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Louis Andriessen
La Commedia
Winner of the 2011
Grawemeyer Award
for Composition

Andriessen on winning the
Grawemeyer Award

Photo: © Hens van den Brogaard



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Louis Andriessen wins Grawemeyer Award for his opera *La Commedia*

Louis Andriessen has won the 2011 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition for his Dante-inspired multimedia opera *La Commedia*, premiered in 2008. The Grawemeyer Award, granted annually by the University of Louisville, is the world's most prestigious composition prize, worth \$100,000 (£62,000; €73,000), and Louis Andriessen is the first Dutch composer to win the award.

Andriessen's *La Commedia* was selected from a wide international field of entries, and the Grawemeyer's prize announcement describes how the composer "uses Dante's epic poem as a springboard for subtle and ironic commentary on modern life, drawing a multilingual libretto from the Bible and other sources. Although some describe Andriessen's music as hard-edged, it is always human and humane."

Louis Andriessen writes of his reaction on winning the award: "Just before the Second World War, I was born in a sidestreet by a small canal in the medieval centre of Utrecht. Believe me, 71 years later, getting the world-famous Grawemeyer Award for *La Commedia* seems to be completely unreal. How could this happen?"

"When I was four years old my father walked with me over the bridge of the canal to St Catherine's Cathedral. In that church he played the organ and conducted the choir which twice a week included 40 boy trebles (girl sopranos were permitted only 25 years later). Did it all start sometime then? Perhaps it was hearing him play the organ when I started composing ten years later (I simply began by imitating my father and my 14-year-old brother Jurriaan). My father taught me: "Don't think you are important, we are just worms, but we have the duty to serve the music and write as well as we can".

"I am very grateful for the prize. Let us remember my wife Jeanette, who always provided valuable critical input about my compositions and supported me throughout the 50 years we lived together. She suffered a serious illness during the time I was working on *La Commedia* and died before the first performance. The complete five-part score is dedicated to her."

About *La Commedia*

La Commedia is Andriessen's fourth opera, following *De Materie* (1985-88), *ROSA The Death of a Composer* (1993-94) and *Writing to Vermeer* (1997-98). It was commissioned with the financial support of the Fonds voor de Scheppende Toonkunst and The Netherlands Opera, and was premiered at the Holland Festival in 2008 with film by Hal Hartley, an international cast, Ensemble Askó/Schoenberg, Synergy Vocals and children's choir De Kickers, conducted by Reinbert de Leeuw. The same forces (with local children's choirs) performed *La Commedia* in April 2010 at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and at Carnegie Hall in New York. Two parts of the opera were introduced to American audiences in 2006 and 2007, when the Los Angeles Master Chorale premiered *The City of Dis* and the Los Angeles Philharmonic gave the US premiere of *Racconto dall'Inferno* following performances in Europe by MusikFabrik and the RAI Orchestra.

A full-evening stagework in five parts, *La Commedia* is a highly individual operatic reflection on Dante's journey through heaven and hell, summoning up the joys, sorrows and follies of humanity. At its

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Amsterdam premiere the *Sunday Times* described the work as “the distillation of a lifetime’s creativity... There is nothing ethereal about this opera. Its questing vigour is of a materialist, Brechtian, Godardian kind. It relishes the mixture of media, musical quotations and parody, intellectual subtexts and ironic commentary while remaining spunkily itself — a brilliant, new-fangled circus.”

To hear soundclips of *La Commedia* visit www.boosey.com/commediaAV
To watch a web documentary on Andriessen visit www.boosey.com/podcast/12868

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About the Grawemeyer Awards

The University of Louisville awards half a million dollars, \$100,000 each for music composition, education, ideas improving world order, religion and psychology. The selection process includes a jury of professionals from each discipline and a knowledgeable lay panel. The Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition was established in 1984 and previous winning composers published by Boosey & Hawkes have included Harrison Birtwistle, John Adams, Unsuk Chin and in recent years Brett Dean (2009) and York Höller (2010). The late Charles Grawemeyer was an industrialist, entrepreneur and University of Louisville graduate who had a lifelong passion for music, education and religious studies.

For further information about the Grawemeyer Awards visit www.grawemeyer.org.

About Louis Andriessen

Louis Andriessen was born in Utrecht in 1939 into a musical family: his father Hendrik, and his brother Jurriaan were established composers in their own right. Andriessen studied with his father and Kees van Baaren at the Hague Conservatory, and between 1962 and 1964 undertook further studies in Milan and Berlin with Luciano Berio. Since 1974 he has combined teaching with his work as a composer and pianist. He is now widely regarded as the leading composer working in the Netherlands today and is a central figure in the international new music scene.

From a background of jazz and avant-garde composition, Andriessen has evolved a style employing elemental harmonic, melodic and rhythmic materials, heard in totally distinctive instrumentation. His acknowledged admiration for Stravinsky is illustrated by a parallel vigour, clarity of expression, and acute ear for colour. The range of Andriessen’s inspiration is wide, from the music of Charles Ives in *Anachronie I*, the art of Mondriaan in *De Stijl*, and medieval poetic visions in *Hadewijch*, to writings on shipbuilding and atomic theory in *De Materie Part I*. He has tackled complex creative issues, exploring the relation between music and politics in *De Staat*, the nature of time and velocity in *De Tijd* and *De Snelheid*, and questions of mortality in *Trilogy of the Last Day* and *La Commedia*.

Andriessen’s compositions have attracted many leading exponents of contemporary music, including the two Dutch groups named after his works *De Volharding* and *Hoketus*. Other eminent Dutch performers include the Ensemble Askó/Schoenberg, Nieuw Amsterdams Peil, the Schoenberg Quartet, pianists Gerard Bouwhuis and Cees van Zeeland, violinist Monica Germino and conductors Reinbert de Leeuw and Edo de Waart. Groups outside the Netherlands who have commissioned or performed his works include the San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Kronos Quartet, London Sinfonietta, Ensemble Modern, Ensemble InterContemporain, Icebreaker, and Bang on a Can.

Collaborative works with other artists include a series of dance projects, the full length theatre piece *De Materie* created with Robert Wilson for the Netherlands Opera, and three works created with Peter Greenaway: the film *M is for Man*, *Music*, *Mozart*, and the stage works *ROSA Death of a Composer* and *Writing to Vermeer*, premiered at the Netherlands Opera in 1994 and 1999 respectively. Collaborations with filmmaker Hal Hartley include *The New Math(s)* and *La Commedia*. Recent works written for vocalist Cristina Zavalloni include the monodrama *Anais Nin*, touring this season. Nonesuch Records has released a series of recordings of Andriessen’s major works, including the complete *De Materie*, *ROSA Death of a Composer* and *Writing to Vermeer*.

For further information visit www.boosey.com/andriessen.