

**Frank Zappa's Orchestral Works:
Art Music or "bogus pomp"?**

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Introduction

This dissertation was conceived in response to the many authors, notably Jonathan Bernard, Matthias Kassel, Ben Watson and Kevin Courier, who suggest that Frank Zappa's "art" music contains stylistic references to early 20th century composers as Igor Stravinsky, Eric Satie, Charles Ives, John Cage and Edgard Varèse.¹ On the whole such studies, though undoubtedly important contributions to Zappa criticism, stop short of further specific investigation as to why Zappa's music evokes the style of these composers. If we are to make an attempt at understanding Zappa's music fully in this light, it is necessary to examine these assertions more closely, in order to discover the degree to which Zappa's music has absorbed particular stylistic nuances from each of the aforementioned composers.

For the purposes of this first tentative step towards an in-depth investigation into stylistic similarities between early 20th century modernists and Frank Zappa, I have chosen to concentrate primarily on the influence of Edgard Varèse. To examine all the possible stylistic references to 20th century composers' noted by Bernard, Kassel and Courier, would go beyond the limits of this initial dissertation. The study is conducted as a narrowly focused comparative examination, where specific Zappa pieces are analysed in order to show how they relate to Varese's methods of composing. In my analyses that follow, I have consulted Jonathan

¹ Throughout the bibliography that I have used for this dissertation there are associations made to the early 20th century modernists I mention. See: Jonathan W. Bernard, "Listening to Zappa," *Contemporary Music Review*, 18, 4 (2000): 63-103; Matthias Kassel: "Frank Zappa and the idol of his Youth" in Meyer and Zimmermann eds., *Edgard Varese, Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary* (Suffolk: 2006); Kevin Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen: The Subversive World of Frank Zappa* (Toronto 2002); Ben Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (London 1996)

Bernard's book *The Music of Edgard Varèse* as guidance on Varèse's technique, as well as the opinions of Varèse himself as most famously exemplified in the "Liberation of Sound" lecture he gave in 1936.² This will form a basis to which we can compare certain elements of Zappa's music to, and in turn ascertain the degree to which Zappa's music uses distinctively "Varèsian" ideas. Zappa's works that are specifically referred to appear in the following CD releases: *The Perfect Stranger*, *The London Symphony Orchestra Volume II*, *The Yellow Shark* and *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*. The analyses will consider examples of both acoustic and electronically recorded pieces from within this discography.

In Chapter 1, I have included specific comments the authors I have chosen to respond to have made. This provides the initial platform of inquiry, and one that also reveals the unrealised nature of some elements of Zappa criticism I am aiming to expand upon. Beginning with Ben Watson and Kevin Courier, I examine some of their assertions about Zappa's music and early 20th century modernism. Both authors represent a major contribution to Zappa criticism, but centre mostly on Zappa's rock output and the environment in which such music was conceived. Thereafter, I consider contributions made from Jonathan Bernard and Matthias Kassel in their move towards addressing Zappa's "art" music, and also reflect upon Elliott Carter's views on Varèse in an attempt to consolidate my comparison with Zappa.

From Chapter 3 onwards, I will examine these assertions in several analyses of Zappa works, chosen particularly to reflect some of the sound-scapes Varèse's orchestrations display, and to associate these to Zappa. A discussion of "Bogus Pomp" centres on block-structure and timbre, and examines the possible origins of how Zappa created the piece in view of his skills as a studio engineer and observer of

² See Jonathan W. Bernard, *The Music of Edgard Varèse* (Yale 1987) and Edgard Varèse, "The Liberation of Sound," in Strunk ed., *Source Readings in Music History* (Yale 2000): 1049-1050.

Varèse's attention to timbre. Following this, an analysis of "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress" addresses the question of pitch stasis as described by Bernard, and to consider the extent to which this represents a specific technique of Varèse. Thereafter I discuss isolated elements in various other Zappa works, and examine the extent of Varèsian influence they contain.

Some critics might object that the "art" music influence on Zappa has generally been over-exaggerated, possibly even ascribing to Zappa the same elevated sense of prestige he himself satirised in such music as "Bogus Pomp." But it is undoubtedly the case that Zappa held Varèse in high regard, from his first experience of listening to *Ionisation* to his own aspirations of compositional technique explicitly described in his own words as Varèsian. Whether or not it is true that Zappa wished to be regarded on the same level as Varèse, he clearly acknowledged the aesthetic allegiance in such comments as this one, quoted in *The Real Frank Zappa Book*: "In my compositions, I employ a system of weights, balances, measured tensions and releases – in some ways similar to Varèse's aesthetic."³ He goes on to describe this as being similar to a "Calder mobile," a device with various weights, suspended and balanced with each other by the varying distance between them. Such a suggestive but relatively general comment challenges us to diagnose exactly how and to what extent Zappa's "system" actually can be described, and whether or not it helps to hear his music in light of the Varèsian "measured tensions and releases" he sees as fundamental to the "Varèsian aesthetic." That, in short, is the principal aim of this thesis.

³ Frank Zappa with Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, (London 1989): 162-163.

Chapter 1

Making connections – Frank Zappa, Stravinsky and Varèse.

The principal focus of much existing Zappa criticism centres on the commercial or popular material Zappa produced with the Mothers of Invention and his later touring bands. There has been much written about this side of Zappa's work including many books, articles and interviews that address the mixture of style within the overall musical material he produced. In order to understand the reasons why such stylistic diversity exists, Zappa's social, musical, intellectual and political interactions have been extensively explored. Many interviews and reviews of Zappa exist largely within the popular music press ranging from *NME* to the *Popular Music* journal. More of his attitudes towards American culture, freedom of expression and social issues are examined in Watson, *Negative Dialectics*; and Richard Kostelanetz in Rocco ed., *The Frank Zappa Companion: Four Decades of Commentary* (London 1997).

There remains however noticeably less critical response to his contemporary "classical" or "art" music which he composed alongside the commercial rock and improvisatory jazz output. This thesis is primarily concerned with Zappa's "art" music, where the intention is to investigate the degree to which he attempts to create his "Varèsian aesthetic," and to consider this on reflection with the authors previously mentioned. From the outset of such a discussion, the differentiation between the styles of Zappa's music present problems in terminology. For the purposes of this dissertation I have used the terms "art music" and "orchestral music." I acknowledge that these terms are perhaps unsatisfactory descriptions, but they are used only in an attempt to make a distinction between styles in Zappa's music.

“Weird abuttals”

In this introduction to the analyses that form the subject of the next chapter, it is necessary to present some examples of how critics compare Zappa’s music to the music of many early 20th century composers. Ben Watson incorporates both of Zappa’s styles in his considerations of early 20th century compositional influences in *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*. In his opening chapter Watson begins to make the connection between Zappa, Stravinsky and Varèse:

The technical freedom of Varèse, which allowed him to deal with sound in the manner of the abstract painter, balancing and contrasting blocks of sound, is a product of his Dada-Futurist social programme. Varèse is as aware as Stravinsky of the excitement of a crashing pulse, but offsets unrelated rhythms, making the admixture a matter of textural collage. Distracted by the vocal icing on Zappa’s music, people frequently fail to listen to it as *sound*: his weird abuttals of genre in fact work like extensions of Varèse’s contrasting sonic blocks.⁴

Here, Watson suggests the origins of Zappa’s methods of placing unrelated musical episodes together. Such “technical freedom” in the shape of “sonic blocks” as exemplified in Varèse, might account for this, especially if Zappa’s Dadaist leanings are to be taken into account. One of Varèse’s key compositional models was to combine non-blending sounds, where blocks of these sounds are balanced and contrasted with each other.⁵ As can be seen from Zappa’s quote in the previous chapter, he clearly saw his own methods of composing to be concurrent with Varèse. It is interesting to observe then his aesthetic comparison to a Calder Mobile that demonstrates “weights”, “balances” and “releases.” Watson implies here that as with Varèse, Zappa embraced the same technical freedom in composition, without the constraints of constructing his music on any compositional system that might be associated with serialism or octatonicism or other examples of a given pitch-class

⁴ Ben Watson, *Negative Dialectics* : 6-7

⁵ See Varese in “The Liberation of Sound”

technique. Watson also urges us to listen to Zappa's music not only as music, but specifically as sound, which opens our ears to some of the underlying technical detail that could exist. Some of this detail he is suggesting therefore could be interpreted as "extensions of Varèse's sound blocks."

The question thus arises: do Zappa's "weird abuttals" demonstrate precise similarities with Varèse's "sound-block" technique? In chapter three, this view is tested in an analysis of *Bogus Pomp*, alongside suggestions that Zappa's chosen timbre relates to a specific approach to the organisation of form, thus addressing Watson's collage idea. For Zappa, the combination and diversity of timbre that exists within the percussion section of the orchestra are a major force in his music, timbres that Watson also links to Varèse: "Varèse showed how the orchestra could be organized to contrast musical materials, opening the ear to the marimba, woodblocks and drums..."⁶ As we shall observe in "Bogus Pomp," Zappa's combinations of timbral qualities are noticeably similar to Varèse's, in particular, combinations that involve woodblocks, drums and low brass. Indeed, Kevin Courier also makes this link in describing *Ionisation* that the piece:

...requires a group of thirteen who can play a total of thirty-seven percussion instruments, including gong, Chinese blocks, tam-tams, snare-drums and Cuban claves....Zappa would draw on many of these innovations in dozens of his own compositions.⁷

Courier's proposal of this relatively clear timbral link between Varèse and Zappa is clearly desiring of further elaboration.

⁶ Ben Watson, *Negative Dialectics*: p59.

⁷ Kevin Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen* p27.

Watson's "weird abuttals" also seemed to have posed problems for Jonathan Bernard in his article "Listening to Frank Zappa," where he addresses the question of how to appreciate Zappa's "art" music, in view of him being a rock musician:

Appropriate listening strategies for Zappa's pieces for acoustic concert ensemble (ACEs) must be based primarily on models developed from his more abundant commercially successful output, not so much on the music of early 20th-century composers music he admired, such as Stravinsky and Varèse.⁸

Bernard introduces a potentially useful strategy in an attempt at understanding some of the juxtapositions that occur in Zappa's music. Rather than attempting to apply a specific model of compositional technique borrowed from Stravinsky or Varèse, he suggests that Zappa's craft in constructing his orchestral works is derived more from his rock and film score works, examples of which exist as *200 Motels* and *Lumpy Gravy*. Perhaps this approach does in some way make Zappa's music easier to understand in such a context, but it provokes further questions as to why Zappa clearly stated that he felt his music was "close to Varèse's aesthetic." Bernard is suggesting that we can hear more in Zappa's orchestral works if we listen to them as if they were an extension of his rock pieces, therefore contextualising Watson's series of "weird abuttals" as merely another series of unrelated musical and spoken sections that characterised Zappa's live concerts. This is perhaps a useful listening tool, but Zappa's craft as a composer can still be observed if we listen with what I might suggest as "Varèsian" ears.

Both Bernard and Watson recognise that Zappa's music is distinctive by the blocks of unrelated music that unfold over a whole piece, but the question is, has this technique been developed from studio craft or is there any serious attempt by Zappa to recreate some of the sounds of Varèse? In another article by Watson,

Frank Zappa as Dadaist: Recording Technology and the power to repeat (1996), he introduces another description of Zappa's technique as a studio engineer: "a composer who refused compositional ideologies, adopting instead a collage aesthetic."⁹

Watson's assertion of a "collage" technique is potentially problematic because it could be used as a blanket term that suppresses any further enquiry as to how such a collage is constructed – this will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Watson intersperses *Negative Dialectics* with many references to early 20th century composers, and specifically in this following quote a reference to Varèse. In describing Zappa's piece "Holiday in Berlin Full Blown" from *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*, he suggests a timbral connection with Varèse:

Rather than thinking along academic lines (vertical harmony versus horizontal rhythm) Zappa is contrasting each as timbre in the manner of Varèse: the dull thunder of the bass guitar and the dead beat of the drums separate out the "melody" instruments in the most intriguing way.¹⁰

When we listen to some of Zappa's music, we are drawn to the many, sometimes brief sonic references that evoke Varèse, both in his rock and art music styles. To pick *Hyperprism* as one example, in the opening bars from rehearsal mark 1, we hear low trombone pedal notes that rumble beneath slapstick and bass drum. This combination of timbres reflect the same feature Watson is drawing from "Holiday in Berlin Full Blown." However, throughout Watson's comparisons between Varèse and Zappa, he mainly relies on percussion timbre as the principal identifying Varèsian feature: "consummate Varèsian percussion (woodblocks and drums)"¹¹ or "intricate

⁸ See Jonathan Bernard on "ACE" terminology in, "Listening to Zappa," *Contemporary Music Review*, 18, 4 (2000): p66

⁹ Ben Watson, "Frank Zappa as Dadaist: Recording technology and the power to repeat," *Contemporary Music Review*, 15, 1-2 (2000) 109-137.

¹⁰ Ben Watson, *Negative Dialectics*, p169. Zappa's "Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich" is analysed in Chapter 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p424

Varèse like percussion” on “It must be a Camel.”¹²

Watson has outlined similarities that suggest Varèse’s influence upon Zappa, but as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, examples such as these remain directed at Zappa’s rock output. Also, there remains a noticeable absence of reference to specific areas of Varèse’s music that these similarities can be drawn from.

Matthias Kassel redresses this convention by making a convincing comparison with one of Zappa’s works, in this case “Mo’n’Herb’s Vacation” to Varèse’s *Arcana*. To begin though he observes that any specific motivic quotation from Varèse’s works are “comparatively rare.” However, he suggests that the horn passage in *Arcana* (bb 3-4) after rehearsal mark 9 shown here in Ex. 1.1, are “unmistakeable” in likeness to that of the opening motif from Zappa’s “Mo’n’Herb’s Vacation” shown in Ex 1.2:



Ex 1.1: Edgard Varèse – *Arcana* bb3-4 from Kassel in *Edgard Varèse, Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary* p449

Kassel’s specific analysis in itself is rare, being one of the few examples which quote specific areas of music for the purposes of argument. Indeed the reference with Zappa to Varèse here follows from a previous comparison he makes to Stravinsky’s works, in particular *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *L’histoire de Soldat*.¹³ To paraphrase Kassel, it is a more common phenomenon in Zappa’s music for melodic quotation to evolve from Stravinsky than it is from Varèse. Kassel provides us with a helpful

¹² Ben Watson, *Negative Dialectics*, p162

¹³ In a tribute to Stravinsky, Zappa based “Titties’n’Beer on *L’histoire de Soldat*

starting point, even in concurrence with Watson and Courier that Zappa's principal model of a Varèsian sound-world exists in his deployment of percussion.

Ex 1.2: Mo'n'Herb's Vacation from Kassel in *Edgard Varèse Composer, Sound Sculptor*,
Visionary p449p448.

MO 'N HERB'S VACATION

I.

Frank Zappa

SLOW \downarrow 56

FLS 1234 nasal smorz

OBS 1234 smorz

CLS 1 2 3 smorz

BNS 1 2 3 smorz

CB smorz

TBN 1234

TBA 1234

PERC 1 BELLS
 6 HUGE BASS DRUM w/ drum stick beats
 5 TEMPLE BLOCKS
 SM CHINESE OPERA GONG

ELEC BASS

DRUM SET HIGH HAT SNARE DRUM BASS DRUM ROTO TOMS HH FLOOR TOM

CBS SLOW \downarrow 56 at heel

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To provide a clear reference point about the compositional models and processes Varèse used, useful guidance can be found in *The New Worlds of Edgard Varèse – A Symposium (1979)*. It contains three papers that were included in the symposium that was held at the City University of New York in April 1977. One of these contributors was Elliott Carter who provides us with a Varèsian backdrop to begin a comparison with Zappa’s orchestral works:

Varèse, of course, coming at a later time with another aesthetic, another vocabulary, and with a desire to produce music that interested because of its internal patterning, carried these three phases – rhythmicized orchestra, percussion alone, and a combination of both with each contributing different elements to the total effect – to a much greater development. In general the pitched instruments, usually winds, tend to be treated as percussion instruments repeating short patterns of one or two fixed pitches and thus can be easily amalgamated into the tonal effect.¹⁴

Carter draws on specific features of Varèse – “rhythmicized orchestra,” “percussion alone” and then subsequently both in “combination” which provide useful criteria in relating elements of Zappa’s music to Varèse. If we examine specific areas of Zappa’s music that suggest Varèsian characteristics, then we can use Carter’s description as a test for this. Varèse’s “rhythmicized orchestra” might resonate with Zappa’s four-square rock motifs that intermittently appear in *Bogus Pomp*, and the use of percussion combinations with pitched instruments that contribute to the development of timbral form – possibly towards the “greater development” Carter describes. In addition, Carter’s “three phases” he describes resonates with Zappa’s compositional freedom, evolving from the rock vernacular, the orchestral and the subsequent integration of the two.

The aforementioned statements of comparison that are presented here by Bernard, Watson, Kassel and Carter, give an indication that the connection with

¹⁴ See Carter’s Introduction in *The New Worlds of Edgard Varèse, A Symposium* (New York 1979) p4

Zappa's music to Varèse is more than a passing similarity. The following chapter will attempt to show some of these comparisons in greater detail, and to show using Carter that there are clear Varèsian features that Zappa clearly employed in his craft as a composer.

Chapter 2

Frank Zappa the composer

Before I go on, let me warn you that I talk dirty, and that I will say things that you will not enjoy nor agree with. You shouldn't feel threatened, though, because I am a mere buffoon, and you are all Serious American Composers. For those of you who don't know, I am also a composer. I taught myself how to do it by going to the library and listening to records. I started when I was fourteen and I've been doing it for thirty years. I don't like teachers. I don't like most of the things that you believe in – and if that weren't bad enough, I earn a living from playing the electric guitar.¹⁵

In this address to the American Society of Composers, Zappa positions himself in an epigraph to his output as someone who is effectively lower in status from his audience as he applies the social norm of guitar music being subservient to the supposedly greater art of academic composition. Meanwhile, he qualifies his status as a composer as being plainly different in methodology and training. However, although he positions himself in a subordinate position, he clearly thought that his methods and music were relevant and worthy to share the same platform of discussion with other supposed colleagues. Arguably though, in his own intellectual separation from the composition society, he created a further position of elitism for himself.

The question of elitism is a complicated one for Zappa. On the one hand he despised anyone in American society that thought themselves superior, as this would usually involve people who wielded power as a result of money or political position. On the other he was mostly critical of the abilities of the musicians he hired to perform his music, demanding almost impossible standards of musicianship that his music required.

¹⁵ Zappa (with Occhiogrosso), p190

After the rather beleaguered recording and release of the 1978 *London Symphony Orchestra Volume II* LP, Zappa turned his attentions to composing and releasing most of his music on the Synclavier sampling system.¹⁶ The “human element” in Zappa’s performances marked a change in direction for Zappa where he moved towards composing and releasing more of his material using the Synclavier medium.¹⁷ It was far more cost effective and time efficient for composing, even if the initial financial outlay of the equipment was considerable.

The Synclavier system was an early form of powerful sampling software manufactured by New England Digital, which was described by the company as a “fully integrated computerised audio system used for music and post production.”¹⁸ The philosophy of the Synclavier company was to produce a synthesiser system for music production regardless of cost. Some of Synclavier’s clients were in close contact with the team of engineers that designed it, including Zappa who periodically employed the company’s David Ocker to assist in the production of scores and orchestration. Given that Zappa would go on to use the Synclavier in his further works, it could be argued that he viewed the Synclavier’s synthetic production of sampled and synthesised sound to be an equally valid instrumental medium to that of conventional acoustic instruments.

Zappa’s aspiration to be taken seriously as a composer was given a boost in 1984 when he was invited by Pierre Boulez to record some of his music at IRCAM, which resulted in *The Perfect Stranger* album.¹⁹ *The Perfect Stranger* was

¹⁶ See Zappa (with Occhiogrosso) 151- 156.

¹⁷ Zappa was intolerant of what he calls the “human element,” which some may describe as minor inaccuracies in performance. His derision is evident on the London Symphony Orchestra Vol. II sleeve notes.

¹⁸ Synclavier Home Page, (Synclavier history), <http://www.500sound.com> (accessed 06/07)

¹⁹ More on Boulez and Zappa can be found in Ben Watson, *Negative Dialectics*, 427-429.

Zappa's first release of a dual recording of acoustic and sampled Synclavier performance.

The Synclavier gave Zappa the freedom to compose and release his music without the constraints of musicians and their union requirements. The practical aspects of writing music to be played by humans, in some concert location, and for them all to be paid was taken out of the equation completely. As a machine, the Synclavier was capable of achieving results that humans could not, which introduced Zappa to writing music that had even more complexity than before. It therefore allowed him to display his abilities as a "serious" composer, without the inaccuracies of the "human element" detracting from any of the technical craft the music may contain. In this light, it is not too much of a stretch to tie in Zappa's subsequent turn to technology in view of a philosophy initiated several decades earlier by Varèse. During his 1936 Liberation of Sound lecture, Varèse projected towards the future his desire for machines to compose music that went beyond the abilities of human performance: "I am sure that the time will come when the composer, after he has graphically realized his score, will see this score automatically put on a machine which will faithfully transmit the musical content to the listener."²⁰ Zappa could already achieve this in his operation of the Synclavier system which could arguably be what Varèse envisaged. Did Zappa view the Synclavier as being the next step that Varèse imagined as a "sound machine"? We can only speculate, but for Zappa, the Synclavier system enabled him to compose music beyond the constraints of real time, manipulate sound and integrate various material that was not possible with a conventional orchestra. That is not to say, of course, that every composer adopting the Synclavier medium can be assumed to be directly influenced by Varèse's music or

²⁰ Edgard Varèse, "Liberation of Sound."

his ideas in “The Liberation of Sound.” But, in Zappa’s case, there are at least some compelling grounds to relate to Varèsian theory, given his knowledge of Varèse and the enthusiasm for the sounds that he heard in Varèse’s music.

Varèse’s futuristic predictions resonate here with the capabilities of the Synclavier:

And here are the advantages I anticipate from such a machine: liberation from the arbitrary, paralyzing tempered system; the possibility of obtaining any number of cycles or if still desired, subdivisions of the octave, consequently the formation of any desired scale; unsuspected range in low and high registers; new harmonic splendors obtainable from the use of sub-harmonic combinations now impossible; the possibility of obtaining any differentiation of timbre, of sound-combinations; new dynamics far beyond the present human-powered orchestra; a sense of sound-projection in space by means of the emission of sound in any part or in many parts of the hall as may be required by the score; cross rhythms unrelated to each other, treated simultaneously, or to use the old word, "contrapuntally" (since the machine would be able to beat any number of desired notes, any subdivision of them, omission or fraction of them) - all these in a given unit of measure or time which is humanly impossible to attain.²¹

For Varèse, the construction of any possible timbre in any given sound combination would be a major device in which to manipulate sound by way of some electronic process. It is precisely this manipulation of manufactured sound that Zappa developed in his principal Synclavier works of *Jazz from Hell* (1986), *Perfect Stranger* (part) (1984) and *Civilization Phase III* (1994), works that arguably might continue Varèse’s predictions in the development of compositional methods. It is not clear whether Zappa saw his Synclavier as being Varèse’s intended “sound machine,” but there exists a connection between both composers in their regard to sound manipulation, and their ideas on the accuracy of performance such music should command.

²¹ Edgard Varèse, “Liberation of Sound.”

Still, the point is not entirely straightforward, for there is some evidence of contradictions in some of the subjects in his attitude to live performance:

One thing that the Synclavier can't replace is the experience of conducting an orchestra. The orchestra is the ultimate instrument, and conducting one is an unbelievable sensation. Nothing else is like it, except maybe singing doo-wop harmony and hearing the chords come out right.²²

Here we observe Zappa separating the experiential from the practical. His application of Synclavier technology to his music was not only a vehicle for imaginative experimentation but a necessary tool in overcoming the practical difficulties of working with large numbers of musicians. One gets the impression that in Zappa's "ideal world," he would still maintain that manipulating the orchestral sounds from the podium of the symphony orchestra supersedes any form of synthesised sound production. This psychological experience for Zappa seems to be one that he cannot control, an emotional experience he likens to the unexplainable automatic pleasure one enjoys on hearing a particular piece of music.

Furthermore, while the practical considerations in eliminating musicians and their idiosyncrasies may have given Zappa the impetus to release *The Perfect Stranger*, in *Jazz from Hell* (1986), by contrast, Zappa's use of Synclavier could be considered as the "actual instrument" rather than a substitute for the live ensemble. The album contains eight pieces, all instrumental, save for some vocal effects in "Massaggio Galore." Some blocks of material are juxtaposed timbrally, but the over-riding effect in all of the pieces is the continuous pulse. Over these continuous rhythms, Zappa constructs a kaleidoscope of changing timbre, cross-rhythms and motives that sound even more advanced than *The Perfect Stranger*. As Ben Watson informs us in his discussion of these pieces, "Zappa had bought more RAM (random

²² Zappa (with Occhiogrosso), p176

access memory): the bell-like purity of tracks like “Outside Now Again” on *The Perfect Stranger* has given way to more complex timbres, enabling a more filthy, Zappaesque sound.”²³ Watson also suggests that although the live performance aspect in this album is absent (except for Zappa’s extended improvisation on “St. Etienne”), our attentions are therefore drawn towards Zappa’s compositional model: “Given their mode of realisation, it is possible to concentrate on Zappa’s predilections undistracted by considerations of musician personality and audience expectation.”²⁴ We might conclude therefore that although Zappa may have originally transferred to Synclavier technology out of practical reasons, in *Jazz from Hell* it could be argued that he was engaging with the technology wholly as a medium of compositional expression, instead of a medium of substitution, which we later see culminating in *Civilization Phase III*.

The piece that is discussed in the following chapter is an orchestral version of one that also exists as a Synclavier version. The experience of “Bogus Pomp” contributed to Zappa’s move towards Synclavier production, one that perhaps was a reluctant necessity.

²³ Ben Watson: “Frank Zappa: the Complete Guide to his Music” p83

²⁴ Ibid

Chapter 3

The Music – Making sense of Zappa

Zappa did not attach any importance to describing his own creative methodology, not even to comment on why he viewed his particular sound-craft to be successful. When asked by Kurt Loder in 1984 in an interview on this issue, Zappa responded, “I don’t know how to explain it. I just do it. It’s not based on any academic regulations.”²⁵ Although he did not acknowledge any specific methodology, Zappa’s music displays characteristics that evoke, to my ears at least, deliberate intentions in regard to his organisation of structure and timbral colour. In the following study I shall select some of Zappa works to determine whether there are obvious consistent characteristics that imply some kind of systematic approach. In part, this will involve examination and evaluation of the associations Courier and Watson have discussed between Frank Zappa’s music and certain early 20th century composers. I will also suggest how Zappa has developed some of these characteristics, incorporating them to create his own very distinct style.

While Courier and Watson have observed similarities with early 20th century compositional style in Zappa’s music (as introduced in the previous chapter), Bernard argues that we should not separate Zappa’s rock music from his orchestral music in our critical response. He considers both compositional styles simultaneously, allowing his argument to conclude that Zappa composed in a “collage” style. Without dismissing Bernard outright, there is a danger in the summary use of a term like “collage”, in underplaying the inner complexities Zappa’s music contains. So

²⁵ See Ben Watson, “Frank Zappa as Dadaist: Recording technology and the power to repeat,” *Contemporary Music Review*, 15, 1-2 (2000) 109-137

called collage may or may not contain specific compositional processes like serialism or techniques involving the construction of pitch class sets. Some of it may indeed sound like Varèse or Stravinsky, but if we are to allude in any meaningful way to any similarities Zappa's music has to these composers, it is essential to make some attempt at describing what constitutes the particular elements of Zappa's musical collage.

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians includes Zappa along with such composers as Charles Ives, Arvo Pärt, Heinrich Lachenmann and John Zorn as collagists, and offer the following description of such a craft:

A term borrowed from the visual arts, where it refers to the act of pasting diverse objects, fragments or clippings on to a background, or to the work of art that results. Musical collage is the juxtaposition of multiple quotations, styles or textures so that each element maintains its individuality and the elements are perceived as excerpted from many sources and arranged together, rather than sharing common origins. Other words used for this effect include 'montage', 'assemblage' and 'bricolage'. The term 'collage' has been applied to music with a variety of meanings, mostly to describe 20th-century works that borrow musical material from multiple sources.²⁶

Such a definition characterises collage as a specific method of composition, but, the question still remains as to how any such a collage and its "multiple sources" are constructed. In Zappa's case, he juxtaposed his unrelated objects of music together, but his sources did in fact share "common origin," constructed exclusively from his own compositions that he re-arranged and transcribed for the many different functions.

Moreover, the term "collage" might even be construed as a reference to Zappa's Dadaist leanings. By defining the "weird abuttals" as some form of sonic Dadaism, that being the assemblage of unconnected objects, this in essence describes Zappa's craft in a completely different plane, ultimately one that places it beyond

²⁶ New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians – (entry on collage)

reference to any “system” or method. In some shape or form, elements of this sonic Dadaism may well exist in Zappa’s music, but this is not the principal focus of this study. I am convinced that specific methods of structure, timbral relationships, pitch language and orchestration do exist in the music. The question is, to what degree are these elements of composition specific to Zappa and/or Varèse?

The forthcoming analyses feature the following pieces: “Bogus Pomp” (*London Symphony Orchestra II*), “The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” (*The Perfect Stranger and Yellow Shark*), “Times Beach II” (*The Yellow Shark*) and “Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich” (*Burnt Weeny Sandwich*). Any reference to musical material is given as a time reference taken from each CD at any given point. In the case of “Bogus Pomp” however, the time references here are taken independently but in conjunction with a long-play record.

A few preliminary points of method should be addressed at the start. First of all, in my discussion, I have specifically not used any scores of Zappa’s music. Although this has proved a somewhat problematic limitation, examining the music in this way conforms to Zappa’s own learning experience of 20th century compositions. He did not analyse scores, he constructed a mental impression of the sound-world of the music that he heard. In doing so he has adopted his own unique understanding of this music, an understanding that would ultimately be different if studied from scores within the academic environment. The aspect of adopting one’s own individual methods of understanding music is highlighted by Robert Walser in *Ten Apothegms and four Instances*:

We don’t imagine that we understand someone who is speaking a language with which we have no familiarity, but music can more easily be understood as interpretable within one’s own discursive competency. We often hear unfamiliar musical systems as not having a system at all, or as warped versions of the systems we know. That is why music enables great

understandings and misunderstandings across cultural boundaries. This phenomenon is both a caution for analysis and an object for it.²⁷

Walser shows the validity in conducting our analyses within the frame of our own understanding of musical systems. Zappa's understanding of Varèse's music was moulded by his listening method that was purely an aural experience. His unique "discursive competency" originated from performing and listening to doo-wop, jazz and R&B. Arguably, then, in an analysis of Zappa's own music, our own method of appreciation should be identical, with the musical "text" being the recording.

A second preliminary concern, however, is more specifically relevant to the understanding of Zappa as a "composer" influenced by such aural experiences. During his breaks from the touring band, Zappa's working environment was the mixing studio where he spent a large amount of his time. This simple fact carries potentially intriguing implications: in essence we might say, he was used to *producing* music rather than *composing* it in the traditional sense. That is to say that his method of constructing music was largely based on studio techniques that involve overdubbing, modifying sound wave patterns, fading and cutting/inserting material that are common in studio production.

Arguably, the essence of this process is the one defining factor of Zappa's style, a style that incorporates a sectional or block-like arrangement of musical material. With these interrelated concerns in mind, we can now turn to explore how best to "analyse" the musical results.

²⁷ Robert Walser in Moore, Allan F. ed., "Ten Apothegms and Four Analyses," *Popular Music Analysis* (Cambridge 2003) p23.

Bogus Pomp

[Large Orchestra version (London Symphony Orchestra Vol II, 1978)]

The 1978 LSO recording of “Bogus Pomp” is a mixture of new and recycled musical material. The earliest layer of material is derived from a 1968 *Mother’s of Invention* Concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London. Some time in the 1970s, Zappa transcribed and re-orchestrated this material, in order to combine it with some of the music that appeared in his *200 Motels* film score of 1971. The score itself was to be the principal focus of this bizarre low budget movie which centred on the exploits and vulgarities of a touring rock band. No doubt the low artistic or entertainment status of the film itself resulted in poor listeners’ response to the music. A further problem with the *200 Motels* recording springs from the fact that the orchestra did not expect Zappa’s score to be as complicated as it was. The *200 Motels* performance then was under-rehearsed and generally substandard. Re-using some of this previous musical material from *200 Motels* gave Zappa another opportunity for it to be heard. The piece first appeared entitled “Bogus Pomp” on the *Orchestral Favourites* album which of 1975. Some three years later Zappa further developed the piece and lengthened it to 23 minutes, and it is this version that was recorded in 1978 by the London Symphony Orchestra with Kent Nagano.

Even then however, the story was not over: although this version had undoubtedly attained a much higher performing standard, it would not be released until 1984. The delay resulted from several years of studio editing to eliminate inaccuracies. In fact, problems for Zappa had begun at the outset of the LSO project. As a result of booking difficulties with hiring a large enough auditorium to house

Zappa's mammoth orchestra, the LSO version was recorded in the Twickenham Film Studio in London – a space as Zappa complained, that was not ideal:

We tried every “major” concert hall – every one of them was booked with Christmas shit. We tried all the smaller town halls – same deal. We couldn't find a hall anywhere, so we wound up at Twickenham Studios (a film studio where they used to shoot the “007” movies), on an old soundstage, with completely dead acoustics. It was big enough to hold the 107-piece orchestra, but it sounded diabolical.²⁸

On the whole then, this situation was to be yet another unsatisfactory episode in Zappa's attempt at hiring a large scale ensemble to record his music.

In the recording, Zappa's editing has not managed to completely eradicate some of the isolated moments of performance inaccuracy. Not surprisingly he was still unhappy with this LSO performance, and his derisory remarks about the “human element” are included in the sleevenotes:

Rock journalists (especially the British ones) who have complained about the “coldness” the “attempts at perfection,” and missing “Human elements” in *Jazz from Hell* should find *LSO Volume II* a real treat. It is infested by wrong notes and out-of-tune passages.²⁹

But although this sarcastic commentary leaves no doubt that Zappa was frustrated and unsatisfied with the LSO performance, he remained enthusiastic about the underlying musical narrative of the album:

Built into the composition is a little psychodrama based on the idea that in an orchestra, the principal violist never gets a good solo. What happens in the minds of the other principal string players when the lowly viola gets all the hot licks? Something stupid, of course, culminating in the principal cellist's improvised emotional outburst near the end of the piece. All this is supported by cheesy fanfares, drooling sentimental passages and predictable “scary music.”³⁰

²⁸ Zappa (with Occhiogrosso), p152.

²⁹ Zappa's comments are presented in the sleevenote commentary of the *LSO Vol II* LP

³⁰ See Zappa's commentary on the *LSO Vol. 2* sleevenotes.

Ironically enough then, in spite of his difficulties with the “human element,” this “psychodrama” refers the piece directly to Zappa’s experience of musicians and the relationships they have towards each other.

Perhaps as an offshoot of his interest in film music, Zappa intended *Bogus Pomp* to be an emotion based, light-hearted composition that conjured up images of humour, containing “scary music” that might appear in a Hollywood movie. As his commentary reveals, the piece was intended purely for entertainment. Zappa is clearly telling his audience not to take the piece too seriously, and in doing so he is deflecting and undermining any serious attempts of analysis any critic might undertake of his music. As critics though, we need to analyse musical material in order to contextualise and understand it. Although Zappa did not want his music to be taken seriously, he cared about his craft. In turn, by trying to decipher Zappa’s methods, we must take this music seriously, if mindful of the fact that this activity was something that he vocally despised.

As previously discussed, in keeping with Zappa’s listening experiences, we must rely on our ears to identify relevant and important features of the piece. The first important feature to remember is that “*Bogus Pomp*” is derived from the *200 Motels* movie score. Movie score by nature is episodic, in that successive blocks of music provide an emotive aural dimension to aid the visual dimension of the unfolding scenes. *Bogus Pomp* is structured in just such an episodic fashion, where successive blocks and styles of music are joined together. These styles might be loosely termed as light-hearted and serious. The successive episodes are characterised by specific orchestrations with distinct timbral features or declamatory statements of musical motif. Overall, Zappa uses these forces to emphasise an integral instrumental hierarchy.

Analysis

Overleaf is a table that shows the episodic nature of Bogus Pomp. To begin at a general level, we might immediately observe how some episodes are quite precise in duration of one minute or plus or minus 10 seconds. Some are 2 or even 3 minutes, but the structure of the piece still remains governed by quite precise time frames. The significance of this suggests that the music is designed to fit a given duration of time. As Zappa was constructing slots of material to be similar in duration, dividing Bogus Pomp into convenient 1 or multiples of 1-minute-long sections, this reveals a roughly arithmetical and practical sense of structure derived from studio production techniques. This method is opposed to a more notationally derived structuring that is less associated with time frame duration.

At a more detailed level, the table also shows a schematic description of specific sonorities Zappa has used within the time frames or sound blocks that constitute the entire piece. The sound blocks are also chronologically represented here by a letter at the top of each column.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
	1	1		1		1			1	1		1		1	1	1
	2			2	2	2	2	2		2		2		2	2	2
		3		3	3	3	3	3		3				3	3	3
			4	4		4	4	4			4	4			4	4
	5	5		5		5	5	5								5
				6		6	6	6		6	6					
											7					
				9									8			
				10									9			
01:10	00:34	02:01	02:11	01:26	01:10	02:04	03:10	00:54	02:18	01:07	00:18	00:35	00:30	00:43	03:37	01:18

(Duration in minutes/seconds)

Sonorities:

1 – brass 2 – woodwind 3 – percussion 4 – strings 5 – piano 6 - drumkit

7 – harp 8 – spoken 9 – scrapes 10 – bongs

(Sonorities in bold type denote motivic declamation).

Varesian sonorities and textures

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
		1														
					2			2								
		3		3	3	3	3		3						3	3
		4		4												
				5												
				9												
				10												
01:10	00:34	02:01	02:11	01:26	01:10	02:04	03:10	00:54	02:18	01:07	00:18	00:35	00:30	00:43	03:37	01:18

(Duration in minutes/seconds)

A [00.00] – (times are given in minutes and seconds throughout the piece)

Bogus Pomp opens with epic fanfares and Hollywood orientated film score

orchestration. The musical material here first appears as the opening sequence to the

200 Motels soundtrack called “Semi-fraudulent/Direct-From-Hollywood Overture.”

Zappa recycles it further in the “Holiday in Berlin” motif from the 1976 *Burnt Weeny Sandwich* album.

Turning our attention to timbre, we hear the three primary forces of flute, piano and horn thereafter. Zappa combines firstly the flute with piano, then horn with piano. The doubling of each of these instruments together, demonstrates Zappa’s awareness of the sound production qualities of the individual instruments. He combines each instrument so that the initial “attack” of every unison of the melody in both instruments results in a new, hybridised tone quality. Therefore if we consider that the initial sound production of piano notes are immediate, due to the force of the hammer striking the strings, the consequence of combining this with the slower attack wave of the horn for example creates a new timbral consequence. This feature is particularly prevalent in Zappa, and we will see subsequently that he augments the palette of timbral extremity to include wood-block and snare-drum with other instruments of slower attack. From a timbral focus therefore, the piano is Zappa’s centre in which to combine the two other instruments.

B [1.10]

A sudden change in texture with low fortissimo brass dominates this section, but Zappa still retains the piano with short intermittent interjections. Zappa introduces gongs, woodblock, drums and rasping noises to act as opposing forces to the brass. Low attack/high density sound qualities in the brass and piano serve as an opposing dimension to the immediate attack and starkness of the woodblock, drums and rasping noises. This sound-world might suggest moments from a number of Varèse’s works but one of the best examples to illustrate Zappa’s re-creation of this soundscape could exist in *Ionisation*.

C [1.44]

Zappa now condenses the texture by only using the single sonority of strings therefore there are no timbral doublings. He uses many contrasting effects which include tremolando and pizzicato, which has more than a passing resemblance in sound masses that occur in moments of Varèse's *Amériques*, a work that Bernard tells us was one of Zappa's favourites.³¹ Zappa uses this section to incorporate another important motif of the piece - that of a three note figure. The descending *f#*, *e* and *a* figure [Fig. 3.1] are repeated periodically, with the intervals being transposed as part of a sequence.

Fig 3.1

**D** [3.41]

This section is characterised by slow pondering woodwind and brass in the bass register with the additional accompaniment of the drum-kit. This sound-scape is a stark contrast to the previous section, and perhaps a pre-cursor in timbral development to the next section.

E [4.50]

Zappa re-introduces string sonority with the opening violin gesture. It is a rhythmic motif which is also doubled with pitched wood-blocks. This motif however is brief, acting as an introduction to full brass and woodwind sonority that is interspersed with more Varesian percussion. This Varesian reference is again exemplified in the

³¹ See Jonathan Bernard, "Listening to Zappa" p92

rasping noises, sleigh bell interjections and snare drum amongst the low brass and tremolando strings. Aside from the strings, this particular texture is reminiscent of *Intégrales*, shown here in Fig 3.2:

Fig. 3.2 - *Intégrales* bb9-12 after rehearsal mark 16

a tempo

The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes woodwinds and strings. The second system includes percussion.

Woodwinds:
Flutes (Fl.) and Clarinets (Cl.) in Bb: *pp* (pianissimo), *mf* (mezzo-forte), *f* (forte), *pp* (pianissimo), *f* (forte).
Horn (Hb.): *pp* (pianissimo), *f* (forte).
Trumpets (Trpttes) in F: *pp* (pianissimo), *mf* (mezzo-forte), *f* (forte).
Trombones (Trombones): T. (Tenor), B. (Baritone), C.B. (Contrabass). *molto*, *pppp* (pianississimo).

Strings:
Violins (Vl.), Violas (Vla.), Cellos (Vcl.), Double Basses (Cb.). *pp* (pianissimo), *mf* (mezzo-forte), *mp* (mezzo-piano), *f* (forte), *pp* (pianissimo).

Percussion:
1. C. c. (Cymbals), C. r. (Cymbals), T. c. (Tom-toms). *pp* (pianissimo), *mp sur la caisse* (mezzo-piano on the drum).
2. Cits. (Cymbals), B. ch. (Bass Drum). *mf* (mezzo-forte), *p* (piano), *pp* (pianissimo), *f* (forte).
3. Grls. (Gongs), Ch. (Chimes), T. b. (Tambourine), Gong. (Gong), T. t. (Tom-toms). *pp* (pianissimo), *L.Y.* (Loud Yell).
4. Trgl. (Triangle), Cy. ch. (Cymbal Chimes), Vrg. (Vibraphone), Gr. c. (Gong). *pp* (pianissimo), *(loud)*, *pppp* (pianississimo).

If we also take account of the strings then this overall sound can also be heard in *Amériques* shown in Fig.3.3:

Fig. 3.3: *Ameriques*, (rehearsal 14)

The image displays a page of a musical score for rehearsal 14, marked with a rehearsal symbol and '(J. 144)'. The page number '31' is located in the top right corner. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes parts for Piccolo (Pic.), Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Obs.), English Horn (E.H.), Clarinets in Bb (CLARINETS Bb), Bassoon (Bsns.), Contrabassoon (C.Ban.), Cymbals (C Tpts.), Trumpets (Trbs.), Tuba, and Contrabass (C.Tuba). The second system includes Harp 1 and 2, Timpani (Timp.), Snare Drum (S.B.), Large Drum (L.R.), Cymbal (Cym.), Conga (C.Cym.), Triangle (Tri.), and Woodblock (W.). The string section at the bottom includes Violins 1 and 2 (Vlns. div.), Viola (Vln.), Violoncello (Ve. div.), and Contrabass (Cb. div.). The score features various musical notations such as dynamics (p, f, ff, pp, mf), articulation (quasi gliss., gliss. chromatique), and performance instructions (con sord., suspendue (baguette bois)). The woodblock part includes vocalizations: 'si x do f ve x mi' and 'In x sol x In x'.

This section sees the first deployment of a new and particularly favourite sonority of Zappa's that might suitably be described as "bongs." The identity of these pitched instruments Zappa uses have not been specifically identified but Varèse exploits a similar difference in sonority and pitch of the tam-tam and gong in *Intégrales*. See Fig. 3.4:

Fig. 3.4: Intégrales bb8-10 after rehearsal mark 4:

The image displays a page of a musical score for the piece 'Intégrales' by Zappa, specifically measures 8-10 after rehearsal mark 4. The score is written for a large ensemble of instruments. The instruments listed on the left side of the page are: Flutes (Fl.), Horns (Hb.), Middle Bass (mib), Clarinets (Cltes.), Bass Clarinet (sib), Cor (fa), Trumpets (ré), Trumpets (ut), Trombones (T.), Bass Trombone (B.), Contrabass (C. B.), Cymbals (Cy.s.), Congas (C.c.), Tom-toms (T.c.), Chimes (Chs.), Cymbals (Cymbs.), Bongos (B.ch.), Gongs (Grls.), Tam-tam (T.b.), Gong (Gong.), Tam-tam (T-t.), Trgl., Cymbal (Cy.ch.), Varg., and Gong (Gr.c.). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics (e.g., *sf*, *pp*, *ppp*, *pp*, *ppp*), and articulation marks. There are also some performance instructions in French at the bottom: '(1) sur le rebord avec baguettes tam-tams' and 'roulez'. The page number '48' is visible in the top right corner of the score.

Zappa's sonorities create the effect of temporal uncertainty as the nature of each "bong" has the illusion time slowing but within the regular pulse of the rest of the music. It is inconclusive as to whether Zappa used the exact same instruments as

Varèse, but it is likely that he might have heard such an effect from Varèse's music in the first instance. Throughout Zappa's compositions, rock and orchestral, this sound frequently occurs, either acoustically or modified by electronic effects. Towards the end of this section, the pitches from the bongos are transferred initially to flutes and then in lower woodwind. Such a transfer of melodic motif is rare in *Bogus Pomp*. Zappa prefers to manipulate his musical material in successive gestures that are continually constructed from new musical ideas. Although some isolated instances of melodic reference are present, Zappa does not employ this technique as an overall form of compositional development.

F [6.24]

After the initial introduction of the bongos in the previous section, this next section is characterised by the frequent recurrence of this particular sonority and motif. This feature interrupts the changing styles of this section, thereafter culminating in a riff orientated rock excerpt for full orchestra.

G [7.34]

Major contrast again ensues from the strong rock rhythm of the previous section to an emotive and rich string texture that state the three note figure from the bongos. As before, this motif periodically re-appears but Zappa does not develop or vary it for the purposes of successive musical material. Although Zappa does not extensively use this particular device, it maintains a minimum motivic continuity through the sections.

There are many changes of texture and sonorities in this section that include doublings of piano and vibraphone, oboe and wood-block and the low register interjected rumble of the bass trombone. Juxtaposed timbral contrast is also achieved

by extensive use of snare and bass drum, drumkit and woodblock. This then, is a development from the initial combinations of timbre Zappa uses in section A with piano, flute and horn, where the timbral range of doubled instruments is expanded.

H [9.38]

Following on from this percussion-orientated soundscape, Zappa introduces further timbral contrast in doubling combinations using the piano as a central sonority with contra-bassoon, vibraphone and xylophone. He uses these particular instruments in a process of changing sonority, characterised by the change in initial attack qualities of the specific instruments used in each combination. This spectrum of timbral development is revealed as the contra-bassoon moves through to vibraphone to xylophone. The extremities of timbre are clear, from the low growl of the contra-bassoon, to the softer qualities of the vibraphone culminating in the abruptness and percussiveness of the xylophone. This process is underlaid with the unifying sonority of the piano. Together with this event of timbral development, the whole of this section has major contrasts in style, most notable in a short interlude of a chord orientated rock progression for full orchestra. As the insertion of this particular excerpt seems stylistically out of context in relation to previous material, the effect is entertaining and rather humorous. Zappa also maintains previous motivic reference to the three note figure first announced by the bongos in section E. He includes this in all three forces of strings, brass and woodwind.

I [12.48]

This episode begins and ends with strings playing in a tango-like rhythm. This diverts the unfolding musical development from the timbral dimension in the previous

section, to a more melodic and rhythm orientated bridge passage within a single sonority. Two violas feature here in a dialogue based on blues improvisation.

J [13.42]

Zappa returns to a strong riff-orientated rock rhythm in a section that is identified by the introduction of another film-like principal theme. It acts as a stylistic, sound-world juxtaposition to some of the previous disjointed percussive complexity. It could be argued that Zappa has taken the momentum of seriousness away from his previous allusions to Varèse. If the idea of seriousness is in the exemplification of Varèse, then this seriousness is counter-acted or balanced by a sound that invokes the lighter idiom of movie-score. The entertainment value is presented here in the over-inflated sound of a large symphony orchestra playing rock. Previous references to compositional detail however still exist with a moment of timbral doubling, this time with the trumpet and xylophone. Similarly, motivic reference is maintained with a brief quotation of the pitches used in the bongos.

K [16.00]

After a short tacet, at 16:00 exactly, a sound wash of harp glissandi and electric bass serve as an accompaniment to what sounds like an improvisation for viola and drumkit. Owing to the loose programmatical subject matter Zappa describes for the piece, the viola gives an example of prowess in the limelight by playing what Zappa describes as a “solo” and “all the good licks.”

L [17.07]

This short episode is identified by a timbre and motif change to a brief return of the previous riff played in the woodwind, thereafter culminating in the doubling of trombone with high register cello. This frantic cello gesture is what Zappa describes in his programme notes as the principal cellist's reaction to the previous viola solo.

M [17.25]

Suddenly at 17.25, a very different sound-world is in place here with the introduction of spoken shrieks and scraping noises. A voice is heard to say, "Finished?!" to the principal cellist and there follows a tacet to 18:00.

N [18.00]

Motivic reference is heard now with the brass and woodwind's declamation from near the end of section K. This texture is now augmented to include melodic doubling with glockenspiel and xylophone. The overall musical content in this section however is chaotic, in which there exists no timbral or motivic development. There is never any sense of unity in this light, therefore structurally, it is a section that is characterised as having successive undeveloped episodes.

O [18.30]

Another small Varesian sound-world is exemplified here by the rattle of wood-block and sleigh-bells strangely reminiscent of the opening bars of Hyperprism, shown in Fig. 3.5. Zappa uses this similar sonority as a back-drop to another viola solo.

Fig. 3.5: *Hyperprism*, rehearsal mark 1

3

The image displays a page of a musical score for rehearsal mark 1. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. At the top left, a large number '1' is enclosed in a box. The instruments listed on the left include Flute (Fl.), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. in b), Oboe (1. and 2.), Bassoon (B.), Trumpets (1. and 2.), Trombones (T.), Saxophone (S.D.), Double Bass (I.D.), Double Bass (B.D.), Tambourine (Tamb.), Cymbal (Cr. Cymb.), Snare Cymbal (2 Cymb.), Tom-tom (T. t.), Triangle (Trgl.), Anvil (Anvil), Steel Drum (Sl. St.), Conga/Bongos (2 Ch. Bl.), Low Register (L.R.), Rhythm (Rtl), Big Rhythm (Big Rtl), Steel Drums (Sl. Bils), and Siren. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (ppp, f, sf, mf, mp, p, ff, sfz), articulation (gliss., sfz), and performance instructions like '(d. = d. préc.)', '(con sord.)', 'sans sord.', and 'mollo'. There are also markings for '1' at the beginning and end of the rehearsal mark. The time signature is 6/8, and the key signature has one sharp (F#).

P [19.13]

Zappa now changes texture by increasing the tempo to included vigorous interplay between all sections of the orchestra. The theme identified from section K alternates with strings and percussion that has moments of pizzicato and cross rhythms. Zappa combines the timbral extremities by doubling the trumpets with xylophone and later with glockenspiel in a section that is approaching the end of the piece. One might

argue that this would have been a good place to bring the piece to a conclusion as the fortissimo dynamic leads the listener to presume that this might be imminent;

Q [22.50]

Rather, Zappa adds a short coda in yet another timbral and texture change that features a low pedal F in bass trombone underneath a wash of interjections from untuned percussion and piano.

Structure and form

Form in Bogus Pomp is principally timbral, where the recurring deployment of a given orchestration provides a sense of overall continuity to the piece. Particular sonorities are reserved for various functions, an example being brass and woodwind employed to declaim the three principal themes. In contrast, strings are used to conjure emotion and expressiveness. Where there is a lack of thematic form therefore, Zappa replaces this with different musical material but in similar timbral reference to the previous sonorities. This timbral form is then subjected to further development in the various sections as more instruments are added, specifically in melodic doubling to modify further the combinations of sonorities.

An overview of “Bogus Pomp” finds that it is highly sectional, with each section being defined by their contrasting timbral and stylistic identities. It could be said that this sectional identity conforms to conventions found in film-score where successive musical events occur that relate to the visual frames that unfold. Some of this material is pre-composed, inserted into the work for the purposes of melodic reference and hitherto a device that might traditionally delineate form. The formal importance of motivic detail in Bogus Pomp remains minimal however. Zappa’s combinations of timbres are much more prominent in the articulation of form. Thus

the best attempt towards a further understanding of the structure of the piece is likely to be a careful consideration of the timbral dimension.

Hierarchy of instrumentation

If we were to try and develop an ordered categorisation of Zappa's instrumental deployment, we might begin by noting how extensively he uses brass and woodwind for introducing new themes. Also, this particular combination was used in Zappa's jazz and big-band compositions that he performed with in his various touring bands and rock ensembles. Therefore, it might be argued that similar orchestration in "Bogus Pomp" is a continuation of this texture. Zappa also uses this combination in forceful interjections to interrupt contrasting timbral passages. Such a technique can be seen extensively in Varèse's writing, although Varèse's pitch content underwent constructive processes that Zappa's music does not. This particular pairing of forces of brass and woodwind is the major unifying timbral sound of the whole piece, giving aural reference points which create a timbral existence of form. To my ears, it is the constant return of this texture that gives the piece whatever overriding sense of coherence it has. Indeed, the strength of this sound idea is enough to carry the listener through the various stylistic and motivic changes over the whole duration of the piece.

Occupying a close second in this rough hierarchy of timbral importance, Zappa's use of percussion is clearly the timbral dimension that most strongly suggests Varèse, with background rattlings of wood-block, sleigh-bells, scraping noises and slap-stick, textures all associated with *Intégrales* or *Hyperprism* for example. The "bongs" that feature from section E may refer to Varèse's extensive use of gongs and tam-tam, sounds that occur throughout almost all of Varèse's works. These sonorities could be described as Zappa's own "Varesian signifier," a device that acts

as a timbral quotation to Varèse as opposed to a motivic quotation as suggested by Kassel in relation to Stravinsky.³²

Zappa also uses percussion very specifically in doubling combinations with other instruments in the orchestra, where he punctuates melodic detail with the combination of woodblock or xylophone with other tuned instruments of the orchestra. This is Zappa's principal device that gives his music characteristic identity, by combining tuned and non-tuned instruments in order to create hybrid attack qualities for unisons in a melodic movement. It might be argued that Zappa's use of percussion occupies a similar aesthetic to Varèse. In *The Music of Edgard Varèse – A Symposium*, Robert Morgan provides a useful description of Varèsian percussion: “For, in Varèse, the percussion is not thought of as an independent, element, with a separate logic of its own, but is conceived always in reference to the pitched element.”³³ Morgan shows that Varèse, as with Zappa, treated percussion in a very specific way. Both composers used percussion in a direct relationship with tuned instruments. We can see this first hand in the original version of Zappa's “The Black Page,” where complex rhythmic motives in the drum-set are doubled with tuned percussion. However, we cannot conclude that the systems of timbral relationships each composer employed are identical, but both Zappa and Varèse used percussion specifically to modify the sonorities of pitched instruments.

At a slightly more elusive level of this rough hierarchy, in “Bogus Pomp,” the emergence of the piano as a pivotal instrument is an important detail that cannot go unnoticed. There are limited solo passages for the piano, only areas that occupy points of textural repose, from the vigour of strings or strident fanfare brass but it

³² See Kassel's example in Chapter 1

³³ Robert P. Morgan, in Van Solkema, ed., “On Edgard Varèse,” *The New Worlds of Edgard Varèse: A Symposium* (New York 1979) p24.

performs the function of being a central force in a moment of timbral development with percussion at 09.38.

In using the piano as a central sonority, and in turn utilising the specific density and attack qualities of that instrument, Zappa successively combines the contrasting timbres of the other instruments involved. At 09.38, this timbral evolution begins from the almost imperceptible attack and constant sustain of the contra-bassoon, the soft attack and slow fading resonance of the vibraphone, through to the immediacy in attack of the xylophone. Although this episode is brief, its significance in relation to Zappa's studio craft should be observed, as it is an acoustic example of this type of timbral modification.

Finally, unlike the brass and woodwind combination, Zappa's strings are not used for declamatory effect, more to create a homogeneous texture that counteracts the strident sounds of the brass and woodwind. Although the strings occupy moments of background accompaniment, there is much isolated complexity in their parts and effects that include extensive tremolando and pizzicato. Varèse includes some extended writing for strings in *Amériques*, but it is unclear whether Zappa is attempting to replicate this specific sound-scape for "Bogus Pomp." Certainly Zappa uses the strings as an interrupting device in the same way as Varèse would have done, but perhaps the texture of strings is not as obvious an identifier to Varèse as the more readily identifiable sound-scape that he created with percussion.

Varèsian "bogus pomp"

It would obviously be wrong to state that "Bogus Pomp" sounds like a piece by Edgard Varèse. To what degree, if any is "Bogus Pomp" Varèsian? In the context of any Varèsian reference Bogus Pomp may contain, with consideration given

to Watson's "weird abuttals," we must consider the extent of Varèse-like blocks of sound within the listening experience of the whole piece. To re-phrase the previous question: Has Varèse influenced Zappa to an extent that this can be heard in Bogus Pomp? I believe that in light of the aforementioned analysis the answer to this question is a tentative "yes." It cannot be the over-riding description of a piece that was initially conceived as a spoof Hollywood movie-score however. Although Varèse structured his music in clearly identifiable sections, Zappa's sectional structure is derived from film-music and other inserted material, all of which was initially engineered in the mixing studio.

Zappa's treatment of timbre, although largely reminiscent of Varèse in the places I have identified, does not contribute to an overall sense of a Varèsian sounding piece. The Varèsian signifiers that I have described are just one of the many stylistic moments in a piece that exemplifies Zappa's diversity of craft. He knew how to create a recognisable Varèsian soundscape but omitted any form of process Varèse employed on his own music.

Has Zappa achieved his aim therefore? Is "Bogus Pomp" merely for "entertainment purposes" and nothing more? Zappa has cleverly crafted Bogus Pomp to be entertaining, by the inclusion of the very "weird abuttals" Watson describes. What defines this weirdness therefore, might be the ridiculous juxtapositions of one extremity to the other, where full orchestra rock riffs give way to Varèsian soundscapes for example. The fact remains, that Bogus Pomp contains only small blocks of Varèsian sounding material which overall is a minor feature of the whole piece.

“Weights, balances, measured tensions and releases”

We can perhaps make better sense of Bogus Pomp in light of Zappa’s description of his own compositional method as stated in the introduction of this dissertation. With Zappa not expanding in any specific detail, it is left to the listener to conclude what he actually meant by “weights, balances, measured tensions and releases.”

We might consider then that section D for example is balanced stylistically with section E, then section E in turn is balanced with section F. Whether “balance” is inferred to mean “complimented with” or “opposed to” is unclear, but perhaps both definitions are correct in a given context. Certainly a stylistic balance exists, as D is slow and pondering which then gives way to sounds that could invoke *Intégrales* and *Amériques* in section E, progressing further to a rock excerpt for the full orchestra in section F. After this in section G, Zappa introduces expressive string texture to oppose the momentum of the rock beat. We observe the “weird abuttals” Watson is describing, but they are not quite so weird when we think of Zappa’s Calder Mobile illustration. Although the successive blocks of music Zappa places together differ in style, texture and timbre, he balances or compliments each with similar timbres and textures later. To include the Varèsian moments that I have suggested, Zappa balances these by enveloping them with the other stylistically contrasting sections.

This is a larger overview of the structural arrangement of the piece, but Zappa could equally be referring to smaller ideas to do with timbre and orchestration. Are his “weights” anything to do with texture or instrumentation or motif? The textural “weight” of the full orchestra in the opening bars of section A could be “balanced” by the reduced texture of the flute piano and horn thereafter. Also we might consider the fully-scored Hollywood film style of the opening bars which is of short duration,

is balanced by the longer duration of a much lighter texture we see at the very end of the piece in section Q. Infinite speculation around this idea is possible, but if we make an attempt at understanding the music as Zappa described using his “weights, balances, measured tensions and releases,” at least we find ourselves in a position in which to begin adding interpretative nuance to what Watson describes sweepingly as “weird abuttals.”

The Girl in the Magnesium Dress

In 1984 Zappa was commissioned by Pierre Boulez to record some of his music with the Ensemble InterContemporain at IRCAM. This venture resulted in the release of *The Perfect Stranger*, an album that incorporated three compositions played by the Ensemble (“The Perfect Stranger,” “Naval Aviation in Art” and “Dupree’s Paradise”) and four recorded on Synclavier (“The Girl in the Magnesium Dress,” “Love Story,” “Outside Now Again” and “Jonestown”).

Kevin Courrier states that “The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” was the first of Frank Zappa’s pieces to be recorded on Synclavier.³⁴ In this light, *The Perfect Stranger* album might be seen as a test for Zappa, a trial of faultless Synclavier replication against the inaccuracies inherent to the human element of musical performance. Occhiogrosso includes a short section in *The Real Frank Zappa Book* of events that surrounded the recording of this album, which included a première performance of some of the pieces that were to be part of this release. Zappa though, remained unimpressed as to the quality of these performances, which perhaps gave him the impetus to incorporate Synclavier recordings of his music on *The Perfect Stranger* and entirely thereafter in *Jazz from Hell*.

Melody, rhythm and use of pitch

“The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” is not constructed using the combinations of timbre as demonstrated in “Bogus Pomp.” Zappa uses the timbral colours of each individual instrument as equal sonic forces. This effect maintains purity in timbre and the melodic line of the vibraphone, marimba and Fender Rhodes piano. This has

³⁴ See Kevin Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, p389.

the effect of focusing the listener towards the complexity of Zappa's rhythm and melodic interplay while absorbing the underlying notion of pitch language.

The following transcribed example at Fig. 3.6 illustrates the pitches and intervals Zappa has used for the internal melody. There may be some inconsistencies with other listeners here, as the perception of one person's ear will differ slightly from another, but the notional pitch language can still be observed nevertheless. "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress" uses every pitch in the chromatic scale, and one will notice, as discussed that some notes are favoured more than others.

Most obvious from the outset in this piece is the inhumanly fast motion of the intricately woven vibraphone lines that are incorporated into the machine-like rhythms. The deployment of pitches in these opening phrases gives a chaotic feel, with many leaps and scales incorporated that do not infer any sense of voice-leading or intended melodic end point or "goal". The rhythms that Zappa uses are also irregular and complex; they do not synchronise with any of the fast pitch detail in respect of sequential patterns and do not contribute to any sense of internal phrasing. It could be argued that the relationship between rhythm and melody has been dismantled, allowing these two forces to exist independently of each other. Courier suggests similarities with the player piano music of Conlon Nancarrow, where the mechanical complexity of the music is a product of the music's conception for that particular technology.³⁵ Unlike Nancarrow's studies however, Zappa's mechanical rhythms in "The Girl with the Magnesium Dress" are counter-balanced with a prominent melodic thread running throughout.

This intermittent central counterpoint exists without reference either to the complex counter melodies or their rhythms. Zappa uses a sampled Fender Rhodes

³⁵ See Kevin Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, p389.

Fig 3.6

The Girl in the Magnesium Dress (*The Perfect Stranger*) - Pitches used in central melody

0:00 0:06 0:16

0:23 0:26 0:29 0:32 0:36

0:42 0:46 0:52 0:54 1:00 1:03 1:05 1:07

1:13 1:17 1:19 1:24 1:28 1:34 1:37 1:39 1:41

1:44-47 1:49 1:51 1:53 1:55

2:00 2:03 2:08 2:11 2:16

2:18 2:23 2:27 2:43 2:44 2:45 2:46

2:33

2:51 2:54 2:56 2:58 2:59 3:00 3:02 3:04

3:06

tacet

N.B. Where accidentals are necessary, their descriptions are editorial suggestions.
All preceding accidentals are cancelled at the beginning of a new bar.

piano sound with the melodic detail concentrated in the mid treble register. This slower melodic line is characterised by pitches that are held over the continuing counter-melody or are sustained on the end of a particular melodic gesture. These pitches can occur in both the treble or bass registers. Another factor that allows the listener to focus on this melodic thread is the level at which it has been recorded in the final mix. Zappa allows us to hear certain areas of important melodic detail by using this technique, by creating an environment of a sonic foreground and background. Each separate force therefore melody, rhythm and the underlying thread of counterpoint plays an autonomous role in the first 43 seconds of the piece.

However at 0:46s, the relationship between the separate melodic and rhythmic detail begins to converge on a rhythmic repetition on *g#*. Until this point, there are no obvious occurrences of repeated notes, showing that Zappa intended this feature to be a defining moment in the piece, a moment of convergence for the three previously independent forces. The repeated notes continue at varying pitches until they tail-off at 2:17. This convergence or intersection of forces is a point of structural significance, significance that demonstrates Zappa's attention to form.

Zappa's development of pitch and rhythm relationships here could again be related to some Varèsian influences. Jonathan Bernard describes Varèse's technique of "pitch stasis" or "frozen music":

...a collection of pitches (or indefinite pitches where the stasis is conveyed by percussion) in a particular registral disposition and, in the case of oscillating type of stasis, in fixed groupings is repeated several times and undergoes in the process a rhythmic elaboration...The pitch collection may be in a single part, or a single chord played by several instruments, or a series of events in different parts or groups of parts."³⁶

³⁶ Jonathan Bernard, *The Music of Edgard Varèse*, 134-135.

By far one of the major compositional tools Varèse used in his music is his repetition of pitches (tuned or percussion) over a given rhythm. From the opening bars of *Amériques* for example we observe both harp parts continually playing the same interval as an accompaniment to the solo flute melody. As the piece progresses, it can be seen that each area of pitch stasis is interrupted by a new gesture in a contrasting texture, which Bernard has observed. *Amériques* is only one example, but this technique can be seen as one of the overall principal building blocks of Varèse's music. Quintuplet semi-quavers in pitch stasis can be seen in each part of this piece. To show an isolated example that is characteristic of Varèse, the same configuration occurs in *Arcana*, one bar after rehearsal 15, shown here in Fig. 3.7:

Fig. 3.7: Arcana at rehearsal mark 15

39

15

Picc. 1, 2, 3

Fls. 1, 2

Hautf. 1, 2, 3

C. Angl.

Heck.

Cl. Mi 1, 2

C. s. Si 1, 2

Cl. Cb. Si

Bons. 1, 2, 3

C. Bons.

Cors en Fa 2, 4, 6, 8

Trp.ttes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Trbns 1, 2, 3, 4

Tubas

C. B. Tuba

Timb.

1 [Ong. / Cy. ch. / T. c. c. / Cl. c. c.]

2 [T. L. g. / Fouet / Cl. c. c.]

3 [C. / Quiro / Engl. / B. ch]

4 [C. r. / T. b. / Cy. s.]

5 [Cymb. / T. c. / Coques]

6 [Xp. / Clop. / B. ch / Crc.]

V. ons 1, 2

Alfos

Cellos

C. B. 1, 2, 3 / 4, 5, 6 / 7, 8, 9, 10

15

39

* Ong. - Cy. ch - Tam-Tams avec la bois de la mailloche

If we apply this model to “The Girl in the Magnesium Dress,” we observe a stasis or freezing of the melody by rhythm as previously mentioned at 0:46. This freezing, incorporates all three forces but in two different ways. 1) Rhythm and melody are allowed to exist for the first time as a single entity in their unison repetition. These convergences also have significance in that 2) they contribute in certain places to the on-going thread of counterpoint. (A clear example of this can be heard at 1:34 where this particular pitch has been notated with a double tail, one that represents the repetition of rhythm and the other that represents the additional sustain).

But most important of all for Zappa, this particular feature has the purpose of defining form. The middle of the piece sees a series of repeated pitches singly or in multiple that occupy nearly two thirds of the duration of the piece, a development of previously gestured pitches from the opening. As can be seen from the transcription, subsequent occurrences of this particular feature continue to 2:43, this being the last example, and acting also as a reference to the previous recurrent utterances. Now we can observe that Zappa has incorporated the freezing of pitches to define form over the whole duration of the piece: At 0:06 there is the sustained *c* which is in octave displacement to the previous *c* at the end of the opening gesture. Although brief, we see this *c* repeated between gestures 0:16 and 0:23. Zappa now develops this *c* at 0:52 to include *f#* at 0:54. Both the *c* and the *f#* undergo octave displacement at 1:00, 1:03 and 1:05. Further note freezing occurs at 1:49 to 1:55 where the cluster of *g*, *g#* and *c* occupy two separate parts. As the piece progresses towards the end, Zappa quickens the occurrences of note freezing, and repeats previously deployed intervals and clusters that infer some kind of pitch orientated recapitulation. Furthermore, this technique is concurrent with Bernard, as he describes Varèse’s areas of note-freezing thus: “The pitch repetition acts as an

accumulator of tension, which is released when the repetition is finally superseded.” Therefore, as well as a reference tool for previous pitch relationships, Zappa might also be using this device as a tension building motif against the intervallic leaps of the overall character of the melodic flow.

Bernard does not ascribe Varèse’s use of pitch stasis to delineate form, but Zappa might be incorporating Varèse’s technique of pitch stasis for his own methods in the construction of form. To recall Walser’s ideas about “discursive competency,” it could be said that “The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” has Varèsian influences, but with a Zappa-esque development in this particular model of pitch orientated organisation. As mentioned, Bernard is careful not to state Varèse’s pitch stasis as a statement of form, as he considers the problems in regarding Varèse’s moments of pitch stasis as objects, that is events of precise reference and “recurrences,” rather than the processes Varèse used to manifest these particular events. To state absolutely that Zappa developed Varèsian pitch stasis to include form might be risky even in his own understanding of the technique, where his arrangement of pitch language and intervallic organisation in this particular piece alludes to this. The uncertainty exists because owing to the brevity of the entire piece, being just over 3 minutes, there is perhaps little time for any series of sustained developmental processes to ensue. Also, one cannot specifically *hear* a process; rather, a compositional process can be more easily observed in visual analysis and not as part of an aural one. If Zappa was actually hearing pitch stasis in *Arcana* or *Amériques* for example, he would directly employ the event rather than preceding it with some kind of preparatory process. If we consider then Zappa’s areas of pitch stases as specific musical events rather than the result of an evolutionary process as with

Bernard's comparison with Varèse, we can suggest that in this particular piece, Zappa intended pitch stasis to define motivic form.

Intervallic motif with pitch stasis

Zappa has also deployed areas of intervallic consistency within these areas of pitch stasis. This additional feature also contributes to the identity of the piece, creating an integrated relationship between intervallic organisation and pitch language. The low *c* at 0:06 precedes the *g*[#], ending the gesture on *f*[#]. This collection of pitches is repeated from 0:52 which incorporates an additional *g* natural. We observe therefore the consistent intervallic relationship of a falling minor third, often incorporated amongst falling fourths, which prevails again at 1:53. At 2:08 the minor third is again accentuated although in a different register, developing further to include the diminished fifth which is perhaps a reference to the pitch stasis feature between 1:03 and 1:05. Another occurrence of falling fourths exists at 2:43, this time incorporating a major third.

Diatonic and non-diatonic intervals are both used, but overall the piece adopts a chromatic nature which is prevalent to the overall identity of the piece. By including areas of frozen pitches that constitute a unison or octave, or even the interval of a tenth at 2:23, this simultaneously acts as a contrasting feature to the overall chromaticism, and areas of non-diatonic pitches.

Magnesium “measured tensions and releases?”

The independence in each part remains a major feature in this piece but it could be argued that where a part stalls in rhythm and pitch as suggested, another carries the flow towards another point of stasis and so on. Tension then is

exemplified in stasis and the release is the continuation in flow of another part continuing another melody. It would be more difficult to describe the piece from the point of “weights,” as each part is as important as the other which perhaps suggests ideas of “balance.” Again we speculate, but even if there are no clear answers to the questions that arise here, we still get some insight into Zappa’s mode of thought on the methodology of his craft.

“The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” was not to exist solely as a Synclavier composition however. It was later orchestrated by Peter Rundell, the conductor of Ensemble Modern in 1992 for the *Yellow Shark* recording which resulted in the piece being longer in duration and larger in instrumentation. It could be said the Rundell was the catalyst for Zappa between the virtual sound-world of the Synclavier to the real-time performance in the *Yellow Shark* recording. Rundell helped Zappa to realise the specific sonorities he wished to employ in what proved to be an extremely demanding piece to play for all concerned. The recording displays the outstanding musicianship necessary to successfully execute such difficult music. Rundell’s orchestration adds intensity to the original clinical purity of the piece, incorporating a larger range of timbres. The recording of this performance conveys a certain sense of danger, where the antiphonal complexities of the score demand considerable musicianship from all of the players involved.

“The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” therefore has evolved from a sampled study of form in pitch and rhythm, to a score that transforms the piece’s timbral identity resulting in a richer texture. As Zappa continually re-edited and re-released his work, “The Girl in the Magnesium Dress” is another example of his music having a dual identity – *The Perfect Stranger* version and the *Yellow Shark* version.

Although largely the same piece in pitch and rhythm, they both exist as very contrasting sound-worlds.

Further instances

The two preceding analyses examine the degree in which Zappa made attempts at creating a Varèsian sound-world within the context of a whole piece. As the listener becomes familiar with Zappa's music, it becomes apparent that Zappa prefers to include Varèsian sounds as inserted isolated events, within the other blocks of sound that constitute a given piece of this nature. If Zappa wished to further develop Varèse's techniques of pitch stasis or rhythmic juxtaposition (as described by Bernard for example) then perhaps we should expect a more consistent Varèsian construction, that is to say that several sound blocks together should follow in succession.³⁷ In this light, we can surmise that Zappa is briefly quoting a Varèsian sound-scape as another section or "weird abuttal" as part of a greater whole in his music. It is evident though that Zappa has made a recognisable attempt at creating such sound-scapes, and it is these isolated moments that attract the attentions of most critics in this regard.

There are sections of Zappa's music, both rock and orchestral that contain passing resemblances to Varèsian orchestrations. Some of these more isolated examples will now be examined. They will be considered in the same context of "block structure" as Bogus Pomp, but within the isolated events, their Varèsian attributes will be tested.

³⁷ See Jonathan Bernard, *The Music of Edgard Varèse*, ch4, 128-192.

Times Beach II (*The Yellow Shark* 1993)

In Kevin Courier's description of Zappa's 1993 release *The Yellow Shark* that appear in his book "Dangerous Kitchen," he includes comparisons to modernist composers that he suggests relate to Zappa. These include Nancarrow, Webern and Varèse but he stops short of specifying exactly what this musical relationship is. However, by quoting the above composers, his purpose is to contextualise Zappa's music as a stylistic move away from the more abundant commercial discography that is the central focus of the book. In considering Zappa's "Times Beach II," he states that: "*Times Beach*...resembles Varèse's *Offrandes*."³⁸ Courier gives no more reason for his assertion here and it leaves the reader wanting to know more. On listening to *Offrandes*, the listener might observe that the opening fanfare to "Times Beach II" is the only resemblance this particular piece has, where the repeated clarinet and trumpet notes might infer a brief statement of pitch stasis and Varesian orchestration. There is no suggestion of motivic reference.

In the wider context however, apart from having no soprano part, the aesthetic profile of "Times Beach II" seems quite distant from that of *Offrandes*, as the piece has more of a continuous feel, where both woodwind and brass textures overlap in a continuous dialogue of melodic and motivic interplay. Although there exists some motivic repetition in *Offrandes*, "Times Beach II" does not have an obvious arrangement of block structure, a feature that is most noticeable in *Offrandes*, characterised by timbral contrast. The woodwind and brass orchestration may infer a Varèsian texture, but this alone does not suggest a Varèsian sound world as the

³⁸ Kevin Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, p487.

pitches vary in such a way that Varèse would not have employed – i.e. the parts are not static enough and do not repeat in pitch and/or rhythm.

It also cannot be concluded that the motives Zappa uses replicate any other Varèsian references to *Offrandes*, therefore Courier's comparison seems very superficial. This reminds us that many comparisons that are made to Zappa's pieces might not be anything more than unrealised observations, a potential pitfall that Walser warns us to be "cautious" about when relying on our own individual understandings of the music we address.³⁹ It could even be argued that such observations result from Bernard's listening perspective, where we are invited to take into view Zappa's rock compositions when listening to his orchestral works. In doing so, this might reveal more effectively the art music sounds which in turn would safely fall into Watson's "weird abuttal" scenario. What Courier's statement here lacks therefore, is a quantified comparison to Zappa and Varèse's music that differentiates between implied replication of Varèse's technique, and a passing reminiscence of Varèse's sound-world, but without replicating a similar Varèsian compositional model.

The reason I have included "Times Beach II" in searching for Varèsian influences in Zappa's music illustrates that some comparisons are weak due to a lack of specific references. Courier however is quite correct to draw our attention to this piece as it exemplifies the opposite side of Zappa's stylistic spectrum in regard to his rock output. "Times Beach II" is not a piece that consists of separate blocks of changing material, in general it could be said to be timbrally static. The intervallic movement presents no clear models of motif; instead the parts occupy a more independent relationship to each other with an emphasis on rhythmic interplay. This rhythmic interplay, which was a principal feature in "The Girl in the Magnesium

³⁹ See again Robert Walser in Moore, ed., "Ten Apothegms and Four Analyses," *Popular Music Analysis* (Cambridge 2003) p23

Dress” might suggest a distant connection towards Varèse’s technique of polyrhythmic independence, although it goes against Zappa’s own views:

“Polyrhythms are interesting only in reference to a steady, metronomic beat (implied or actual) – otherwise you’re wallowing in rubato.”⁴⁰ Zappa clearly did not view this technique to be successful without a regular pulse maintained throughout, so one might expect that he would not choose to adopt such a method as a compositional tool (as Varèse would have employed) without some form of regular repeating force.

This effect is demonstrated throughout *Bogus Pomp* for example where the drum kit provides a regular rhythmic pulse as an accompaniment to some of the sections that have a thinner texture.⁴¹ “Times Beach II” therefore could not be considered as a piece that is influenced by Varèse but it could be considered one of Zappa’s pieces that exemplifies a style which is wholly original, a piece that is significant in defining Zappa’s own “art music” style.

Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich (1970)

However insufficient Courier’s previous comparison might appear elsewhere, he usefully draws our attention to Zappa’s 1970 *Burnt Weeny Sandwich* album in a succinct description: “an instrumental collection with a couple of doo-wop songs thrown in...” The “instrumental” element in *Burnt Weeny Sandwich* is constructed from a host of pre-recorded material from short chamber pieces that segue with full-length rock improvisations. Courier also notes: “The pleasures found in *Burnt Weeny Sandwich* are more subtle, which may be why it’s rarely mentioned and generally dismissed. It possesses some of the elegance of a chamber work, but without sacrificing any of Zappa’s proclivity for musical satire.” This “elegance” is

⁴⁰ Zappa (with Occhiogrosso), p181.

⁴¹ See Section D of “Bogus Pomp”

an acknowledgement by Courier that this particular album begins to exemplify a stylistic shift in Zappa's style from the majority of his previous releases to 1970. While containing only two doo-wop cover songs – “WPLJ” and “Valerie”, the rest of the rock and chamber material is interspersed with innovative textures that included replications of Varèse's percussive timbres of scrapes and slapstick. “Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich” begins with an explosive sound that is followed by a series of scrapes and single strikes of the snare drum.⁴² This sound-scape is under-laid by continuous clock chimes. Zappa superimposes this largely ostinato and guitar based improvisation with rattling interjections of wood-block, guiro, xylophone and metallic timbred objects that include triangle and cymbal. This texture becomes even more prominent as the end of the piece approaches, culminating in a chaotic coda of rattling percussion that continues after the guitars have finished. This isolated timbral event is one of many contrasting textural blocks that characterise the whole album and it could be argued that this small area in timbral contrast is Zappa's reference towards Varèse's aesthetic.

To support the idea of passing musical quotations, Courier (and Kassel) mention another piece in the album, “Igor's Boogie” which contains a specific melodic reference to Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* being the main basis for the ostinato.⁴³ If Zappa was clearly quoting Stravinsky by name and musical quotation, in an album that harbours art music associations, then could we assume that the percussion on “Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich” is a timbral reference to Varèse? We can hear at bb26-27 [Fig.3.8] in “Chanson de La-haut” in *Offrandes*, Varèse uses a regular repeated triangle to provide a constant rhythmic backdrop for the contra-bassoon, trumpet and soprano.

⁴² Kevin Courier reveals that this explosive sound was actually produced by a spatula hitting a pan. *Dangerous Kitchen* p203

Fig. 3.8, *Offrandes* bb26-27.

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Offrandes" (bb26-27). The score is divided into two main sections. The left section features a vocal line with lyrics and several instrumental parts, including three flutes (Fl.) marked with "Flatterzunge" and "mf". The right section shows a full orchestral and vocal ensemble. The vocal part is marked "très declamé" and "3". The lyrics are: "vois tour-ner la ter-re et je son-ne mon clé-ron vers tou-tes". The instrumental parts include: Pte Fl., Fl., Hb., Cl., Bass., Cor., Trppte., Trbne., Voix, 1er V., 2me V., A., V.C., C.B., Hrp., Tr., T.B., Cymb., Gr.C., G., and T.M. The score is numbered "N.Y. 2074" at the bottom.

This might seem quite an isolated example but this particular excerpt contains the instrumentation and timbral sounds that Zappa was attracted to. To be sure, Zappa may not have taken this idea directly from *Offrandes*, but certainly his rattling percussion that appears in the background towards the conclusion of “Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich” can even be ascribed to the opening bars of *Hyperprism* for

⁴³ See Matthias Kassel in Meyer and Zimmermann, eds., p449

example. In *Hyperprism*, [Fig. 3.9], Varèse uses a multitude of untuned percussion that rattles against the fortissimo low register of the brass and the siren. Examples of this can be easily observed in the opening bars, and at several instances thereafter.

Fig. 3.9: *Hyperprism*, rehearsal mark 1

3

The image shows a page of a musical score for the piece *Hyperprism*, rehearsal mark 1. The score is written for a large ensemble and includes the following parts:

- Fl.** (Flute)
- Cl. mi b.** (Clarinete en mi bemol)
- 1. Cors enf.** (1. Cors en fa)
- 2. Cors enf.** (2. Cors en fa)
- 8. Cors enf.** (8. Cors en fa)
- 1. Trppts.** (1. Trompete)
- 2. Trppts.** (2. Trompete)
- T.** (Trombone)
- Trbns.** (Trombone)
- B.** (Bass)
- S.D.** (Soprano)
- I.D.** (Alto)
- B.D.** (Bass)
- Tamb.** (Tambourin)
- Cr. Cymb.** (Cymbale)
- ♯ Cymb.** (Cymbale)
- T. t.** (Tambourin)
- Trgl.** (Trombone)
- Anvil.** (Anvil)
- Sl. St.** (Slit)
- ♯ Ch. El.** (Cymbale)
- L. R.** (L. R.)
- Rttl.** (Rattles)
- Big Rttl.** (Big Rattles)
- Sl. Blia.** (Slit)
- Siren.** (Siren)

The score features various musical notations, including dynamics (e.g., *ppp*, *f*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, *ppp*), articulations (e.g., *gliss.*, *tr.*, *acc.*), and performance instructions (e.g., "(1) sur le rebord", "(2) membrane", "sans sourd."). A rehearsal mark "1" is placed at the beginning of the score.

What Zappa might be doing here, is incorporating both of the aforementioned Varèsian features together to create a general altogether Varèsian sound-scape. Therefore, we again observe that the nature of Zappa's Varèsian references appear to be isolated timbral events. Their origin perhaps can rarely be pinned down to single specific Varèsian compositions, but in view of Zappa's listening experience and

therefore resulting appreciation of Varèse's music, this in turn resulted in his echoes of Varèse in a general Varèsian, timbral sound-world.

Conclusion

To what degree therefore are the pieces that have been discussed been affected by Varèse's influence? Are Zappa's "weird abuttals" strictly derived from Varèse or are they purely as a result of his studio craft? Also, if we interpret these aforementioned examples as Varèsian, was this a consistent feature throughout Zappa's career, or was there a Varèsian phase that Zappa developed into his own, more distinctive style thereafter? Therefore, might we consider this in terms of an evolution of a new genre, defined as the "weird" or the "incongruous" perhaps?

What we observe in "Bogus Pomp" is a piece that has been constructed in a clear block format, with each block having a distinctive character in style and timbre etc. As we also observe, the blocks are constructed in a reasonably consistent time orientated system that operates to roughly 1 minute or multiple in duration. Such an emphasis on time-duration strongly suggests that Zappa constructed "Bogus Pomp" from processes that involve cutting and editing to a time-slot plan as derived from studio methodology. Composing using his Synclavier equipment, Zappa would have been continually aware of his music being correspondent to time duration, as the nature of such technology allows. This could not be interpreted as a technique that Varèse employed, rather a technique directly derived from Zappa's studio craft.

Within any given sound-block, Zappa infers Varèse's sounds with passing timbres that reflect moments contained within most of Varèse's works. What Zappa does not do however, is construct the music through a specific compositional method, resulting in the timbral sounds that we could associate with Varèse. In short, Zappa omits the process, but creates the sound in independent isolation. This can be readily observed in "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress," where one might suggest there exists some isolated areas of pitch stasis. This pitch stasis though is again isolated, and

somewhat fleeting as the stasis only inhabits one particular voice where instead Varèse would have involved many. The moments of percussion reminiscent of *Hyperprism* that appear in “Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich” again seem to be interjected embellishments, a “weird abuttal” that connects the opposing stylistic worlds of Varèse with rock.

Zappa and Varèse have a common purpose in that they did not observe a system-based methodology, rather they adopted a freedom to develop their own styles that for Varese, was considered ground-breaking for his time. As we have discovered, Courrier’s assertion that “Times Beach II” could be attributed to Varèse’s sound-world is not particularly strong, revealing that Zappa may have been slowly moving away from composing music that reflected this influence. *Civilization Phase III*, posthumously released in 1994 is a Synclavier mix of narration, rock and chamber music. The chamber pieces are not cutting edge for music that was composed in 1994, instead reflecting a post-modernist sound reminiscent of the 1950s. What remains however is a consistent study in the relationship of timbres, with an emphasis on opposing timbral combinations such as woodwind against metallic textures and studio enhanced sounds derived from acoustic instruments.

We find that Zappa and Varèse shared a common purpose in their development of sound modification and technology. After his decision to completely retire from live performance during the late 1980s, Zappa was to compose his music for the remainder of his life on the Synclavier. For the next six years until he died, he worked as incessantly as his health would allow in the studio which culminated in his final 1994 release of *Civilization Phase III*. Some might say that this was the beginning of Zappa’s “mature” phase, where his status as a “serious” composer might have been associated more with experimental electronic composition as opposed to

parody and rock music. *Civilization Phase III* does not possess any of the obvious Varèsian sounding moments of his previous work, but we could be tempted to suggest that with the Synclavier, he was engaging with a sound technology Varèse might have approved of if we recall his ringing claim:

The electronic medium is also adding an unbelievable variety of new timbres to our musical store, but most important of all, it has freed music from the tempered system, which has prevented music from keeping pace with the other arts and with science. Composers are now able, as never before, to satisfy the dictates of that inner ear of the imagination.⁴⁴

We can only imagine the sounds Zappa may have been inspired to create had he lived longer and developed his style wholly in the electronic medium. He was certainly aware that there was an “unbelievable variety of new timbres” as Varèse predicted. We can observe this in his favourite technique of doubling pitched and non-pitched timbres together in the acoustic medium. He carries this idea through to the Synclavier where the possibilities of modifying timbres are limitless. Crucially for Zappa, Varèse specifies “Composers are now able, as never before, to satisfy the dictates of that inner ear of the imagination.” He is stating the importance and origin of sounds being a phenomenon of the imagination, which in turn does not specifically rely on traditional notated music as score. Zappa seems to have had this “inner ear of imagination” which led to his experimentation of sound, later exemplified on his later Synclavier works, of which no notational representation exists.

On the whole I emerge from this study with the sense that the pursuit of Varèsian references is illuminating and frustrating in equal measure. Although it is easy enough to indicate areas of his music that evoke some of Varèse’s sounds, it seems a stretch to conclusively say that Zappa adopted Varèse’s techniques of

⁴⁴ Edgard Varèse, “Liberation of Sound”

composition. Where Zappa only relied on his ear to educate himself about the techniques of composition, his own sensibilities as Walser mentions have been a factor in moulding his very own unique form of compositional craft. From Zappa's description of what he understands "Varèse's aesthetic" to be, we are only left with his visual metaphor of the "weights, balances, measured tensions and releases" of the Calder Mobile to decipher any ideas of a compositional model. This general metaphor can, I think, add some sense of direction to the tracking of "sound blocks" through a piece like "Bogus Pomp, but proves more difficult to apply to "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress and many other works.

Unlike Varèse however, Zappa's music is derived from the electronic means of its own construction. The fact that the recording-studio and Synclavier were the primary tools for the production of his music left an indelible mark on Zappa's style. Mixing and engineering tracks were the principal tools of Zappa's craft, within which he constructed his various sound-scapes and sonorities. He knew that successful music could be constructed from juxtaposing timbres and textural forces like Varèse, but he used this technique more as a tool to differentiate style. We might therefore like to re-think Watson's statement from chapter 1: "his [Zappa's] weird abuttals of genre in fact work like extensions of Varèse's contrasting sonic blocks." The key word here is "extensions," which sidesteps any specific description of how Zappa actually constructed his Varèsian "contrasting sonic blocks." If we turn Watson's statement on its head, I suggest that Zappa's arrangement of "weird abuttals of genre" are not the extensions of Varèse's technique as he describes, but actually it is Zappa's extension of Varèse's technique that are to be found within the "weird abuttals" themselves. "Bogus Pomp" and "Theme from Burnt Weeny Sandwich" have the inclusion of short excerpts of Varèsian sounding moments within the larger

framework of a stylistically diverse piece of music. This diversity, originating from studio practice, is the key feature that defines Zappa's music, and to engage with Zappa on the origins of some of this diversity leaves us with some understanding that the "weird abuttals" might not be quite so weird after all.

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