

# Reuse and Variation in Hans Abrahamsen's *Wald*

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## Introduction

Beginning at the age of thirty-seven between 1988 and 1998, Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen took an extended break from composing. This period of reflection, contemplation, and private work came after professional success in the late 1970s and 1980s. A precocious young composer and prominent figure of the Danish “New Simplicity” movement, he had written a confident body of work by 27. These early works like *Stratifications* (1975), *Winternacht* (1976-78), and *Walden* (1978) blended the clarity of expression and concise use of musical material associated with “New Simplicity” along with elements of neo-classicism, neo-romanticism, and collage-like polystylism. The success of these works lead to commissions from the Berlin Philharmonic<sup>1</sup> and the London Sinfonietta<sup>2</sup> in the 1980s.

Yet despite these high profile commissions or perhaps due to them, Abrahamsen found it increasingly difficult to compose saying “I couldn’t find the way to make what I wanted” and that he was “paralyzed by the white paper.”<sup>3</sup> “He felt that his music had become so complex that he no longer had the tools to create what he

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<sup>1</sup>*Nacht und Trompeten* (1981)

<sup>2</sup>*Märchenbilder* (1984) and *Lied in Fall* (1987)

<sup>3</sup>Robin, “Hans Abrahamsen: Fame and Snow Falling on a Composer.”

tried to imagine.”<sup>4</sup> While he stopped producing new work, he did not stop working, and throughout this period, which he calls the “fermata” of his compositional life, he focused on arranging and orchestrating both other composers’ works as well as his own earlier pieces. Abrahamsen arranged works by Bach, Ives, Nielsen, Nørgård, and Ravel for ensembles ranging in size from woodwind quintet to chamber orchestra, and for his own work, he made different orchestrations of the woodwind quintet *Walden* and septet *Winternacht*.

Abrahamsen emerged from this period of writer’s block with his *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1999-2000), which was commissioned by the BIT-20 Ensemble and composed for his wife, pianist Anne Marie Abildskov. In this four movement work, Abrahamsen draws upon musical material from his earlier pieces, most notably in the last movement where he arranges the eighth movement (*Rivière d’oubli*) of his *Ten Studies for Piano*. The *Concerto* also contains references to music by other composers through descriptive indications such as “Wie Mahler!” and “Hommage à Ligeti.”

These two characteristics, returning to earlier music and referencing other composers’ work, has become a hallmark of Abrahamsen’s style in this “post-fermata” period. *Four Pieces for Orchestra* (2004) is an arrangement and development of the first four movements of *Ten Studies for Piano* and references “post-Wagnerian orchestral repertoire, from Bruckner to early Schoenberg and Anton Webern.”<sup>5</sup> His nearly hour-long chamber work *Schnee* (2006-08) is based upon the opening of Bach’s *Contrapuntus I* and also references *Winternacht*. *Air* (2006) for solo accordion is a twin to *Canzone* (1978), his first work for accordion, and this material was used as the basis for *String Quartet No. 3* (2008).

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<sup>4</sup>ibid.,

<sup>5</sup>Johnson, “*Fire Stykker for Orkester*.”

In addition to these referential qualities, Abrahamsen began to incorporate new techniques in rhythm, timbre, and ensemble layout into his compositional language. The *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* features frequent changes of meter and complex polyrhythms, as well as microtonal inflections in the woodwinds and “natural” French horn. The nine musicians of *Schnee* are symmetrically organized in a semi-circle with three woodwinds and piano on one side, three strings and piano on the other, and a percussionist in the center. Its overall form involves ten canons interspersed with three intermezzi during which various combinations of the woodwinds and strings gradually detune their instruments by a quarter tone over the course of the work.

### **include repeat signs and repeating material in new techniques**

One piece that contains all of these “post-fermata” elements (material from an older work, references to another composer’s music, complex meters, microtonality, and symmetrical ensemble layout) is Abrahamsen’s *Wald* (2008-09). The 18-minute work was jointly commissioned by ASKO Schönberg and the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and is scored for a large ensemble with novel doublings, among them bass flute and bass trumpet. *Wald* is a set of seven variations based on the beginning of Abrahamsen’s 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:

*Wald* is a twin piece to *Walden*, but also to my former piece *Schnee*.

In *Walden* I borrowed the title from the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who, in the middle of the nineteenth century, in a little wooden hermit house at the bank of the lake Walden pond, wrote the book

*Walden* of his life and time in the forests. Here he experimented living for two years in order to come closer to nature and to see if it was possible to live simply without all the unnecessary needs created by society. ... In my piece *Walden*, I tried to search for the same simplicity, handling the most simple material, but at the same time trying not to lose the poetry.

Robert Schumann wrote in 1848-49 a wonderful piano piece, *Waldszenen*. He wrote this collection of short pieces with beautiful titles like “Einsame Blumen,” “Vogel als Prophet,” and also “Jäger auf der Lauer,” just a few years before Thoreau wrote his book *Walden*. For them the forest is the magical romantic place that gives a spiritual insight to man, but also from where we get our food through hunting. For me the forest still has this magical quality and *Wald* has scenes with a hunting horn that calls (I many years ago played the magical “Waldhorn” and remember playing in the forest near my home), flocks of birds that when agitated take off, and there is also the sense of a hunt followed by galloping horses.<sup>6</sup>

**closing statement on Wald**

## Scope and Methodology

This dissertation has two goals. The principle goal is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of *Wald* focusing on the compositional techniques characteristic of Abrahamsen’s “post-fermata” music. This analysis will address each variation and identify pitch and rhythmic structures, the use of the ensemble’s symmetrical layout, and how Abrahamsen develops and varies the musical material across the work. The second goal is to examine *Wald*’s relationship to other music 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**

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<sup>6</sup>Abrahamsen, “*Wald*.”

- 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.

## Summary of State of Research

Hans Abrahamsen is a composer who has been relatively unknown outside of Europe until recently. His international profile expanded significantly after the composition of *Schnee* and more recently with the premiere of *let me tell you* (2014) by the Berlin Philharmonic. The Cleveland Orchestra's recent tour of this piece, accompanied by profiles of his career in the New York Times and **somewhere else**, as well as its awarding of the 2016 Grawemeyer Prize has brought further attention to his work in the United States.

Despite this, very 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup>Rasmussen, *Noteworthy Danes*  
White, *New Music of the Nordic Countries*.

to knowledge on the music since his compositional “fermata.”

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