

The Influence of Rock Music Aesthetics on the Works of Louis Andriessen

Abstract. Louis Andriessen, as one of the most important contemporary composers, fascinates listeners around the world with his unique musical language, combining elements of repetitive (minimal music), jazz, funk and contemporary techniques. Nowadays, more and more theorists indicate the influence of rock music aesthetics on his works as well. This refers mainly to his early works from the 1970s, when his original musical language, later defined as the “hard-edged” Hague school, was not yet fully crystallized. Nevertheless, the impact in question has not been, so far, fully examined. Therefore, this article is an attempt to explore the music of Louis Andriessen in terms of the presence of rock music elements.

The author of the article analyses the chosen pieces by Louis Andriessen, especially his works from the 1970s and 1980s, in which the listener observes a significant number of minimal music elements. The analysis focuses on the comparison of the Dutch composer’s music to songs of the most important rock bands of the 1960s and 1970s, especially Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple. The main aspects to be compared include timbre, instruments and their roles, scales, music texture and, most importantly, ostinato form which is the basis of a musical composition both for Andriessen and in rock music.

Keywords: Louis Andriessen, minimal music, rock music, riff, ostinato, aesthetics of music.

1. Introduction

Louis Andriessen is a contemporary Dutch composer, whose musical language underwent, for over half a century, many changes under the influence of various contemporary styles and trends, starting from post war serialism and graphic music, passing through pastiche and American minimalism. Andriessen’s mature compositions also incorporate characteristic elements of various artists’ pieces like Johann Sebastian Bach, Igor Stravinsky, Charles Ives and many others. Hence, he created a unique and individual style, which characterizes repetitive, complex rhythmic structures, homogenous textures with saturated and harsh timbre combined with modal melodic material. However, his music would not sound the same if it was not influenced by popular music genres, particularly jazz and funk, which Andriessen was tremendously fascinated with from his early childhood. Although, nowadays, more and more theorists indicate the influence of rock music aesthetics on his works as well. Nevertheless, the impact in this question has not been, so far, fully examined. Furthermore, that influence has also never been confirmed by the artist himself. Therefore, these considerations inspired to write this paper, which attempts to explore the music of Louis Andriessen in terms of the presence of rock music elements.

2. Louis Andriessen and rock music: sociological and political perspectives

The end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s was marked by numerous military conflicts and political changes all over the world, which forced many people to actively get involved in a communal life. One of those people was Louis Andriessen, a composition student at the Royal Music Conservatory in The Hague at that time. As a young person, he already started demonstrating his radical political views, enhanced additionally by Luciano Berio who was at first his teacher of composition and later a friend of many years. Like his Master, Andriessen identified himself with left-wing movements, just to mention the Dutch group called *Notenkraaker*, the activity of which was directed against the conservative cultural establishment. In the composer’s opinion, the Dutch government supported only profitable artistic projects, thus hampering the chances of the development of young and independent artists like Andriessen (Andriessen 1989: 37).

In the late 1960s, the composer finally turned away from the world of high culture and gradually ceased to present his works at concert halls. He turned to music clubs and contemporary art museums in order to demonstrate his output charged with underground and clearly anti-systemic overtones. He entered then into cooperation with light music performers, which resulted in the establishment of *De Volharding*¹ in 1971, a politically committed band that was the counterbalance for conservative classical music orchestras. Their repertoire, apart from arrangements of Terry Riley’s, Igor Stravinsky’s and Darius Milhaud’s pieces, also covered Hanns Eisler’s protest songs which were performed in city streets, parks, music clubs and other public places (Zyła 2009: 19–20). What made *De Volharding* significantly different from traditional ensembles was the idea described by Andriessen as “dehierarchization” (Trochimczyk 2002: 21–22) or “democratization” (Yayoi 2006: 167) of ensembles. The idea was understood as breaking away from traditional hierarchical divisions within a music group and blurring the borders between the reproduction of music and improvisation. Therefore,

¹ The name *De Volharding* (in English: persistence) directly referred to the Dutch socialist movement from the 1920s, the members of which were factory workers (Zyła 2009: 18–19).

the final shape of a piece was to be determined collectively by the composer and performers, who became simultaneously co-authors of the work (Żyła 2009: 19–20).

An anarchist, rebel, proponent of equality and community – these features attributed to Andriessen were also the qualities of rock music artists of the 1960s and 1970s, whose songs dominated radio stations all over the world at the time. On numerous occasions, rock music, like the works of the Dutch artist, was induced by a political situation, an example of which might be the punk rock of the 1970s stemming from radical leftist circles. The anti-establishment approach of Andriessen also seems to be close to the ideas of the American jazz and rock musician Frank Zappa, whom the Dutch composer had been interested in for years, as he admits in an interview with Maja Trochimczyk (Trochimczyk 2002: 22). Similarly, Zappa had a liberal approach to art: he was not used to divide it into high and pop art. He believed that all creative works could have some artistic value (Zappa 1996: 22). Over time, this idea became the foundation of both progressive rock and collage compositions by Andriessen just like *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven* wherein he alternately quotes fragments of the Viennese classic's works and big-band standards, thus creating interesting sound contrasts. Zappa, like Andriessen, combined in his music the works of classical masters with elements of pop music repertoire to produce new timbral and aesthetic qualities. Interestingly enough, Zappa developed a particular respect for the works of Igor Stravinsky, Anton Webern and Edgar Varese (Zappa 1996: 20). In general, however, he was very critical of classical and contemporary music, as he considered them a product of the then-elites (Zappa 1996: 136), which again brought him closer to the Dutch composer's attitude.

Andriessen's connections with the world of rock music, occurring on sociological and ideological levels, undoubtedly provoke us to undertake further studies on other analogies; this time, however, on the music aesthetics level.

3. Ostinato in rock music and the music of Louis Andriessen: analogies

The compositions written by Andriessen in the 1970s derived, according to the composer, from the concept of American minimalism (Andriessen 1989: 27). The movement is identified with the simplicity of musical utterances, reduction of the sound material and overt exploitation of trance rhythms. What becomes the crucial formative element is ostinato, which also constitutes an important component of rock music. It is called a 'riff' and defined in the literature as a repeatable short melodic-rhythmic pattern (Wicke, Ziegenrucker 1985: 398–399). The source of rock riff was blues rock music, wherein an important role was played by the so-called guitar lick² and improvised, to a certain degree, parts of the bass guitar³. As in jazz, ostinato in rock music can play the role of chordal accompaniment, against which improvised parts of solo instruments are performed (Wolański 2000: 196). With time, however, out of a riff there emerged an instrumental music theme, characterized by a clear melodic line and prominent rhythmic structure.

In order to make riff patterns more distinct, they were gradually being simplified in terms of music texture and even made completely monophonic. The riff used to be attributed to the electric guitar and bass guitar parts, which doubled it in unison and octave (Ex. 1). That kind of texture was typical of hard rock in particular. It crystallized at the end of the 1960s and beginning 1970s thanks to such bands as Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin.

The image shows a musical transcription for two instruments: Electric Guitar and Bass Guitar. Both are in 4/4 time and share a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Electric Guitar part is written in the treble clef and consists of a repeating eighth-note pattern: G4, A4, B4, C5, G4, A4, B4, C5. The Bass Guitar part is written in the bass clef and consists of a repeating eighth-note pattern: G2, A2, B2, C3, G2, A2, B2, C3. The two parts are played in unison and octave.

Example 1. Black Sabbath, *Iron Man* (own transcription)

² A guitar lick is a typical element of blues-rock music. It is usually an ostinato melodic-rhythmic structure, performed by the electric guitar. What makes it different from a riff is its partly undefined, improvised form. Whereas the initial motif of a guitar lick, which can be defined as a leading motif, was usually determined, the remaining fragments were enriched by instrumentalists with a series of improvised embellishments and additional sounds making up a melody or sonorities. The riff, copying the pattern of a guitar lick, adopted mainly melodic-rhythmic structures based on different variants of pentatonic scales and the blues scales derived from them. See also: Kabza (2014: 21–22).

³ In the 1960s, the part of the bass guitar in rock bands gradually started to assume a fixed ostinato form of two-bar accompaniment, frequently of slightly figured character and varied rhythmic patterns. Ostinato could be repeated in a direct way or in sequences, taking into account transposition onto following steps of the scale and strictly maintaining its melodic shape. Bass parts in blues contributed to the crystallization of a fixed form of a rock riff and the potential of its transposition onto other scale steps. See also: Kabza (2014: 22).

The monophonization of texture, unison and ostinato structures are also present in numerous Andriessen's works written in the 1970s. Andriessen's characteristic unison was introduced in *Volkslied* (1971). It was used especially in politically committed pieces and had a symbolic dimension, as it reflected democratic and communitarian ideas. Over time, those unisons started to be called "collective" (Everett 2006: 66) in the literature because they were strictly associated with the concept of performance practice followed by Andriessen's politicized ensembles.

The composition titled *De Stijl* makes an interesting example. It is the third part of *De Materie* opera, written in the period of 1984–1988. Its content covers selected episodes from the life of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian and concepts of the visual arts movement named *De Stijl*. The composition combines stipulations of many pop music genres, including jazz, funk and big-band repertoire. It is a unison riff in the sections of bass instruments, electric guitars and piano that plays an important formative role. It has been enclosed within ostinato segments (Ex. 2) and it undergoes constant, though subtle, transformations, which was probably supposed to denote the semi-improvised character of funk music, stemming from jazz, blues and blues rock.



Example 2. L. Andriessen, *De Stijl*, ©Boosey & Hawkes, mm. 235–237

The monophonic texture also makes an essential part of the 1976 composition titled *Hoketus*. Inspiration came from the 13th-century hoquet technique, initially identified with vocal music. The work also belongs to the group of compositions with political provenance as the hoquet technique forced performers to cooperate closely, which was actually an interesting way of expressing the idea of solidarity. The segment where the texture changes from chordal to monophonic one was marked in the score with the letter E. Musicians collaborating with each other on the basis of complementary rhythms develop a persistent, permanently repeated musical structure with motor rhythm that obviously draws on the rock riff (Ex. 3).



Example 3. L. Andriessen, *Hoketus*, ©Boosey & Hawkes, p. 9

An important feature of a riff is also a close cooperation of melodic and percussive instruments in terms of rhythm (Wolański 2000: 108–109), which characterizes particularly hard rock. Compared to other genres, it is defined by transparent texture and a simpler melodic layer though by relatively complex rhythms, frequently of syncopated character (Ex. 4).

Example 4. Led Zeppelin, *Bring It Home* (own transcription)

The rhythmic layer, treated as the component strictly coordinating all instrumental parts, also constitutes an essential element of Andriessen's composition as he could express, thanks to that, the idea of community and equality. The composition titled *Workers Union* (1975) for any instrumental ensemble is a unique example (see: Ex. 5).

The composer applied relative notation in the score, determining only rhythmic and dynamic development of music. All the musicians perform a roughly outlined melodic line of an indefinite pitch. The narration, like in the pieces of American minimalists, originates from the principle of repeatability of short melodic-rhythmic cells that actually bring to mind riff structures.

Workers Union is, therefore, a non-standard score: considerably indeterminate, providing the musicians with the possibility of exerting some influence on the timbral shape of the piece, which can be associated with the idea of democratic ensembles, but still precise enough to make them cooperate closely. That compositional strategy was adopted to ironically portray the atmosphere around the title workers' union, the members of which formed a precarious and unstable community due to internal conflicts within the group⁴.



Example 5. L. Andriessen, *Workers Union*, ©Donemus, p. 1

Another piece where Andriessen emphasized the rhythmic aspect is *Mausoleum* written in 1979. The content of the work is made up of selected fragments of *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State* by Mikhail Bakunin (1871), the founder of anarchism. Concerning the time when the piece was written (1979), it might be assumed that the composition was prompted, inter alia, by punk rock culture arising from anarchist ideologies. The musical narration of external parts is characterized by motor rhythms and constant development of the main theme's melodic line, stemming from a simple motif of modal nature. A large performing body, consisting of, for instance, an elaborate wind section, dulcimer, two harps, two vocalists and the string section, realizes collectively and really consequently fast rhythmic passages, simplified sometimes in particular parts due to the limited performing potential.

Due to its popular character, the sound material of rock music, similarly to jazz, comprises modal scales. They also appear in many works by Louis Andriessen and provide the material for melodic lines and accompanying counterpoints. An example of such a composition is *De Staat*, the sound fabric of which was based chiefly on the material of Dorian, Phrygian and Lydian scales; the procedure was meant to make a reference to ancient Greek scales and simultaneously correspond to the non-musical content of the work that is fragments of the *Republic* by Plato (Adlington 2004: 58–68).

The already-mentioned composition *De Stijl* is another example, equally significant. Ostinato accompaniment in the bass line was based on the material of the Mixolydian scale (Ex. 2), which is one of the most frequently used modes in rock music, along with the Dorian scale. In the central episode of the composition, in the upright piano part, the artist introduced some dance accompaniment of boogie-woogie character (Ex. 6), wherein the notes of the highest voice move along the steps of the blues scale, typical of blues and hard rock music.



Example 6. L. Andriessen, *De Stijl*, ©Boosey & Hawkes, mm. 385–386

⁴ The author obtained the information from Zygmunt Krauze (unpublished interview, October 14th, 2015).

The occurrence of modal scales can be also observed in the *Zilver* (1991), the premiere of which took place on January 11, 1995 in Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California (the US)⁵. In the narration of the piece, there are two simultaneous, contrasting musical layers; the first of them is a chordal chorale in a slow, steady rhythm, realized by the woodwinds and string instruments, whereas the other – performed by the vibraphone, marimba and piano – is based on short chordal structures, characterized by smooth changes in rhythmic patterns. Both layers appear in imitation, which corresponded, in the composer's opinion, to the organ works of Johann Sebastian Bach. The melodic line shaped by the highest voices is characterized by scale-like, ascending and descending passages. The remaining sound structures are composed of diverse scales, like Ionian, natural, Dorian and Lydian-dominant⁶.

4. Means of performance

Since the 1970s, there has been a noticeable influence of pop music bands, including big band and jazz ensembles as well as rock bands, on performing bodies of Andriessen's works. In a standard rock band line-up, there is a singer (most often the front man), electric guitar and bass guitar as well as a drum set. Bands can also be expanded with additional instrumental parts, for example the Hammond organ, analogue synthesizers or an upright piano.

The aforementioned instruments play significant roles in Andriessen's works, specifically the bass guitar. The composer's interest in this instrument can be associated with the fact that his wife Jeanette Yanikian (1935–2008) was a guitarist and she was particularly fond of playing the bass guitar in pop music bands⁷. The artist also admitted in numerous interviews that what really mattered to him in music (pop music included) was the clarity of the bass line (Mendyk 2007: 50), the aspect emphasized also by his composition teacher Luciano Berio (Trochimczyk 2002: 34). Compared to other bass instruments, the guitar is characterized by considerable agility, enabling musicians to perform figured melodic structures. It was of particular importance in virtuosic jazz but also in rock music, where the bass guitar doubled the part of the electric guitar and had to meet the requirements of melodic riffs. *De Staat* is a symptomatic example, as the bass guitar therein is responsible for building a clear basis for chord structures and for leading the rhythmic narration. It is the only non-doubled instrument in the whole ensemble. Additionally, to highlight its crucial role, the composer placed it in the center of the whole performing body, calling it the "Buddha" and thus attributing the instrument with a symbolic meaning (Andriessen 1989: 6).

Andriessen is equally keen on employing two electric guitar parts in his works, just to mention *Hadewijch* (1988), *Dancing On the Bones* (1997) and the above-mentioned *De Staat*. The application of these instruments might be associated with jazz influences, especially the big band music, wherein they play the role of accompanying instruments. The composer, however, entrusts them with the realization of melodic-rhythmic ostinato structures, which makes his approach much closer to rock music and to hard rock in particular. The doubled part of the electric guitar may also show some correspondence to heavy rock music, over time also called "heavy metal" (Wolański 2000: 112). The genre created in the mid-1970s was one of the first to incorporate in good two parts of the electric guitar, which contributed to a further division within a band into the rhythm guitar (the accompanying one) and the lead/melodic guitar (the solo one).

It is also noteworthy that keyboard instruments played an important role in the Dutch artist's compositions, especially the grand piano that was used as a percussion instrument: for instance in the *Mausoleum*, just as Igor Stravinsky did⁸. Over time, however, in the 1970s, other keyboard instruments, like analogue synthesizers in particular, started to attract the composer's attention; the synthesizers dominated both electronic music and symphonic rock (for example, bands like King Crimson and Yes), wherein they functioned as the instruments imitating the sound of an orchestra. A synthesizer was applied in *De Stijl*, where its sound substituted the string section and harp.

⁵ See: Boosey & Hawkes Publishing House, <http://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Louis-Andriessen-Zilver/2307>

⁶ The Lydian-dominant mode is a popular jazz scale. It is characterized by the lowered 7th step, unlike the Lydian scale (Kałużny 1994: 29–30).

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ It is suggested, inter alia, by Rolf Liebermann in a conversation with Zygmunt Krauze, recorded for the documentary film *Cisza i dźwięk* [Silence and Sound], dir. Andrzej Kostenko, Warszawa, Polish Television 1989.

5. Conclusions

The influence of rock music on the works of Louis Andriessen seems to be obvious and considerable. That is why it is truly surprising to discover that in many interviews the composer admitted that he had not shown much interest in the rock music genres over his lifetime (Mendyk 2007: 50) and sometimes had even depreciated them, defining as the “downtown music” (Cross 1998: 179). It can be assumed, therefore, that such inspirations actually might have been drawn completely from the composer’s subconscious. Unfortunately, it is hard to confirm these suppositions and they will probably remain unanswered.

Nevertheless, many researchers indicate evident analogies between the artist’s output and rock aesthetics, giving examples, inter alia, of harsh timbre of his works (bringing to mind a distorted/overdriven guitar), exposition of a lively and motor rhythmic layer, as well as melodic-rhythmic ostinato structures. One of the researchers is Jonathan Cross, the author of *The Stravinsky Legacy*, who points out to rock music as the source of harsh sonorities in the artist’s compositions (Cross 1998: 171). A different perspective is taken by Maja Trochimczyk, who believes that “non-classical sonorities” of the *On Jimmy Yancey, Dat Gebeurt in Vietnam, Hymn to the Memory of Darius Milhaud, Workers Union* stem from, among others, the references to instruments and performance practices in jazz and rock music (Trochimczyk 2002: 60). Matthew Boyden and Nick Kimberley, in turn, claim that the *Hoketus* was “aggressively rock-orientated”, compared to the composition titled *De Volharding* (Boyden, Kimberley 2002: 586). In 1989, during the production of the *Cisza i Dźwięk* (Silence and Sound) documentary, the presentation of the *Workers Union* composition in a television studio took place. Interestingly enough, the performance was given by a group resembling a rock band. The group’s line-up consisted of two pianos (the composer himself sat down at one of them), a synthesizer, bass guitar and four drum sets. The exceptional character of that particular performance was also noticed by the American composer Aaron Jay Kernis, who asked Andriessen about associations of the piece with rock bands’ artistic output. The Dutch artist replied as follows:

“In this particular performance, the piece had much to do with American rock music. First of all – the selection of instruments, and those fast rhythms played by the percussion, repeated by electric instruments and pianos. It determined the rock sound for sure.”⁹

Although Andriessen’s art is commonly defined as “hard-edged Hague school” (Everett 2006: 75, 145, 146, 240, 243), with reference to the 20th-century painterly movement that fascinates, by the way, the composer himself, Louis Andriessen will remain for the author of this paper, first and foremost, “the European heavy metal answer to American minimalism”¹⁰.

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⁹ *Cisza i dźwięk* [Silence and Sound], dir. Andrzej Kostenko, Warszawa, Polish Television 1989 [Polish translation made by the Polish Television].

¹⁰ Mary Beth Crain, Los Angeles Master Chorale and Louis Andriessen, *LA Weekly*, November 14, 2007, <http://www.laweekly.com/arts/los-angeles-master-chorale-and-louis-andriessen-2150955> [access: October 12th, 2015].

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Roko muzikos estetikos įtaka Louiso Andriesseno kūrybai**Santrauka**

Louisas Andriessenas, vienas ryškiausių šiuolaikinių kompozitorių, viso pasaulio klausytojų dėmesį patraukia dėl savo unikalios muzikinės kalbos, jungiančios repetityvinės (minimalistinės) muzikos, džiaz, *funk* muzikos elementus su šiuolaikinėmis technikomomis. Pastaruoju metu vis daugiau teoretikų taip pat pažymi roko muzikos estetikos įtaką jo kūrybai. Vis dėlto šis klausimas iki šiol dar nėra išsamiai išnagrinėtas. Šis straipsnis – tai bandymas Louiso Andriesseno muziką tyrinėti būtent roko muzikos įtakos aspektu.

Skirsnyje „Louisas Andriessenas ir roko muzika: sociologinės ir politinės perspektyvos“ trumpai pristatomos Andriesseno politinės pažiūros ir akivaizdi jų įtaka vėlesniems darbams. Daug dėmesio skiriama Andriesseno bendradarbiavimui su lengvosios muzikos atlikėjais ir jo vadinamųjų demokratinių ansamblių idėjai. Pateikta daug svarbios informacijos apie olandų kompozitoriaus ir roko muzikos atlikėjų (ypač Franko Zappos, kurio estetiškos nuostatos domino Andriessena) požiūrių panašumą.

Skirsnyje „*Ostinato* roko ir Louiso Andriesseno muzikoje: analogijos“ aptariamas *ostinato* principų, taikomų amerikiečių minimalizmo inspiruotuose Andriesseno kūriniuose, ir roko rifų, būdingų tokių grupių kaip „Led Zeppelin“ ir „Black Sabbath“ kūriniams, panašumas. Vienas svarbesnių čia nagrinėjamų aspektų yra monofoninė muzikos faktūra ir unisono apraiškos, sietinos su Andriesseno politiniais ansambliais; taip pat ritminiai aspektai ir instrumentų deriniai. Galiausiai palyginama garsinė medžiaga, ypač deriniai aspektai, būdingi tiek Andriesseno kūriniams, tiek roko dainoms.

Skirsnyje „Atlikimo priemonės“ aptariamos instrumentų funkcijos, būdingos Andriesseno kompozicijoms, sunkiojo roko („Deep Purple“, „Led Zeppelin“) ir progresyviojo roko („King Crimson“ ir „Yes“) dainoms. Minimi tokie instrumentai kaip bosinė gitara, elektrinė gitara, fortepijonai ir analoginiai sintezatoriai, dažnai naudojami olandų kompozitoriaus darbuose.

Išvados autorius dar kartą išryškina Andriesseno požiūrį į roko muziką ir kitus popmuzikos žanrus. Supažindinama ir su kitų autorių įžvalgomis, atskleidusiomis išskirtinį roko muzikos estetikos poveikį olandų kompozitoriaus kūrybai.