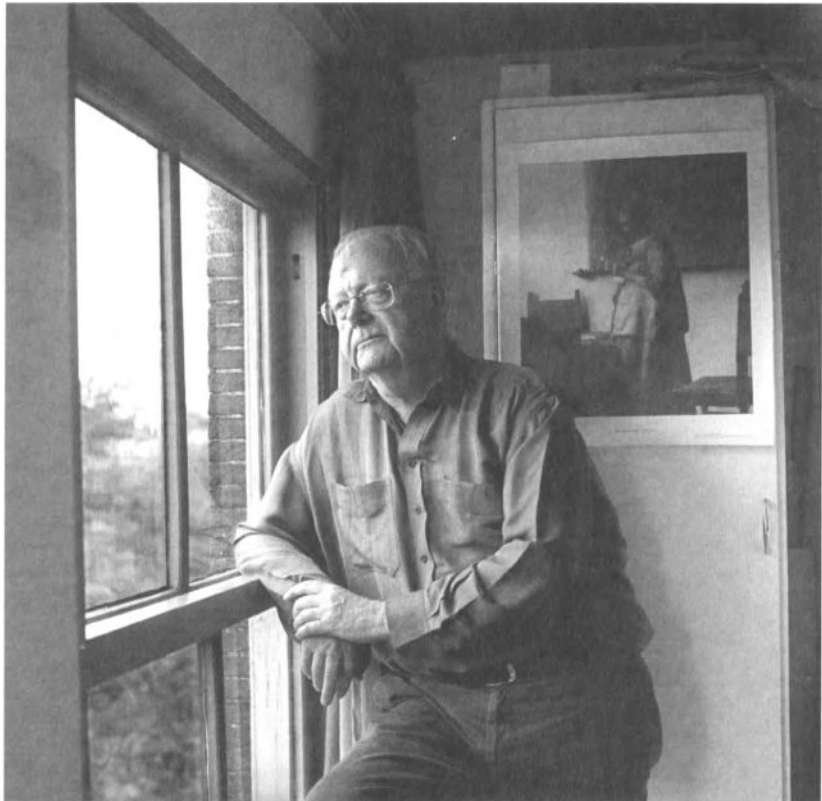


Loud Chords and Calm Moments

Louis Andriessen, Composer

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[E M I L E W E N N E K E S]



Louis Andriessen (1939-).
Photo by Klaas Koppe.

When can you describe a composer as 'setting the tone' for his contemporaries? When his work is regularly performed throughout the entire (Western) world and key works from his oeuvre are known to a relatively large audience? Perhaps. Another indication is the demand for the composer's music – for music on CD, for sheet music, but also for new works for eager musicians. A further sign is when the composer is stylistically influential and attracts pupils

from near and far. Holding important positions in the music world is also part of the description of such a composer, as is the large number of publications about him.

All of which certainly applies to the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen. In the United States and London, festivals lasting several days have been devoted to his work, accompanied by a great deal of media attention – but that’s something you get used to. Celebrated ensembles all over the world, such as Ice Breaker, Ensemble Intercontemporain and Ensemble Modern, include his work in their repertoire, and he has a portfolio of commissions that will keep him busy for years. One of the works that he’s concentrating on at the moment is a new opera-in-the-making inspired by Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, parts of which are already being tried out in occasional performances by various ensembles. And as for the positions that Andriessen holds: in the Netherlands he has been teaching composition at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague for decades. From time to time he also plays a professorial role elsewhere. In 1997, for example, he spent a year in an endowed chair at what was then the Catholic University of Nijmegen (now Radboud University). Since 2004 he has held a chair in the Arts Faculty of Leiden University, which has close ties with the conservatory in The Hague. Outside his own country, too, Louis Andriessen is a respected teacher. He has held visiting lectureships at the Californian Institute of Arts (Los Angeles), Princeton University and the Catholic University of Leuven, and has lectured on music theory and composition at Yale. It should also be mentioned that Andriessen was for a time artistic director of the Meltdown Festival at the South Bank Centre in London and the prestigious Tanglewood Festival in the wonderful American Berkshires.

Speaking volumes

Theses, dissertations, articles and books based on Andriessen’s work are published at home and abroad as regularly as clockwork. In 1993 Frits van der Waa compiled a sizeable collection of essays under the title of *De slag van Andriessen*. A number of Andriessen’s talks and lectures have been edited and published under the name of *Gestolen tijd* (2002, translated as *The Art of Stealing Time*, 2002, and also available in Russian since 2005). And when the University of Bristol began to publish a series with the highfalutin title of *Landmarks in Music since 1950*, Louis Andriessen’s composition *The State* was given the honour of having an entire volume (written by Robert Adlington) devoted to it – something previously achieved only by Dmitri Shostakovich and György Kurtág.

The first two chapters of this book say a great deal about Andriessen’s style and ideals: the first chapter has the brief title of ‘Music and Politics’ and the second is entitled ‘Jazz, Minimalism and Stravinsky’. Stravinsky occupies a special place in Andriessen’s work. He has played a role in Andriessen’s music ever since the latter’s first published composition (*Nocturnen*, 1959) and Andriessen frequently quotes him directly and indirectly. Andriessen also collaborated with the musicologist, writer and composer Elmer Schönberger on *Het apollinisch uurwerk. Over Stravinsky*. This book, which was published in 1983 (and translated into English in 1989 as *The Apollonian Clockwork. On Stravinsky* and also published in Russian in 2003), was described by the prominent musicologist Richard Taruskin as ‘the one book about Stravinsky Stravinsky would have liked’.

As far as international stature is concerned, Andriessen is placed on the same pedestal as Jan-Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562–1621). A pretty coincidence, given the way Andriessen flirts with Sweelinck's music – for example, the quote from *Mein junges Leben hat ein End* in the opera *Writing to Vermeer*. Just as composition and the improvisational techniques of keyboard players changed somewhat because of Sweelinck, so Andriessen has influenced post-war composing with his stylistic interpretations.

The jury report from the prestigious 3M Prize, worth 100,000 guilders at the time, fully endorsed this: 'He has always been contrary and gone against the flow. He has never accepted existing traditional forms of expression, performance practice and the structure of the music world. He created his own.' Not even his greatest enemy could refute this description.

A born artist

In short, no self-respecting music encyclopaedia nowadays can be without an entry on the life and work of Louis Andriessen. There's also a very good chance that he won't be the only 'Andriessen' listed in such a work of reference. After all, Louis was born in 1939 as the youngest son of the composer, organist and conservatory director Hendrik Andriessen (1892–1981) and the younger brother of Jurriaan (1925–1996), also a successful composer, to mention just two members of the dynasty. The Andriessens have been an artistic family for generations. Grandfather Nico (whom Louis never knew) was a respected musician in his day. One of his uncles was the pianist Willem Andriessen (1887–1964; also a conservatory director); another was the sculptor Mari Andriessen (1897–1979, known for his many memorial monuments, including the famous statue of the *Dockworker* in Amsterdam: see p. 138).

With a background like that, it's not surprising that the young Louis was destined for an artistic career. He initially studied composition with Kees van Baaren at the Royal Conservatory and was subsequently taken under Luciano Berio's wing. Andriessen gained national celebrity at the end of the sixties when he caused a stir as one of the so-called 'Notenkrakers' (Nutcrackers), a group who anchored their political and social attitudes in a rather exuberant artistic credo. The Nutcrackers, formed by a.o. Peter Schat, Misha Mengelberg, Reinbert de Leeuw, Willem Breuker and Louis Andriessen, acted as a catalyst in the modernisation and later the reorganisation of the musical infrastructure of the Netherlands. In 1969, they got together to perform a *Nutcracker Suite* with rattles and horns with which they disrupted a performance by the Concertgebouw Orchestra under its chief conductor Bernard Haitink.

This demonstration was aimed at the programming policy, which they regarded as conservative, and at the authoritarian structure of the most important orchestra in the Netherlands, which was seen as a symbol of the 'ruling classes'. More generally, the demonstration expressed their dissatisfaction with 'the cosy little ways of distributing funding and designing conditions for subsidies, which passed for cultural policy only because of a loose understanding of the term', as *De Tijd* put it shortly before the demonstration. However, the *Notenkrakers*aktie (Nutcrackers' demonstration) was primarily an expression of frustration at the way the younger generation could hardly get a toe in the door with the institutionalised artistic organisations.

A result of Andriessen's views on art and politics was his rejection of the symphony orchestra, which he saw as antiquated and authoritarian, and his subsequent establishment of alternative music ensembles with unorthodox instrumentation. Take, for example, Orkest De Volharding (initially a politically motivated street orchestra made up almost completely of wind instruments) and the instrumentally egalitarian Hoketus, both of which were named after compositions by Andriessen. The name of Hoketus very clearly illustrates the fact that Andriessen is a keen supporter of the time-honoured 'hoketus' or 'hocket' technique, where individual notes of a shared melody line are alternated between different players.

Music as a monolith

The opera *Reconstruction* (Reconstructie, 1969), devised together with Jan van Vlijmen, Misha Mengelberg, Peter Schat and Reinbert de Leeuw, made history. This work brings together many themes relating to the sense of cultural uneasiness prevailing at the time as well as a growing involvement in social issues: Vietnam and the colonialist policy of the United States, the Cuba crisis, the charismatic personality of Ché Guevara and so on. Its performance led to disturbances, even to parliamentary questions, because government money had supposedly been used to insult a friendly nation – the United States. The issue eventually fizzled out, but it firmly established the reputation of the young composers. Before long, however, they each went their own way once again.

Not long after this, Louis Andriessen would become the main representative of the so-called Hague School of composition. His crystal-clear idiom of crashing columns of chords amongst often slowly meandering minimalist movements soon won him international recognition. In addition to the loud percussive chords, the repetitive structures, the flirtation with jazz and the constantly recurring hocket technique, Andriessen also regularly prescribes plain, vibrato-free song lines in his work. The vocal element plays a crucial role in all of Andriessen's music. Not only in the large-scale music-theatre works, but also to pieces that were not designed for the theatre, such as *The State* or *Mausoleum*.

In Andriessen's instrumentation, the string instruments are expressly subordinate to the wind instruments. These are usually supported by a rhythm section of percussion, piano, synthesizer, electric bass and guitar – a typical line-up adopted from pop and jazz music. With such instrumental combinations, Andriessen is able to create an extremely fluid synthesis between the different worlds that even today are often thought of as very far apart. Even when Andriessen occasionally makes use of more traditional genres or instrumentation, he manages to treat them in such a way that the end result is still original. For example, in his first string quartet, *Facing Death* (1990), he treats the strings almost as wind instruments; hardly anything remains of the heavy emotional charge of the Romantic string sound because of the jazz riffs that are played in unison – a nod to the furious solos of the legendary jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker.

Andriessen creates mono-dimensional music with the components that have been mentioned above, in the sense that – at least on first hearing – he usually provides only one aspect of the overtone, with no complex layering of melodies. But this does not mean that his music is easy to perform. Quite the reverse, in

fact, as may be illustrated by the dreadfully tricky *Facing Death*. Many of his more extensive pieces are rather monolithic in character, as is the case with philosophically high-aiming pieces such as *The State* (De Staat, 1976, based on texts by Plato), *Mausoleum* (1979/rev. 1981, based on texts by writers including Bakunin), *Time* (De Tijd, 1981, based on the work of St Augustine) or *Velocity* (De Snelheid, 1983/rev. 1984). And yet Andriessen's work can also be extremely sophisticated. Examples of this are the subdued *Hadewijch* (1988), based on the texts of the medieval mystic of the same name, which forms part of the musical dramatic quadriptych *Matter* (De Materie, 1989), and *TAO*, the second piece of the *Trilogy of the Last Day* (Trilogie van de Laatste Dag, 1996/97), written for the Japanese-Dutch pianist Tomoko Mukaiyama.

Living paintings and cows on stage

The highlights of his oeuvre include the previously mentioned opera *Writing to Vermeer*, which he devised in 1999 with Peter Greenaway, the English writer, artist and director. This work has been staged in various cities, including New York. In the opera, the cinematographic signature that brought Greenaway worldwide fame via films such as *The Draughtman's Contract* and *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* is unmistakable. His visual concept brings paintings to life, a cow lumbers over the stage and impressive images breathe new life into facets of Dutch history. With its large-scale projections of the letters that various women write to Vermeer, *Writing to Vermeer* is visually similar to *Rosa, a Horse Drama*, the music-theatre production created by Greenaway and Andriessen in the mid-nineties for De Nederlandse Opera. In parts of *Writing to Vermeer*, Andriessen's musical style is more sober and at the same time more dramatically powerful than ever (the fact that he is currently working on a Vermeer suite with material from this opera reveals a lot about a new kind of development in Andriessen's composing.)

Andriessen's oeuvre now stands at around one hundred published works. Their unique and headstrong idiom, their instrumentation and their role in the history of music make some of the compositions that have been discussed key works of international composition from the last quarter of the twentieth century. Other works, however, have more of a one-off character. For that too is a side of Louis Andriessen: the artisan, the craftsman, the musician in heart and soul, who doesn't approach music like a cell biologist, but sees it as a living passion that is constantly being reinvented. What is always present, even in the shorter pieces, is his strong and recognisable musical personality. Generally you can tell after just one bar: this is Andriessen. Setting the tone... ■