Something Amiss with the Fairies. Gavin Thomas on the Elusive Music of Hans Abrahamsen

SOMETHING AMISS WITH THE FAIRIES

Forests, fairies and found objects... Gavin Thomas introduces the elusive music of Hans Abrahamsen

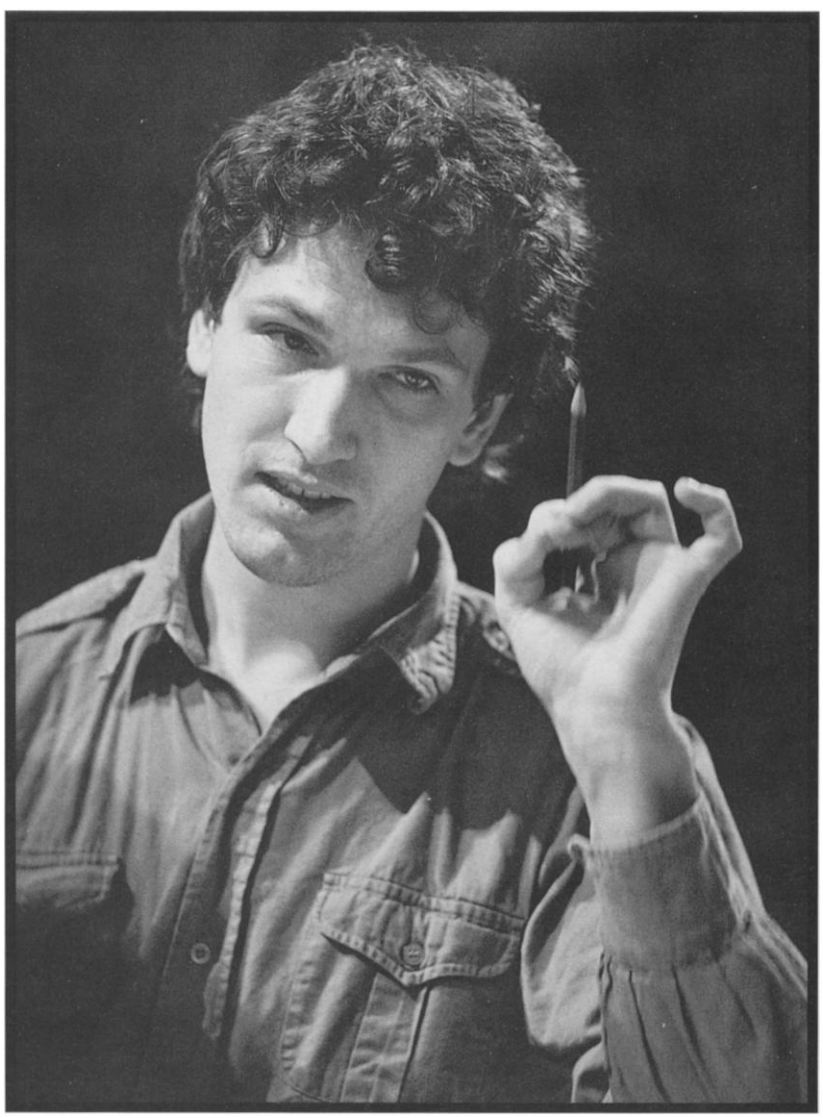


Photo: Malcolm Crowthers

Despite government initiatives and the best efforts of consumer organisations, the accuracy of the labels affixed to our musical products remains disappointingly vague. Overstocked shelves offer us the New Complexity, the New Simplicity, the New Romanticism, the New Objectivity, the New Subjectivity (the ad-man's 'new' concealing the fact that most of the products on display have long since passed their sell-by date; the offered substances, like our ubiquitous E numbers, rarely delivering the anticipated degree of ecstasy). And naturally, as in any hypermarket, each brand name makes extravagant claims about its unique ability to remove those nasty 20th-century stains.

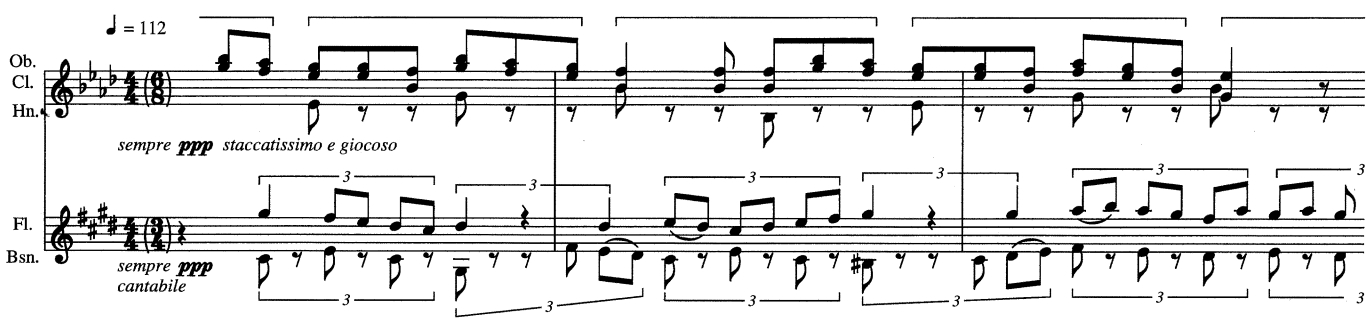
So it is with the New Simplicity (which is neither particularly new nor especially simple), a name which suggests an eco-friendly deodorant guaranteed to suppress the rank odours of unwashed modernists, or perhaps a hairspray strong enough to secure one's tresses even in the high winds of contemporary uncertainties; a brand of reactionary utopianism ill-equipped for 20th-century existence. And indeed the titles of the works of Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen, the movement's most distinguished protégé, would seem to bear this out: *Winternacht* ('Winter night'), *Flowersongs*, *Märchenbilder* ('Fairy tales'), *Nacht und Trompeten* ('Night and trumpets').[1] The names evoke the land of once upon a time, music of escape and withdrawal. As the composer writes of his wind quintet *Walden* (inspired by Henry Thoreau's novel describing two years of reclusive woodland life):

> His stay there was an experiment, an attempt to strip away all the artificial needs imposed by society and rediscover man's lost unity with Nature. In that particular sense his novel is a documentation of social inadequacy and a work of poetry (Utopia) as well.

Nature, utopia, social inadequacy – here, it seems, are all the ingredients of a heady escapist fantasy, and a fantasy, it might initially appear, which is borne out by Abrahamsen's music itself. The nostalgic penumbra which clings to the hauntingly beautiful last movement of *Winternacht*, for example, with its elfin horn fanfares, heard as though from a great distance and counterpointed against a folksy violin melody, might at first seem the work of an artist happier with the flickering halflights of an Ardenesque forest than with the neon illuminations of the contemporary megalopolis.

And yet there is something strangely amiss with Abrahamsen's woodland fairies: the horn is in the wrong key, the violin in the wrong time signature, while the abrupt silences which periodically interrupt the music's progress suggest not so much a brief shift in the direction of the nocturnal breezes as the hallucinogenic gaps of a malfunctioning memory. This is music of magical illusion; but illusion nonetheless. And when at the end of the movement Abrahamsen, in a characteristic gesture of annihilation, dissolves the rocking E minor accompaniment into a succession of repeated tone clusters which then fade, leaving a few staccato scraps to tick away mechanically into the silence, the nature of the illusion is made clear: the past exists, but its existence cannot conceal its difference; and the closer to it we approach, the more of a chimera it appears.

In fact, the magical illusions of *Winternacht* (of which more later) represent a moment of extreme subjectivity in Abrahamsen's work. To return, for a moment, to the beginning of his career is to discover a composer whose early music, far from evoking such ghostly utopias, describes an altogether more neutral encounter with the encyclopedia of musical styles. The New Simplicity (let us accept the label, despite its rather dog-eared condition), a movement associated with Danish composers such as Karl-Auge Rasmussen and Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, began, as did so many recent musical developments, in opposition to the Darmstadt hegemony (indeed as we approach the year 2000 it is beginning to seem that the history of western art music over the last half-century could be written largely in terms of the various reactions to total serialism). The work of composers such as Rasmussen and Holmgreen attempted, as indeed did every anti-Darmstadt movement, to 'simplify' (at least in a literal sense) material and technique, to establish a perceptible sense of form and to evolve a new relationship with past musical styles and objects. Nothing particularly new here, of course; all this could equally well describe any of the string of neo-classicising movement which have been so striking a feature of music over the past century and beyond. What perhaps best characterises the New Simplicity of early Abrahamsen (and also Rasmussen) is not the ironised salvage of historical ways of speaking and their reassimilation into a new language so much as an almost polemic sense of historical open-endedness and stylistic disunity.[2] New Simplicity is not a style, but an attitude towards style, and its subject matter is defined not by its simplicity (it *may* be simple, but it may also be dense, dissonant and entirely 'modern'), but by its *distance*. It's an aesthetic which has a tendency to take whatever is familiar and to hand and turn it on its head; the musical equivalent of sleeping in the bath, boiling water in the fridge or keeping flowers in the lavatory, an approach which can be seen in three of Abrahamsen's earliest works, the provocatively titled *Symphony in C* of 1972 and *Symphony no.1* of 1974 (the word 'symphony' should be read in italics), and the further orchestral work *Stratifications* of 1973-75. The first movement of the *Symphony no.1*, for instance, is constructed entirely out of outrageously bald, and harmonically meaningless, juxtapositions of E minor and D major, cast in an entirely superfluous sonata form which has no harmonic motivation or dynamic but which acts simply as a kind of musical frame. The surface of such music may simulate, at a very superficial level, classical archetypes, but the way in which such material is manipulated emphasises its otherness; as though the music were being composed entirely in quotation marks. What is important in the material of such music is not the musical 'subject' (which is to imply subject*ive*) as a cipher of the composer's ego but the subject as object, the way in which it is manipulated, it three-dimensionality.[3] Thus, the G major/minor tonality which opens *Stratifications* has neither cultural resonance nor emotive colouring – it's simply a particular type of sonority; neutral source material which is subjected to a series of abstract transformational procedures which owe a great deal to the canonic processes of works such as Ligeti's *Atmosphères* and very little to functional tonality or past styles. It sets in motion a slowly evolving series of processes whereby the familiar, whether the perky little B major trumpet theme at letter B or the repeated D major dyads at letter C, is gradually swallowed up by Abrahamsen's compositional machinations, general-



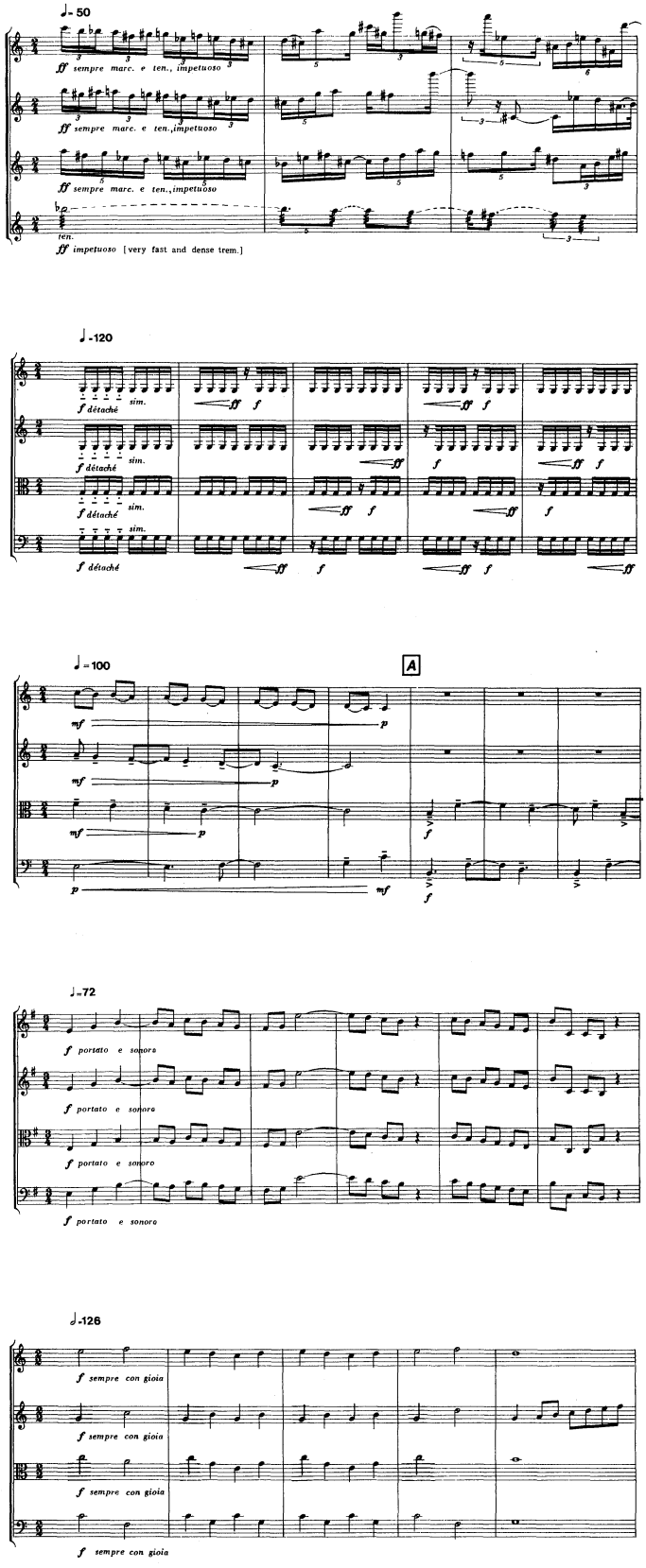
Ex 1: NOT SO SIMPLE: the opening of the finale of *Walden*, showing superimposed folk tunes, one in E*b* major, 6/8, dotted crotchet equals 74.6, the other in C# minor, 3/4, crotchet equals 168. The entire movement consists entirely of this texture, lasts about a minute, is played *ppp* throughout and stops suddenly at the end like a music box cutting out. © Wilhelm Hansen and reproduced by permission

ly reaching a point of maximum rhythmic and harmonic saturation before a new process is set in motion. It is, for all its airy and colourful textures and passing tonal references, an essentially subversive and anti-historical piece; a way of dealing with the past which suggests not so much the desire to preserve it as the wish to kill it off completely; to strip it of all inherited meaning and inscribe it into a context in which it is systematically pulverised.

Stratifications and *Symphony no.1* represent one possible way of working with the past whilst divesting it of its acquired subjective meanings, but the way in which the historical *donnés* are absorbed into the musical fabric ensures that in both works the overall sense of stylistic integrity and formal logic are never in doubt. That the investigation of history-as-object could take on an altogether more extreme aspect is shown by what is probably Abrahamsen's most celebrated early work, the First String Quartet, *Preludes*. Here the *objets (re)trouvés* are not swallowed up into a homogenous whole but projected starkly and in all their irreconcilable contradictions on to the surface of the piece. Each of the ten short movements presents a different leaf from the musical encyclopedia, opening with micropolyphonic corruscations *à la* Ligeti, finishing with a sprightly C major baroque overture, and leading between-times through the obsessively reiterated Gs of the second movement, the white-note cadential patterns of the fourth, the G major galop with wrong-note accompaniment of the seventh, to the unison E minor melody of the ninth (Ex.2). There *are* unifying factors, such as the constant emphasis on the note G and the pervasive, indeed almost thematic, use of semiquavers repeated on the same note, but what most strikes one about the work is its irreducible urge towards open-endedness and disunity.

Clearly, such a piece throws overboard the whole notion of The Work as something unified and defined by a dominant style; in the First Quartet there is no Style, only styles. But this is not the nostalgic evocation of lost musical paradises within an alien 20th-century, nor the quasi-ironic reformulation of classical ideals into a new neo-classical musical language, nor a form of cultural commentary; rather, its mute presentation of unrelated cultural artefacts offers a sort of museum form, an anthology of musics arranged in (to̅ use Rasmussen's phrase, 'not-previously-heard-contexts'), with the composer as curator. And by removing them from their intended contexts and putting them side by side, Abrahamsen also destroys what meaning they originally had, just as any object placed in a museum (a pot, for instance) will immediately acquire a new function (no longer a common household utensil but an object of archeological enquiry).

There are, however, distinct limits to the anthologising fervour of the First Quartet – indeed it's a piece which might be seen as much as an aesthetic provocation as it is a finished work of art – while the abstract and rather schematic transformational procedures of *Stratifications* seem to have proved a starting point rather than an end in themselves. What happens next in Abrahamsen's work is in a way totally unexpected. It involves, crucially, the rediscovery of the subjective; the intervention in and spontaneous shaping of the work rather than the objective classification of stylistic phenomena. Works such as *Winternacht* and *Walden* move far beyond either the stylistic 'cool' of *Stratifications* or the barefaced juxtapositions of the quartet to an infinitely more subtle play on style and procedure. This is music of allusion and illu-

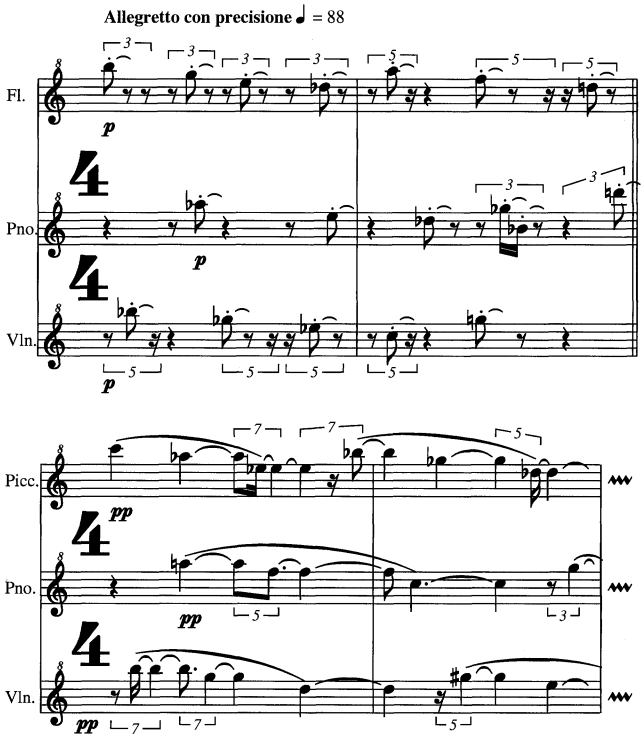


EX.2 ARTEFACTS FROM THE MUSICAL MUSEUM: DETAILS FROM MOVEMENTS 1, 2, 4, 9 AND 10 OF ABRAHAMSEN'S *PRELUDES* © Wilhelm Hansen and reproduced by permission

sion, full of a wonderful sense of fantastic poetry and mercurial humour, one whose richness depends partly on a relation to the past which is now much more oblique; the discovered objects are buried, like a deep underground river which shapes the music whilst only occasionally rising to the surface. The triadic tickings which open *Winternacht*, for example (Ex.3a), are so jumbled up as to be virtually unrecognisable for what they are, while the allusive horn call with which *Walden* begins is so thoroughly absorbed into the floating diatonic counterpoint which surrounds it that it is only at a second or third hearing that one recognises it for the coded message from the past which it is.

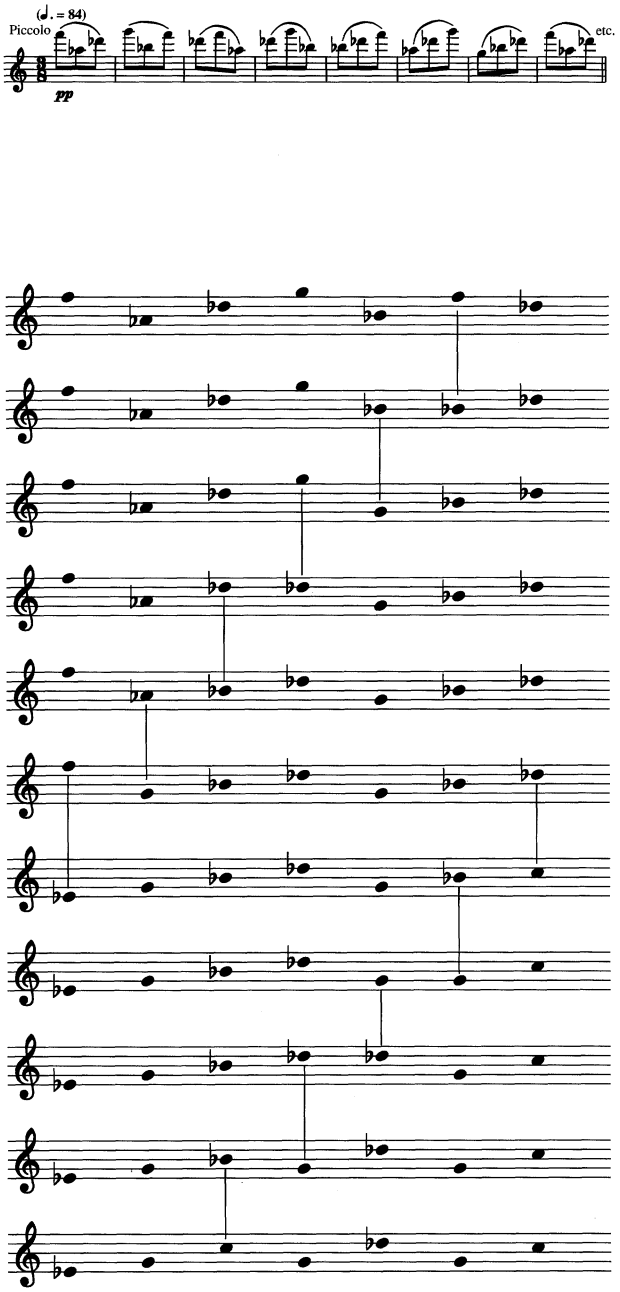
But it's not just the game of stylistic hide-and-seek which creates the mysterious atmospherics of a work like *Winternacht*, and it's a mystery which goes deeper than the alluringly seductive surface, the deliciously shadowy instrumentation and cute neo-tonal materials, although these are the things which are most obviously and immediately captivating about the work. The deceptively 'easy' surface imagery is organised according to an elliptical and elusive (illusive, allusive...) formal method which stresses not logical connectedness but half-graspable correspondences. It's all the more surprising given that the deterministic unfolding of *Stratifications* was one of its most characteristic features, but while the concretist musical procedures of Abrahamsen's earlier works succeed in establishing an admirably logical and tangible progression of events – as triads turn into clusters, canons go progressively out of synch, rhythms gradually accelerate, registers shift from high to low, or whatever – they bring with them a sense of predictability; the feeling of machines which, once set in motion, must be left to run their course. In *Walden* and *Winternacht*, by contrast, procedures are suddenly cut off, apparently unrelated ideas are thrown abruptly to the surface. It's almost as though the stylistic breakdown of the First Quartet had resulted in a consequent formal disintegration, but although *Walden* and *Winternacht* share the quartet's succession of short movements, the way in which material migrates within and between movements creates another field of illusion. It's as if the music is, in some strange way, larger on the inside than on the outside, and if this all sounds a trifle fanciful then one should at least note the dedication of the second movement of *Winternacht* to that master of visual illusion, MC Escher. That this dedication represents more than mere lip-service should be suggested by the appearance half way through this same movement in flute, violin and piano of what may (but equally may not) be a distant variation of the opening of the first movement (Ex.3). This sudden, unexplained *mise en scène* opens up an Escher-like fissure in the music, an alternative plane of perception whose vertiginous scale seems out of all proportion to the apparently small music it inhabits. The relation between musics A and B is never explained (and of course to explain an illusion is also to destroy it), and, in a narrative sense, neither A nor B do anything, go anywhere, 'mean' anything; they're simply images in a potentially infinitely reflecting hall of mirrors.

Winternacht is a perfect but perhaps unrepeatable jewel of a piece, and it's a mark of Abrahamsen's integrity that whenever he has exhausted the possibilities of one approach he has immediately gone on to try something new. What neither *Walden* nor *Winternacht* have, by their very nature, is a sustained sense of large-scale motion and development; indeed they're works which might suggest that Abrahamsen is essentially a miniaturist, and



EX.3 MISE EN SCENE: TWO MOMENTS FROM *WINTERNACHT* (MOV.1, BB.1–2 AND MOV.2, BB.28–29) © Wilhelm Hansen and reproduced by permission

his next two major works, the orchestral piece *Nacht und Trompeten* and the Second Quartet, both attempt to answer the question of how, once again, to write 'big' music. *Nacht und Trompeten* is something of a crossroads piece, opening with material reworked from the last movement of *Winternacht* (that same lilting E minor melody plus distant horn calls, now wrapped up in a thick orchestral fog), later developing into the thumping toccata which also appears in the Second Quartet. It's a work of many magical moments, but the large-scale attempt to compose out material which had remained residual in Winternacht seems curiously self-defeating. Those enigmatic silences are gradually filled in with *piano* tam-tam strokes, while the E minor folk tune is developed into a grand apotheosis in E major in which the standard rhetoric of orchestral romanticism is just a little too close to the surface. Likewise, the toccata into which the piece climaxes is a disappointingly obvious way of resolving the discontinuities implicit in the work's material. In the Second Quartet also there's a feeling that Abrahamsen is trying to extract greater mileage from his ideas. It's a notably dissonant and aggressive piece, almost as if Abrahamsen had decided to start writing 'real' music: to link, develop, and to write in a markedly more 'contemporary' idiom, though it all sounds a little impersonal, veering (the faltering lyricism of the third movement excepted) between declamatory chromatic recitatives, chunky toccatas and Ligetian swirlings. It demonstrates the dilemma of a composer who has perfected a highly personal identity and then attempted to move beyond the confines of that style, and in the light of preceding and subsequent works (and by the temporary hiatus in the Abrahamsen catalogue for the two years following the Second Quartet), it could almost be seen as a point of crisis.[4]

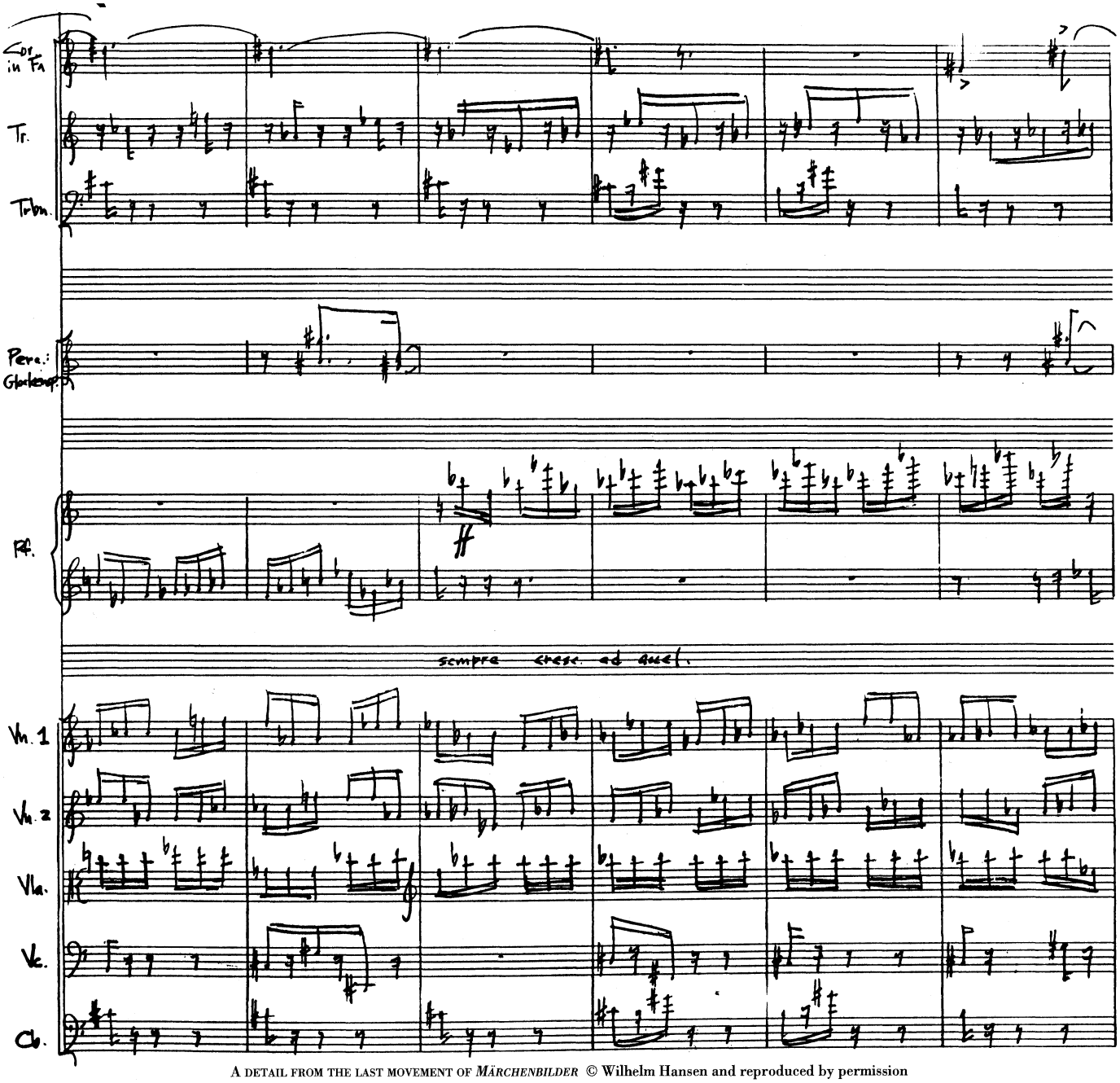


EX.4 A PERMUTATIONAL SCHEME FROM *MÄRCHENBILDER*, WITH RESULTANT PICCOLO LINE © Wilhelm Hansen and reproduced by permission

In fact the moment of crisis (if indeed it really was that) resolved in Abrahamsen's mercurial London Sinfoniettta piece, *Märchenbilder*. It's a virtuoso performance: three dazzling movements which fizz along, generally at a breakneck pace, like some latter-day Iolanthe on speed. Here the rather severe persona of the Second Quartet has given way once more to the magical and supernatural evocations of *Winternacht*. There's a quality of artful naivety in these bright, almost toy-like instrumental tales; a kind of wide-eyed innocence and an aura of almost Schumannesque picture-painting, whether in the kaledoscopic ostinatos and scalic patterns of the first movement, with its angular, menacing (in a Hans Christian Anderson sort of way) secondary subject marked *grotesco*, the miniature march of the second or the brilliant *moto perpetuo* diatonic figuration of the third.

Compared to *Winternacht* not only are there about five times as many notes per second, but there's also a real and breathless sense of development and large-scale form. Beneath the dazzling pyrotechnics of the last movement lies an isorhythmic scheme of mathematical exactitude. The simple surface pattern of alternating scherzo and two trios conceals a slowly evolving wind melody based on an ascending/descending set of proportions (2/3/4/5/4/3/2), each of which is allotted an intervallic character (descending scale for 5s, seventh chord for 4s, fourths/tritones for 3s, etc.). First stated in dotted quavers (i.e. so that proportion 2 equals a dotted crotchet, 3 equals a minim plus semiquaver, etc.), the rhythmic durations are progressively augmented until by the end of the movement they have grown to a double dotted minim (i.e. proportion 2 equals semibreve plus dotted crotchet).[5] This long-term deceleration underlies one aspect of the music, but the way in which the surrounding toccata figuration is composed is no less artful. The piccolo line of the second trio, for instance, is composed by taking a seven-note ostinato transformed a note at a time according to the scheme shown in Ex.4. The resulting note sequence is then written into 3/8 so that, with its contradictory internal and external metres, plus registeral shifts, its origin can be sensed without being fully heard. In other places the game becomes even more obscure. In the piano part at letter D, for instance, the left hand plays a fixed 18-note ostinato while the right plays an eight-note ostinato derived from the same process shown in Ex.4, while at the beginning of the movement the piano/string ostinato appears to be based on a freely permutating and transforming five-note cell. Such procedures are, in essence, hardly different to the concretist techniques of *Stratifications*, but they are executed with such speed and fluidity – sometimes absolutely strictly, sometimes more freely, sometimes cut off in mid-flight – and applied to diatonic material which is at once neutral and allusive, so that the whirlwind sense of motion and progression sounds neither mechanically formulaic nor stylistically rooted.

Märchenbilder is the perfect balancing act of a composer whose entire work has been played out in the interstices of styles and methods. Where previous works had seemed to veer now towards the abstract, process-led, now towards the overt play on style, *Märchenbilder* achieves so perfect a marriage of method and material as to absorb its influences completely and to appear entirely personal. The precision, clarity and originality of such a world was, however, something of a last word. Another London Sinfonietta commission, the miniature cello concerto *Lied in fall*, followed. This beautiful and expansive work preserves the same sense of allusive neutrality – allusive in its long-spun melodic lines and ceaselessly reiterated falling phrases; neutral in that such generic motives are absorbed into a thoroughly personal idiom – though without ever quite matching the brilliance and inventiveness of *Märchenbilder*. Another piece for cello, the solo work *Storm and still*, subsequently appeared in 1989, followed by arrangements of works by Nielsen, Ravel and Satie, since when Abrahamsen has failed to produce a single original work. One can only admire the honesty of his refusal to write music which has lost its motivating sources and hope that this particular crisis will eventually pass, because with Hans Abrahamsen in charge, who knows what the fairies will get up to next.



A DETAIL FROM THE LAST MOVEMENT OF *MÄRCHENBILDER* © Wilhelm Hansen and reproduced by permission

Notes

1 Himself a child of a winter's night, Abrahamsen was born on 23 December 1952 in Kongens Lyngby, near Copenhagen. He initially studied horn at the Royal Danish Conservatory and subsequently undertook composition studies with Per Nørgard and Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen. He first came to prominence with his First String Quartet, *Preludes*, and then to widespread international attention with *Nacht und Trompetten*, first performed in 1981 by the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Hans Werner Henze. **2** The last movement of Rasmussen's *Parts apart*, for instance, is a kind of three-layered stylistic play, with Rasmussen's commentary on Stravinsky's commentary on Bach: (Stravinsky's) neoclassical pastiche is accompanied by (Rasmussen's) shouts, foot stampings and motor horns. The work ends with a final cadence which is not played but collectively exhaled by the members of the ensemble. **3** The way in which objects and transformed in the music of New Simplicity is often referred to as 'concretist', a term borrowed from the visual arts. **4** Although for a completely contrary view of the Second Quartet see Henk Maarten's's entry on Abrahamsen in the *St James Dictionary of Composers*. **5** The construction of this melody is also reminiscent of recent works by Ligeti, even perhaps down to the similarity between the constantly falling melodic contour of Abrahamsen's wind line and the similarly descending melodic outline of Ligeti's piano etude 'Autumn in Warsaw'. Indeed the influence of the Hungarian composer is strikingly evident throughout Abrahamsen's work, whether in the mutual fascination with Escher or in the continual employment of micropolyphonic techniques. The Ligetian influence can sometimes sound disconcertingly obvious, as at the beginnings of the third movement of *Walden* or the second movement of *Winternacht*, the only apparent difference being that where Ligeti's textures tend toward the chromatic, Abrahamsen's tend towards the diatonic. The influence continues unabated in *Märchenbilder* – the very first bars, for instance, recall the opening upward flourishes of *Melodien*, while the wailing chromatic descents which concludes the second movement are another Ligetian fingerprint. But what is new in *Märchenbilder* is the sense that Abrahamsen has at last fully absorbed Ligeti's example, so that the music suggests two composers sharing a common working practice rather than an unresolved compositional debt.