

Don't get too comfortable

An essay and conversation about the ideas and music of Louis Andriessen.

David Pay

At a time in our history when the all-encompassing individual pursuit of private riches has delivered society to the brink of economic ruin, the music and ideas of Louis Andriessen offer a profound alternative to limitless capitalism.

Through his music, we're reminded that things aren't always what they seem, and that over time, the posing of alternatives — to whatever those things might be — transforms ideas, events, and even people. Andriessen's music shows that we can (and should!) critique the world around us while still remaining a part of it. And he demonstrates that collectivity requires leadership, but that leadership does not require hierarchy valuing one person's commitment and contribution more than another's.

How does he do this? Mirjam Zegers offers a hint in her excellent introduction to *The Art of Stealing Time*¹:

Matters which he chooses to talk about sometimes appear to be very far removed from the subject at hand. By means of anecdotes, sketches of what went before, elaborations on details and sometimes serious reflections, Andriessen describes his sources, his way of working and his aesthetic. In contrast to the many obscure intellectual explanations which have surrounded art in previous decades, his manner of speaking is provocative, if not polemic. He can trace the pre-history of a piece of his back to the moment when as a child, his father counted his toes (and they never added up to ten). With all this, he creates a pleasant illusion of simplicity. Life doesn't seem nearly so complicated as you thought. But his music also looks deceptively simple on paper...

With all his fleet-footedness, Andriessen avoids disclosing his recipes and elegantly draws a veil over the fact he doesn't fully understand the underlying mystery (ultimately the only thing of importance). One thing he does know: if the truth is to be found anywhere, it will not necessarily be hiding in the depths. It often lurks just below the surface.

Never lurking too deep beneath the surface of a conversation with Louis Andriessen are polemics, dialectics and irony. These three elements are at the core of Andriessen's music and thought. In music and in conversation, he offers the exchange of logical, rational arguments to put forward his truth. He contrasts opposing ideas and styles, mixing high art with low art, deep intellect with crass vulgarity. And, like his father counting his toes, he loves to show us that we can't always take what we see and hear at face value.

Andriessen might write a passage that sounds like Mozart, but really, it might be a critique of a system that esteems bourgeois music. In his latest opera, *La Commedia*, he offers the audience heartfelt transformation through love and death, then instead of ending with

¹ Louis Andriessen (edited by Mirjam Zegers, translated by Clare Yates), *The Art of Stealing Time* (Todmorden: Arc Music, 2002), 10

celestial choirs, he surprises us with a children's chorus singing a blunt message from Dante.

Don't ever get too comfortable, Andriessen seems to tell us. And when we pay attention to his music and ideas, we won't.

Every time I speak with Andriessen, I receive insight into his music, and a deeper understanding of art and its role in the world around us. In September 2008, I recorded a conversation with him at his residence on the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam. You can hear the complete conversation online at www.musiconmain.ca, but with thanks to a transcription by Meaghan Williams and Jonathan Evans, we can read some of Andriessen's ideas below. (I've edited some of the dialogue for the sake of making it more readable.)

A Conversation with Louis Andriessen, September 2008

David Pay: One of the biggest influences you've had on me and how I think about music came from your whole uptown-downtown mixing of social strata, high and low, and expectations about what music is supposed to be. And I think about you as a political force too, part of *The Nutcrackers* and *The Tomato Throwers* in the 70s.

I wonder if you expect people to react to your music in an outward way? When you play with these political thoughts in your music, do you expect an outcome from the listener?

Louis Andriessen: Well, I suppose because of my history, I am realistic enough to realize that things are different than what people think when they are outside the action. I learned in the late 60s and early 70 that when you want to act politically, you should act politically and not musically. Those are basically two different things. However, since I was a composer, I did find some ways where you have a funny kind of combination.

The other side of what I considered was political at that time was not the actual composing itself, but all the things after the composing: *Who is going to play? Where is he playing? For whom is he playing?*

That was around the time I started with the Volharding [a large ensemble founded in 1972], and those were the main subjects. We were very idealistic, and I had the ideal that in a band, all the members should all have the same information, the same knowledge and training so that all the members could compose and write and play.

What I learned from early political action is that you should be very practical when you want to think about politics, and not have discussions about the political/musical content of scores, which I think is very questionable. Back then I already had ideas about the position of the composer in society, and I started thinking about forming an orchestra. I followed what jazz musicians by nature do all the time: call their friends together and start playing music, where the alienation, we hope, is less than in classical music. Still nowadays it is the same. So that was, now looking back to it, the most important sign of the splitting of the ideas and the practical politics.

DP: So the formation of the ensemble and the relationship with the players comes out of political thought?

LA: Looking back to it, I would say certainly it was the first thing at that time, but secondly it was also a question of taste. I prefer to go to Willem Breuker concerts than to the Concertgebouw Orchestra. Very simple.

DP: To this day?

LA: Yes. And because of the blowing on the trumpets by the jazz musicians I could write a piece like *De Staat* [from 1976, a large ensemble work based on Plato's *Republic*]. Not because I listened to Bruckner.

DP: And how, in a piece like *De Staat*, do these ideas around democratizing music play out in terms of musical structure?

LA: Structure? I won't immediately know what to say. It was evident to me at the time that the idea of unison was very important. You are the strongest when you form a unity in the political circle, for instance. So unison was the highest thing you could get into the music. That's why the end of *De Staat* is the way it is. That is one very important element.

Certainly, there are also structural ideas that have to do with Plato. But one thing is very important when talking about the pure abstract musical elements *vis-à-vis* the idea of democracy: we should strive for the spreading of knowledge. Knowledge is the most important. Information goes before that already, and of course education.

That's why *De Staat* is the way it is, why everybody has the same musical information, the same thing to do. It's a very strange thing to do, because it's basically rhythmical unison, almost all the time. And that, for me at that time, was a political idea. The transposition into music of a political idea, a philosophical idea.

DP: So everybody has the same thing to do. If I think about that piece *vis-à-vis* your simultaneous improvisational practice where the individual has a freedom and autonomy with respect to everybody else they are working with...

LA: The free improvisation was not the subject, because that is basically good for solo or trios or duos. The larger the ensemble gets, the more difficult it gets to have a sort of control over the final result. And as a composer I want, I should, take responsibility for the final result.

In *De Staat* it's created by a polemic element where you can hold your audience and then move suddenly to another subject, a technique I learned from the improvisers. That is in the structure of the piece, that's true. It always changes by cutting, like with scissors. There are no nice, elegant fadings, ever. And that has to do more with the montage of the improvisers, I'm sure.

DP: When you say no nice transitions, it reminds me that *De Staat* has no *crescendi*, no *decescendi*, no *accelerandi*, no ornamentation? Why?

LA: What I realized is that when you want to be very outspoken about what you want to say, be outspoken. Be very clear and precise. And don't be elegant. Elegance was not the point.

DP: The style of composing is about being emphatic then?

LA: It had to do with being clear and to want to teach. It's also a kind of teaching. I call it rhetoric.

DP: So what's happening now in your music? I think of *La Commedia* (2008), your most recent opera, and when I first heard this sitting in a rehearsal, I kept thinking, "this is Andriessen?" The opera sounds like Andriessen, but it's quite different in terms of emotional content.

LA: That's true. But it shouldn't come as a surprise. I think that in *De Tijd*, [1980-81], the piece seemed to generate different kinds of, let's call it profound feelings, or emotions, even though now we talk about the soul or the spirit. You know, emotion is a very strange question. When I composed *De Tijd* I was not aware of it, and I thought of writing a piece on time perception, which for me was the intellectual translation of that kind of feeling, whatever you may call it. Certainly feelings of vague sentiments. There are hundreds of words for it, of course. It is less well known than the rational, functional side of the brain, which we have to deal with in the music all the time. It's all knowledge, like the clarinet and the oboe, four parts. It's all knowledge, isn't it?

It's a so strange combination of techniques and nonsense. It's amazing!

DP: The thing that I find so amazing as well, is that for me, I have an emotional response to music. But I've heard you speak about removing emotion from performance.

LA: I hope that mankind will try to rule his instincts by the rational. In parts four and five of *La Commedia*, I try to get into a sense of sentiment. I think that was a difficult decision, but I did end with the kids chorus. The rational, always, reflects upon all the sentiments, you see. Not to control sentiment, but to show the different sides of it. But it's not only that, it's also something different. When it's only that, then I think it's sentimental.

DP: And you don't have much place for that.

LA: My father told me sentimentality is lack of sentiment; which was a very wise thing to say.

DP: Thinking about the opera, I wonder whether these ideas translate across cultures. In *La Commedia* you have Italian, Dutch, English...

LA: Old Dutch, Latin...

DP: So it's essentially impossible for any one person to understand every word.

LA: I first faced this problem when I decided to do *De Staat* in Greek. I had all kinds of reasons, and I was very outspoken about it. First of all, the musical reason: it's elegant to use the text in the original language. And the second reason to do it was that the philosophy of Plato, or at least the fragments I use, seems to be simple. He says you should forbid certain musical scales as they are not good for women and soldiers. Of course that idea is very complex, and today it's completely incomprehensible! So we can try to think about whether we have to re-examine Plato, and to think about what people have said about his philosophy. So there's a lot to do when you really want to have a discussion about what Plato meant and why he wrote *The Republic*.

Singing in Dutch or in English or in Icelandic or whatever, would not really help this discussion. When these kinds of pieces are performed, there is a good chance there is a program book, or surtitles. And if you have that, then people can reflect upon it by reading and seeing if they want to check that later.

DP: So you're counting on the audience working. Early on you spoke about political ideas changing you, making you think about what to do, where to do it, whom to do it for. Who ideally is your listener? Do you have an ideal listener?

LA: Well, friends with whom it's evident that they hear what I want to tell them. But how they would explain what I want to tell them, that is their own responsibility. I can explain why I like Greenaway's movies, for instance, and then people think that I am saying something about my own music. And when Elmer Schönberger and I wrote *The Apollonian Clockwork*, a book about Stravinsky, people said that I was really writing about myself! I'm not an ideal person to explain how you have to listen to my music.

DP: But I think you're the ideal person to say how you want someone to listen, or what you want them to listen for. Or do you care how they listen?

LA: Let's put it another way. I'm a reader. I read about half an hour, an hour every morning, and one of my favourite writers is Nabokov, whom I call the Stravinsky of literature. Why do I like Nabokov so much? For the same reasons I like Stravinsky so much, which is a completely incomprehensible, enigmatic combination of funny and sharp and ironic, and a dealing with traditions and conventions, but breaking them all the time. And it's profoundly melancholic. Later I understood that there is disappointment in Stravinsky and it is more profound than all the driving rhythms.

DP: Do you think that Stravinsky intentionally put disappointment into the music?

LA: Absolutely. And when you read about him and hear him talk, you understand that he learned this from Gogol and from other Russian writers. I use the word irony for that, irony on a philosophical level, not on the level a joke. The idea that you accept that something seems to be one thing, then when you turn it around, the rabbit is now a devil, or whatever: that is probably the crux of what I deal with as a composer.

That little melody of Cristina's you quoted from *La Commedia*... that's really exceptional. The whole choir around it is very beautiful and it makes me cry too. But on the other hand I deal with questions like "What would Chausson have done now?" Well, of course I'll do it

differently, and I have different concepts and so on. I don't see it as a contradiction, I see it as a place where you have to start from.

DP: Did you put that moment in specifically to cry?

LA: No, it just came. And then you can say no it didn't, or you can say yes it did. There are moments when things like this happen – when they turn into something magical. There are tricks also, tricks which you use in musicals. But this amazingly beautiful moment works because the bar before it has to prepare it, and cannot be as beautiful as the moment itself.

DP: So, music and all its tricks come out of the actual physicality of music?

LA: Yes, what else? And your experiences.

DP: With this idea of the physicality of music, I'd like talk with you about music as matter. I always thought of *De Tijd* and *Materie* as musical descriptions of philosophy. Do you see them as actual descriptions of Time and Matter, or are they about the philosophy of these subjects?

LA: I use the ideas about perception of Time to create an environment which seems to open possibilities for deeper thoughts... or feelings. But the reason behind that is to create something like... emotion is not the right word for... "something." There are other words which are often forgotten, for instance "consolation." That's a word which people understand very well when they listen to Bach. And this acceptance of consolation is very beautiful, it's close to mercy. Those are the kind of words I come up with when we talk about the emotional side

DP: Do you think of creating that "something" in advance, or is that just an influence that is always there?

LA: No, you don't think about those things, you have to start composing. It's very prosaic.

DP: And you're workman-like in your diligence, I think.

LA: Absolutely. You have to sleep well, you have to get up well, and to be not too tired. Around 11:00 AM, I can start to do some real creative work.

DP: Somebody told me a story about your early political days where you didn't want authority and you were rallying against authority. They said you went horseback riding and did not want to lead the horse because you thought that would be too authoritative. Have you ever heard this story about yourself? That you wouldn't kick the horse and you wouldn't tell it to turn?

LA: No, this is completely a-historical!

DP: Oh, that's too bad, because it was an excellent story!

LA: Everything is mixed up. Where to start? First of all I was never against authority, I was against authoritarianism. We really need authority on all kinds of levels all the time. There is the discussion about bridge building. When you want to get to the other side of the river, then you have to have somebody who thinks about how get there, you see. And you can build a bridge together, but you need somebody who is going to do the engineering. That's authority, the person who knows about the weight, and the pressure of the wind and all of that. Bridge building is for me the metaphor for the discussion about authority.

Now my story with horses is very painful. I went riding for the first time, and the horse knew that it was my debut, and it threw me off! I landed on my back and was breathless for about two minutes. That is the real story of my first and last time on a horse. It didn't really work out very well!

DP: Today you're known as an authority on music and teaching, and you have this huge influence around the world on other composers and on several generations of composers. You're also now an historical figure. You're in our textbooks. You're a part of how music has changed over the last 40 years. Do you find there are stories or ideas or texts that make you think, "That's not how it was!"?

LA: There are mistakes, certainly, but I really don't care about that. I have the feeling that the best way to explain it is to talk about "dramatic irony." That's what Schlegel calls it, and where irony became a philosophical subject. The philosophers say that we cannot be sure of anything except the fact that we die. That's the dramatic irony, that everything can have different appearances.

This is where I feel at home now, more than with the dialectical idea of progression through movement and ideas, which I thought as a Marxist was the correct ideology, that one fights and the other fights back, and through that the world will be better. Dialectic thinking shows that through contradiction and the delivery of better, or at least different, ideas, the world will be a better place. That's very close to the idea of irony I think, but irony doesn't accept the fact that the world will be better, which you find back in postmodernism thought, too. Maybe for these reasons, I could be called a postmodern composer!

DP: And that suits you?

LA: No, that doesn't interest me at all! But that music changes, and that what you do, and that your interests change, this has to do also with the fact that you yourself certainly change. I have read different books. I have listened to Claude Vivier, which has been one of the most important experiences for me as a composer in the last 20 years. There is a kind of sound, a kind of thinking in Vivier which I knew would be somewhere. It's amazing, thoroughly dark, and still ironic. It's also a kind of attitude; I can't say it better. Vivier really goes very far. You have to be very careful otherwise you miss it, in a way.

DP: I think that with music that is difficult on first hearing, we miss so much. Whether we miss the Greek text in *De Staat* or the irony in Vivier, it's because it takes work. I think for listeners, it takes work. Because the rhetoric is unusual, we don't know where to hang our hat.

Spending some time in Amsterdam, I have found that European and North American audiences have different ways of listening, and that there are different ideas of what music is aesthetically “acceptable” and what’s not. As you travel around do you find that your music is received differently in the New World and the Old World?

LA: I find it very difficult to judge that. I have a feeling that in big cities, people are open and positive and like to be amused. But I think that in Holland, it’s comparable to America and Canada in that the acceptable styles and genres are wider than in countries like Germany, France, or even Belgium. When you go to hear contemporary music in those countries, it’s all basically modernist, post-Schoenberg stuff. Let’s call it chromatic, pulseless music.

In Holland it’s different. I think that Holland is more than any other European country influenced by the American culture. Also in the negative sense for certain. There is no country with so many soap opera series on TV. When you turn on Dutch TV, it’s all American series.

DP: It’s like Canada!

LA: Well I must say, this summer I have been in love with “Desperate Housewives.” Apart from the actresses, who are really very funny, the score is a very strange, ironic sort of music, filled with pizzicato things which I find make it very ironic.

Perhaps we will find it ironic, too, that one of today’s most celebrated composers should lead us to music as diverse as Claude Vivier and the score of “Desperate Housewives.” Maybe Louis Andriessen is again trying to show us that life and art are not always what they seem to be, and, just as those ladies from Wisteria Lane have learned, what lurks beneath the surface might be closer to the truth.

I wonder what words might describe that truth? *Don’t ever get too comfortable*, Andriessen seems to suggest. *Don’t ever get too comfortable*.

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David Pay is the Artistic Director of Music on Main in Vancouver. He produced “Andriessen @ 70” – a festival launching the international celebrations of Louis Andriessen’s 70th Birthday – in Vancouver (April 3-9, 2009).



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