

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



## **Equal time for Frank Zappa's 'serious' side in Ojai fest : In the main event at this year's contemporary music-minded Ojai Music Festival, the famed German group Ensemble Modern featured the 'classical' side of Frank Zappa on Friday night**

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Whatever else can be said of the big Friday night main event of this year's 64th annual Ojai Music Festival, it should be noted that at least one absent party - the late, great American iconoclast Frank Zappa - would probably have been thrilled by what went down at Ojai's Libby Bowl. Zappa, though best-known as an irreverent rocker, bad boy virtuoso and scatological satirist, was also a passionate "serious music" composer, frustrated that this prodigious side of his creative output was never given proper respect or public airing.

In some small but powerful way, that lack of exposure was given a bit of equal time correction, with the arrival - in its first West Coast appearance - of the remarkable Frankfurt-based new music group Ensemble Modern. EM, which has famously nailed performances of Zappa's music, on the 1992 album "The Yellow Shark" and 2004's "Greggery Peccary and Other Persuasions," is this year's featured artist at the Ojai Festival, along with noted composer-conductor George Benjamin. But on Friday, the star of the show was clearly Zappa. He likely would have reveled in hearing his music played - and impeccably - at an internationally renowned festival that has hosted some of his heroes, including Pierre Boulez, Igor Stravinsky and Olivier Messiaen.

On Friday night, from the opening sinuous, tricky and groovy sounds of "What Will Rumi Do?," from "Greggery Peccary," a sense of delicious revelation was in the Ojai air. Most of the opening half was dedicated to music from "The Yellow Shark," the last big project Zappa worked on before his death, at 52, in 1993.

That suite serves as a tidy primer in the elements of Zappa's style, from the serious music side,

full of mixed-up genres, thorny atonal plotting and wisps of his humor (as in the comical avant-vaudeville bit, "Welcome to the United States"). Among the high points in that portion of the evening was the intricate, post-12-tone maze of "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress," followed by the bracing Boulez-meets-Messiaen solo piano piece "Ruth is Sleeping," masterfully played by veteran EM pianist Hermann Kretzschmar.

Also on the "Yellow Shark" menu was the ethereal waltz "Get Whitey," peppered with complex and angular ensemble flights. As exciting as it might be to listen to the 1992 recording, hearing this knotty, charging music played so sharply in a live, in-person setting amounted to mini-epiphany.

Opening the second half of the concert were two short works by one of Zappa's acknowledged classical heroes, Edgard Varese, the solo flute piece "Densities 21.5" (played beautifully by flutist Dietmar Wiesner) and the ensemble work "Octandre," through which we can hear the influential imprint of the early French modernist on the hairy wry genius from Laurel Canyon.

Music from "Greggery Peccary and Other Persuasions" differs from "Yellow Shark" in that the music was arranged from earlier material, much of it on the early high-end digital synthesizer, the Synclavier, and taken from Zappa's mini-rock-opera, "Greggery Peccary" (included on Zappa's posthumous compilation album "Läther"). The music is also more prominently groove-lined, with accessible rock twists as a foundation atop which Zappa's fiendish technical complexity is layered, and which the EM delivered with an uncommonly cool ease and intensity.

A subversive high-low cultural brilliance is at work in this music, on pieces including "Revised Music for Low Budget Orchestra," "Put a Motor in Yourself" and "Moggio." EM, led with a crisp incisiveness by conductor Brad Lubman (the group has no consistent conductor, by design), laid into the blissful complications of the scores with an almost frightening naturalness.

Among the three encores was a blast from Zappa's distant past, his "deep cut" classic, "Peaches in Regalia." EM ended each of the two sets with an unlikely but suitable anthem, Zappa's heady "G-Spot Tornado," one of the most madly intricate dance tunes ever written. The number appears on the Zappa album "Jazz from Hell," in a digitally sequenced form. Heard live, the exhilaration ante is upped considerably.

Zappa understood, better than most any other composer, that complexity can be sexy, and not unrelated to the primal-electrical charge of rock 'n' roll. Friday night's wowing encounter in Ojai reminded us that, quite apart from his rock circus work, Zappa was a great American maverick in

the classical sense, who may one day be appreciated as such.

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