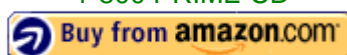


Zapping Them with Zappa in Oslo



Perfect Strangers / Zappa
AUDIO CD; HYBRID SACD - DSD
1-800 PRIME CD



In countries with smaller populations—and Norway has just over 5 million people, with a fairly low average population density—a few prominent individuals and institutions can make a disproportionate contribution to national life. Two such organizations, one old, the other new, have just joined together, to considerable effect. The elder of the two, the Norwegian Radio Orchestra (*Kringkastningsorkestret* in Norwegian, abbreviated as KORK), founded in 1946, finds its way into the nation's home through its frequent appearances on TV, often in non-classical repertoire. The younger is the label LAWO, founded only in 2007 (I interviewed the founders, Vegard Landaas and Thomas Wolden, whose surnames generated the company name, in *Fanfare* 35:6), with which KORK now has a non-exclusive arrangement. Its first fruits have taken the form of a high-voltage album of Heiner Goebbels's *Suite for Sampler and Orchestra* from *Surrogate Cities*, and five ensemble pieces by Frank Zappa (*Perfect Strangers*, LAWO Classics LWC1063). I spoke to Rolf Lennart Stensø, the chief executive, via Skype.

Can you tell me first how you came to choose this repertoire? It's not exactly what one expects a Norwegian orchestra to be recording!

Here in the Orchestra we had talked about Zappa for many, many years and wanted to do something. And then we decided to do a concert at a rock venue here in Oslo, and we used that opportunity to make this CD. We've done several concerts there, in the Rockefeller Centre; it's a nice place, but it's kind of difficult, since it's small and we can't use the whole orchestra. It was Thomas Søndergård's idea, in fact, from the time when he was still our chief conductor.

Was it part of an existing concert series?

No, not really. It was a special occasion, an opportunity to do something unusual. And it's written for the size of our orchestra. The musicians are really

into this kind of music and it suits the orchestra very well. But no, it wasn't in a series of similar projects—this was the Zappa-Goebbels Project!

I usually find that audience noise in a live recording can be a bit of a distraction, but here their enjoyment becomes part of the experience.

Yes, absolutely; it's great. And the Zappa audience is a really dedicated audience. They know every part of every note!

And it's wonderfully crazy music.

Totally crazy! I've been listening to that music myself since I was 12 years old or something like that. If you have once been a Zappa listener, you'll be listening to it for the rest of your life. A lot of the audience there was really dedicated, singing along and everything!

It sounds fantastically difficult to play, though.

Yes, it is, really difficult. The musicians have solo parts that are really into each other, really together, so you can hear immediately if something is not together or if there are wrong notes or something. It's a real challenge for everyone.

The Goebbels is a very strange piece, a kind of conflation of different things....

The first time I heard Goebbels's music, I thought about it as something really urban, music which is really modern. As I have continued listening to the music—on records, and live—I still think the same thing: This is music of today, more than some of the other orchestral stuff that is being written. The combination of the sampled sounds [with the orchestra] is very nicely done. It's a very contemporary sound. I like it very much.

It's odd that it manages to be historical, modern, Postmodern—all sorts of different things rolled into one.

Yes, it's an extraordinary combination. Some of the Zappa listeners are retired—the music is that old! But I think Zappa's and Goebbels's music will survive into history. They have their own special languages—and they're fun to listen to!

One moment in the Goebbels that brings up the hair on the back of your neck is where he introduces a recording of the voices of cantors. The idea of Jewish voices being heard as part of a German industrial landscape—especially from a composer called Goebbels!—is laden with all sorts of historical association.

It's kind of strange, but it works very well. Everyone reacts to the name Heiner Goebbels, of course.

Does the Orchestra tackle this kind of music very often?

I would say we don't do it often enough. I wish we had the opportunity and time to do it more, because it really made the orchestra get better and grow. Now we are doing various types of programs. We are not a typical classical orchestra—we do a lot of pop music and folk music and contemporary music, and of course music of Norwegian composers. This week, for example, we are playing Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations* together with three pieces from South America and Kodály. So we are always playing different kinds of programs; the variety is really big. We're trying to do different kinds of music all the time.

Now it has been four or five years since we did Zappa's music, and I think it's time for us to do it again; now that the record is released, it's time for us to take it up again.

Obviously a broadcasting orchestra tackles a wider range of music than most others, but do you find your repertoire is governed to some extent by what the other orchestras in Oslo are doing?

Not so much by what the others are doing as by what the broadcasting company wants us to do, combined with the way we have to think as an orchestra, to maintain the development of the orchestra and keep the quality—because everything we are doing is based on a classical quality. So if we are doing Goebbels or Zappa or pop music or black metal music, we have to have the basis of a very good classical orchestra. That's the basis for every project, but it's also the basis for people wanting to play with us. If a pop musician or a jazz musician wants to play with us, it's based on the belief that we are a really good classical orchestra and we really know what we are doing. That's part of the game. The balance between doing the big television shows and radio broadcasts and becoming a better and better orchestra—that's the real split in our production.

Let's discuss your choice of label for this recording. LAWO has been remarkably successful—only a few years ago it didn't exist and already it's a very prominent label, and not just in Norway.

It has been really amazing what the label has managed to do.

So why did you go there with this Goebbels/Zappa project rather than to a longer-established Norwegian label like Simax?

We go everywhere! Vegard [Landaas, of LAWO] is a really nice guy, and we communicate very well with him. He's really open-minded. In that sense I think it's a really interesting company to work with. We have also signed a contract with Naxos, which gives us a really huge distribution network, so we have the possibility of reaching a large audience with our recordings. But we wouldn't sign a contract that would exclude us from other companies. That's a good thing, because LAWO stands for something experimental and of high quality. This spring we are releasing a live classical CD with a violinist and double bass player from northern Norway, and this will be something totally different from Zappa, so the range of music styles in LAWO is also very big. It's a double concerto for violin and double bass by Bottesini. Then we're doing some Svendsen, and some other things with double bass; we're doing a lot of live stuff on that record. The violinist is Arvid Engegård and the bassist is Knut-Erik Sundqvist. So it's a totally different kind of record from the Zappa, but LAWO stands for both of these totally different projects.

Then we have a record coming up this year, also with LAWO, with our principal clarinet player, Bjørn Nyman, with concertos by the Finnish composer Crusell. And we've also got a double-concerto CD of Poulenc coming up—the two-piano concerto and organ concerto on one record. That's also a project we

started with Thomas Søndergård. We have Christian Ihle Hadland and Håvard Gimse as the piano soloists and the organist is Kaare Nordstoga. He's the organist in Oslo Domkirke, the city church of Oslo. Everything is ready—we're just waiting for the mixing and so on.

We'll be going on tour to northern Norway shortly, to Narvik and Bodø (that's the town I come from, by the way). We're playing there with a pop artist from northern Norway called Kari Bremnes, and then we are doing a classical concert in the fantastic new hall in Bodø, called Stormen; we're doing *The Firebird* there. And we have a competition with soloists from northern Norway. The winner there was Aleksander Nohr. He's 28 years old, a baritone, who will sing Vaughan Williams's *Songs of Travel* in his home town.


We try to do as much touring as possible in Norway. We had this great project last autumn called "Da KORK kom til bydga," roughly translated, "When the Radio Orchestra came to a small village." It brought us out to five places in Norway and we made a program for television. It was a big success. We search and find three talents for every place, and among others we found the tenor Bror Tødenes, and he's still totally unknown. But in the last year amazing things have been happening with his career. I think he's going to be really great, and this was a very nice way to do it.

I have the resulting CD, with Bror Magus Tødenes and KORK conducted by Ingar Bergby [Simax PSC1338] on my desk here. He's a remarkably natural talent and will doubtless go places.

The casting people were asking me: Have you heard about this guy before? And I said no. I checked out the people at the opera and they had heard about him but said: "He's very young—be careful." But he's amazing, absolutely natural.

Another absolutely natural talent is Stian Carlstensen. I spent some time with him and his accordion at the Bergen Festival a few years ago, and was astonished by the spontaneity of his musicianship. He reminds me of John Ogdon in that respect—what is entirely natural to him leaves the rest of us flabbergasted. Do you have any plans to work with him?

He's really great. We have worked with him on several occasions. In 2014 he won the Telenor Prize. We have agreed to do a record with him, with his own music—that has always been a dream of his. Whatever he does is amazing, whether he's talking about music, playing the flute or the banjo. We just have to find the right time and then we'll make the recording.

 **GOEBBELS** *Surrogate Cities*: Suite for Sampler and Orchestra. **ZAPPA** *The Dog Breath Variations/Uncle Meat. Dupree's Paradise. The Perfect Stranger. G-Spot Tornado. Revised Music for Low Budget Orchestra* • Thomas Søndergård, cond; Norwegian CO • LAWO 88843089372 (SACD: 60:58) Live: Oslo 2/11/2010

If the idea of the concert on which this recording was based was to give an impression of the adaptability and virtuosity of the Norwegian Radio Orchestra, it succeeded handsomely. *Surrogate Cities* by Heiner Goebbels (b. 1952) is a vast, 90-minute work, of which the suite for sampler and orchestra accounts for about a third. It is indeed a suite, a Baroque suite, the movements taking their names—but not their styles—from the dance movements you would expect to find there: Sarabande, Allemande, Courante, Gigue, Bourée, Menuet, and Gavotte, with the addition of two variations sets in the form of a Passacaglia and a Chaconne. Goebbels's language is Postmodern—a term people often fall back upon when they're not sure how else to describe something, and in this instance I have to use it because his terms of reference are so wide: The work incorporates recordings of modern industrial processes, urban landscapes, and, most movingly, in the seventh-movement Chaconne, the voices of cantors, supported by some exquisite string writing. The excitable Menuet which follows provides a point of contact with Zappa—its manic energy seems always about to send the music careening off somewhere else. There's something of the power of the best rock music about the piece as well and, not far from the surface, a hint of the malevolent violence that gives so much of Varèse its fizz. And yet the whole thing is viewed with dispassionate irony, often animated by a degree of humor. The work as a whole is diffuse and lacks focus, but in the same way that a city is diffuse and lacks focus—it spirals off in different directions, and at the end it just stops, as if now out of sight.

American classical music has always benefitted from the inroads of mavericks, perhaps the most obvious examples being Gershwin and Ellington from jazz. Frank Zappa is the only prominent figure to have made those inroads from rock, and the five Zappa pieces here accordingly simmer with the energy you expect of the best rock music. And Zappa made the move on his own terms—no one could claim that he was, for example, an expert contrapuntist; instead, he takes a single line and reinforces and decorates it. That explains the single-minded sense of direction of each piece, as well as their lack of sustaining power: Zappa's music is built for speed and accuracy, not Brucknerian architectural spans; where it dawdles, it is generally because it stops to draw breath on the way. And every so often it casts the stylistic net unexpectedly wide: I bet if you played the opening minute or so of *The Perfect Stranger* to someone who had never heard of Zappa and asked who the composer might be, you'd get the answer "Messiaen."

The KORK players bring Goebbels the differentiated textures he requires and crank up a gear to send the Zappa scores belting out at the desired speed; Thomas Søndegård husbands these fierce enthusiasms with skill, and the engineer team has caught it all with plenty of body. It all serves to project a skillful balance of earnestness and fun. **Martin Anderson**

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