

Here is an intriguing disc of what might loosely be called fusion music, recorded live early in 2010 at Oslo's Rockefeller Concert Hall by the Norwegian Radio Orchestra. The Rockefeller is a music and entertainment complex in down-town Oslo, including Rockefeller Music Hall (capacity: 1350). The venue is one of the leading providers of rock and pop concerts in Norway, but it also hosts a wide variety of musical genres, club nights, film screenings and television/radio broadcasts. Radio Orchestras tend to be versatile in providing a wide range of musical genera, and the Norwegian Radio Orchestra certainly handles consummately the complex fusions involved in Lawo's pairing of Goebbels and Zappa. The audience appears to be silently engrossed throughout performance.

Danish Thomas Søndergård, the NRO conductor at the time is also versatile; he studied percussion and timpani at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, and in 1992 became the Royal Danish Orchestra's timpanist. He is currently principal conductor of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and principal guest conductor of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

Frankfurt-based composer Heiner Goebbels (b.1952) has never been easily placeable in the music industry. Musicologists say "his work de-constructs the conventions of opera, theatre and concert music". He started as a composer of 'incidental' music in the seventies, as part of the Linksradikales Blasorchester (so-called left radical brass band), so politics is a fundamental constituent of his art. Broadening his path in music, he began composing and directing his own audio plays and staged concerts in the mid-Eighties.

One of his largest works, *Surrogate Cities*, became a highly acclaimed 90-minute composition for a large orchestra, commissioned by the Alte Oper Frankfurt and performed by the Junge Deutsche Philharmonie. First performed in 1994, it offered a sonic portrait not only of the conditions of life in a contemporary city but also of the orchestra performing it. Indeed, many players of this work are required to produce non-musical sounds with their tuned instruments, merging with a very physical battery of percussion instruments. So radical are these non-musical sounds, it is difficult to identify their origins.

One of several units of the 90 minute *Surrogate Cities* is 'Suite for Sampler and Orchestra', which the composer describes as "An approach to the phenomenon of the city from various sides". Eclectically, it is divided into 10 movements, each given the name of a French Baroque Dance - Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue, with the addition of Passacaglia, Minuet, Gavotte, Bourée, Chaconne and Air. In the Suit's post-modern devices, there is little or nothing of the true Baroque styles in these movements, except for the deep, slow growling of the basses in Passacaglia, coupled with the playing of looped recordings from the 1930s of a curious mode of singing by Kantors. Others, such as the Minuet, are given some particular noises, the sampler's loop of typewriter chatter in this case.

Whether or not this extraordinary music is convincing or not, I leave to the listener, but there is no doubt of the superb performance by the Radio Orchestra, for sheer precision and verve in handling this hugely complicated score. The sonics are vivid and the ear constantly registers a new kind of sound or combination of existing ones. The high resolution capture of the live performance clearly registers both tuned and non-tuned instrumental timbres, from the lowest rumbles to a violin string bowed at stratospheric pitch. This is achieved by much close microphony, resulting in a "wall of sound" with little depth perspective. The hall ambience obviously gives most of the orchestra its required bloom, but the hall itself is only identifiable when the closely captured music stops.

It struck me that this piece would have been opened up thrillingly by arranging the musicians around a 5.1 microphone array, giving a full surround sound like that of 2L's discs of the Philharmonia, but that does not seem to be the case. The surround speakers are certainly active, but with a characteristic reflection from the back of the hall, and I couldn't track down any instrument or noise which clearly originated from side or back. However, the front speakers play 50's type stereo in sounds like piano or drum interacting with one another from "within" the speakers. In multi mode, the centre speaker does a fine job of cementing the centre sound stage; but listeners in stereo are nevertheless given a clean left-to-right sonic stage, but with even less stage depth.

Lawo provide a rather high contrast photo of a most unusual stage seating plan, in a rectangular shape with two huge percussion groups at the front, one each side of the conductor, with keyboard instruments on the wings at each side. Rows of seats occupy a rather steeply stacked set of rows behind the percussion, seating the strings, woodwind and brass. Such an arrangement, for the live audience, might have made it difficult to produce a believable full surround experience, which probably would have been easier to achieve in a studio.

Frank Zappa (1940-1993), initially a great star of the USA's rock and jazz scenes, was later heavily influenced by Edgard Varèse's orchestral pieces and the musique concrète. The fact that he was also a bandleader, songwriter, composer, recording engineer, record producer, and film director surely influenced Goebbels in his career, so this sharing of Oslo's live concert was apt.

In the 80's Zappa wanted to move away from his vocally accessible albums towards more extreme post-modern orchestral work, and eventually could fund a two-album set with the London Symphony Orchestra of his existing

orchestral pieces and some new ones, which exposed his full-blown atonal period. Five of these pieces conclude the disc, each with a distinctly tongue-in-cheek title ("The Perfect Stranger" is the titular of this issue).

Lawo's quirky B/W booklet photos echo this droll approach. However, apart from 'G-Spot Tornado' in which the NRO attack a country song on steroids at terrific speed, there is paradoxically little real humour in the bones of Zappa's pieces. But they are superbly played by the Radio Orchestra and Søndergård, each piece being applauded by a very enthusiastic Norwegian audience (applause for the Goebbels comes only at its end). The NRO also respond to the challenge of the cynical 'Revised Music of Low Budget Orchestra' with solid rhythm and brilliant articulation.

Those listeners with Multichannel will enjoy the fully immersive clapping in the last 5 tracks - very life-like and also demonstrating the Hall's size and geometry. There is a problem, however: if you dial up a Zappa track rather than playing right through, you will find that the track starts too early, several seconds into the end of the previous track's applause. Very irritating.

Certainly a specialist SA-CD, but will be heartily picked up by those interested in atonal, dissonant fusion music, or the fans of Zappa, of which there are still many.

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