

THE MUSICAL TIMES OF FRANCESCO ZAPPA

by David Ocker

Go ahead, I know you can't resist asking: "*Who is Francesco Zappa?*" Francesco Zappa was a musician from Milan who lived near the end of the 18th century. No one has bothered to remember when he was born, only that he *flourished* between 1763 and 1788.¹

While Francesco 'flourished', Europe was ablaze with new inventions like the steam engine, powdered wigs and Mozart. Although no practical uses were ever found for this stuff, it didn't stop them from being used to make someone a lot of money.

Francesco had to make a living too. He was a talented guy who could play the violoncello. Even back in those days people knew that what you had between your legs made a big difference, and so Francesco found honest employment sawing away while noblemen ate dinner. It wasn't such a bad job if you remembered every fifteen minutes to remind the nobleman what a wonderfully perfect human being he was, stressing the intense personal privilege you felt by coming to his *digestive assistance*. He might even remember to pay you.

If you needed to pry a little extra out of the old boy, you could always try *composition*. Just dash off a few easy new pieces, write the nobleman's name in BIG letters on the score, and then play them when you knew his highness had plenty of cash on hand. Francesco dedicated his very first work (a set of six trio sonatas) to a Sicilian Count Catanti. Our hero never forgot the Count even after leaving Italy for London (then the very center of the civilized English world).

He took those same six little trios, RE-dedicated them to some unsuspecting Englishman (no doubt collecting a second big tip), and then found a publisher for them. Why not find someone else to dedicate a few more trios to? Get them published, and then ... what about a *recording contract*?

While Francesco waited for his next royalty check, he thought it prudent to find a steady job. Soon he was employed as *Master of Music* for none other than the Duke of York. Besides playing during the Duke's feedings, Francesco spent time instructing the Duke's family on the attainment of musical rapture. Not a bad life, all in all.

This position naturally gave Francesco a certain amount of 18th century *name recognition*. With his music advertised as far away as the American colonies, he found opportunities to tour Europe. A trip to Germany with his 'cello even produced some good reviews: "*Francesco Zappa ... charmed his audience by his beautiful tone and delivery.*"² Whether Francesco was actually the first performer to attract attention by using a woman's stage name will have to be left to future historians to decide.

It might have been about that time that Francesco began to call himself *Francois*. "Francois" Zappa eventually settled in The Hague while there was still enough room there for him to play his 'cello.

Using his international reputation, he probably had no difficulty impressing the local musicians and finding some sweet, young students. It is here, living peacefully in Holland, that History last recorded Francesco Zappa, classical musician.

Like his birthdate, Francesco's date of death has never been reported. Rumors that he travelled to America in a small boat using his 'cello as a paddle, or that he made a fortune in London by designing the first steam powered gin-and-tonic maker certainly seem apochryphal.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries mankind continued to develop new uses for Mozart, so there was less need for a composer like poor Francesco. Gradually his music found its own level

in dusty libraries, indexed in large dusty catalogues devoted to dusty dinner music. A listing in an encyclopedia here, a music dictionary there; that was about all the P-R Francesco Zappa got for many centuries.

"BUT WAIT!!", I hear you ask, "wasn't there supposed to be a record contract?"

That's right, I did say something about that. Since 18th-century record companies were plagued with immense technical problems, Francesco's debut album had to be postponed until all the bugs in the *steam phonograph* were eliminated. Once *coal burning cassettes* came into vogue, however, the project was completely forgotten.

Then, back in 1984, a very interesting thing happened. That's when Frank Zappa formed THE BARKING PUMPKIN DIGITAL GRATIFICATION CONSORT, the first musical ensemble dedicated to the preservation of early 21st century performance practices.

As the director of the *BPDGC*, Frank knew the real value of unfulfilled 18th century recording contracts, and he realized the appropriateness of recording Francesco Zappa. After rescuing the music from those dusty libraries³, and arranging it for the instrumental resources of the Consort, the Consort recorded it in their favorite hall, the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen.

There you have it. After all this time: FRANCESCO ZAPPA'S DEBUT ALBUM. You can enjoy it with dinner, or just listen along the next time you feel the urge to wear a powdered wig.

Included on this record are all the trios that Francesco dedicated to Count Catanti and to that unsuspecting Englishman, plus a few from a later set that he dedicated to a certain *"Prince Charles."* Any more questions? How about *"What's next for the BARKING PUMPKIN DIGITAL GRATIFICATION CONSORT?"*

Well, that's hard to say. The Consort has already recorded some of Frank Zappa's own music⁴, and there seems to be plenty of other Zappas waiting for *their* chance. There's *Domenico Zappa*, the 16th century Viennese Zink player, or *Father Simeone Zappa*, the Bolognese musical theorist of the same century⁵, or Guido Zappa, the mathematician, or Paolo Zappa, the author of a book on leprosy (*"UNCLEAN! UNCLEAN!"*), or Anita Zappa, the poet. Maybe we'll even find a way of liberating some of Francesco Zappa's *symphonies* from the *really* dusty libraries in Europe. But don't worry, we'll do something.

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footnotes

1. Guido Salvetti, THE NEW GROVE DICTIONARY OF MUSIC & MUSICIANS, Stanley Sadie, ed., Washington D.C., MacMillan, 1980, vol. 20, p644
2. Edmund S. J. van de Straeten, HISTORY OF THE VIOLONCELLO, London, William Reeves, 1915, p169
3. The music on this record was stored for a very long time at the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley, and at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Special thanks to Jim Lee, who used RISM to point us in the right direction, and to Gillian Anderson & Carol Armbruster at the Library of Congress.
4. THE PERFECT STRANGER, Boulez conducts Zappa, Angel Records, 1984
5. Rob. Eitner, QUELLEN-LEXICON der MUSIKER und MUSIKGELEHRTEN, New York, Musurgia, 1898.