

Louis Andriessen: An Appreciation

By Robert Hurwitz

Hearing the news about Louis Andriessen receiving the great honor of being awarded The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music at the New York Philharmonic reminded me of a conversation I had with Louis two decades ago. The meeting took place in New York in March 1986, and I remember expressing my frustration that more people in America had not heard his music. Around a dozen years earlier I had heard *De Staat* performed by the New York Philharmonic, not as part of its regular subscription series, but as a one-time-only performance at a summer new-music festival. I was bowled over, but after that I could not remember another major performance of his work in New York.

I had heard a recording of *De Staat* a few years earlier — both John Adams and the music critic Peter G. Davis had told me about an album of the work made in Holland, and based just on that I sought out Louis, hoping to record his music on Nonesuch. By the time Louis and I had our conversation in '96, we had released four of his major works on CD.

Louis brings a personal sensibility to his music that reflects both his Dutch and European heritages, and while one can hear a relationship to minimalism, to Stravinsky, to the European avant-garde, and even to French music, his work still has the one thing you hope for most in a composer: an utterly unique voice. You know an Andriessen piece the instant you hear it. He has an extraordinary ear for harmony, an endless rhythmic invention, and an intelligence behind each piece that means that not only do the notes matter, but there is always an idea behind those notes. His ability to create new juxtapositions of musicians, ensembles, and instruments depending on the needs of the piece is unlike anyone else I know.

I understood that one of the problems of getting orchestras to play his music was the fact that he really didn't write works that fit the symphony. There was an economic challenge for orchestras to play his music. In a regular symphony concert, every member of an orchestra is usually paid, whether they are performing a piece or not. For *De Staat*, which is the kind of work that I thought should be part of the repertoire of all modern symphony orchestras, only thirty musicians are called for, and seven of those performers — electric guitarists and electric bassists, as well as four singers — have to be hired in addition to the full orchestra.

And so I made the naïve suggestion: “Why not adapt a few of your larger pieces for symphony orchestras? Or consider writing for a traditional orchestra?”

(more)

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Louis said (and I am recalling as best I can that conversation from 20 years ago): “In terms of writing for American orchestras, I am never asked. But what is more important for me is that I have an unusual situation in Holland. I have developed wonderful relationships with these different ensembles of Dutch musicians, like the Asko Ensemble and the Schönberg Ensemble, and particularly De Volharding and Hoketus, the ensembles I founded to play my music. Not to mention the New York–based artists of Bang on a Can, whose dedication and musicianship are so important to me. Not only are these fabulous musicians, they are my friends. So most of the pieces I write fit the size and scale of their ensembles. These pieces are meant to be played precisely for the instruments they are written for — no more, or no less. They are not meant to be, except in a few instances, adapted for larger or small forces.

“It’s not up to me to worry about whether anyone else will play them; if they do, in their intended form, that’s wonderful, and if they don’t, they don’t. I can live with that.” Louis seemed like a very happy man.

It was an important lesson to me about an artist whose concerns are strictly musical, someone who never puts so-called success in front of his art. He had faith in his music, and he was not going to back off from his ideals. Many great artists I know have suffered from the anxiety of feeling at times as if their work is not getting its due from the public or from critics. In the quarter century I have known and worked with Louis, not once have I heard the slightest amount of concern about his place in the world, nor a single complaint or even mention of his “career.”

But slowly, imperceptibly, Louis has arrived at a place that has validated his faith in his music and in the process that he has chosen. A rough timeline of his American career: John Adams was the first significant American musician of note to bring Louis’s music to this country, commissioning a new piece for the San Francisco Symphony in the early 1980s. When Nonesuch recorded *De Staat* and *De Tijd* in the late ’80s, they were the first recordings of his music by an American company. A dozen years later Lincoln Center produced an extraordinary festival of his music, including the premiere of his opera *Writing to Vermeer*. Nine years after that he was given the Debs Composer’s Chair at Carnegie Hall and in 2011 he received the University of Louisville’s Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition. His great masterpiece *De Materie* had a major performance by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2014, and two years later they commissioned and premiered an opera, *Theatre of the World*. This past season, a production of *De Materie* at Park Avenue Armory was one of the most important cultural events in New York.

And now, he has received The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music at the New York Philharmonic and is being commissioned to write a large piece for them.

For decades Louis has been a role model for younger composers, and not only because of the amazing music he has composed. He has also been an inspiration for the way he has tenaciously stuck to his guns. And for the way he has had faith in both the present and the future.

Robert Hurwitz has been President of Nonesuch since 1984. He becomes Chairman Emeritus of the label in 2017.