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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Olmstead, Andrea. 1985. 'ASUC 1984'. *Contact*, 29. pp. 38-39. ISSN 0308-5066.

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### ASUC 1984

American Society of University Composers 19th Annual Festival Conference, Ohio State University, 4-8 April 1984

If Ohio State University wanted to attract attention to the 19th annual ASUC Conference<sup>1</sup> by inviting iconoclast Frank Zappa as keynote speaker, they succeeded. At 44 Zappa is still an 'angry young man'. He spoke abrasively about the relation of contemporary music to 'industrial' American society—his point being that there is none. Insults are his style: he dislikes universities, teachers, and tenure, and he criticises new music as 'irrelevant' and 'genuinely obnoxious' to society. 'There is', he said, 'no way a composer will ever convince a real live person there is a need for his services.' Zappa may think he's expressing new ideas but of course Schoenberg's reply when he was asked why he became a composer was, 'Because nobody else wanted the job.' Both serious and pop composers today, Zappa says, should be aware of how great a role financial considerations play in the decisions of record companies. This fact should also be readily apparent to anyone over 13, Zappa's age for 'Debbie', a fictitious, archetypal, sheltered American teenager who is the 'pop music consumer and ultimate arbiter of musical taste for the entire nation'.

What is Zappa's answer to his gloom and doom about the profession of music making? The machine. Zappa's frustration with performers has deterred him from live performance, even his own—he claimed that he had not played the guitar in over a year—and led him towards the Synclavier II. Used more by Hollywood and pop composers than by university composers, this \$100,000 gadget contains a synthesizer, computer, and printer. In private conversation Zappa revealed himself as even more radical than his address indicated: to achieve his musical ends he wants to eliminate musicians' unions, and ultimately live performers. Zappa, who owns his own record company (he has sold over 30 million albums), has no real solution to the problem posed to him that many composers cannot afford 'the machine'. Despite his distrust of live performers, live musicians performed American premières of his *Naval Aviation in Art?* (Pro Musica Chamber Orchestra of Columbus) and *The Perfect Stranger* (the Columbus Symphony Orchestra) at concerts during the conference.

A certain amount of dissimulation was evident on both ASUC's and Zappa's parts. First, the reasons why Ohio State invited Zappa—to the consternation of some members of the ASUC board—should be plain. In his address Zappa said, 'I do not belong to your organisation, I know nothing about it, and I'm not even interested in it.' Did the conference planners really think Zappa belonged in the university composers' category, along with—to choose participant composers at random—Allen Bonde, Norman Dinerstein, Brian Fennelly, Paul Lansky, Alex Lubet, Edwin London, and Pauline Oliveros—or were they looking at the possibility of attracting the press and overflow crowds? Second, and more interesting, why did Zappa accept this invitation? This season saw his first foray into the 'serious' music world when he was a guest composer at IRCAM. As IRCAM represents the establishment of European composition, ASUC similarly represents the establishment of American

composition, and the pieces performed at the conference were American premières of works originally given in Paris. The ASUC conference lent Zappa a respectability among people he maintains he dislikes; what is curious is that he wants such acceptance.

With the initial Zappa flurry over, the 285 registered participants settled down to the business of a four-day conference: 40 scheduled papers and panels, and 65 works (picked from around 1000 submitted) in back-to-back concerts. Although the planners had reduced the number of pieces compared with earlier conferences and increased the number of papers, attempting to hear and assimilate all the music was an exercise in overcoming overdose.

Owing to the amount of music presented, I was unable to attend all the paper sessions, which ran simultaneously with concerts. The subjects of the sessions were 'American Music', 'Minimalism', 'Computer Music', 'Professional Services for Composers', 'Graduate Programs in Composition', 'Non-tonal Pitch Organization', 'Music Perception', and 'Time and Music'. Partly because of Ohio State's computer music facilities (they have a PDP 11/45) and its courses in music perception, the conference geared itself somewhat in these directions. Particularly memorable among the music perception and the composer papers was 'Performance Space, Ritual, and Illusion' by Elliott Schwartz, who interjected the composer's view into the two hours allotted to psychoacousticians. (The representative from IRCAM persuasively rediscovered the wheel by proving scientifically that timbre affects the perception of counterpoint—which French composers in the 17th century knew when they wrote in *style brisé*.)

'Graduate Programs in Composition: Pedagogical Responsibilities' was as deadly as its title, but 'Professional Services for Composers', chaired by Joel Chadabe, sensibly stressed the practical ends of composition. Margaret Jory of ASCAP and Barbara Petersen of BMI (American equivalents to the British Performing Rights Society) spoke about the merits of performing rights organisations. Nancy Clarke of the American Music Center informed the audience of the many benefits of the AMC and its library, which serves as a central clearing-house for American composers. John Duffy, founder of Meet the Composer, explained the history, purpose, and future plans of the Exxon orchestral residency program, in which composers are placed with major orchestras, serve as advisers on new music, are commissioned by the orchestras to write new works, and develop new music programs in the community. At the final concert Duffy was created a life member of ASUC in recognition of his numerous efforts on behalf of composers.

The general impression I gained from the music offered at the conference was that ordered atonality—non-repetitive chromaticism based on expanded motifs, or twelve-note music, or some kind of free serial technique—was accepted as a given. It demonstrates that a conservative Schoenbergian influence remains at the heart of today's university teaching: Schoenberg has become respectable and bourgeois. Composers seem to be suffering from a fear of using the modern orchestra, probably because of lack of access to it. Most symptomatic of this alienation was a certain rhythmic timidity, which was less evident in the chamber works and at times altogether absent from the computer music, some of which was rhythmically very impressive. Another exception was Edwin London's choral technique in *Psalm of these Days V*.

On the whole there was little in the way of genuine

experimentation, but the best examples of 'interesting' music were electronic works, which included computer-generated sound with visuals, modified instrumental sounds, and new instruments created specifically for use with electronic filters. Orchestral music came next in order of interest (of which the best example was William Kraft's *Triple Play*), but a conservative handling of rhythm detracted from its effectiveness. Much of the chamber music took for granted a high degree of virtuosity, but used it for little more than local coloristic effects. The severest criticism I have of the entire event, from a compositional point of view, is that the composers seemed unable to sustain their works from beginning to end, because of either lack of inspiration, or lack of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic integration—that is, lack of technique. This may show that the university has become a place to learn theory and not practice.

The first concert I attended began with Urban 15, an ensemble of six percussionist-dancers from San Antonio, Texas, who performed three works by J. George Cisneros, one of their members. The music was ritualistic, representing a kind of parochial primitivism, and was numbingly loud. Pauline Oliveros combined live electronics with performance on the accordion in two atmospheric repetitive works, *Rattlesnake Mountain* and *The Seventh Mansion*. Of *Rattlesnake Mountain* the composer wrote: 'The piece records [my] responses while watching the shape of the mountain and the effects of breezes blowing through the meadows and forest below.' The music achieved the desired effect. This concert ended with an amusing and clever two-part piece by Michael Schell, called *An Alarming Situation*, which dealt with clocks in all sorts of ways.

Friday night's concert was distinguished by Edwin London's choral and orchestral *Psalm of these Days V*, based on Psalm 47, which London conducted. This lyric and diatonic work was very well crafted for the chorus and maintained an air of comforting religiosity.

Of the two concerts of electronic music, one consisted primarily of videos accompanying electronic music. Of these Reynold Weidenaar's *Night Flame Ritual* for electronic tape, clarinet (the soloist was F. Gerard Errante), and video was outstandingly enjoyable; it managed successfully to combine the serious subject of fire-fighting with a colourful whimsy. The audience knew we were in trouble when the soloist performing James Wagoner's *On the Beach at Fontana* (text by James Joyce) for soprano and tape said she had never met the composer and asked him to identify himself before she sang. It seems from his inept prosody that he could benefit from becoming better acquainted with singers.

The final concert of the conference was performed by the Columbus Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Christian Badea. Mark Phillips's three-movement *Intrusis* betrayed a familiarity with Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. *Liturgy* by Nancy Laird Chance achieved a solemn, coloristic effect. The highlight of the evening was *Triple Play* by William Kraft, composer-in-residence for the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra; it incorporated solo cello and antiphonal percussion from the balconies. We also heard *Ensemblance* by Peter Child, scored for a conducted chamber group and tape, and Steven Stucky's *Transparent Things*, a quiet and restrained contemplation of D major.

Fittingly, perhaps, the conference ended with a performance of Zappa's *The Perfect Stranger* for large ensemble. Conventionally scored for orchestral instruments, the work begins with ascending string

glissandos and ends with woodwind and brass playing descending, drunken-sounding glissandos. In the middle, each family of instruments is given a turn. Despite his railing at performers' shortcomings, Zappa's music is not especially difficult, being in rhythmic unison much of the time. One is forced to the conclusion that, since many other composers of music much more difficult than his have coped ably with live performers, so can Zappa. Present in the audience, he did not have the grace to acknowledge the conductor and orchestra.

<sup>1</sup> ASUC's purpose is the promotion of interest in new music. It publishes the *ASUC Journal of Music Scores*, in which facsimiles of works by its member composers are printed, issues recordings, promotes broadcasts, and sponsors an annual composition competition. Its *News Bulletin* carries notices of its activities, and selected papers from its annual conference are published in a series of monographs. ASUC membership, which is open to all composers and other musicians interested in contemporary music, is dealt with by the American Music Center, 250 West 54th Street, Room 300, New York, NY 10019. The *Journal of Music Scores* and the recordings are available from European American Retail Music, Inc., PO Box 850, Valley Forge, PA 19482.

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