

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Agamemnon

Louis Andriessen

In 2016 Louis Andriessen became the third recipient of The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music at the New York Philharmonic, an honor in which he had been preceded by the French master (now deceased) Henri Dutilleux (in 2011) and the Danish composer Per Nørgård (in 2014). He, too, is a creative presence of towering international stature, named Composer of the Year by *Musical America* in 2010 and honored with the Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition in 2011.

Music is in his DNA. His father, Hendrik Andriessen, was an organist and composer, and one of Holland's leading musical lights through the mid-20th century; his uncle, Willem Andriessen, was a notable pianist and composer; and his older brother, Jurriaan, also achieved distinction as a composer. Louis Andriessen studied both with his father and with the esteemed Kees van Baaren at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague and continued studies under Luciano Berio in Berlin and Milan. Returning to the Netherlands, he became a standard-bearer of the avant-garde.

In 1969 he was involved in the *Notenkraakersactie*, a demonstration that disrupted a concert of the venerated Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra as a protest against that ensemble's lack of attention to new music. Viewed as a politically potent act, it marked a turning point not just for modern Dutch music but also for state-funded music education in Holland and for the burgeoning historical-performance movement in which that country was then gaining prominence. Rather than continue to write for what, for

him, had come to represent a medium drowning in reactionary expectations, Andriessen ceased composing for standard orchestras, casting his instrumental music instead for large or small ensembles of less predictable make up. From the late 1960s through the '70s he was central to the founding of three modern-music groups — STEIM (Studio for Electro Instrumental Music), De Volharding (Perseverance), and Hoketus (Hocket); the last remained active for a decade, while STEIM and De Volharding continue to this day. They gave rise to important musical technologies and repertoire. In the intervening years, Andriessen has come to terms with the viability of the symphony orchestra — as, for example, in his *Agamemnon*, a modern take on the genre of the symphonic poem — and he recently composed a piece for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra he once protested, having helped advance the conception of what a modern symphony orchestra can be.

Andriessen has traveled far as a composer, his style developing through various phases

IN SHORT

Born: June 6, 1939, in Utrecht, the Netherlands

Resides: in Amsterdam

Work composed: 2017, on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Jaap van Zweden, Music Director, with the generous support of The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 20 minutes

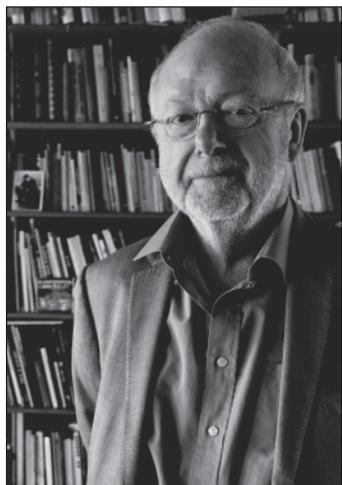
— from early efforts in neoclassicism and serialism toward the cleansing reduction of minimalism and the liberating possibilities of jazz. Stravinsky has served as an ongoing influence, reflected sometimes literally and often subliminally. Stimuli from other composers or extramusical sources have played key roles in several of his works: quotations of Charles Ives in his *Anachronie I* (for orchestra, 1966–67); the visual art of Piet Mondrian in *De Stijl* (for speaker, voices, and large ensemble, 1984–85); and medieval poetry in *Hadewijch* (for solo singer, voices, and large ensemble, 1988). A succession of major pieces for large ensembles has cemented his place in contemporary music: *De Staat* (*Republic*, 1976), *De Tijd* (*Time*, 1981), *De Snelheid* (*Speed*, 1983), *De Materie* (*Matter*, 1985–88, a theater piece created with Robert Wilson), and *Trilogie van de Laatste Dag*

(*Trilogy of the Last Day*, 1996–97). The middle section of the last, *TAO*, will be featured on the New York Philharmonic's concerts next week as part of *The Art of Andriessen* (see "Creating the New, Inspired by the Past," page 10, for more). Many of his works gained a substantial following through their recordings on Nonesuch Records, a champion of his music.

His oeuvre crosses many genres, including the stage works *ROSA Death of a Composer* and *Writing to Vermeer*, created in tandem with Peter Greenaway, and his collaborations with filmmaker Hal Hartley, including *The New Math(s)* and *La Commedia*, the latter being an operatic treatment of Dante. His latest opera, *Theatre of the World*, about the 17th-century polymath Athanasius Kircher, bowed in Los Angeles and Amsterdam in 2016, and this coming spring will bring the

In the Composer's Words

Louis Andriessen says that *Agamemnon* grew out of his idea for "a war-like piece, full of fast music and nervous terror," in this case drawn from Greek antiquity and, specifically, from *The Iliad*. He says this of the title character:



It's true that he's often viewed as a villain and he was certainly a brutal warrior and a womanizer, who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia in a deal to get the right winds to sail to Troy. Yet, he was an inspiring leader who was originally reluctant to go to war and only agreed to support his younger brother Menelaus, whose wife, Helen, had been abducted by a Trojan prince. I don't want to pass judgment on Agamemnon because he lived in a very different moral world to ours, where the humans — particularly their leaders — were largely puppets of the gods. I think of him as a double character, part good guy and part bad guy, so interesting because he is like a lot of us. ... Though *Agamemnon* is for symphony orchestra, the scoring is slanted to my personal sound-world, with some typical Andriessen additions: soprano sax, two pianos on either side of the conductor, electric guitar, bass guitar, and drum kit. This allows enough martial brutality.

Dramatis Personae

Andriessen includes this list of characters in the score for *Agamemnon*:

Agamemnon: led a ten-year war, also King of Mycenae, seducer of women

Kalchas: Trojan defector, seer

Iphigenia: sacrificed to the goddess Artemis. Or perhaps not?

Achilles: the fleet-footed warrior

Klytaimnestra: murders her husband Agamemnon when he comes home victorious. He brings with him the young prophetess Cassandra, the daughter of the king of Troy.

The composer's list draws on Greek mythology. Agamemnon commanded Greek forces in the Trojan War, although their departure into battle was stalled by Artemis, goddess of the hunt. After being offended by Agamemnon's slaying of a sacred animal, Artemis stilled the wind so ships could not sail. Kalchas prophesied that to appease the goddess, Agamemnon would have to sacrifice something sacred in return, his daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon tells his wife, Klytaimnestra, to send their daughter to him, for she has been promised in marriage to Achilles in return for his bravery in battle. In some tellings, Artemis takes pity upon Iphigenia before she dies and carries her away to become the mortal goddess Hecate. Cassandra, who was taken by Agamemnon as a spoil of war, was gifted with the ability to foresee the future, but cursed by Apollo so that her prophecies would never be believed.

Andriessen explains that the roles played by these personages are musical:

It's not a literal drama depicting specific scenes in the narrative. It's more an interplay of characters, who are distinct but can also be grouped into the men — Agamemnon, Achilles, and the seer Kalchas — and the women — Iphigenia, Klytaimnestra, and the Trojan prophetess Cassandra, daughter of the defeated Trojan king who was taken back to Greece as Agamemnon's concubine. You might hear Achilles running around the battlefield one moment and then perhaps Iphigenia in a few quieter bars in B minor. And Kalchas is there arguing in declamatory music about the will of the gods.

Still, one character does make a literal appearance: Cassandra, who reflects on the story via the words of Aeschylus, translated by Ted Hughes and expanded by Andriessen.

— The Editors

The Sacrifice of Iphigenia
by Leonaert Bramer, ca. 1623



premiere of a new work commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, as well as a series focusing on his music at the Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam.

Instrumentation: three flutes (two doubling piccolo), three oboes, soprano saxophone, two clarinets plus bass clarinet and

contrabass clarinet, two bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, vibraphone, xylophone, gongs, two cymbals, snare drum, two medium tom-toms, two split drums, two bass drums, drum kit, two pianos, electric guitar, bass guitar, and strings.

Listen for ... Cassandra

Andriessen offers these instructions for narration that ends the piece:



Conductor and orchestra remain in position, keeping the tension. Cassandra stands up from her position within the orchestra, picks up the microphone and speaks (not acted, normal speaking voice).

Just a few words.
Agamemnon was killed by his wife.
Soon I will be killed as well.
This is life.
The luckiest hours
Like scribbles in chalk
On a slate in a classroom.
We stare
And try to understand them.
Then luck turns its back —
And everything's wiped out.
Joy was not less pathetic
Than the worst grief.

— Text from *Aeschylus*, translation by Ted Hughes, with first three lines by Louis Andriessen

Cassandra, standing before the burning city of Troy,
by Evelyn De Morgan, 1898