

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 Sondergard, cond.; Norwegian Chamber Orchestra • LAWO 88843089372 (SACD 60:58) Live: Oslo 2/11/2010

At its height in the postwar era, the German avant-garde was fearsome enough that running into barbed wire was a gentler experience. But in Germany, as elsewhere, the drift of radical movements in music has been toward the center, and an almost friendly, certainly more accessible, modernism has caught on. Catching on deserves to happen for the *Suite* that Heiner Goebbels (born 1952) has assembled from his large-scale work, *Surrogate Cities*. The pre-recorded sounds emitted by the sampler are blended dramatically with a conventional orchestra heavy with percussion, creating the composer's retort to the "rural idyll." Through a mixture of thumps, bumps, knocking, rapping, and many assorted sounds that are hard to identify (perhaps these belong to what Goebbels calls "sub-cultural sounds"), the pastoral ideal of the Beethoven Sixth and many other musical works is answered by the noise and song of the city.

If this sounds like a recipe for chaos, it isn't. Goebbels, an artistic polymath best known as a theater director, understands how to attract an audience, and his highly varied idiom remains as listenable, and often as haunted, as Bernard Hermann's film scores for Alfred Hitchcock. The *Suite* is organized along Baroque lines, with ten movements titled *Gigue*, *Allemande*, *Passacaglia*, etc., but their musical contents aren't Baroque. The most ingenious, and the most moving, is No. 7 *Chaconne/Kantorloops*, where the sampler plays a cantor's high tenor voice singing over the moody string line. The program notes, which are well translated from German and not too dense with artspeak, describe the reasons why this is city music, but I found the cover art more indicative. Harking back to Dali's style of creepy Surrealism, the black-and-white photos depict two schoolgirls in knee socks languishing on the stairs, its banisters covered in large black beetles. Inside the booklet, the girls climb on to a pitched roof with a flock of ravens circling overhead. Striking a pose midway between the playfully Lolita-ish and Edgar Allen Poe, these images made me enjoy Goebbels's compositional style, the musical equivalent of film noir.

Frank Zappa's forays into orchestral music from the Seventies onward showed two sides, the waggish and the serious. The waggish Zappa created titles like *G-Spot Tornado* and *Dog Breath Variations* (*Fanfare's* earliest reviewer wasn't amused), while the serious Zappa explored an idiom complex enough to interest Pierre Boulez, whose 1985 album, *Boulez Conducts Zappa* (EMI), was probably the cultural high point for Zappa-as-longhair. Although he had studied with Vincent Persichetti—there's an odd couple for you—Zappa was essentially a self-taught composer. Although you can pick up bits and bobs of Stravinsky and Varèse, especially the latter, Zappa was an auto-didact original. The orchestral pieces performed on this CD, which are between three and thirteen minutes long, tend to be fascinated by a specific thing, like a motorized quasi-Brazilian rhythm, string glissandos, or a bluesy riff.

I'm on the side of witty self-conscious figures like Zappa, if only because he described one piece (on the Boulez album but not this one) as follows: "Love Story' features an elderly Republican couple attempting sex while break-dancing." Send Polaroids.

The live concert recorded here, which includes ample applause, are models of enthusiasm. Under the excellent Danish conductor, Thomas Sondergard, the performances give off more heat and swing than the aloof *haute couture* readings under Boulez, in the case of Zappa. The recorded sound is very good as heard through two-channel stereo, the notes interesting, although they might have told us more about the individual Zappa pieces. The whole enterprise came as a delightful surprise but most especially the Goebbels *Suite*, which is the product of a talent worth paying more attention to.

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