

Reuse and Variation in Hans Abrahamsen's *Wald*

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Introduction

At the age of thirty-seven, Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen took an extended break from composing between 1988 and 1998. This period of reflection, contemplation, and private work came after professional success in the late 1970s and 1980s. A precocious young composer, he had written a confident body of work by 27, works predominantly associated with the Danish “New Simplicity” movement, of which he was a prominent figure. 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 the “New Simplicity” style along with elements of neo-classicism, neo-romanticism, and collage-like polystylism. The success of these works lead to a commission from the Berlin Philharmonic¹ and two from the London Sinfonietta² 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.”³ “He felt that his music

¹*Nacht und Trompeten* (1981)

²*Märchenbilder* (1984) and *Lied in Fall* (1987)

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

had become so complex that he no longer had the tools to create what he tried to imagine.”⁴ 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. This process of revisiting other music extended to his own work, evident through different orchestrations of his woodwind quintet *Walden* and his septet *Winternacht*.

His emergence from this period of writer’s block began 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 work, the musical material is clearly drawn from his earlier pieces, most notably in the fourth movement where he arranges the eighth movement (*Rivière d’oubli*) of his *Ten Studies* for piano.

something about the piano concerto’s style

Each work “post fermata” has shown an immense focus on the reuse of musical material from earlier works. Additional new techniques like microtonal sonorities and the spatial layout of ensembles have become significant aspects of his compositional language.

Walden is a four-movement work for wind quintet composed in 1978 and commissioned by the Funen Wind Quintet. The title of the 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.”⁵ Abrahamsen’s piece reflects on this experiment and indicates in his

⁴ibid.,

⁵Abrahamsen, “*Walden*.”

program note:

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).⁶

details on Wald

Wald is, in a way, a series of variations from the beginning of my woodwind quintet Walden (1978). This thematical idea is very simple - a rising call of a fourth and the response in other voices. This idea is repeated several times, but because the call has a slower pulse than the responses, the process leads to them changing order.

In Walden I borrowed the title from the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who, in the middle of the eighteenth 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. The book is filled with poetry, but is also cutting and critical of 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.

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

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.⁷

⁶Ibid.

⁷Abrahamsen, “*Wald*.”

Scope and Methodology

Summary of State of Research

Bibliography

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