

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

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Introduction

At the age of thirty-six between 1988 and 1998, Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen (b. 1952) took an extended break from composing. Abrahamsen experienced debilitating writer's block, saying 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 stopped taking commissions and 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 that lead to a new stylistic period, one built upon the foundations of his first period but extended beyond it to innovative territory.

A precocious young composer, Abrahamsen had written a confident body of work by twenty-seven and was a prominent figure associated with the Danish "New

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

Simplicity” movement. This movement was largely a reaction against Darmstadt serialism and sought to “establish a perceptible sense of form and to evolve a new relationship with past musical styles and objects.”² The works of this first period, like *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. His 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 indebted to the groundwork he laid during the period of his “fermata.” He returned to his older works and made different orchestrations of them, 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) initiating a fertile period of artistic synthesis that combined the practice of returning to older works (and referencing other composers’ works) along with new compositional techniques. Beginning with *Schnee* (2006-08) and *Wald* (2008-09), Abrahamsen’s style crystalized into one based on austere musical materials, repeating material delineated by repeat signs, frequent changes of meter, tempo modulations,

²Ernste, “Hans Abrahamsen’s *Winternacht*,” 8.

³BWV 1072-1078

complex polyrhythms, and symmetrical ensemble layout.

While *Schnee* has gained greater notoriety due in part to its dramatic hour-long length, *Wald* better exemplifies the synthesis of recasting previous materials with a renewed compositional language which characterizes Abrahamsen's second period. The eighteen-minute work was jointly commissioned by the Danish ensemble ASKO Schönberg and the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, and it is scored for a large ensemble of fifteen musicians with novel instrumental doublings, among them bass flute and bass trumpet. *Wald* consists of seven variations based on the beginning of his woodwind quintet *Walden* (1978). The thematic material appearing in both pieces is a rising perfect fourth horn call that elicits responses from other instruments. 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. Of its connection to this earlier work and to Robert Schumann's music, Abrahamsen has said:

As Abrahamsen indicates, *Wald*'s circle of referential and poetic influences includes *Schnee*, his early work *Walden*, the book of the same name by Thoreau, and Robert Schumann's *Waldszenen*.

Scope and Methodology

This dissertation has two goals. The principle goal is to analyze *Wald* for innovations in compositional technique characteristic of Abrahamsen's second period. This analysis will focus on

(material from an older work, references to another composer's music, complex meters, microtonality, and symmetrical ensemble layout)

development of musical material across variations, new approach to texture, and

use of symmetry.

The second goal is to examine *Wald*'s relationship to other music. The music of Abrahamsen's second period largely falls under two categories: arrangements of his earlier music and music based on previous works, either his own or another composer. through the following questions: How is *Wald* based on his earlier work *Walden*? In what ways is *Wald* a twin piece to *Schnee*? Is *Wald* related Schumann's *Waldszenen* in any substantial way beyond poetic kinship?

how I plan to complete these analysis

- get in contact with Abrahamsen (connection with ESM as Howard Hanson guest in 2013)
- analyze *Walden*, focusing on first mvmt, for re-used material
- set theory for pitch aspects (Ernste (2006) indicates he thinks this way)
- compare symmetrical layout of *Schnee* and *Wald*

To answer these questions, I plan to analyze the first movement of *Walden* from which Abrahamsen indicates he bases *Wald* on.

examine the compositional practices of the second period through the lens of *Wald*

MORE CLEARLY SAY POINTING OUT ALL THE NEW THINGS THAT HAVE SURFACED IN HIS MUSIC SINCE innovation arising from period of reflection Schoenberg stopped composed for 10 years Donatoni crisis compare compositional practice from first period to second period handling of texture and orchestration and development of music and harmony speculation: what he learned in the middle to give rise to these things influence of minimalism and Steve Reich (repeating material)

Summary of State of Research

Hans Abrahamsen has been relatively unknown outside of Europe until recently. His international profile expanded significantly after the composition of *Schnee* and more recently with the Berlin Philharmonic premiere of *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 his work in the United States.

Despite this burgeoning profile, 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 details his earlier career from the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ 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 since his compositional "fermata."

⁴Rasmussen, *Noteworthy Danes*
White, *New Music of the Nordic Countries*.

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