

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

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Introduction

Between 1991 and 1999, 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 leading to a new stylistic period, one built upon the foundations of his first period but extended beyond it to new 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 Simplicity" movement. This movement was largely a reaction against Darmstadt

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

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 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) initiating 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 returned to previous works in two ways: arranging a work for a larger ensemble or using a 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)

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

³BWV 1072-1078

for orchestral forces in *Four Pieces for Orchestra* (2004) and the final movement of the *Piano Concerto*, respectively. On the other hand, *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 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* and *Wald* 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. The passing of material

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

⁵Abrahamsen, "*Wald*" Program note.

⁶Ibid. Program note.

around ensemble figures prominently throughout the work, and Abrahamsen controls this 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"⁷ to *Schnee*? Is *Wald* related 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 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 the first movement, as it contains the majority of the common material and has connections to the additional movements in the work. Part three will consist of a detailed analysis of the introduction and seven variations in *Wald*. The focus will be on the way

⁷Ibid. Program note.

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).

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 is limited to his earlier career from the 1970s and 1980s.⁸ 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."

⁸Rasmussen, *Noteworthy Danes*.
White, *New Music of the Nordic Countries*.

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