

Hans Abrahamsen's Second Period: An Analysis of *Wald*

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Introduction

Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen's piece for large ensemble, *Wald* (2009), is a "series of variations" building on the opening of his earlier piece for woodwind quintet entitled *Walden* (1978). This return to his own music stemmed from a crisis in Abrahamsen's compositional life, between 1991 and 1999, when he took an extended break from composing. During this time, Abrahamsen experienced debilitating writer's block; he wrote that he was "paralyzed by the white paper" and "felt that his music had become so complex that he no longer had the tools to create what he tried to imagine."¹ While he slowed in producing new work, he did not stop working. Throughout this period, which he calls the "fermata" of his compositional life, Abrahamsen found inspiration in arranging and orchestrating other composers' works as well as his own earlier pieces. This period of reflection, contemplation, and private work provided the necessary catalyst leading to a new stylistic period, one built upon the foundations of his first period but extended beyond it to new territory.

¹Robin, "Hans Abrahamsen: Fame and Snow Falling on a Composer."

A precocious young composer, Abrahamsen had written a confident body of work by age 27 (1979) and was a prominent figure associated with the Danish “New Simplicity” movement. This movement was largely a reaction against Darmstadt serialism which sought to “establish a perceptible sense of form and to evolve a new relationship with past musical styles and objects.”² Abrahamsen’s works of this first period, including *Ten Preludes for String Quartet* (1973), *Stratifications* (1975), *Winternacht* (1976-78), and *Walden* (1978), blended the clarity of expression and economy of musical materials associated with “New Simplicity” along with elements of neo-classicism, neo-romanticism, and collage-like polystylism. Later first period works, like *Six Pieces* (1984) for horn, violin, and piano, and *Märchenbilder* (1984), and *Lied in Fall* (1987) show a greater sense of chromaticism and denser, more granular textures, perhaps revealing the influence of his teacher György Ligeti.

The musical style of Abrahamsen’s second period is deeply informed by the groundwork he laid during the period of his “fermata.” He returned to his older works and reorchestrated them for alternate ensembles, most notably the woodwind quintet *Walden* and septet *Winternacht*. He arranged and orchestrated works by Ives, Nielsen, Nørgård, and Ravel for ensembles ranging in size from woodwind quintet to chamber orchestra. Most importantly, Abrahamsen found inspiration in a set of canons by J.S. Bach³ that he arranged with a distinctly Minimalist aesthetic, a pairing he would later revisit in *Schnee* (2006-08).

Abrahamsen’s “fermata” ended with the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1999-2000); this work initiated a fertile period of artistic synthesis that combined the practice of returning to previous works (and referencing other composers’ works) with new innovations in compositional technique. In this second period, Abrahamsen has re-

²Ernste, “Hans Abrahamsen’s *Winternacht*: Reflections on an Etching by M.C. Escher,” 8.

³BWV 1072-1078

turned to previous works in two ways: arrangement for a larger ensemble and starting from an existing germinal motive and expanding upon it significantly. For instance, Abrahamsen recasts the first four movements and eighth movement of *Ten Studies for Piano* (1984-98) for orchestral forces in *Four Pieces for Orchestra* (2004) and in the final movement of the *Piano Concerto*, respectively. *Air* (2006), for solo accordion, is a reworking and development of material from his first piece for accordion, *Canzone* (1978), and *Air* further serves as a point of departure for *String Quartet No. 3* (2008).⁴

Beginning with *Schnee* (2006-08) and *Wald* (2008-09), Abrahamsen's style crystallized into one based on tightly constrained musical materials, microtonal sonorities, repeating material delineated by repeat signs, frequent changes of meter, tempo modulations, and complex polyrhythms. The two works are drastically different in scope and instrumentation, with *Schnee* scored for nine musicians lasting an hour and *Wald* scored for fifteen musicians lasting eighteen minutes. Abrahamsen has nonetheless indicated that *Wald* is a "twin piece" to *Schnee*⁵, and indeed they share not only the aforementioned characteristics but also clearly articulated forms and symmetrical ensemble seating plans.

While *Schnee* has gained greater notoriety, due in part to its dramatic hour-long length, *Wald* better exemplifies the synthesis of his second period, where previous materials are recast and further developed within the context of these new compositional resources. It consists of seven variations based on the beginning of his woodwind quintet *Walden* (1978), and Abrahamsen has indicated there are additional connections to Robert Schumann's *Waldszenen*.⁶ The thematic material appearing in both *Walden*

⁴Abrahamsen, "*String Quartet No. 3*" Program note.

⁵Abrahamsen, "*Wald*" Program note.

⁶Ibid. Program note.

and *Wald* is a rising perfect fourth horn call that elicits responses from other instruments.⁷ The horn call repeats but has a slower periodicity than the other responses leading to a gradual change in the order of call and response. The passing of material around the instruments of the ensemble figures prominently throughout the work, and Abrahamsen controls this feature through the symmetrical arrangement of the ensemble into six groups. With these characteristics in mind, *Wald* represents an excellent case study to discuss the features of Abrahamsen's second period.

Scope and Methodology

This dissertation has two goals. The principle goal is to examine the innovative compositional practices characteristic of Abrahamsen's second period through an analysis of *Wald*. The second goal is to examine *Wald*'s relationship to other music through the following questions: In what ways is *Wald* based on his earlier work *Walden*? How is *Wald* a "twin piece"⁸ to *Schnee*? Is *Wald* related to Schumann's *Waldszenen* in any substantial way beyond poetic inspiration?

In order to conduct this analysis and address these questions, this essay will be divided into three parts. Part one will place Abrahamsen in a historical context by briefly discussing other twentieth-century composers who have exhibited commonalities in the two areas that define his second period: 1) a break preceding a significant change in style, and 2) a predilection for reworking earlier musical material. Part two will provide an overview of *Walden* and *Wald* in order to compare and contrast Abrahamsen's first and second period styles. Significant differences will be drawn between the two periods, and the discussion of *Walden* will largely be limited to

⁷Ibid. Program note.

⁸Ibid. Program note.

the first movement, since it contains the majority of the common material and has connections to the additional movements in the later work. Part three will consist of a detailed analysis of the introduction and seven variations in *Wald*. The focus will be on the way Abrahamsen recasts the germinal material from *Walden* and develops it throughout the piece via harmony, orchestration (including timbral choices and the symmetrical ensemble layout), and texture (including metrical choices and polyrhythmic layering).

A Preliminary View of *Wald*

An analysis of *Wald* must first begin with *Walden*, since it contains the germinal material from which *Wald* is built. Abrahamsen composed *Walden* in 1978 on a commission from the Funen Wind Quintet. The title of the four-movement work comes from Henry David Thoreau's novel of the same name that documented the American philosopher's "attempt to strip away all the artificial needs imposed by society and rediscover man's lost unity with nature."⁹ In the program note for the piece, Abrahamsen describes the musical material and the kinds of processes that interested him:

Walden was written in a style of re-cycling and "new simplicity." A lot of superfluous material has been peeled away in order to give space to different qualities such as identity and clarity. Various layers are encountered in the quintet such as the organic (growth, flowering, decay), concretism (mechanical patterns) and finally the descriptive (distant horn calls and other ghost-like music of the past enter our consciousness like a dream).¹⁰

The layers of organicism, concretism, and descriptive are fitting descriptions of how the material unfolds in each movement. Organicism is central to the first

⁹Abrahamsen, "*Walden*" Program note.

¹⁰Ibid. Program note.

and second movements where motives develop gradually through additive processes, for instance two-note becoming three-note melodies and rhythmic augmentation and diminution. The third movement features a three-note pattern articulated heterophonically with polyrhythms (10 over 7 over 4). This susurrous texture gradually decreases in speed and gives way to slow legato oscillating patterns that mechanistically compress in rhythm, ascend in register, and coalesce into an interlocking sixteenth note texture. The “ghost-like music of the past” has relevance to both the horn call of the first movement as well as the fourth movement whose contrapuntal texture is stylistically reminiscent of Baroque music. This final movement features a composite texture of an E-major flute and bassoon duo in 3/4 and an Eb-major trio of oboe, clarinet, and horn in 6/8.

Abrahamsen’s unfolding of the first movement’s horn call and response is the material that he revisits in *Wald*. Figure 1 shows the first two of four call and response phrases separated by grand pauses.

The phrases contain two motives: a single rising Bb-Eb call and three D-F echoing responses. Each instance of the motive differs slightly in rhythmic subdivision, and over the course of the four phrases, Abrahamsen changes the order of the call and responses by rhythmically displacing each instance. Comparing the first phrase to the second, the horn enters within beat 4 as before, but the bassoon enters 5 quarter notes earlier, the clarinet 4 quarter notes, and the flute 4 quarter notes plus one triplet eighth note. This process continues for phrases three and four and ends with the horn motive having rotated to the last order position isolated from the other instruments (see Figure 2).

The simplicity and straightforward process-driven development of this material is indicative of Abrahamsen’s first period compositional technique. His reworking

♩ = 63-66

G.P. G.P.

Flauto

Oboe

Clarinetto *)

Corno *) con sord.

Fagotto

5

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Cor. [con sord.]

Fg.

*) Clarinet in A and Horn in F both written at actual pitch.

Figure 1: Horn call and responses.

13

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Cor.

Fg.

Figure 2: Horn motive phrase four.

of this material in *Wald* retains these qualities yet recasts the material with greater emphasis on timbral nuance.

The form of *Wald* consists of an introduction and seven variations whose successive durations decrease over the course of the work. The listing of durations in Table 1, measured from the commercially released recording,¹¹ shows that this decrease is not linear but illustrates Abrahamsen's affinity for compressing global proportions, a technique he also used in *Schnee*. **Something on the effect this produces.**

Table 1: Sectional proportions

Section	Duration
Introduction	3:10
Variation 1	2:38
Variation 2	2:09
Variation 3	2:35
Variation 4	2:00
Variation 5	1:39
Variation 6	1:31
Variation 7	1:18

These variations are juxtaposed with little to no transitional material. Their boundaries and subsections are clearly demarcated in the score through the use of different tempi, meters, descriptive markings, and double bar lines. Table 2 gives a comprehensive list of every tempo change and descriptive marking that accompanies a new subsection or variation.

Table 2: *Wald* form.

Section	Measures	Tempo	Descriptive markings
Intro	mm. 1-108		
	1	Tempo I ♩ = 88	Allegro con brio

¹¹footnote for recording

Section	Measures	Tempo	Descriptive markings
			“wie aus der Ferne” (“as from a distance”)
	37	Tempo II $\text{♩} = 66$	Poco meno ma maestoso poco grottesco e ironico
	73	Tempo III $\text{♩} = 100$	Allegro vivace e agitato “aufgeregt” (“excited”)
	91	Tempo IV $\text{♩} = 88$	Meno mosso, soave e fluente
Var 1	mm. 109-267		
	109	Tempo I $\text{♩} = 92$	Allegro con brio ma un poco piu mosso ancora “wie aus der Ferne” (yet “as from a distance”)
	171	Tempo II $\text{♩} = 77$	Poco meno maestoso ma un poco piu mosso ma poco lamentoso
	238	Tempo III $\text{♩} = 100$	Allegro vivace e piu agitato “sehr aufgeregt” (“very excited”)
	254	Tempo IV $\text{♩} = 88$	Meno mosso, soave e fluente
Var 2	mm. 268-408		
	268	Tempo I $\text{♩} = 94$	Allegro con brio ma sempre poco piu mosso
	322	Tempo II $\text{♩} = 82$	Un poco meno ma ancora piu mosso lamentoso e melancolico
	382	Tempo III $\text{♩} = 100$	Allegro vivace e agitato “wieder aufgeregt” (“excited again”)
	402	Tempo IV $\text{♩} = 88$	Meno mosso, soave e fluente
Var 3	mm. 409-442		
	409	$\text{♩} = 32$	Adagio misterioso (“Nachtmusik”)
Var 4	mm. 443-473		
	443	$\text{♩} = 32$	Stesso tempo
Var 5	mm. 474-581		
	474	$\text{♩} = 64$	Con nuova energia “Wie ein plötzliches Erwachen”

Section	Measures	Tempo	Descriptive markings
	490	♩ = 144	(“Like a sudden awakening”) Vivo furioso (“vielleicht eine Jagd”) (“perhaps a hunting”)
	522	♩ = 165	Presto volante (“galoppierend, immer vorwärts”) (“galloping, always forward”)
	562	♩ = 132	Più mosso
Var 6	mm. 582-594		
	582	♩ = 66	Andante mesto
Var 7	mm. 595-605		
	595	♩ = 64	Piu lento

This table highlights variations and sections that are musically connected by these indications, but of course, do not describe the full extent of their relationships. There are interrelated sections and variations across the piece that are not captured by this table, and the entire form of the work can be grouped in the following way:

Part A: Introduction, Variation 1, Variation 2

Part B: Variation 3 and Variation 4

Part C: Variation 5

Part D: Variation 6 and Variation 7

The introduction establishes the primary motivic and harmonic material, while variation 1 and 2 are very close re-readings of the introduction with differences in proportion, orchestration, and motivic development. These three sections, grouped together in the previous list as Part A, each contain four subsections differing in tempo, harmony, and activity. Variation 3 and 4 contain the quietest, calmest, and most introverted music, while Variation 5 functions as the climax, containing the loudest, most chaotic, and texturally dense music. Variations 6 and 7 are harmonically related

to the fourth part of Part A and contain similar material with different orchestrations.

The orchestrational features of the work are directly tied to the way Abrahamsen arranges the 15 musicians of *Wald* into a semi-circle containing six symmetrical groups. Figure 3 shows a diagram of the seating plan in the score and indicates that there are 4 groups of duos and 2 groups of trios with the piano occupying the central position and not belonging to any group.

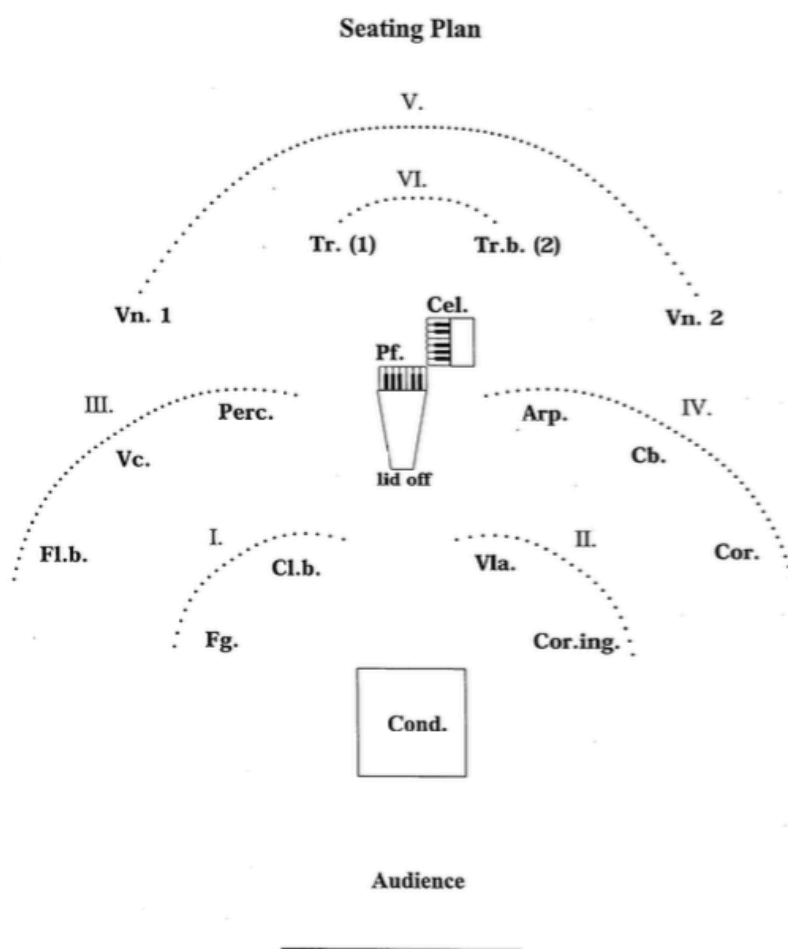


Figure 3: Wald seating plan.

Throughout the variations, the six groups exchange musical ideas in a way that is often balanced and symmetrical. A brief examination of the first two sections of

the introduction (measures 1-72) will illustrate this process. This passage features the horn call motive from *Walden* and shows how Abrahamsen expanded the earlier piece's process of rhythmic displacement to apply both to motivic ordering and pitch ordering.

Like *Walden*, the first section of the introduction features four phrases containing the rising perfect fourth motive and subsequent echoes that undergo gradual displacement. Each of the four phrases repeats verbatim as Abrahamsen makes extensive use of repeat signs in the introduction and first two variations. The number of measures within these phrases can be described in this way: 2 mm. ||: 9mm. :||: 8mm. :||: 9mm. :||: 8mm. :||.

The harmonic material of this first section is extremely paired down, consisting of only a D4-G4 dyad colored by a 1/6th-tone flat D4-G4. $\sharp\downarrow$

Summary of the Literature

Relatively unknown outside of Europe until recently, Abrahamsen's international profile has expanded significantly after the composition of *Schnee* and more recently with the Berlin Philharmonic premiere of the song cycle *let me tell you* (2014). The Cleveland Orchestra's recent American tour of this piece and its receipt of the 2016 Grawemeyer Award for Music has brought further attention to Abrahamsen in the United States.

However, little analytical work has been conducted on his music. Danish composer Karl Aage Rasmussen and scholar John David White have written books profiling Danish and Nordic composers respectively, but their discussion of Abrahamsen

is limited to his earlier career, from the 1970s and 1980s.¹² Composer Kevin Ernste's dissertation on *Winternacht* (1978) represents one of the only in-depth analyses of his music. Considering the existing scholarship's focus on the music of Abrahamsen's first period, this dissertation would represent a significant and original contribution to the knowledge on the music of his second period.

¹²Rasmussen, *Noteworthy Danes*.
White, *New Music of the Nordic Countries*.

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