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BRAZEN

Louis Andriessen's "La Commedia," at Carnegie, and other premières.

by Alex Ross

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Andriessen summons up a panorama of decadence, agony, and almost insolent joy.

In November, 1969, a group of radical young Dutch musicians ran amok at the Concertgebouw, the fabled Amsterdam concert hall. At the start of a performance by the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the troublemakers, who included the composers Louis Andriessen and Reinbert de Leeuw, began making noise with nutcrackers, rattles, bicycle horns, and other devices. They also distributed leaflets denouncing the orchestra as a "status symbol of the ruling élite." The Netherlands being both a tradition-minded and a tolerant land, the Nutcracker Action, as it was called, elicited an ambivalent response: the provocateurs were summarily ejected from the hall, but their ideas prompted much serious discussion. Forty years on, the Nutcrackers have become eminences: Andriessen is the most influential of Dutch composers, and de Leeuw, who has focussed on conducting, has held posts from Tanglewood to Sydney.

Yet they haven't quite sold out. Although Andriessen occupies the Richard and Barbara Debs Composer's Chair at Carnegie Hall—the kind of big-money post that his younger self might have mocked—Carnegie's recent survey of Andriessen's work and that of his colleagues and protégés, de Leeuw among them, has revealed an undiminished capacity for making mischief. The composer still resists Romantic trappings, favoring what he has called a "terrifying twenty-first-century orchestra" of electric guitar, keyboards and Hammond organ, saxophones, bongos, and other non-Wagnerian instruments. He likes amplified, pop-style voices better than pure-toned, vibrato-heavy ones. His pantheon of idols has Bach and Stravinsky at the center, but also makes room for Count Basie, Charlie Parker, and the Motown greats. At the age of seventy, he remains a bit of a badass.

Andriessen witnessed the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands when he was a child, and, like many of his generation, he embraced American culture as a counterweight to Germanic tradition. He was one of the few European composers to appreciate American minimalist music, which restored a tonal center and regular pulsation without indulging in nostalgia. His breakthrough 1976 work "De Staat" is a rigid riot of obsessive repetition. Still, Andriessen absorbed minimalism on his own terms. "In America, there is not enough angst!" he once told the journalist K. Robert Schwarz. "I'm much more aggressive."

The centerpiece of the Carnegie series was a concert performance of "La Commedia," Andriessen's fourth opera and his most ambitious creation to date. Having written three theatre works of a conceptual bent—"De Materie," "Rosa," and "Writing to Vermeer"—Andriessen has struck at the core of the Western tradition, setting Dante's Divine Comedy. Passages from the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso intermingle with Old Testament quotations and Luciferian monologues by the

Dutch playwright Joost van den Vondel, summoning up a panorama of decadence, agony, and, at the end, an almost insolent joy. Given that the opera is dedicated to Andriessen's late wife, the guitarist Jeanette Yanikian, it seems searingly personal, although no true devotee of Stravinsky would use such sentimental terms.

Even for a composer who admires both Bach and Chaka Khan, the stylistic frame of reference in "La Commedia" is staggeringly wide, ranging from Gregorian chant to what might be called Satanic Broadway. Most surprising are the lavish melodies that adorn the Garden of Earthly Delights. You might suspect that the composer is pushing an ironic agenda —preferring the grinding rhythms of his Hell to the lilting songs of his Paradise. But the Inferno becomes oppressively relentless, while the naïve chants of a Paradiso children's chorus catch the heart. Hell and Heaven run together in a wild continuum.

Let's hope that New Yorkers soon get to see "La Commedia" fully staged, and in an appropriate space. The Carnegie performance, with the Asko-Schoenberg ensemble under de Leeuw's direction, lacked nothing in precision or intensity, and the singers—Claron McFadden, Cristina Zavalloni, Marcel Beekman, and Jeroen Willems—revelled in their Dantescan roles. Unfortunately, Carnegie's long reverberation time reduced Andriessen's neon sounds to murk. De Leeuw had better luck at Zankel Hall the following night, when he led the German actress-singer Barbara Sukowa and Asko-Schoenberg players in his own piece "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," a riveting recomposition of Schubert and Schumann lieder. At Zankel, the sound remained crisp, permitting Romantic song to be transformed, as if by devilish magic, into a spectacularly strange cabaret revue.

April tends to be the month when new music comes out of hiding. Touring ensembles and superstar soloists, who dominate concert halls in February and March, return home with their Brahms symphonies and Tchaikovsky concertos, allowing non-dead composers to poke their heads into the bigger halls. At contemporary concerts in the past couple of weeks, New York's younger composers have asserted themselves with particular strength. Without following a stylistic party line, they have extended Andriessen's governing idea that classical composition is not a distinct language but, rather, a musical matrix, able to subsume any sound.

Under the umbrella of the Andriessen festival, the American Composers Orchestra presented a program titled "Louis and the Young Americans," charting his broad impact. The highlight was "These Worlds in Us," by Missy Mazzoli, who has emerged as a leader of New York's young moderns, and who also performs with the semi-classical, semi-electronic band Victoire. Mazzoli studied under Andriessen, but she does not imitate him. It's all too easy to copy surface features of Andriessen's music: the punchy brass-and-wind writing, the swaggering ostinatos. What Mazzoli emulates is the underlying clarity of his structures. "These Worlds in Us" has the expected sampling of pop touches—a plinking cowbell, wheezing melodicas—yet the sound-world is spare, the architecture spacious. The work is dedicated to Mazzoli's father, who served in Vietnam, and evokes pain experienced through the haze of a forgiving memory.

In the midst of the Andriessen festivities, the New York Philharmonic presented the second concert in its fitful new contemporary series, "CONTACT!" Alan Gilbert conducted new works by Sean Shepherd and Nico Muhly, who both studied at Juilliard in the early aughts, and one by Matthias Pintscher, a rising star of German music who has lately migrated to New York. Each piece had the virtue of unpredictability. Shepherd's "These Particular Circumstances" started out in threatening thickets of complexity, then grew increasingly boisterous, to the point that it threw in a quotation from "The Planets." Muhly's "Detailed Instructions," by contrast, proceeded from peppy ostinatos to a haunting nocturnal meditation, with flute and piccolo lines glimmering against inky chords of lower brass and strings. Pintscher's "Songs from Solomon's Garden"—a setting of part of the Song of Solomon, with Thomas Hampson as the vocal soloist—combined a familiar modernistic pointillism with mesmerizing sustained tones and murmurs of fragmentary melody.

On my nights off, I've been listening to a recording of Timothy Andres's "Shy and Mighty," an hour-long suite for two pianos, which Nonesuch will release next month. Just twenty-four, Andres first drew notice as an undergraduate, his student pieces hinting at a formidable imagination. "Shy and Mighty" is the kind of sprawling, brazen work that a young composer should write. I haven't made sense of it all yet: some sections play heady games of allusion, while others strum away on a simple figure, like a guy sitting alone on a park bench with his guitar. For long stretches, though, the music achieves an unhurried grandeur that has rarely been felt in American music since John Adams came on the scene. The language is essentially Romantic, but progressions such as you might find in Chopin and Brahms are slowed down and elongated; it's as if the contents of an imperial drawing room had been strewn along the side of a desert highway. Nothing is harder for a young composer than to find an individual voice. Andres is on his way: more mighty than shy, he sounds like himself. ♦

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