Two Composers Visit Campus

John Corigliano and Louis Andriessen, two of the world’s most highly regarded and widely commissioned contemporary composers, visited the School of Music in February for extended residencies. Student musicians in a number of SoM ensembles, who had been rehearsing works by both men in the preceding weeks, were able to benefit from the insight only a composer could offer in rehearsals leading up to performance day.

Karen Jenks, graduate student of violin, had the opportunity to play works by both Corigliano, in the University Symphony Orchestra, and works by Andriessen, in the University Symphony Band. “I’ve rarely had the opportunity to work with composers,” she said, “so these sessions were very enlightening. As musicians, we are used to trying to glean as much as we can from what’s written on the page. To have the composer standing in front of us coaching us is an opportunity that no musician should ever forego.”

John Corigliano arrived on February 1st and spent the next several days sitting in on rehearsals.

The quintessential New Yorker, Corigliano grew up in a musical family. His father was concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic, his mother an accomplished pianist. He attended Columbia University and the Manhattan School of Music and has been on the faculty of the Juilliard School since 1991. He holds the position of Distinguished Professor of Music at CUNY’s Lehman College.

Corigliano first came to international attention when he won the chamber music prize at the 1964 Spoleto Festival for his Sonata for violin and piano. Since then, he has been in demand for commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, opera, ballet, and film. His Symphony No. 2 won the Pulitzer Prize. His score for the movie The Red Violin received an Oscar, and he has been the recipient of a number of Grammys. He was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1991, and, in 1992, Musical America named him Composer of the Year.

The University Symphony Orchestra, Kenneth Kiesler, conductor, performed his Piano Concerto at a program at Hill on Friday, February 3, with Arthur Greene as soloist. His Promenade Overture, performed by the USO, opened the program.

“Observing Corigliano work with ensembles was like watching a hungry chef prepare his favorite meal,” said Emily Threinen, graduate conducting student. “Attention was given to every nuance of every phrase, and every phrase was a small gesture within a larger soundscape. When he would ask...
for something in the music, he didn’t use adjectives like louder or faster, he used narrative adjectives like piercing, contemplative, enraging, funny, surging, seductive, destructive, powerful. He was passionate in his demeanor and vibrant in his delivery. There was no room for error.”

Corigliano’s most recent work, Circus Maximus (2005), written for symphony band, took him two years to complete. At the February 3 concert, the University Symphony Band, under the baton of Michael Haithcock, performed the 35-minute work, played in eight sections and calling for a static ensemble on stage with interplay with offstage musicians scattered around the hall: in the balcony, at the rear doors, marching down the aisles.

“Circus Maximus is my first work written specifically for concert band,” Corigliano wrote. “Many years ago, I arranged a piano four-hand suite, Gazebo Dances, for band, but I have always felt more comfortable writing for the symphony orchestra. The sight of a multi-staved-and-transposed-band score still fills me with dread.” (Later in February, his Gazebo Dances was performed by the Concert Band, Steven Davis conducting.)

“Each time I write a piece, I always ask myself, ‘Why are you writing this?’” Corigliano said. “So in this case, why am I writing a band piece for young people to play? And the answer was that the bands can, because of the way they rehearse, actually deal with a fully spatial situation, which I always wanted to do, and that suggests to me the idea of sensory overload and decadence, which suggests to me the world we’re living in and the world of a dying Rome, which had to have constant entertainment to distract itself.”

“Circus Maximus is not just a composition for band,” said Threinen. “It’s a dramatic musical representation of our current society. In one of his discussions, he said that we are living in one of the most exciting and scary times and that with this major surge of technology and other advancements comes a major surge in destruction.
The last note of Circus Maximus is a real gunshot. The symbolism needs no explanation.”

“I’ve played the [Promenade Overture] several times before this, “said Jenks, “and it was an amazing opportunity to be able to hear from the composer himself what he really envisioned. A piece like that is so dependent on the whims of each performer, and to have the composer there was a unique chance to really understand his vision.”

Corigliano is currently on hiatus from composing. “I don’t just write,” he told NewMusicBox. “I have to have a reason to write. I don’t have one right now. And I don’t think I need to, either. I just finished a big piece. I need to read some books, go to some plays, travel, take care of myself, meditate a little, become a more relaxed person, and then compose something.”

Just as John Corigliano was leaving town, Louis Andriessen arrived for a February 6-17 residency. Andriessen, who was born in Utrecht into a musical family, has been described as “one of the world’s most distinctive and influential composers … intent on breaking down the barriers between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art to fashion something gritty, powerful, and unique.” He studied with his father, a composer as well, and with Kees van Baaren at The Hague Conservatory. He is widely regarded as the leading composer working in the Netherlands today and a central figure in the international new music scene.
A thinking man’s composer, Andriessen’s influences range from the music of Igor Stravinsky to the paintings of Piet Mondrian, from political movements to philosophical schools of thought.

In a noon-hour conversation with William Bolcom at Rackham on February 6, the composer said, “before the 1960s, one didn’t even think of combining low brow and high brow cultures.” It was the “dehierization of music” that opened things up. But the liberation came with a surprising downside: peer pressure to embrace the avant-garde. “The ’60s freedom to experiment,” he said, “was almost imprisoning.”

Andriessen’s musical influences come from all genres—jazz harmonies and be-bop rhythms, Indonesian Gamelan, funk, and R&B. Described as a “maverick composer who defies categorization,” his impact on the evolution of music is undeniable.

But his solid training in the classical repertoire supports his more experimental works. In creating new music, Andriessen told Bolcom, “Composers must still look for an historical pillar to rest upon. Style alone doesn’t make good music. New music is not new just because it’s atonal or tonal, but because of how it sounds. To do something completely new, you have to say ‘no’ to a lot of music.” He cited the ironic example of a friend who said he could never compose because he liked too many kinds of music: he could say ‘no’ to none of them.

During his visit, the University Symphony Band presented “Louis Andriessen in Concert” at the Power Center. Concertgoers were greeted by his nine-minute carillon work, Arrival of Willibrord. The evening started out with La Passioine (2002) and concluded with M is for Man, Music, Mozart, performed live before the 1991 Peter Greenaway silent film of the same name, a thirty-minute homage to Mozart conjured up by Greenaway and Andriessen in collaboration for a 1991 BBC2 television series, Not Mozart, aired on the bicentennial of Mozart’s death.

Other highlights of his visit included a screening of the film opera, The Death of a Composer: Rosa, a Horse Drama, also by Greenaway and for which Andriessen wrote the score. A final concert, “The Chamber Music of Louis Andriessen,” featured the Contemporary Directions Ensemble, Andrew George, conducting.

“With Mr. Andriessen’s work, it was especially comforting to have him present,” said Jenks, “to reassure us that what he’d written on the page was actually what he wanted us to hear. Some of the indications in the music were completely contrary to our violinistic instincts, and before his arrival it was difficult to be sure that we were playing correctly. After we’d worked with him a few times, however, we were able to change the way we heard our sound and our performance as a result was what he’d envisioned.”

“I got the impression that when it comes to interpretation and style of his music, Andriessen wants each performer to ‘own’ their part and to become the character of his notation,” said Threinen. “It was like a true marriage between himself and the artist or performer. The members of the Symphony Band were well prepared for his visit, so when he asked for something in rehearsal it was always related to character. He usually asked for more of something: more aggressive, more sensual, more quirky, more dainty. When a performance is charged with freedom of expression and that expression is performed at the most artistic level, it turns up the passion for all involved.”