The chords of chaos

Chaos seems to follow Michael Rosenzweig, but this hasn't affected his ability to make precisely formed, sublime music. **Ruben Mowszowski** reports

Reflections of a wild composer: Rosenzweig seems to incite rebuke. "A combination of my naivety and other people's malice and lack of humour," he says. PHOTO: NICK ALDRIDGE

I got the warning from a mutual friend: Rosenzweig is in town. Originally from Cape Town but now resident in London, this enfant terrible, our very own bad, brilliant boy of music, has a reputation for attracting chaos which over the years has assumed mythic proportions.

An activist leading student marches at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the early 1970s, he was charged with possession of dagga and detonators planted by police, expelled from UCT (or more accurately resigned by arrangement with the university senate), walked out drunk from a Columbia University doctoral programme abandoning stipend and scholarship, was charged in a British court for driving at 240kmh in his Porsche which he subsequently wrote off ... the list goes on.

Michael Rosenzweig's child-like openness and vulnerability combined with a posture reminiscent of a Renaissance prince (some would say ponce) seems to incite rebuke. Head-kicked around by neo-Nazi street thugs in Berlin, laid out while dancing by a teenager wielding a bottle. Chaos follows him. And yet from him comes the most ordered, precisely formed and structured and simultaneously sublime music.

Rosenzweig is in Cape Town, not as a composer but as a conductor. His compositions have never been performed here despite him having had dozens of favourable reviews overseas that, he says, the establishment could not have failed to notice.

What do people say about him, I ask Mark, the owner of an after-concert pizza hangout for classical musicians. "He's a lunatic", Mark says, "but he's brilliant."

Despite what he claims is a conspiracy by the British musical establishment to suppress his music, Rosenzweig has produced a body of work that many composers would envy: 25 compositions (20 of them commissioned), a string of major awards (both first and second prizes in

one competition) culminating with a prestigious fellowship in Germany.

“The fact is”, he says, “with a little support I could have completed four times that number of compositions.” It is a measure of the quality of his music that despite their best attempts to suppress it, his opponents have been unable to fully succeed. “Frankly, I still have the potential to outcompose Bartók”, he says.

The liner notes on a recent CD of his music tell you that this is music that the establishment does not want you to hear. Music is in fact Rosenzweig’s strongest and most convincing card. It is enjoyed most, he says, by those who have no musical knowledge at all and those who have a great deal of it. The people in the middle who think they know what music is are the ones, he says, who are most threatened by it.

Rosenzweig the conductor appears to have had an easier time than Rosenzweig the composer. He admits that he has offended people but says that the “gaffs” he has made are “a combination of my naivety and other people’s malice and lack of humour”.

He forgets to write a letter of thanks to a titled sponsor. He has a disagreement over the meaning of a Latin word with the wife of the chairman of the institute that employs him. He over-indulges in alcohol after conducting the English Chamber Orchestra at a festival when he should have made a dignified exit. (“To be honest,” he says, “I was sort of hoping to meet Greta Scacchi there.”)

His professional clothes have a tendency towards being over-used and under-ironed. “I’m a musician not a diplomat”, he says. “Do you think people like Wagner, Beethoven or even a slimy little shit like Mozart were renowned for their diplomatic skills?”

Move with him into the arena of his music and the petulant brat becomes an instant adult and wise teacher. Play his music and you will wonder how it could have been composed by this unwilling martyr who claims to have been so bitterly oppressed. Most of his opponents have never listened to it, he says, and that is the problem.

How he became a composer is a story that I enjoy. His appointment in New York as co-leader of a jazz group with a former Miles Davis musician seems to have precipitated a collapse which landed him in bed, unable to walk. Along comes an old associate of Charlie Parker, the legendary jazz saxophonist. He brings with him an old gramophone and a scratched record which he leaves with Rosenzweig. Parker’s music? Not at all. It is Bartók’s *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste*.

Listening to it initiated what he describes as a decade of 18 hours a day compositional work. Like Schoenberg, under whose influence he came, Rosenzweig taught himself how to compose and his *Symphony in One Movement* was an immediate outcome. He was admitted without undergraduate qualifications to London University for a master's degree, and a scholarship to the doctorate programme at Columbia University followed.

Rosenzweig's compositions have the strange quality of seeming to be both greater than, and coming from some source other than, the person one knows as the composer. He appears to have no need to proclaim a personal voice - indeed he expects his stamp on the work to become insignificant with time and the qualities of our particular epoch to come to the foreground. His aim, he says, is to lead the listener into a "far larger universe than they can perceive or imagine" and "in this exalted state" to move us towards "a better, fairer world".

"The larger universe, rendered in 12-tone, is of cosmic proportions yet the core of it is both deeply emotional and familiar. Bartók is there and I like to think so also is that old friend of Charlie Parker."

Is Rosenzweig's music Eurocentric? Then you mustn't speak English if you think that's the case, he says. He points out that it is not the language you use, but the content that is relevant. The "geographic mysticism" of his music, he says, locates it firmly in terms of its emotional content in the streets of Cape Town (but don't bother listening for Cape jazz here - it's not that sort of thing).

Rosenzweig has been on a long and difficult journey. Now the prodigal son has returned, somewhat more subdued and ready, he says, to create the large-scale orchestral and operatic works that will secure our participation in the music of the 21st century. Will we take the few steps towards this wild and weary son?

Michael Rosenzweig will conduct a concert that includes music by Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Barber, Elgar and Rosenzweig at Endler Hall in Stellenbosch on Saturday May 15 1999 at 8pm. For enquiries call Anton Els at (021) 434 1325. Book online