

Experimenting with Opera in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: The historicizing approach to art in the late twentieth century brought to the surface a less obvious characteristic of generic forms: the fact that they do not simply vanish but metamorphose or merge with other genres.

Opera had long been considered a dead genre, incompatible with the modern world, when postmodernist composers, such as Philip Glass, Louis Andriessen or John Adams set out to reform its conventions and modes of representation. Whether inspired from the immediate reality, from history or from other texts, opera advanced to the centre of postmodernist concerns. The innovations were so radical that the name of this musical genre had to be changed: disk opera, postmodern metamusic (commentary on Dante's poem), music theatre, or postopera.

Our approach to Louis Andriessen's *La Commedia*, which refurbishes Dante's famous *Divine Comedy*, emphasizes semiotic aspects, intertextuality, generic hybridity and multimodal representation.

Keywords: Louis Andriessen, *La Commedia*, metamusic, intertextuality, film opera, post opera

INTRODUCTION

In the opening of his "Melancholia, Noise and Intertextuality in Louis Andriessen's *La Commedia*," Joel M. Baldwin explains his motivation for choosing this topic: "While questions of irony and politics abound in the literature on Louis Andriessen (1939–2021), a critical evaluation of intertextuality in his work does not yet exist, despite the composer's constant drive towards a polystylistic language in music and theatre that very often incorporates multiple outside sources and a wide range of texts as compositional or narrative inspiration". (Baldwin 2022: web)

Performed for the first time in 2008, *La Commedia* by Dutch composer Louis Andriessen registered an immense success, being shortly after hailed as one of the best compositions of the twenty-first century. Generically speaking, this piece of music is a hybrid, critics referring to it as film opera, disk opera, postmodern metamusic (commentary on Dante's poem), music theatre, or postopera. The exploration of this multifarious universe is likely to spark points of interest for musical theory as well.

FROM DANTE'S TO ANDRIESSEN'S *COMMEDIA*

Dante's monument of medieval culture is a tripartite structure, with the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* as stages of Dante's journey in afterlife.

Andriessen's layering follows a different logic. There are ontological distinctions between a **level of reality** (the performance of the opera with the premiere audience and the composer interacting in a reality show), a **realistic level of representation** (*ciné vérité*) with scenes shot in contemporary (hellish) Amsterdam, on the beach (purgatorial), and a **self-reflexive semiosis of representation**: the suspension bridge of an assemble scaffolding or a movie screen (paradise). Dante's theological *imago mundi* is thus substituted by Andriessen's hierarchy of representations in realistic, surreal and symbolic key. There is a permanent shuttling of the camera between a familiar urban landscape with bars, cafeterias, girls cycling along the street and handing out manifestos, traffic, a band of musicians getting paid by the conductor with money collected from begging on the one hand and a surreal building site with moving cranes and suspension bridge parodying the ascension from hell to paradise centred on the figure of Satan as

headmaster. Between the levels of reality there is a permanent symbolic transfer. For instance, the manifesto disseminated by the girls reads “Resist” framing them as rebellious, fallen angels. Andriessen explores the way different languages—visual, sound and narrative - can interact and be conveyed through multimediatric performance.

A MULTIMEDIA AESTHETICS

La Commedia (composed between 2004-08 and premiered in 2008) is a film opera in five parts, five mini-cantatas, with electronic music inserts by Anke Brouwer. The black-and-white film was created by Hal Hartley and the photography is signed by Hans van den Bogaard.

The libretto is a selection of lines from *La Commedia*, following the track from Inferno to Paradiso, interspersed with fragments from other texts – Psalm 107, *Das Narrenschiff*, the 16th century recruitment *text* for the Guild of the Blue Barge and two plays, *Lucifer* and *Adam in Ballingschap of Aller treurspeelen Treurspel* by 17th c. Joost van den Vondel - an exercise in intertextuality which changes radically the meaning of Dante’s poem.

A sensational soprano, Claron McFadden, mezzo-soprano Cristina Zavalloni (to whom the opera was dedicated), baritone Jeroen Willems, Hal Hartley, director, and conductor Reinbert de Leeuw performed in the company of Synergy Vocals, Netherlands Opera, and Askol|Schönberg Ensemble.

The first tableau, “The City of Dis or: The Ship of Fools,” alludes to Saint Augustine’s polarity – City of God and City of Man - serving as an opposition between a corrupt and doomed society and God’s steadfastness and eternity. Dis means devil, but this is actually an allegory of a fallen, sinning Amsterdam which calls to mind the confused humans in a boat in Psalm 107, who are bound to a restless sea rendered rough by God’s will to punish the heresy of those who, although given the possibility to see God’s work, both in the deep chasm and on high, still refuse to turn to God for guidance and help, staggering like drunkards and losing their minds.

The musicians arrested by the police and released on a boat along the Amsterdam Canals in the movie are the modern counterpart of the parabolic ship of fools described by Plato in *The Republic* (Book 6) which inspired several works of art, the most famous being Alexander Barclay’s estate satire (*The Ship of Fools*) and Albrecht Dürer’s woodcuts. *The Summons to the Guild of the Blue Barge* is thus an ironic reversal of the motif of the sinner summoned by God to acknowledge his sins and repent in view of the impending death in the Catholic tradition (for instance, *Everyman* - a medieval Dutch morality play). As the opera ends with a reference to the Last Judgment and the audience’s capacity to understand what has just been performed, this is one of the circles of overall meaning

Andersen is drawing in imitation of Dante’s circles/ limbos in the Inferno.

The parallelism between the unfolding plots is all the time obvious, and Anderson’s equations are very imaginative and unambiguous.

The Garden of Delights score played by the orchestra corresponds in the movie to a couple’s kiss of erotic intimations, to scenes of drinking, smoking, attempts at rape, extremely violent fighting

Looking from a distance, the message seems to be a warning against dogmatism and dictatorship. The inserts from Vondel are impurities which generate a different semantic field in Dante’s Inferno. Satan is called the Emperor of the Kingdom of Sorrows; he is great, impressive and defiant, the Vondel lyrics being set on an impressive orchestra canvas: “Male chorus narrates this story over an ostinato of bass guitar, cimbalom and drumset, sounding like nothing so much as Andriessen-ized death metal—which makes perfect sense, given that genre’s preoccupation with all things Hellish”. (Andres 2014: web)

In the movie, the character interpreting Satan is contemplating his hands, suggestive of his artificer powers, while supervising the huge machinery of a building site. He threatens to corrupt man, God’s creation, until God is horrified at that hideous face which he had created in his own image. Lucifer resents God’s creation in his likeness which seems to him to be a tyrant’s will to repress the other’s face and reproduce only himself all around. Satan says he will build church upon church up to heaven implying that institutionalized religion is oppressive. In fact, the chorus of children in proletarian uniforms, with dirty faces, straightjacketed and aligned like soldiers in the final scene are said to be, as well as the builders, “solid citizens” – that is, indoctrinated, obedient armies of slaves.

POSTOPERA TRAVESTIES: THE VOCAL BODY AND SIMULACRUM

The movie abounds in images of characters attempting to make the sign of the cross and proving very clumsy in the attempt. They seem to be trying to revert, as Dante says in the poem, from a sinful to an ascetic life but they find it very difficult to ignore the body or to mutilate it.

Dante himself seems to be alienated from his true self and effeminated by his cult of Beatrice “sent from heaven.” As Jelena Novak glosses on the disembodiment of voices in recent operas, especially through technology, the copresence of the live singer and of her previously recorded song creates confusion about the identity of the singing body, while the recording has no corporeal support: “That relationship between body and machine creates a kind of vocal ‘alloy’ consisting of live and pre-recorded components. Such a vocal result ‘outgrows’ the performing body: since the body singing live is not sufficient to produce the vocal result that Van der Aa

envisaged, the technologically enhanced voice appears beyond the physical limits and capacity of the vocal apparatus of the singing body". (Novak, 2012, web)

Novak remarks the contradiction which blocks illusion and identification with the character between Dante's male voice in the text and his female voice interpreted by a mezzo-soprano. Being summoned to Paradise, Dante seems to be emasculated, suffering gender alienation and finally dying hit my Beatrice's car.

Beatrice, as God's lieutenant, is hiding a black body under the impeccably white male costume while her head is wrapped up in white in Muslim fashion. Some guard opens the door of her car and she descends among the cameras journalists are directing to her posing as an official or a star. Standing in a balcony like heads of state, she is waving her head towards some undefined blocks of flats in the distance and a leafless tree while turning a blank look to the camera, as if to check the way she is self-performing. Humanity has vanished from this imaginatively impoverished landscape reminiscent of the urban paucity in the former communist countries.

Dante's progress in light of mediaeval theology is paralleled by the players of the small wandering orchestra in real life. They are like Adam driven into suffering from Paradise by God's wrath. There is no consecrated chalice or Gospel on the old-fashioned table supporting the real body of one of the girls which seems to have been washed ashore by the waves. Their books and newspapers belong to the lay world, lost among other items in the networks of news. They are toiling hard to earn their living, plodding their cycling through sand, playing the cello despite the rough wind scattering the pages of their scores. Their ascent of the mountain (Fig. 1) looks like the Golgotha of a lifetime, while their reduction to black shapes while tumbling down from the mountain seems to suggest their falling to death, their reduction to shadows of the other world.



Fig. 1

At this moment they join the characters moving between realms of the afterworld: Satan, Dante (who is now dead, having been crashed by a car) and Beatrice standing in a crane cart. Reality has gone; simulacra have replaced it.

Of great effect is the scene where a disabused Satan produces a moralizing piece over a drink about the decay of the world which parallels Cacciaguida's (Dante's ancestor) dirge on the fallen state of Florence in comparison to the aristocratic city he had known in the twelfth century (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2

The opera excels in style shift. Andriessen begins with a track of traffick noise, with minimalist noises caught from the environment, uses electronic inserts, mixes up jazz and pastiche of Bach and Stravinsky among others. The homophonic Renaissance music is in tune with the world on the stage (the five parts resemble five cantatas) while dissonant chromatic chords, noises, jazz or folk ballad belong with the modern world.

CONCLUSION

Andriessen's film opera is not simply an experiment but an achievement competing with traditional opera on all levels, including mesmerising melodious effects. There are at least two passages in the score of exceptional beauty. One of them is Casinella's sonnet based on Dante's *Convivio* sounding like a remote, melodious cavatina, hymning Dante's lady and conveying his sense of frustration at not being able to express in words all that he thinks of her. The other piece is *Luce eterna* interpreted by Beatrice, an eerie piece of music, unearthly, beyond the achievement of traditional opera in its crystal-like body of pure sounds. Intertextuality, multimedia representation and generic hybridity which characterise postmodernism are enriched with the new language (the voice-body reinvention) of postopera.

Andriessen's opera is an inspired composition which opens the door to new explorations of the rich postmodern pluralism and hybridty and the new resources of sound engineering and production.

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