

Frank Zappa & Peter Occhiogrosso (1989) [excerpts]

### Varèse



December 22, 1883–November 6, 1965

Rock and roll albums didn't appear in the marketplace until several years after rock itself was invented. In the early fifties, teenagers bought 78s or 45s.

The first rock and roll album I ever saw was around 1957—*Teenage Dance Party*. The cover showed a group of VERY WHITE TEENS, dancing, with confetti dangling all over the place near some soda bottles. Inside was a collection of songs by black doo-wop groups.

Back then, my record collection consisted of five or six rhythm-and-blues 78-RPM singles. Since I was a lower-middle-class teenager, the retail price of any kind of slowly rotating hi-fi vinyl seemed entirely out of the question.

One day I happened across an article about Sam Goody's record store in *Look* magazine which raved about what a wonderful merchandiser he was. The writer said that Mr. Goody could sell **anything**—and as an example he mentioned that he had even managed to sell an album called *Ionisation*.

The article went on to say something like: "*This album is nothing but drums—it's dissonant and terrible; the worst music in the world.*" Ahh! Yes! That's for me!

I wondered where I could get my hands on a record like that, because I was living in El Cajon, California—a little cowboy kind of town near San Diego.

There was another town just over the hill called La Mesa—a bit more upscale (they had a 'hi-fi store'). Some time later, I was staying overnight with Dave Franken, a friend who lived in La Mesa, and we wound up going to the hi-fi place—they were having a sale on R&B singles.

After shuffling through the rack and finding a couple of Joe Huston records, I made my way toward the cash register and happened to glance at the LP bin. I noticed a strange-looking black-and-white album cover with a guy on it who had frizzy gray hair and looked like a mad scientist. I thought it was great that a mad scientist had finally made a record, so I picked it up—and there it was, the record with "Ionisation" on it.

The author of the *Look* article had gotten it slightly wrong—the correct title was *The Complete Works of Edgard Varèse, Volume I*, including "Ionisation," among other pieces, on an obscure label called **EMS** (*Elaine Music Store*). The record number was **401**.

I returned the Joe Huston records and checked my pockets to see how much money I had—I think it came to about \$3.75. I'd never bought an album before, but I knew they must be expensive because mostly old people bought them. I asked the man at the cash register how much EMS 401 cost.

"That gray one in the box?" he said. "\$5.95."

I'd been searching for that record for over a year and I wasn't about to give up. I told him I had \$3.75. He thought about it for a minute, and said, "*We've been using that record to demonstrate hi-fi's with—but nobody ever buys one when we use it. I guess if you want it that bad you can have it for \$3.75.*"

I couldn't wait to hear it. My family had a genuine lo-fi record player: a **Decca**. It was a little box about four inches deep, sitting on short metal legs (because the speaker was on the bottom), and it had one of those clunky tonearms that you had to put a quarter on top of to hold it down. It played all three speeds, but it had never been set to 33⅓ before.

The record player was in the corner of the living room where my mother did the ironing. When she bought it, they gave her a free record of "The Little Shoemaker," by some middle-aged white-guy singing group on Mercury. She used to listen to "The Little Shoemaker" while she was ironing, so that was the only place where I could listen to my new Varèse album.

I turned the volume all the way up (in order to get the maximum amount of 'fi'), and carefully placed the *all-purpose osmium-tipped needle* on the lead-in spiral to "Ionisation." I have a nice Catholic mother who likes to watch Roller Derby. When she heard what came out of that little speaker on the bottom of the Decca, she looked at me like I was *out of my fucking mind*.

It had sirens and snare drums and bass drums and a lion's roar and all kinds of strange sounds on it. She forbade me to play it in the living room ever again. I told her that I thought it was really great, and I wanted to listen to it **all the way through**. She told me to take the record player into my bedroom.

My mother never got to hear "The Little Shoemaker" again.

The record player stayed in my room, and I listened to EMS 401 over and over and over, poring through the liner notes for every bit of information I could glean. I couldn't understand all the musical terms, but I memorized them anyway.

All through high school, whenever people came over, I

would force them to listen to Varèse—because I thought it was *the ultimate test of their intelligence*. They also thought I was out of my fucking mind.



## "Deserts"



On my fifteenth birthday, my mother said she would spend five dollars on me (a lot of money for us then), and asked me what I wanted. I said, "*Well, instead of buying me something, why don't you just let me make a long-distance phone call?*" (Nobody in our house had ever made a long-distance phone call.)

I decided that I would call Edgard Varèse. I deduced that a person who looked like a mad scientist could only live in a place called Greenwich Village. So I called New York information and asked if they had a listing for Edgard Varèse. Sure enough, they did. They even gave me the address: 188 Sullivan Street.

His wife, Louise, answered the phone. She was very sweet, and told me he wasn't there—he was in Brussels working on a composition for the World's Fair ("*Poème électronique*")—and suggested I call back in a few weeks. I don't remember exactly what I said when I finally spoke to him—probably something articulate like "*Gee—I really dig your music.*"

Varèse told me that he was working on a new piece called "Déserts," which thrilled me since Lancaster, California, was in the desert. When you're fifteen and living in the Mojave Desert, and you find out that the World's Greatest Composer (who also looks like a mad scientist) is working in a secret Greenwich Village laboratory on a '**song about your hometown**' (so to speak), you can get pretty *excited*.

I still think "Déserts" is about Lancaster, even if the liner notes on the Columbia LP insist that it is something more *philosophical*.

All through high school I searched for information about Varèse and his music. I found one book that had a photo of him

as a young man, and a quote, saying he would be just as happy growing grapes as being a composer. I liked that.

## Stravinsky & Webern

The second 33⅓-RPM record I bought was by Stravinsky. I found a budget-line recording (on Camden) of *The Rite of Spring* by something called 'The World-Wide Symphony Orchestra.' (Sounds pretty official, eh?) The cover was a green-and-black abstract whatchamacallit, and it had a magenta paper label with black lettering. I loved Stravinsky almost as much as Varèse.

The other composer who filled me with awe—I couldn't believe that anybody would write music like that—was Anton Webern. I heard an early recording on the Dial label with a cover by an artist named David Stone Martin—it had one or two of Webern's string quartets, and his Symphony op. 21 on the other side. I loved that record, but it was about as different from Stravinsky and Varèse as you could get.

I didn't know anything about twelve-tone music then, but I liked the way it sounded. Since I didn't have any kind of formal training, it didn't make any difference to me if I was listening to Lightnin' Slim, or a vocal group called the Jewels (who had a song out then called "Angel in My Life"), or Webern, or Varèse, or Stravinsky. To me it was **all good music**.



## My All-American Education



There were a few teachers in school who really helped me out. Mr. Kavelman, the band instructor at Mission Bay High, gave me the answer to one of the burning musical questions of my youth. I came to him one day with a copy of "Angel in My Life"—my favorite R&B tune at the time. I couldn't understand why I loved that record so much, but I figured that, since he was a *music teacher*, maybe **he** knew.

"Listen to this," I said, "and tell me why I like it so much."

"Parallel fourths," he concluded.

He was the first person to tell me about twelve-tone music. It's not that he was a fan of it, but he did mention the fact that *it existed*, and I am grateful to him for that. I never would have heard Webern if it hadn't been for him.

Mr. Ballard was the high school music instructor at Antelope Valley High. He let me conduct the orchestra a couple of times, let me write music on the blackboard, and had the orchestra play it.

Mr. Ballard also did me a big favor without knowing it. As a drummer, I was obliged to perform the gruesome task of playing in the marching band. Considering my lack of interest in football, I couldn't stand sitting around in a stupid-looking uniform, going 'Da-ta-da-da-ta-ta-taaaaah; CHARGE!' every time somebody kicked a fucking football, freezing my nards off every weekend. Mr. Ballard threw me out of the marching band for **smoking in uniform**—and for that I will be *eternally grateful*.

My English teacher at A.V. was Don Cerveris. He was also a good friend. Don got tired of being a teacher and quit—he wanted to be a screenwriter. In 1959, he wrote the screenplay for a super-cheap cowboy movie called *Run Home Slow*, and helped me get my first film scoring job on it.



## CHAPTER 8

# All About Music

*"Information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, wisdom is not truth, truth is not beauty, beauty is not love, love is not music. Music is the best."*

Frank Zappa, *Joe's Garage*, 1979

### What Do You Do for a Living, Dad?

If any of my kids ever asked me that question, the answer would have to be: *"What I do is composition."* I just happen to use material other than *notes* for the pieces.

Composition is a process of organization, very much like architecture. As long as you can conceptualize what that organizational process is, you can be a 'composer'—**in any medium you want.**

You can be a 'video composer,' a 'film composer,' a 'choreography composer,' a 'social engineering composer'—whatever. Just give me some *stuff*, and I'll organize it for you. That's what I do.

*Project/Object* is a term I have used to describe the overall concept of my work in various mediums. Each project (in whatever realm), or interview connected to it, is part of a larger object, for which there is no 'technical name.'

Think of the connecting material in the *Project/Object* this way: A novelist invents a character. If the character is a good one, he takes on a life of his own. Why should he get to go to only one party? He could pop up anytime in a future novel.

Or: Rembrandt got his 'look' by mixing just a little brown into every other color—he didn't do 'red' unless it had brown in it. The brown itself wasn't especially fascinating, but the result of its obsessive inclusion was that 'look.'

In the case of the *Project/Object*, you may find a little *poodle* over here, a little *blow job* over there, etc., etc. I am not obsessed by *poodles* or *blow jobs*, however; these words (and others of equal insignificance), along with pictorial images and melodic themes, recur throughout the albums, interviews, films, videos (and this book) for no other reason than to unify the 'collection.'

## The Frame

The most important thing in art is **The Frame**. For painting: literally; for other arts: figuratively—because, without this humble appliance, you can't **know** where *The Art* stops and *The Real World* begins.

You have to put a 'box' around it because otherwise, **what is that shit on the wall?**

If John Cage, for instance, says, "I'm putting a contact microphone on my throat, and I'm going to drink carrot juice, and that's my composition," then his gurgling qualifies as **his composition** because he put a frame around it and said so. "Take it or leave it, I now **will** this to be **music**." After that it's a matter of taste. Without the frame-as-announced, it's a guy swallowing carrot juice.



So, if *music is the best*, what **is** music? Anything **can** be music, but it doesn't **become music** until someone **will**s it to be music, and the audience listening to it decides to **perceive it as music**.

Most people can't deal with that abstraction—or don't want to. They say: "**Gimme the tune. Do I like this tune? Does it sound like another tune that I like? The more familiar it is, the better I like it. Hear those three notes there? Those are the three notes I can sing along with. I like those notes very, very much. Give me a beat. Not a fancy one. Give me a GOOD BEAT—something I can dance to. It has to go boom-bap, boom-boom-BAP. If it doesn't, I will hate it very, very much. Also, I want it right away—and then, write me some more songs like that—over and over and over again, because I'm really into music.**"

Handwritten musical score for "WOOD WINDS 1ST TIME". The score is written on ten staves, with the first staff labeled "JEFF" and the second staff labeled "181". The notation includes various musical symbols, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is written in a style that suggests it is a working draft or a personal sketch.

## Why Bother?

I used to love putting little black dots on music paper. I'd sit for sixteen hours at a time, hunched over in a chair with a bottle of India ink, and draw beams and dots.

No other activity could have enticed me away from the table. I'd maybe get up for coffee or to eat, but, other than that, I was glued to the chair for weeks and months on end, writing music.

I thought it was fun, because I could hear everything in my head, and I kept telling myself how *thoroughly bitchen* it was.

To be able to write a piece of music and hear it in your head is a completely different sensation from the ordinary listening experience.

I don't write 'music on paper' anymore. The incentive to continue was removed by having to deal with symphony orchestras.

## The Anthropology of the Symphony Orchestra

*"I have found, in my varied experience as a conductor, soloist with orchestra, and ordinary listener, that there is a general misuse of power all round, depending in whose hands it happens to repose in any given instance. The orchestra which finds that it has at its mercy a conductor—whom it may dislike for any reason from lack of musicianship to mere unsociability—is frequently as ruthless in its use of power as the conductor who exercises authority merely because he does not fancy a violinist's complexion or the way he sits while playing. Pundits may talk of a conductor's 'authority,' his 'beat' and his 'knowledge of scores,' but actual control of an orchestra is more frequently founded on the less gaudy basis of economics."*

Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1942)

Some critics have said that what I do is a perverse form of 'political theater.' Maybe twenty or thirty percent of my lyrics go

in that direction—the rest of my activities might be more accurately described as 'amateur anthropology.'

For example, when a *real* anthropologist studies a tribe, he has to eat the bowl of worms, put the grass skirt on and **go for it**. For me, wandering around in *the Mudd Club* was kind of like that—and so was working with a symphony orchestra.

The string players are a tribe; the brass players are a tribe; the woodwind players are a tribe—subdivided into 'tribe-lets.' (*The mind-set of an oboe player is different from the mind-set of a clarinet player, which is different from the mind-set of a flute player, which is different from the mind-set of a bassoon player.*) The percussionists are another tribe altogether.

Within those divisions and subdivisions, I was able to observe *specific preoccupations*—like: string players tend to be more concerned with their pensions than anybody else in the orchestra.

Apparently there are special pressures experienced by violinists which do not apply to cellists. It takes a long time to learn how to play a violin, and, after you whittle your fingers to the bone, what's the big payoff? A chair in the nineteenth row, sawing away on whole notes, while some guy who might be better at politics (or blow jobs) is sitting in chair number one, getting all the *bitchen solos*.

Viola players are often *failed violinists*. Not too many people who play the viola chose it because they *love* the instrument—they get *demoted* to it. This happens in grade school. (The viola can be a clumsy thing to stick under a kid's chin—so maybe your posture gets weird.) People who can't quite cut it in the violin section get banished to *viola-land*.

Flute players and harpists look to me like they have a bad attitude because of all that *cloud and angel music* they have to play. French horn players are arrogant too—they have to play all the shit that sounds like graduation.

Timpanists? Forget it—they regard themselves as 'special'

because **their drums** have **musical pitches**. (*None of the other orchestral percussionists is allowed to **double** on timpani—only the timpanist can play the timpani.*)

In high school, I saw trombone players described in a textbook as "*The Clowns of the Orchestra*" (indicating that the author found the image of grown men earning their living by sliding lubricated tubing back and forth, and leaving pools of spit in front of their chairs, pretty amusing).

When Schönberg introduced the *trombone glissando* into modern orchestral writing, critics of the period were outraged, declaring the sound to be *obscene*, and therefore inappropriate for the concert hall.

Players of certain instruments detest being seated near players of certain other instruments, because the other guy's sound *offends* them. During my visit to Orchestra-Land, I looked at these folks, and the instruments they had chosen to play, and tried to imagine what strange forces had produced those choices.

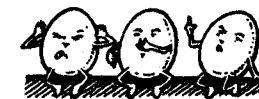
I got the impression that, in the case of the violin, it might have been (as in Italian families where helpless children are forced into *accordionic submission*) the violin was the *family instrument*, and the guy *had* to learn it.

I don't think there are too many cases where parents have *demand*ed that their children learn to play percussion. The same thing with the bassoon: Not too many parents dream of the day when little Waldo will enthrall the neighbors by blowing on a brown thing with a metal doodad poking out the side of it.

The bassoon is one of my favorite instruments. It has the *medieval aroma*—like the days when *everything* used to sound like that. Some people crave baseball—I find this unfathomable—but I can easily understand why a person could get excited about playing a bassoon. It's a *great noise*—nothing else makes *that* noise.

I don't think in the beginning musicians worry about "*how am I going to make a living from playing this?*" They get charmed

by the sound of an instrument, and mutate, over time, into victims of its 'behavioral traditions.'



## We Hate Your Dots

When a composer sends a score to an orchestra, in most instances, they don't want to see it. You can't understand how horrible it is to have to go through that unless you have manually copied a score—until you have had to sit there for months (for some guys, years) **drawing dots**.

The process of preparing a score is an endless job. After you have written hundreds of pages of dots upon dots and checked them to make sure that you didn't make a mistake, somebody has to **copy the parts**.

Each score page shows the conductor what everybody in the orchestra is supposed to be doing at any given moment during the piece.

One page of full orchestral score that takes forty-five seconds to play can take sixteen hours to draw.

Before an orchestra can play what you wrote, a **copyist** has to put on his green eyeshade, roll up his sleeves and say, "*Okay, the bells.*" He looks at the score, and copies out just what *Mr. Bells* is required to do, moment by moment, throughout the piece. Then he copies out the moment-by-moment instructions for *Mr. Chimes*, and so on down the page for **every instrument in the orchestra**.

A copyist gets paid money for that—a *lot* of money. Who pays for it? The composer, of course.

I have a closet in my basement, full of orchestral scores—the result of about five years' work by as many as five full-time copyists. The salaries paid out during that period ran close to three hundred thousand dollars, and then the only way I got to

hear any of it was to spend an even larger amount and **hire** an orchestra to play it.

Thanks to songs like "*Dinah Moe Humm*," "*Titties & Beer*" and "*Don't Eat the Yellow Snow*," I managed to accumulate enough cash to bribe a group of drones to grind its way through pieces like "*Mö 'n Herb's Vacation*," "*Bob in Dacron*" and "*Bogus Pomp*" (eventually released on *London Symphony Orchestra, Volumes I and II*)—in performances which come off like high-class 'demos' of what actually resides in the scores. So, how did I wind up using **those** guys? Well, it's a *long story* . . .

#### ORCHESTRAL STUPIDITY #1

In 1976, the people who promoted our rock shows in Austria (*Stimmung der Welt*) approached me with the idea of doing a concert with the Vienna Symphony. I said okay. After two or three years of pooting around with the mechanics of the deal, work began on the final preparations. The concert was to be funded by the city of Vienna, the Austrian radio, the Austrian television and a substantial investment from me (the cost of preparing the scores and parts).

At the point when the official announcement was made that the concert would take place (I think it was in June or July), there was no written contract with any of the governmental agencies listed above. As it turned out, the person from the Austrian TV who pledged \$300,000 toward the budget (which was to cover three weeks of rehearsal, shipping our band equipment, air fares and housing for band members and band and crew salaries—I was not getting paid for any of this) did not **really** have the authority to do so, and was informed by his boss that that amount had **already been committed to other TV projects**. This created a situation wherein the remaining sponsors still had their funds available and

wished to proceed, but somebody had to round up the missing \$300,000 from another source.

At this point my manager got on a plane to Europe and spent the best part of a month thrashing around the continent, trying to raise the missing bucks. No luck. Between his travel, food, hotels and intercontinental phone calls, plus my investment in copyist fees to prepare the music (*not to mention the two or three years I had spent writing it*), the total amount I had spent **in cash**, at the time the concert was canceled, came to around \$125,000.



#### ORCHESTRAL STUPIDITY #2

The second one goes like this: in 1980, in Amsterdam, the head of the Holland Festival came to my hotel and said the Festival wanted to do a "*special performance of my orchestral music*" with the Residentie Orchestra (from The Hague), as well as performances of certain other smaller pieces by the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, all of these performances to take place during one whole 'special week' of the festival.

I told him that I had received several offers in the past (including one from the Oslo Philharmonic where they thought they might be able to squeeze in **two days** of rehearsal), and described the whole Vienna business in glowing terms.

I told him that it would be nice to have the music performed but, since there was *a lot of it* and it was *difficult stuff*, there was no way I would discuss it any further without the guarantee of a minimum of three weeks' rehearsal, and in no way was I interested in spending any more of my own money on projects such as this.



He assured me that they were committed to doing the project and that the rehearsal schedule could be arranged, and not only that—they were willing to pay for the **WHOLE THING!**

The Holland Festival put up the equivalent of \$500,000 for the event. Deals were then made with CBS to record and release the music, more copyists were hired, musicians from the U.S. who were going to play the amplified parts of the score were hired, road crew people who would handle the PA equipment (as the concert was to be held in an eight-thousand-seat hall) were hired and a rock tour of Europe was booked (to help pay the cost of shipping the equipment and the salaries of the U.S. people involved—again, I was not getting paid), all in preparation for another summer orchestral concert that was doomed like the other one.

What happened? Well, first let's understand the economics of a project like this. It involves a lot of musicians and they all like to get paid (this is a mild way of putting it). Also, since it was to be an amplified concert, there is the problem of special equipment to make the sound as clear as possible in the hall. (It was called the Ahoy—a charming sort of Dutch indoor bicycle racing arena with a concrete floor and a banked wooden track all around the room.) Also, there was going to be a recording of the music, necessitating the expenditure of even more money for the rental of the equipment, engineer's salary and travel expenses, etc., etc., etc.

The money from the Dutch government would cover the salaries of the Dutch musicians, for rehearsal and live performance, and also the cost of the rehearsal hall. As usual, everything else in the budget was my problem.

I had to find a way to pay for the recording equipment, the engineer, the extra payments to the musicians

for sessions (above and beyond their concert pay) and all post-production (mixing, packaging, etc.) on the album. A deal was made with CBS and that problem was solved.

The next problem was how to pay for the rehearsal salaries and travel expenses for the U.S. musicians who were to be involved, as well as their concert performance salaries. This problem was solved by booking a rock tour of about four weeks' duration for the time between the first orchestral rehearsals (the week of April 20) and the rest (a two-week period toward the end of May, just before the actual orchestra concerts).

The band I was bringing over from the States would be doing a total of seventeen weeks' work, all of it rehearsal except for four weeks of rock shows, one week of orchestral concerts and five days of recording. It was to be a nine-piece group and each musician would have earned \$15,000 for the seventeen weeks of work plus having all of their travel expenses paid, all of their food paid for, all of their hotels paid for, etc.

Shortly before the start of rehearsals in the U.S., Vinnie Colaiuta and Jeff Berlin called our office and tried to make secret deals to get their individual salaries raised, saying, "*Don't tell the other guys.*"

When I heard of this, I canceled using the electric group with the orchestra, saving myself a lot of time and trouble rehearsing them, and a lot of money moving them around. Plans remained in effect for the orchestral concerts to continue as acoustic events in smaller halls. The recording plans remained the same also . . . five days of recording following the live performances.

About a week or so after the attempted hijack by the U.S. musicians, our office received a letter from the head of the Residentie Orchestra. Among other things, it mentioned that the orchestra committee (a group of play-

ers that represents the orchestra members in discussions with the orchestra management) had **hired a lawyer** and were ready to **begin negotiations** to determine how much of a royalty **THEY** would get for making a record.

Since I had already raised the funds from CBS to pay them the necessary recording scale for doing this work, such a demand seemed to be totally out of line with reality, as I had never heard of a situation wherein an orchestra demanded that the composer pay **them** royalties for **their** performance of works **he had written**, nor did I feel it would have been advisable to set a dangerous precedent that might affect the livelihood of other composers, by acceding to the wishes of this greedy bunch of mechanics.

A short time after that the orchestra manager and the guy we originally talked to from the Holland Festival flew to Los Angeles for a meeting to go over final details.

They arrived at my house about midnight. By about 1:30 A.M., I had told them that I never wished to see their mercenary little ensemble, and that permission to perform any of my works would not be granted to them under any circumstances. They left soon after that.

It was determined shortly thereafter that the cost of going through all of this intercontinental frolic had brought my 'serious music investment' to about \$250,000 and I still hadn't heard a note of it.

There you have it, folks . . . two orchestral stupidities: a conceptual double concerto for inaudible instruments on two continents, perfectly performed by some of the most exceptional musicians of our time.

Frank Zappa, *Musician* magazine #36, September 1981

## What Is Music?

*"We're coming to the beginning of a new era, wherein the development of the inner self is the most important thing. We have to train ourselves so that we can improvise on anything—a bird, a sock, a fuming beaker! This, too, can be music. Anything can be music."*

Biff Debris in *Uncle Meat*

A person with a feel for rhythm can walk into a factory and hear the machine noise as a composition. If we expand that concept to include light, behavior, weather factors, moon phases, anything (whether it's a rhythm that can be **heard** or a rhythm that is **perceived**, i.e., a color change **over time**—or a **season**), it can be **consumed** as music.

If it can be **conceived as music**, it can be **executed as music**, and **presented to an audience in such a way that they will perceive it as music**: *"Look at this. Ever seen one of these before? I built this for you. What do you mean, 'What the fuck is it?' It's a goddam ÉTUDE, asshole."*

When someone writes a piece of music, what he or she puts on the paper is **roughly the equivalent of a recipe**—in the sense that **the recipe is not the food, only instructions for the preparation of the food**. Unless you are very weird, you don't eat the recipe.

If I write something on a piece of paper, I can't *actually* **'hear'** it. I can conjure up visions of what the symbols on the page **mean**, and imagine a piece of music as it might sound in performance, but **that sensation is nontransferable; it can't be shared or transmitted**.

It doesn't become a 'musical experience' in normal terms until 'the recipe' has been converted into **wiggling air molecules**.

Music, in performance, is a type of sculpture. The air in the performance space is **sculpted into something**. This 'molecule-sculpture-over-time' is then 'looked at' by the ears of the listeners—or a microphone.

SOUND is 'ear-decoded data.' Things which MAKE SOUND are things which are capable of creating **perturbations**. These perturbations modify (or sculpt) the raw material (the 'static air' in the room—the way it was 'at rest' before the musicians started fucking around with it). If you **purposefully** generate atmospheric perturbations ('air shapes'), you are composing.

## Let's All Be Composers!

A composer is a guy who goes around forcing his will on unsuspecting air molecules, often with the assistance of unsuspecting musicians.

Want to be a composer? You don't even have to be able to write it down. The stuff that gets written down is only a recipe, remember?—like the stuff in Ronnie Williams's *MACHA* book. If you can **think design**, you can **execute design**—it's only a bunch of air molecules, who's gonna check up on you?

### JUST FOLLOW THESE SIMPLE INSTRUCTIONS:

- [1] Declare your **intention** to create a 'composition.'
- [2] **Start** a piece at **some time**.
- [3] Cause **something to happen over a period of time** (it doesn't matter what happens in your 'time hole'—we have critics to tell us whether it's any good or not, so we won't worry about that part).
- [4] **End the piece at some time** (or keep it going, telling the audience it is a '*work in progress*').
- [5] Get a part-time job so you can continue to do stuff like this.

## Weights and Measures

In my compositions, I employ a system of weights, balances, measured tensions and releases—in some ways similar to Varèse's aesthetic. The similarities are best illustrated by comparison to a *Calder mobile*: **a multicolored whatchamacallit, dangling in space, that has big blobs of metal connected**

**to pieces of wire, balanced ingeniously against little metal dingleberries on the other end.** Varèse knew Calder, and was fascinated by these creations.

So, in my case, I say: "*A large mass of any material will 'balance' a smaller, denser mass of any material, according to the length of the gizmo it's dangling on, and the 'balance point' chosen to facilitate the danglement.*"

The material being 'balanced' includes stuff other than the notes on the paper. If you can conceive of **any material** as a 'weight' and any **idea-over-time** as a 'balance,' you are ready for the next step: the '*entertainment objects*' that derive from those concepts.

## "Anything, Any Time, Anywhere—for No Reason at All"

If a musical point can be made in a more entertaining way by **saying** a word than by **singing** a word, the **spoken word** will win out in the arrangement—unless a *nonword* or a *mouth noise* gets the point across faster.

This frequently occurs when the stage arrangements of old songs get modified to accommodate each new band. The body of the song, the melody line, the words, and the chords remain the same, but all aspects of 'the clothing,' or the orchestration, are up for grabs, based on the musical resources at hand.

With the 1988 band (twelve pieces, including myself), the orchestration was far more luxuriant for some of the older songs than when they were originally recorded, simply because I didn't want to have eleven guys standing around onstage with nothing to do.

Songs written with one idea in mind have been known to mutate into something *completely* different if I hear an 'optional vocal inflection' during rehearsal. I'll hear a 'hint' of something

(often a mistake) and pursue it to its most absurd extreme.

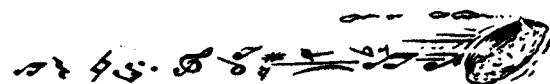
The 'technical expression' we use in the band to describe this process is: "**PUTTING THE EYEBROWS ON IT.**" This usually refers to vocal parts, although you can *put the eyebrows* on just about anything.

After "*the eyebrows*," the ultimate tweeze inflicted on the composition is determining **The Attitude** with which the piece is to be performed. The player is expected to comprehend **The Attitude**, and perform the material with **The Attitude AND The Eyebrows**, *consistently*, otherwise, to me, the piece sounds 'wrong.'

Since most Americans use a personal version of *eyebrowsage* in their conversational speech, why not include the technique as a 'nuance' in a composition?

A musician may give the 'illusion' during rehearsal that he knows what I want on a certain passage, but the hard part is getting him to do it correctly, night after night on the road—because after a while, most musicians forget **why** I told them to do it **that way** in the first place, which brings us to . . .

## Does Humor Belong in Music?



What academicians regard as 'humor' in music is usually stuff along the lines of "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks" (remember, in 'Music Appreciation class,' when they told you that the E-flat clarinet is going "*ha-ha-ha!*"?). Take my word for it, folks—you can do **way better** than that.

I've stated elsewhere that "**Timbre Rules**"—*rules what?* For one thing, it rules in '*the humor domain*.' The minute you hear a trumpet with a Harmon mute going "*Fwa-da-fwa-da-fwa-da*," you register 'something'—a '**humor something**.' (There aren't any technical names for these '**things**' because they don't give foundation grants to study this kind of stuff.)

Likewise, a bass saxophone, playing in its lowest register, conveys another sort of '**H.S.**' (Humor Something)—and how about our ol' buddy, *The Slide Trombone*—surely this graceful, expressive piece of machinery has its own little '**H.S.**' radiator built into it.

I've developed a 'formula' for what these timbres *mean* (to me, at least), so that when I create an arrangement—if I have access to the right instrumental resources—I can put sounds together that tell **more than the story in the lyrics**, especially to American listeners, raised on these subliminal clichés, shaping their audio reality from the cradle to the elevator.

We crack up during rehearsal because some of the stuff is *so stupid*. When building an arrangement, every time I have an opportunity to insert one of those modules I cram it in, and since rehearsal is a daily two-hour occurrence while we're on the road, the arrangements often change overnight, based on the daily news or some morsel of tour-bus folklore.

During the pretour rehearsals, the band members pencil these 'extras' in next to 'the real notes' so, when they finally have the show learned, they know not only the *song-as-originally-written* but also, superimposed on it, a flexible grid which will support a constantly mutating collage of low-rent Americana.

I owe this part of my musical existence to **Spike Jones**.

### La Machine



Most of my compositions today are *written on and performed* by a machine—a computer musical instrument called the **Synclavier**. It allows me to create and record a type of music that is impossible (or too boring) for human beings to play.

When I say too boring, I mean that in most compositions, someone has to play the *stuff in the background*. If you've ever been in a band or know anything about musicians, you know that no musician ever liked to play a background part. His mind wanders.

Much of today's music involves an ostinato bass line or some other type of repeated figure, and if the figure isn't played accurately, with conviction, whatever is laid on top of it doesn't work. To save the sanity of musicians who can't keep their minds focused when assigned to accompaniment duties, this machine will play ostinatos—cheerfully—until it's blue in the face (except it never gets blue in the face).

Anything you can dream up can be typed or played into the Synclavier. One of the things I use it for is writing blocks of complicated rhythms, and having them executed accurately by *groups of instruments*. With the Synclavier, any group of imagi-

nary instruments can be invited to play the most difficult passages, and the 'little guys inside the machine' play them with *one-millisecond* accuracy—every time.

The Synclavier allows the composer not only to have his piece performed with precision, but to *style* the performance as well—he can be his own conductor, controlling the dynamics or any other performance parameters. He can bring his idea to the audience in a pure form, allowing them to hear **the music**, rather than the ego problems of a group of players who don't give a shit about *the composition*.

Obviously, there are things you can do with live musicians that you can't do with the Synclavier, and vice versa. I view them as separate mediums.

Some of the things live musicians do that machines don't do are good, and some are bad. One of the good things that live musicians do is *improvise*. They *respond to the moment*, and can play more expressively than the machine. (The machine is not devoid of expression, but I really have to type a lot of numbers into it to approximate the type of expression that I can get instantaneously from a well-rehearsed live ensemble.)

But musicians tend to be lazy, and they get sick and skip rehearsals. In fact, they do the kinds of things that other people do in normal jobs. If they were working in a shoestring factory, it might not make that much difference. In a live concert, everything is pressurized because all you have to work with is that single, living, two-hour hunk of time.

Machines don't get loaded, drunk or evicted and don't need assistance moving their families around in 'emergency' situations. On the other hand, machines don't decide to say things like "*We're Beatrice*" in precisely the 'wrong' place in the middle of a song, and make people laugh (one of Ike Willis's specialties). Subtracting the bullshit and the mistakes, if I had to choose between live musicians or La Machine, I must admit, from time to time I'm *almost* tempted to opt for the "human element."

## My Job! My Precious Job!

Every so often you hear someone from the Musicians' Union complaining about the possibility of devices like the Synclavier putting musicians out of work. I don't think that will ever happen. There are still plenty of people who believe that the only real music is music played by human beings (wearing leather and large hair).

Other union people seem to be under the impression that if you 'sample' a musician into a Synclavier, you magically (don't laugh) *suck the music out of the musician*, depriving him of some intangible dignity and/or potential income.

**Music comes from composers—not musicians.** Composers think it up; musicians perform it. If a musician *improvises* when he is performing, he becomes, *during those moments*, a *composer*—the rest of the time, he is the interpreter of a musical design originated by a composer. Composers don't have a union—and the Musicians' Union actually makes life more difficult for **them** with certain rule-book technicalities. The Musicians' Union helped to create the market for *sampling machines*, but refuses to admit it.

Listen to the radio—a lot of what you think is being played by *Beautiful Rock Stars* is actually being played by machines like the Synclavier. I know of a group whose producer brought them in for ONE DAY and sampled all their instruments. Then **HE** put the song together using *the sounds* of their instruments—the guys never played on the song. The machine played their instruments *for them*. All they had to do was come back and sing on top of it and make the video.

## While You Were Art

Art Jarvinen is a percussionist and former instructor at Cal-Arts. He put together a chamber ensemble called the E.A.R.' Unit: two percussion, two keyboards, clarinet and cello.

He asked me to write an arrangement of "While You Were Out," a solo from the *Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar* album, for his ensemble to play at one of the **Monday Evening Concerts** (remember the postcard with "*We will be unable to play your piece because it requires a left-handed piano*"?—those guys—they're still in business).

I created the arrangement on the Synclavier, and, using another of the machine's features, printed out the parts. When he saw them, he realized that it was a difficult piece, and worried that his ensemble wouldn't have enough time to rehearse it, as the concert was imminent.

"You're in luck," I told him, "*because you won't even have to play it. All you have to do is learn to pretend to play it, and I'll have the Synclavier take care of the rest. Just go out there and do what all the 'Big Rock Groups' have done for years—lip-sync it and make sure you look good on stage.*"

I made them a tape copy of the Synclavier performance and told him, "*The way to pull this off is to have wires hanging out of your instruments leading into amplifiers and effects boxes on the floor. Any sound the audience hears that might be deemed 'synthesized' will be overlooked because there's a wire coming out of your instrument.*"

Final result? The man who ran the concert series didn't know the difference. The two classical reviewers from the major Los Angeles newspapers didn't notice anything either. Nobody in the audience knew, except for David Ocker, my computer assistant, who had helped prepare the materials. **Nobody knew that the musicians never played a note.**

It produced quite a scandal in 'modern music circles.' Several members of the ensemble, mortified by all the hoo-ha, swore

they would never *"do it again."* (Do **what** again? Prove to the world that nobody really knows what the fuck is going on at a contemporary music concert?)

## Conducting an Orchestra

One thing 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.

From the podium (if the orchestra is playing well), the music sounds so good that if you **listen to it**, you'll fuck up. When I'm conducting, I have to force myself **not to listen**, and think about what I'm doing with my hand and where the cues go.

My conducting 'style' (such as it is) lurks somewhere between nonexistent and massively boring. I try to keep cues to the bare minimum necessary for the players to do their job by simply indicating where the beat is. I don't think of myself as a 'conductor.'

*"Conducting" is when you draw 'designs' in the nowhere—with a stick, or with your hands—which are interpreted as 'instructional messages' by guys wearing bow ties who wish they were fishing.*

## 'Deviation from the Norm'

One of the things I've said before in interviews is: *"Without deviation (from the norm), 'progress' is not possible."*

In order for one to *deviate successfully*, one has to have at least a passing acquaintance with whatever *norm* one expects to deviate from.

When a musician comes into my band, he already knows *sets of musical norms*. The drummers know all the *drumbeat norms* (how to play disco, how to play a shuffle, how to play fatback, etc., etc.). Bass players know all the *bass player norms* (thumb pops, walking lines, 'traditional' ostinatos, etc., etc.). Those are today's *radio music norms*. Part of the fun in preparing touring arrangements is  *nuking those norms*.

The place where one finds the least enthusiasm for *norm-nuking* is in the world of the symphony orchestra. If you hand an orchestral musician a piece of *new music*, his instant response is likely to be: *"Feh! This was written by some guy who is still alive!"*

Players come into the orchestra already *knowing* what's 'good'—because they've played it a million times in the conservatory. So, when a composer approaches an orchestra with a piece of music embodying techniques or ideas that weren't 'certified' during the musicians' conservatory days, he is likely to



experience *rejection at the molecular level*—as a defense mechanism of the entire orchestra.

As soon as an orchestra attempts to play something they don't know, they run the risk of fucking up. There are only two ways for them to avoid this potential embarrassment. One is to rehearse—but who will pay for this precious rehearsal time? The other is to avoid playing **any** new music.

When a guest conductor comes to town, he is not usually giving a performance of something by a living composer. He's doing Brahms; he's doing Beethoven; he's doing Mozart—because he can warm it up in one afternoon and make it sound okay. This makes the accountants happy, and allows the audience to concentrate on his *choreography* (which is really why they bought the tickets in the first place).

Why is that any better than a bunch of guys in a bar band jamming on "Louie Louie" or "Midnight Hour"?

### Hateful Practices

I find music of the classical period boring because it reminds me of *'painting by numbers.'* There are certain things composers of that period were not allowed to do because they were considered to be outside the boundaries of the *industrial regulations* which determined whether the piece was a symphony, a sonata or a *whatever*.

All of the *norms*, as practiced during the olden days, came into being because *the guys who paid the bills* wanted the *'tunes'* they were buying to *'sound a certain way.'*

The king said: "I'll chop off your head unless it sounds **like this.**" The pope said: "I'll rip out your fingernails unless it sounds **like this.**" The duke or somebody else might have said it another way—and it's the same today: "Your song won't get played on the radio unless it sounds **like this.**" People who think that classical music is somehow more *elevated* than *'radio music'* should take a look at the **forms** involved—and at who's paying

the bills. Once upon a time, it was the king or Pope So-and-so. Today we have broadcast license holders, radio programmers, disc jockeys and record company executives—banal reincarnations of the assholes who shaped the music of the past.

The contemporary *'harmony textbook'* is the embodiment of those evils, in catalog form. When I was handed my first book and told to do the exercises, I hated the *sound* of the *'sample passages.'* I studied them anyway. If something is *hateful*, you should at least know what it is you're hating so you can avoid it in the future.

Many compositions that have been accepted as "GREAT ART" through the years reek of these *hateful practices*. For example, the rule of harmony that says: *The second degree of the scale should go to the fifth degree of the scale, which should go to the first degree of the scale [II-V-I].*

Tin Pan Alley songs and jazz standards thrive on **II-V-I**. To me, this is a *hateful progression*. In jazz, they beef it up a little by adding extra partials into the chords to make them more luxurious, but it's still **II-V-I**. To me, **II-V-I** is the essence of bad *'white-person music.'*

(One of the most exciting things that ever happened in the world of *'white-person music'* was when the Beach Boys used the progression **V-II** on "Little Deuce Coupe." An important step forward by going backward.)

It's the instructor's job to make you learn how to do all the stuff in those books. To get a grade, you must write exercises proving that you are capable of accommodating the entertainment needs of deceased kings and popes, and, after you've *proved* it, you get a piece of paper that says you're a *composer*. Is that **nauseating** or what?

It's worse in the graduate courses that teach students how to do *'modern'* music. Even modern music has *hateful practices*—like the twelve-tone business that says you can't play note one until you've cycled through the other eleven, theoretically thwarting tonality by giving each pitch *equal importance*.

The *Ultimate Rule* ought to be: "If it sounds **GOOD** to **YOU**, it's **bitchen**; and if it sounds **BAD** to **YOU**, it's **shitty**." The more varied your musical experience, the easier it is to define for yourself *what you like* and *what you don't like*. American radio listeners, raised on a diet of \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank*), have experienced a musical universe so small they cannot begin to *know* what they like.

In radio music, **timbre rules** (the *texture* of the tune, i.e., "Purple Haze" played on accordion is *very different* from Hendrix playing it on a squealing feedback guitar).

On a record, the overall timbre of the piece (determined by equalization of individual parts and their proportions in the mix) tells you, in a subtle way, *WHAT* the song is about. The orchestration provides *important information* about what the composition *IS* and, in some instances, assumes a greater importance than the *composition itself*.

American listeners know very little about the ethnic music of other cultures, and the closest they get to contemporary orchestral composition is the latest film or TV background music.

It's amazing that schools still offer courses in musical composition. What a useless thing to spend money on—to take a course in college to learn how to be a *modern composer*! No matter how good the course is, when you get out, **what the fuck will you do for a living?** (The easiest thing to do is become a composition teacher yourself, spreading '*the disease*' to the next generation.)

One of the things that determines the curriculum in music schools is: *which of the current fashions in modern music gets the most grant money from the mysterious benefactors in Foundation-Land*. For a while there, unless you were doing *serial music* (in which the *pitches* have numbers, the *dynamics* have numbers, the *vertical densities* have numbers, etc.)—if it didn't have a pedigree like that, it wasn't a *good* piece of music. Critics and academicians stood by, waiting to tell you what a piece of shit your opus was if your *numbers* didn't add up. (Forget what it *sounded like*, or

whether it moved anybody, or what it was about. The *most important thing* was the numbers.)

The foundations that provide grant money for people engaged in these pursuits occasionally decide to stop funding one style of music after becoming *entranced* with another. For instance, it used to be that they would fund only boop-beep stuff (serial and/or electronic composition). Now they're funding only minimalism (simplistic, repetitive composition, easy to rehearse and, therefore, *cost-effective*). So what gets taught in school? *Minimalism*. Why? Because it can be **FUNDED**. Net cultural result? **Monochromonotony**.

In order to gain status at the university, a professor or *composer in residence* has to be plugged into something that's **really hot**—something **FUNDABLE**, and, as of this writing, the secret word is **MINIMALISM**. So, after a busy semester grading the papers of their minimalist trainees, they adjust their berets and fill out the request forms for 'foundation assistance.' Students and instructors alike compete annually for pieces of this pie.

One day, these cultural institutions are going to stop funding *minimalist music* and fund *something else*, and the Serious Music Landscape will be littered with the shriveled remains of '*expert graduate minimalists*.'

## Bingo! There Goes Your Tenure!

The following section is excerpted from the keynote address I delivered at the 1984 convention of the *American Society of University Composers (ASUC)*.

I do not belong to your organization. I know nothing about it. I'm not even interested in it—and yet, a request has been made for me to give what purports to be a *keynote speech*.

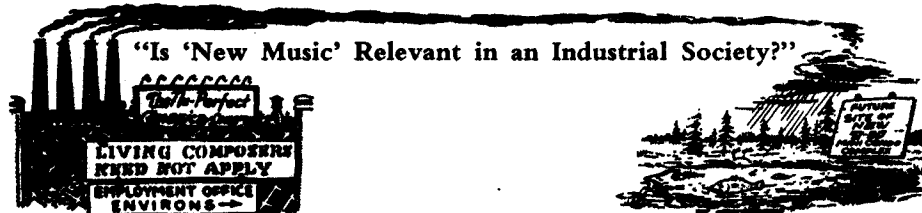
Before I go on, let me warn you that I *talk dirty*, and

that I will say things you will neither 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 schools. 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 by playing the *electric guitar*.

For convenience, without wishing to offend your membership, I will use the word **"WE"** when discussing matters pertaining to composers. Some of the **"WE"** references will apply generally, some will not. And now: *The Speech*. . . .



The most baffling aspect of the *industrial-American-relevance* question is: "Why do people continue to compose music, and even pretend to teach others how to do it, when they already know the answer? Nobody gives a fuck."

Is it really worth the trouble to write a new piece of music for an audience that doesn't care?

The general consensus seems to be that music by living composers is not only irrelevant but also genuinely obnoxious to a society which concerns itself primarily with the consumption of disposable merchandise.

Surely **"WE"** must be punished for wasting everyone's precious time with an art form so *unrequired* and

*trivial* in the general scheme of things. Ask your banker—ask your loan officer at the bank, he'll tell you: **"WE"** are *scum*. **"WE"** are the *scum of the earth*. **"WE"** are *bad people*. **"WE"** are *useless bums*. No matter how much tenure **"WE"** manage to weasel out of the universities where **"WE"** manufacture our baffling, insipid packages of inconsequential *poot*, **"WE"** know deep down that **"WE"** are *worthless*.

Some of us smoke a pipe. Others have tweed sports coats with leather patches on the elbows. Some of us have mad scientists' eyebrows. Some of us engage in the shameless display of incredibly dramatic *mufflers*, dangling in the vicinity of a turtleneck sweater. These are only a few of the reasons why **"WE"** must be *punished*.

Today, just as in the glorious past, the composer has to accommodate the specific taste (*no matter how bad*) of THE KING—reincarnated as a movie or TV producer, the head of the opera company, the lady with the frightening hair on the 'special committee' or her niece, Debbie.

Some of you don't know about Debbie, since you don't have to deal with radio stations and record companies the way the people from *The Real World* do, but you ought to find out about her, just in case you decide to *visit* later.

Debbie is thirteen years old. Her parents like to think of themselves as *Average, God-Fearing American White Folk*. Her Dad belongs to a corrupt union of some sort and is, as we might suspect, a lazy, incompetent, overpaid, ignorant son-of-a-bitch.



Her mother is a sexually maladjusted mercenary shrew who **lives** to spend her husband's paycheck on ridiculous clothes—to make her look 'younger.'



Debbie is *incredibly stupid*. She has been raised to respect the values and traditions which her parents hold sacred. Sometimes she dreams about being kissed by a lifeguard.

When the people in the *Secret Office Where They Run Everything From* found out about Debbie, they were thrilled. She was **perfect**. She was **hopeless**. She was *their kind of girl*.

She was immediately chosen to become the *Archetyp-ical Imaginary Pop Music Consumer & Ultimate Arbiter of Musical Taste for the Entire Nation*—from that moment on, everything musical in this country would have to be modified to conform to what *they* computed to be *her needs and desires*.

Debbie's 'taste' determined the size, shape and color of *all music broadcast and sold in the United States during the latter part of the twentieth century*. Eventually she grew up to be just like her mother, and married a guy just like her Dad. She has somehow managed to reproduce herself. The people in *The Secret Office* have their eye on her daughter at this very moment.

Now, as a serious American composer, should Debbie **really** concern you? I think so.

Since Debbie prefers only short songs with lyrics about boy-girl relationships, sung by persons of indeterminate sex, wearing S&M clothing, and because there is *Large Money* involved, the major record companies (which a few years ago occasionally risked investment in recordings of new works) have all but shut down their classical divisions, seldom recording *new music*.

The small labels that *do*, have wretched distribution. (Some have wretched *accounting procedures*—they might release your recording, but you won't get paid.)

This underscores a *major problem* with living composers: *they like to eat*. (Mostly what they eat is brown and

lumpy—and there is no question that this diet has had an effect on their collective output.)

A composer's job involves *the decoration of fragments of time*. Without music to decorate it, time is just a bunch of boring *production deadlines* or dates by which *bills must be paid*. Living composers are entitled to proper compensation for the use of their works. (Dead guys don't collect—one reason *their* music is chosen for performance.)

There is another reason for the popularity of *Dead Person Music*. Conductors prefer it because they need *more than anything else* to look good.

By performing pieces that the orchestra members have hacked their way through since conservatory days, the rehearsal costs are minimized—players go into jukebox mode, and spew off '*the classics*' with ease—and the expensive guest conductor, unencumbered by a score with '*problems*' in it, gets to thrash around in mock ecstasy for the benefit of the committee ladies (who wish he didn't have any pants on).

"Hey, buddy, when was the last time you **thwarted a norm**? Can't risk it, eh? Too much at stake over at the old Alma Mater? Nowhere else to go? Unqualified for 'janitorial deployment'? Look out! Here they come again! It's that bunch of guys who live in the old joke: it's YOU and two billion of your closest friends standing in shit up to your chins, chanting, '**DON'T MAKE A WAVE!**'"

It's the terror of a *bad review* from one of those tone-deaf elitists who use the premiere performance of every new work as an excuse to sharpen their word skills.

It's settling for rotten performances by musicians and conductors who prefer the sound of *Death Warmed Over* to anything scribbled in recent memory (making them '*assistant music critics*,' but somehow *more glamorous*).

It's clutching the ol' *Serial Pedigree*, secure in the knowledge that *no one checks anymore*.

Beat them to the punch, ladies and gentlemen! *Punish yourselves* before *they* do it for you. (If you do it *as a group*, the TV rights might be worth something.) Start planning now, so that everything will be ready in time for the next convention. Change the name of your organization from ASUC to “**WE**”-SUCK, get some cyanide and swizzle it into the punch bowl with some of that *white wine* ‘artistic’ people really go for, and *Bite The Big One!*

If the current level of ignorance and illiteracy persists, in about two or three hundred years a *merchandising nostalgia* for *this era* will occur—and guess what music they’ll play! (They’ll still play it wrong, of course, and you won’t get any money for having written it, but *what the hey?* At least you didn’t die of syphilis in a whorehouse opium stupor with a white curly wig on.)

It’s all over, folks. Get smart—take out a real estate license. The least you can do is tell your students: “**DON’T DO IT! STOP THIS MADNESS! DON’T WRITE ANY MORE MODERN MUSIC!**” (If you don’t, the little stinker might grow up to kiss more ass than you, have a longer, more dramatic neck-scarf, write music more baffling and insipid than your own, and Bingo! *there goes your tenure.*)

### Pierre Boulez

I met Boulez after sending him some orchestral scores, hoping that he would be interested in conducting them. He wrote back saying that he couldn’t because, although he did have a chamber orchestra of twenty-eight pieces, he did not have a full-size symphony orchestra at his disposal in France (and even if he did, he probably wouldn’t have used it, as he later stated that he didn’t care for ‘The French Orchestral Tone,’ preferring the BBC Symphony).

I bought my first Boulez album when I was in the twelfth grade: a Columbia recording of “Le Marteau Sans Maître” (The Hammer Without a Master) conducted by Robert Craft, with “Zeitmasse” (Time-mass) by Stockhausen on the other side.

Within a year or so of that, I managed to get hold of a score. I listened to the record while following the score, and I noticed that the performance was not very accurate. I later acquired a recording of “Le Marteau” on the Turnabout label, with Boulez conducting, and was surprised to find that he took the first movement much more slowly than the tempo marked in the score. I razzed him about it when we met.

Boulez is, to use one of Thomas Nordegg’s favorite phrases, “*serious as cancer*,” but he can be funny too. He reminds me a little of the character that Herbert Lom plays in the Pink Panther movies. He doesn’t have the ‘psychotic wink,’ but he has some of that nervous quality about him, as if he might—given the proper excuse—start laughing uncontrollably.

I went to lunch with him in Paris, prior to the *Perfect Stranger* recording. He ordered something called *brebis du [fill in the blank]*—I didn’t know what it was. It was some kind of meatlike material on weird lettuce with a translucent dressing. He looked like he was *really* enjoying it. He offered some to me. I asked him what it was. He said, “**The sliced nose of the cow.**” I thanked him and went back to my pepper steak.

I saw him conduct the New York Philharmonic with Phyllis Bryn-Julson as soloist at Lincoln Center in ’86 or ’87. The audience was extremely rude. The first half of the program had pieces by Stravinsky and Debussy; the second half was a piece by Boulez. After the intermission, the audience came back in and waited for him to begin **his** piece—which was very quiet compared to the first two—and then about half the audience got up—noisily—and walked out. He kept on conducting.

I would have enjoyed the opportunity to grab a microphone and scream, “*Sit down, assholes! This is one of ‘The Real Guys!’*”

*The Perfect Stranger*

Since releasing the LSO album, I have turned down at least fifteen commissions from chamber music groups of varying sizes from all over the world who offered me *cash* to write a piece of music for them. If I were a composer just starting out, I would think that was the greatest thing in the world—but I don't have the time anymore, and I shudder to think what would happen to the music if they played it without my being there during rehearsals.

Complicating matters, these commissions are offered in a way that requires my presence at the *premiere performance*—during which I would be expected to sit there and pretend it was terrific.

That's what happened to me when Boulez conducted the live premiere of "Dupree's Paradise," "The Perfect Stranger" and "Naval Aviation in Art?" It was underrehearsed.

I hated that premiere. Boulez virtually had to drag me onto the stage to take a bow. I was sitting on a chair off to the side of the stage during the concert, and I could see the sweat squirting out of the musicians' foreheads. Then they had to go into the IRCAM studio the next day and record it.

In the game of new music, everybody has to take a chance. The conductor takes a chance, the performers take a chance, and the audience takes a chance—but the guy who takes the biggest chance is the composer.

The performers will probably not play his piece correctly (bad attitude; not enough rehearsal time)—and the audience won't like it because it doesn't 'sound good' (bad acoustics; weak performance).

There's no such thing as a 'second chance' in this situation—the audience gets only one chance to hear it because, even though the program says "*World Premiere*," that usually means "*Last Performance*."

Before an audience can tell whether or not it likes a piece, it needs to **listen** to it. Before it can listen to it, it has to **know** that it **exists**. In order for it to exist in a form in which it can be heard (not just on paper), it has to be **performed**. In order for a **large audience** to experience it, the performance must be recorded, released, distributed and given retail shelf space.

Interesting new music **does exist**. In spite of my rude comments earlier in this chapter, I know that sincere, optimistic people continue to compose it. Well, *where the fuck is it then?* Glad you asked! On the rare occasions when it does get recorded, it doesn't get **The Big Push** (or even the *Wizened Little Shove*), so any audience that **might** enjoy listening to it has difficulty finding it.

Mr. Retailer doesn't give a shit—he needs to move as many Michael Jackson records out the door as he can. *He too has a mortgage to pay*. "**Joe Blow's Super-Bitchen Concerto**" that used to wind up in *Bin 29*—way in the back—is not even **there** anymore.

If we expect to develop any kind of musical culture worth preserving for future generations in the U.S., we need to take a good look at the system which determines **how** things get done **why** they get done **how often** they get done and **who gets to do them**.