RECENT MUSIC OF HANS ABRAHAMSEN

Hans Abrahamsen. Traumlieder: For Violin, Cello, and Piano (1984/2009). Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, [2010]. [Table of contents, p. [i]; score, p. 1–23, and 2 parts. ISBN 978-87-598-6941-3, pub. no. WH 30687C. $41.]

Hans Abrahamsen. String Quartet No. 3 (2008). Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, [2008]. [Score, p. 1–10, and 4 parts. ISBN 978-87-598-1745-2 (score), 978-87-598-1746-9 (parts), pub. no. WH 30919. $28.40 (score), $26.80 (parts).]

Hans Abrahamsen. Schnee: Ten Canons for Nine Instruments (2006–08). Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, [2010]. [Pref. matter (instrumentation, performance instructions, stage setup, table of contents), p. i–iv; score, p. 1–191. ISBN 978-87-598-2067-4, pub. no. WH 31173. $55.30.]

Hans Abrahamsen. Double Concerto: For Violin, Piano, and String Orchestra (2010–2011). Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 2011. [Pref. matter (instrumentation, performance notes, stage setup, table of contents), p. i–iv; score, p. 1–57. ISBN 978-87-598-2191-6, pub. no. WH 31276. $72.70.]

While there are certainly many Danish composers throughout history worth hearing, studying, and performing, it seems as though there is often one per generation that stands out as the reigning champion of Danish music. Niels Gade (1817–1890) the composer, conductor, and violinist, spent the beginning of his career in Germany within Mendelssohn's circle, returning to Denmark at the age of thirty-one due to the First Schleswig War to establish himself in a successful career as a prominent musician and educator. He guided the likes of Edvard Grieg (1843–1907) and Carl Nielsen (1865–1931), the latter who ultimately became known as the greatest Danish composer of all time. Nielsen's successor was, arguably, the prolific Vagn Holmboe (1909–1996) whose neoromantic/post-Sibelius aesthetic was very influential on his pupils, including the current champion of Danish music, Per Nørgård (b. 1932), who became equally influential due to his development of the infinity row—a compositional process that resembles Sibelian orchestral textures and explorations in tempos and harmony. Presently, there are several Danes vying to be Nørgård's heir. Of course, only time will tell; it could be decades before one emerges. Each of the members of the current generation all exhibit qualities of their predecessors, while moving forward and developing their own ideas. Those who seem to be receiving the most national and international attention are Karl Aage Rasmussen (b. 1947), Poul Ruders (b. 1948), Bent Sørensen (b. 1958), and Hans Abrahamsen (b. 1952), whose music I will discuss here.

Beginning his professional career in the 1970s on the tail end of the Danish "new simplicity" movement—a response to the complexities inherent in the Darmstadt School throughout central Europe, and not to be confused with the German new simplicity (*Neue Einfachheit*) nor the Tintinnabulation style found in Arvo Pärt or John Tavener—Abrahamsen can be perceived, in retrospect, as being somewhat naïve, in that the older generation's influence—that of Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, Henning Christiansen, and Ib Nørholm—is a bit obvious, particularly in his orchestral music. However, Abrahamsen's intimate style and rigorous forms, which are obvious features of his recent

music, are also noticeable during his early career in pieces such as *Herbst* for tenor, flute, cello, and guitar (1972), *Flowersongs* for three flutes (1973), and *Universe Birds* for female chorus (1973). Throughout the 1970s Abrahamsen continued to develop in distinctive ways. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Abrahamsen enjoyed many successes, professionally, at home and abroad, as well as musically with the imagery and narrative he was able to convey in works such as *Winternacht* for chamber orchestra (1976–78), *Walden* for wind quintet (1978), the orchestral pieces *Nacht und Trompeten* (1981) and *Märchenbilder* (1984), and *Lied in Fall* for cello and ensemble (1987). Abrahamsen has never been a prolific composer, and during the late 1980s he became even less so, coming eventually to a stop in 1991. Between 1991 and 1999 Abrahamsen composed only one new work (*Herbstlied* for soprano and ensemble, 1992), and instead devoted time to reorchestrating works of Nielsen, Bach, Schumann, and Nørgård, reworking some of his own music, and attending to his professorial duties at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, where he has held various posts since 1982. The reasons for his composing hiatus are unclear, but it would seem he thought a period of rumination was in order. He returned to the fold slowly, composing only four new works (most notably the Piano Concerto from 2000) as well as more arrangements and reworkings of his own and others' music from 1999 to 2005.

Since 2006, Abrahamsen seems to have flowered. He has been producing new works at a rate that has not been this consistent since the 1980s—one of which, in this reviewer's opinion, could be considered a masterpiece of early-twenty-first-century music. Most of the time between 2006 and 2008 was spent composing *Schnee*, a magnum opus of about one hour in length, scored for nine players in three groups (violin, viola, cello, and piano; flute, oboe, clarinet, and piano; and one percussionist). The piece requires tremendous virtuosity in terms of rhythm, technique, and stamina from all nine performers. Glancing through the score, one sees music that is meticulously notated and (on closer inspection) finds his trademark strict forms and processes coming to a head. Regarding his forms, Anders Beyer, in his article on Abrahamsen in the *New Grove*, quotes him as saying "My imagination works well within a fixed structure. . . . The more stringent it is, the more freedom I have to go down into detail. Form and freedom: perhaps much of my music has been an attempt to bring the two worlds together" (Anders Beyer, "Abrahamsen, Hans," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2d ed. [London: Macmillan, 2001], 1:31). The work is described as ten canons for nine instruments, paired into five groups with three short intermezzi, where Abrahamsen brilliantly composes a forum for the winds and strings to tune their instruments microtonally so that, as he states in the liner notes of Ensemble Recherche's brilliant performance of the piece (Winter & Winter 910 159-2 [2009], CD), "an ever greater tonal interference arises between groups and pairs of instruments" (p. [5]). Various canonic processes and thematic relationships are widespread throughout the five sets of canons. The composer says in the program notes found on Wilhelm Hansen's Web site that the five pairs of canons are "like a painting in two versions, but with different colors" (http://en.ewh.dk/Default.aspx?TabId=2448&State_2953=2&workId_2953=34990, accessed 15 May 2013). He also states, again from the liner notes of Winter & Winter's recording, that he was attempting to create a "three-dimensional time" and that "they are like two big musical pictures which, heard with distant, unfocused ears, may produce a third, three-dimensional picture" (p. [4]). Another interesting aspect of the piece's form is the five sets of canons gradually diminish in length from eighteen minutes in the first set to two minutes in the last, so that a crystallization of sorts occurs and "finally, time runs out, just as that of our lives runs ever faster to its end" (p. [4]).

Despite all of the piece's complexities, listening to the Ensemble Recherche recording is an entrancing, exciting, and meditative experience that conjures fascinating imagery of, as the title suggests, snow and its many variations. One would never expect to find the exacting rhythms and complex ideas contained within; it would be easy for someone, regardless of musical background, to find some aesthetic reward from listening to this piece. The fascinating thing in this music is how

Abrahamsen is able to produce beautiful, moving music that creates simple imagery while, in reality, it is a complex construction of various elements that might be perceived by the listener only on a subconscious level. The published score is a large spiral-bound tome that is expertly printed and easy to read. Only two very minor production errors were found in the copy sent for review: the spiral collides with the staff labels on page 31, and there are unnecessary blank pages between pages 171 and 172. If I could add anything to this score, it would be extensive program notes, which would certainly help aid study and performance. This work has the potential to find its way into the standard chamber repertoire, and the score is highly recommended for libraries.

Shortly before or during the start of the composition of *Schnee*, Abrahamsen composed *Air* for accordion, a short, four-movement piece that includes music resembling folk melodies, as well as sustained, contrapuntal textures. Two years later, in 2008, shortly after or during the end of the composition of *Schnee,* Abrahamsen arranged *Air* for string quartet, retitling it String Quartet No. 3. The accordion work is well adapted for string quartet. (Elsewhere, as in his *Three Little Nocturnes* [2005], Abrahamsen has written for the accordion and string quartet together, an instrumental combination quite popular in the contemporary music world.) As with *Schnee*, the rhythms are meticulously notated to achieve an exacting effect in tempo and counterpoint, yet come across as a cascading and serene meditation. The piece represents Abrahamsen's recent music well, but lacks the scope and many intricacies found in *Schnee* and the Double Concerto. The published score is sewn and printed in an adequate size. As with *Schnee*, program notes in the score would be preferred; however, very brief notes can be found at the publisher's Web site (http://en.ewh.dk/Default.aspx?TabId=2448&State_2953=2&workId_2953=36682, accessed 15 May 2013).

Arranging and reworking his own compositions is nothing new to Abrahamsen, particularly of late. In addition to converting *Air* into String Quartet No. 3, the composer has also recently arranged Debussy's *Children's Corner* for orchestra, Nielsen's Symphony No. 6 for eighteen instruments, as well as his own String Quartet No. 1 "Ten Preludes" (1973) into *Ten Sinfonias* for string orchestra (2010), and created a new version of 1992's *Herbstlied* for English horn, string trio, and piano. A work that Abrahamsen has arranged more than once is the *Ten Studies* for piano (1984). That same year, six of these studies were arranged for violin, horn, and piano—retitled *Six Pieces*—to accompany Ligeti's Horn Trio in concert. Twenty years later, in 2004, the composer arranged four of them as *Four Pieces* for orchestra, and in 2009 he arranged the *Six Pieces* into *Traumlieder* for piano trio. It is not much of an arrangement; other than the new title, and converting the horn part so that it may be played by the cello, the work is identical to *Six Pieces*. Alternate instrumentations are done all the time by composers and music publishers, but the curious thing about this instance is the new title. Usually, when works are retitled, significant changes, additions, or reorchestrations occur; however, that is not the case here. Furthermore, Abrahamsen and the publisher do not provide any insight as to the title change on either the publisher's Web site or in the score. The piece is reminiscent, as it should be, of the composer's music from the early 1980s, crafting images and environments. But what makes this piece new is the distinctive title, providing listeners with more information to interpret the composer's desired representation of the movements, thus enhancing (or altering) the experience. The spiral-bound score is expertly printed and includes two large, well-hinged parts.

The title of the most recent piece reviewed here, Double Concerto for violin, piano, and string orchestra (2010–11), raised particular expectations for this reviewer, just as the titles *Traumlieder* and *Schnee* did. But unlike them, the title Double Concerto prompted notions of flashy displays of virtuosity from the soloists, as many concertos do. While the piece certainly requires virtuosity and independence not only from the soloists but from the orchestra as well, it is a lush, refined, and gorgeous piece of music. Formally, it is a rigorous, highly-structured score of four movements (slow–fast–slow–fast) lasting about twenty minutes. The slow movements are never stagnant nor are the

fast movements agitated; instead, there is a seemingly continuous flow of motion whose meticulously notated textures drift in the listener's mind. The paradox in Abrahamsen's music—the feeling of simplicity on the outside to the listener, yet complexity inside the score that we have seen in these recent pieces—is what defines his musical style in this reviewer's opinion. It is an outcome that I believe has been sought after by composers for years. I eagerly await his newest pieces to date—last year's String Quartet No. 4, and *In memoriam Luigi Nono* for piano; and this year's song cycle for soprano and orchestra based on a novel by Peter Griffiths, *Let Me Tell You*.

Since Abrahamsen has become so successful at nurturing his personal style, he is now one of the most distinctive composers working in Denmark, if not the world, which is why all of his published scores from all periods of his interesting career are highly recommended for music libraries. This can also be said about many of his contemporaries mentioned earlier, most of whom are also published by Wilhelm Hansen. The Danes are transcending their homeland and regularly finding their way into concert halls across the world. It is possible that the old idea of one champion of Danish music per generation has been outgrown, given the current sizable group of significant composers. As evidenced, at least in part, in this review, Denmark's musical reputation and future generations are in good hands with Abrahamsen and his contemporaries.

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