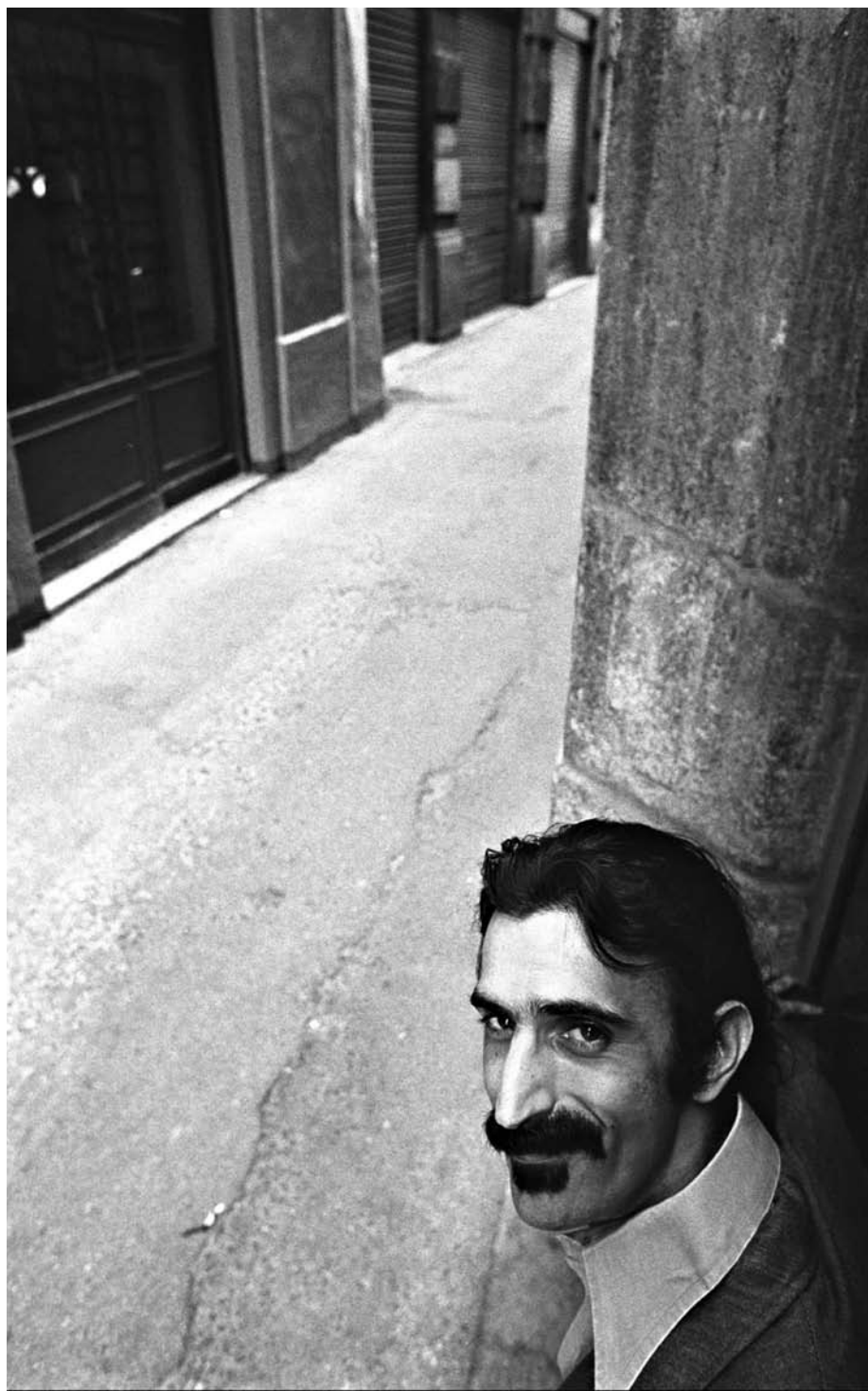
CHAMBER
MUSIC

by Fred Cohn

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's

AMERICAN MASTERPIECES:
CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The March-April calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on pages 12 and 13. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.



Father of Invention

A chamber music concert demonstrates how Frank Zappa has inspired musicians of every ilk.

Abhijit Sengupta had a choice to make for the Frank Zappa concert. His organization, Fontana Chamber Arts in Kalamazoo, Michigan, stages a nightclub-style jazz series in a downtown dance studio. But Sengupta, planning his first season as artistic director, opted instead to present the concert as part of Fontana's main-stage classical music series, held at the Dalton Center Recital Hall at Western Michigan University. The concert, funded in part through the NEA's *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* initiative, took place on November 14. Called "Electric Don Quixote," after the Zappa bio by Neil Slaven, it featured the Kalamazoo-based new-music group Opus 21.

"It was too predictable to put Zappa on the jazz series," says Sengupta. "Putting it on the main-stage series, making it an ambitious concert—it would be just what Zappa would be amused about."

It was an apt call, considering that Zappa was a composer who always resisted pigeonholing. He made his mark as a rock musician, and his first albums with his band The Mothers of Invention seemed to express the anarchic, rock-and-roll spirit of the mid-sixties. But even there, Zappa burst the seams of the genre, mixing straight-ahead rock music with improvisatory riffs and electronic collages—all of it infused with a considerable amount of social satire.

Zappa's eclecticism had its roots in his early musical passions. As a teenager, play-

ing in a rhythm-and-blues band, he discovered the works of Edgard Varèse, whose rhythmically complex style exerted as decisive an influence on his work as the great R&B guitarists did. In Zappa's music, the soundworlds of Stravinsky and Stockhausen rubbed elbows with doo-wop, jazz and rock.

"When you listen to any type of music, whether it's jazz or classical or rock, you usually have a basic idea going in of what it will sound like," says composer Keith Horn, who arranged several Zappa pieces for the concert. "With Zappa, you have no expectations. Everything is a surprise, usually a pleasant surprise. But it's still an identifiable sound. He's an iconic artist, like Picasso or Dalí—you can hear a signature (or see it).

"I can't put my finger on what it is that makes Zappa who he is," Horn continues. "But there's always elements of irreverence that come through. Which makes it really fun to listen to."

In treating Zappa's works as classical music, the Kalamazoo concert continued a significant tradition. Zappa worked with conductors Pierre Boulez and Kent Nagano, and his 1992 collaboration with Ensemble Modern produced *The Yellow Shark*, his last recording. Sengupta had a

clear idea of his goals for Fontana Chamber Arts' Zappa concert—among other things, he wanted it to include only acoustic instruments. But he entrusted its implementation to Richard Adams, Opus 21's founder and artistic director.

Adams, for his part, had himself been toying with the idea for an Opus 21 Zappa concert, making the Fontana offer especially welcome. He enlisted the services of a group of composers—among them,



LEFT: FRANK ZAPPA.
ABOVE: OPUS 21 PLAYS ZAPPA.

Opus 21 members Andrew Bishop, Judy Moonert and Greg Secor—and had them write arrangements of Zappa's works. Some of the composers took a freewheeling approach to the task—for instance, Secor's

arrangement of “Peaches En Regalia,” originally a jazz fusion number, gave it a rumba beat. “Arranging music in different ways is something [Zappa] did in his own lifetime,” Adams notes. “Black Page,” for instance, started as a dense, almost nihilistic drum solo and eventually acquired a melody; Zappa even wrote a disco version.

Before jazz composer Joel Harrison tackled his own assignment, “Dupree’s Paradise,” he listened to two wildly different interpretations: the first, a jazz version with Zappa on guitar and an ensemble including Jean-Luc Ponty on violin and George Duke on keyboard; the second featuring the Ensemble InterContemporain under Boulez. Harrison much preferred the number in its jazz guise: an impression that shaped his own version.

“I knew that [Zappa] went into that crazy free improvisation, but I had forgotten,” Harrison says. “No matter how anarchic his music was, it had deeper roots in jazz than I realized. The orchestral version—I really thought it was lousy. I want to phrase this in a way so that I’m not saying I know more than Frank Zappa, but the piece really came to life for me as a simple jazz head. When he dressed it up for orchestra, it lost all its character.”

COMPOSER JOEL HARRISON



“Dupree’s Paradise” evokes a scene in a bar in Los Angeles’s Watts district on a Sunday in 1964. In Zappa’s own words: “For about seven minutes, the customers (winos, musicians, degenerates & policemen) do the things that set them apart from the rest of society.” Harrison sought to keep that “wild, dangerous” feeling in his own arrangement. For the “B” section, he handed a solo to saxophonist Andrew Bishop, an experienced improviser, while writing charts for the other players that simulated im-provisation.

The Kalamazoo Zappa concert was a sell-out success, attracting a wildly diverse audience: chamber music aficionados, university students, aging “freaks” who have worshiped Zappa through the decades. Harrison couldn’t attend, but when he heard a recording of the concert, he found himself impressed—and surprised. “I heard the rhythms more like jazz musicians would play them—with a swung beat, a looseness,” he says. “But [Opus 21’s] approach is just incredibly perfect in a way. [Classical] musicians of this caliber are trained to play with an incredible kind of precision. If I put the same thing in front of my jazz groups, it would come out somewhat different—but not necessarily better.

“Here’s a group of chamber music players who came up with an idea that worked on all levels,” Harrison says. “A lot of interesting music was created; a lot of people showed up. What a nice idea to do something that was obviously so much fun!”

“Zappa has a depth of musicality that can attract the nerdiest of music nerds, serious classical players, serious rock players, serious jazz players or 15-year-old kids playing in their garage,” says Keith Horn. “To me there isn’t a lot of music to work on that is entertaining and this challenging for musicians.”

Fred Cohn is Chamber Music magazine’s consulting editor.

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AMERICAN
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Performances
in March &
April

MARCH 9 Boston, MA

PRESENTER: **Boston Chamber Music Society** PROGRAM: *Music and Time*: Andrew Imbrie’s *Serenade for Flute, Viola and Piano*; Libby Larsen’s *Black Birds, Red Hills*; George Crumb’s *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*; ARTISTS: Fenwick Smith, flute; Thomas Hill, clarinet; Ida Levin, violin; Marcus Thompson, viola; Astrid Schween, cello; Randall Hodgkinson, piano www.bostonchambermusic.org

MARCH 12 Kalamazoo, MI

PRESENTER: **Fontana Chamber Arts** PROGRAM: *Intimate Voices: Lamentation of the Disasters of War*, by Karim Al-Zand; *Different Trains*, by Steve Reich ARTISTS: Ens String Quartet (Maureen Nelson and John Marcus, violins; Melissa Reardon, viola; Richard Belcher, cello) with Abhijit Sengupta, viola, and Julia Sengupta, cello www.fontanachamberarts.org

MARCH 20 Houston, TX

PRESENTER: **Da Camera of Houston** PROGRAM: Jazz to be announced ARTISTS: Brandon Lee Quintet (Brandon Lee, trumpet; Jon Irabagon, alto & tenor saxophones; Donald Vega, piano; Yasushi Nakamura, bass; Marion Felder, drums) www.dacamera.com

MARCH 23 Lafayette, LA

University of Louisiana, Lafayette PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM: Shafer Mahoney, Brass Quintet; David Sampson, *Entrance*; Eric Ewazen, *Colchester Fantasy* www.americanbrassquintet.org

MARCH 24 Savannah, GA

PRESENTER: **Savannah Music Festival** PROGRAM: Bassist Edgar Meyer plays two duo shows with mandolinist Mike Marshall. The two will perform a variety of material, including many of their own compositions. www.savannahmusicfestival.org

MARCH 26 Stillwater, OK

Seretan Center for the Performing Arts, Oklahoma State University PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM: Shafer Mahoney, Brass Quintet; David Sampson, *Entrance*; Eric Ewazen, *Colchester Fantasy* www.americanbrassquintet.org

MARCH 27 Savannah, GA

PRESENTER: **Savannah Music Festival** PROGRAM: Jazz and swing versions of works by composers such as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Ray Noble, George Gershwin, and Mark O’Connor. ARTISTS: Mark O’Connor’s Hot Swing Trio and French bassist Renaud Garcia-Fons www.savannahmusicfestival.org

MARCH 28 Mobile, AL
University of South Alabama

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM:
Shafer Mahoney, Brass Quintet; David Sampson,
Entrance; Eric Ewazen, *Colchester Fantasy*
www.americanbrassquintet.org

MARCH 30 Odessa, TX
Odessa College

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM:
Shafer Mahoney, Brass Quintet; David Sampson,
Entrance; Eric Ewazen, *Colchester Fantasy*
www.americanbrassquintet.org

MARCH 31 South Bend, IN
Indiana University

PRESENTER/VENUE: **Ernestine M. Raclin School of the Arts**
PROGRAM: Wynton Marsalis, *At the Octoroon Balls*;
William Grant Still, *Danzas de Panama*; Armando
Bayolo, *August Dramas*; Brent Michael Davids, *The
Singing Woods*; Tan Dun, *Eight Colors for String
Quartet*; Vivian Fung, *Pizzicato for String Quartet*;
Jennifer Higdon, *Voices*; George Rochberg, *String
Quartet No. 6* ARTISTS: **Euclid Quartet** (Jameson Cooper,
violin; Jacob Murphy, violin, Luis Vargas, viola; Si-Yan
Darren Li, cello) www.euclidquartet.net

APRIL 3 Savannah, GA

PRESENTER: **Savannah Music Festival** PROGRAM: Two Marc
O'Connor string quartets, and works by Gershwin,
Bernstein, Copland and John Williams ARTISTS: Mark
O'Connor, violin, et al. www.savannahmusicfestival.org

APRIL 7 Madison, WI
University of Wisconsin

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM:
Shafer Mahoney's Brass Quintet; David Sampson's
Entrance; Joan Tower's *Copperwave*
www.americanbrassquintet.org

APRIL 9 Kalamazoo, MI

PRESENTER: **Fontana Chamber Arts** PROGRAM: *Postcard
From Heaven and Haiku*, by John Cage ARTIST: Mollie
Marcuson, harp www.fontnachamberarts.org

APRIL 10 Ada, OK

PRESENTER: **East Central University** PROGRAM: Works by
Steve Reich and other American composers, plus a
rural residency with masterclasses, workshops and per-
formances. ARTISTS: S Percussion (Josh Quillen, Jason
Treuting, Adam Sliwinski, Eric Beach) www.ecok.edu

APRIL 8-13 Whitefish, Dillon, Helena
and Boulder, MT

PRESENTER: **Myrna Loy Center for the Performing and
Media Arts** PROGRAM *No Boundaries*, a residency and
local concert tour, including medley of American folk-
songs; Samuel Barber's String Quartet, Paquito
D'Rivera's *Village Street Quartet* and William Bolcom's
Three Rags ARTISTS: Ying Quartet and Matt Flinner, banjo
and mandolin www.mymaloycenter.com

APRIL 9 Burlington, VT

PRESENTER: **Green Mountain Chamber Music Festival**
and University of Vermont's Lane Series PROGRAM: *On All
Fours*, by Steven Mackey; Joan Tower's Quintet for Flute
and Strings ARTISTS: Kevin Lawrence and David Russell,
violins; Sheila Browne, viola; Brooks Whitehouse, cello;
Carol Wincenc, flute. www.gmcmf.org

APRIL 10 Moorhead, MN
Concordia College

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM:
Gordon Beferman's Brass Quintet, David Sampson's
Entrance, Joan Tower's *Copperwave*
www.americanbrassquintet.org

APRIL 11 Oberlin, OH
Oberlin Conservatory

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM:
Gordon Beferman's Brass Quintet; David Sampson's
Entrance; Shafer Mahoney's Brass Quintet
www.americanbrassquintet.org

APRIL 15 Columbus, GA
Columbus State University

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM:
David Sampson's *Entrance*; Shafer Mahoney's Brass
Quintet; Eric Ewazen's *Colchester Fantasy*
www.americanbrassquintet.org

APRIL 23 New York, NY
Park Avenue Christian Church

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **St. Louis African Chorus** PROGRAM:
Music of Africa and the Diaspora: Meditation for Darfur
(arr. for voice and piano), Fred Onovwerosuoke; *Mi
Nyemo Bendu*, by Princess Hawa Daisy Moore; *Songs
from Sandukwom*, by J.H. Kwabena Nketia; Four Igbo
Songs by Joshua Uzoigwe; *Contemplating Life* by Akin
Euba; Noliwe's aria from *Chaka* by Akin Euba;
Selections from *Twenty-Four Studies in African Rhythms
for Piano*, vol. 1, by Fred Onovwerosuoke; *Big Tooth
Aspen* by Halim El-Dabh; *Three Implied Jesters*, for solo
flute, by Lettie Beckon Alston; *Romance*, by William
Grant Still ARTISTS: St. Louis African Chorus; Darryl
Hollister, piano; Wendy Hymes, flute; Dawn Padmore,
soprano www.africarts.org

APRIL 23 Blue Bell, PA

PRESENTER: **Montgomery County Community College**
PROGRAM: An evening of compositions by Charles Ives,
Arthur Foote, Samuel Barber, and Aaron Copland ART-
ISTS: America's Dream Chamber Artists (Arash Amini,
cellist and artistic director) www.mc3.edu

APRIL 24 Houston, TX

PRESENTER: **Da Camera of Houston** PROGRAM: Jazz to be
announced ARTISTS: Esperanza Spalding Trio (Esperanza
Spalding, bass; drummer Otis Brown, drums; Leo
Genovese, piano) www.dacamera.com

APRIL 26 San Francisco, CA

PRESENTER: **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players**
PROGRAM: Tan Dun's *Water Music* for 4 percussionists
Educational preview open to public April 23 at Lowell
high school and School of the Arts.
www.sfcmp.org