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Processes, Paradoxes and Illusions:

Compositional strategies in the music of Hans Abrahamsen

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Abstract

Hans Abrahamsen's recent music has been the subject of much critical and public acclaim, with his output of the last decade finding a new directness of expression even as it incorporates and develops elements of his musical language that have remained consistent over many years. This article examines the use of compositional processes within a number of these large-scale works – *Schnee* (2008), *Wald* (2009), Double Concerto (2011) and *Let me tell you* (2013) – and explores the ways in which Abrahamsen generates and controls material through a variety of techniques of transformation and repetition. How smaller-scale systems interact to create music of great allusive complexity is considered through discussion of the variation form of *Wald*; finally, Abrahamsen's embracing of types of paradox and illusion are presented as strategies to unlock broader aesthetic issues within his music.

Keywords

Abrahamsen, processes, transformations, doubles, paradoxes, illusions

Processes, Paradoxes and Illusions:

Compositional strategies in the music of

Hans Abrahamsen

The recent works of Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen (b.1952) have received much critical and public acclaim, particularly since the appearance of *Schnee* (2008) – announced by Paul Griffiths as one of the first 'classics' of the twenty-first century – and subsequent compositions such as *Let me tell you* (2013), winner in 2016 of both the Grawemeyer Award and the Nordic Council Music Prize.[1] Perhaps most striking about this music on first hearing is the beauty and delicacy of its expression, with a remarkable display of aural imagination, brilliant control of sonority through orchestration, and the conjuring of new and exciting possibilities from conventional instruments even as it engages in a dialogue with the past – *Let me tell you*, for example, represents a reimagining of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century song cycle, with works such as Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs* an important reference. That immediacy, directness and clarity means that anyone new to this music is afforded an easy way into Abrahamsen's compositional language; it is not difficult to understand what this music is doing, whether that is evoking the manifold experiences of snow, the transformative potential of the forest, or an Ophelia, singing a rewriting of her story using only the vocabulary provided by Shakespeare. In that respect, Abrahamsen's music seems to touch a Romantic sensibility, with an emphasis on immediate experience and the interpretative process that springs from it.

Of course, it is not so simple. Alongside that direct expression runs a clear projection of this music as deliberately and self-consciously 'constructed', and it is the way in which it

[1] Paul Griffiths, 'Hans Abrahamsen', <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/long-bio/Hans-Abrahamsen> (accessed 13 December 2017).

negotiates the territory between these two poles that in part creates its distinctive effect, and through which some of its cultural work takes place. The relationship between music's constructional and sensuous qualities has always preoccupied composers and, to a lesser extent, their audiences, with the history of art-music in the twentieth century in particular charting a complex interplay between how a work is conceived and how it may eventually be perceived; a couple of generations ago, articulating and perhaps even solving the 'problem' inherent in the relationships between inaudible structures and audible result seemed to hold much greater importance for both composers and critics than is the case today.[2] As we reach the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the multiplicity of compositional languages available, and indeed, the different ways in which we now think about how music might be meaningful, seems to have pushed aside many of those concerns. That is not to say, of course, that music no longer perpetually negotiates that territory, nor that the interface does not remain significant for individual composers concerned with generating their material and giving it form, but rather that the possible configurations of any border are rather more complex than has sometimes been suggested. In his recent works, Abrahamsen appears particularly successful in finding a fluid and non-dogmatic approach through which to negotiate these difficulties. He often uses clear and systematic processes, either to generate material on the small scale which is then shaped more intuitively into broader forms, or to create larger-scale structures which articulate those forms more directly;[3] the extent to which this scaffolding is foregrounded inevitably varies according to the techniques used and the different temporal and structural levels on which they are employed. As a result, this music

[2] These are the terms used by Jonathan Bernard in a landmark article on the music of György Ligeti, charting his response to what he saw as the contradictions inherent in his generation's concern with total serialism; Jonathan W. Bernard, 'Inaudible Structures, Audible Music: Ligeti's Problem, and his Solution', *Music Analysis* 6/3 (1987), 207–36.

[3] Abrahamsen discusses the relationship between material and form in relation to his earlier music in conversation with Erling Kullberg; Erling Kullberg, 'Konstruktion, intuition og betydning i Hans Abrahamsens musik', *Dansk Musik Tidsskrift* 60/6 (1986), 258–67.

suggests one way in which a re-balancing of expression and construction can take place, along with the potential that has to unlock a wide-ranging creativity.

Abrahamsen's earlier work has most commonly been considered in terms of its part in the 'New Simplicity' which developed within Denmark in the 1960s and into the 1970s; in Danish *Ny Enkelhed*. As part of a reaction against approaches to composition within the works of the post-war Avant Garde – a reaction found in different forms across much of the new-music community within western Europe and the United States – a number of Danish composers turned towards an explicit reduction of density in both the surface activity of their music, and its underlying processes of construction.[4] Henning Christiansen's *Perceptive Constructions*, op.28 (1964) staked out a compositional aesthetic in which the amount of musical material was drastically reduced, and objectivity and a rational constructivism were prioritized; Erling Kullberg characterizes this as 'Concretism', and such an approach can also be found in other key works of this period, such as Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's *Tricolore IV* (1969).[5] Right from the outset, however, composers viewed as belonging to this group displayed, unsurprisingly, a variety of differing personalities and ways of working. Ole Buck's *Sommertrio* (1968), another composition often held up as an exemplar of the approach, involves cellular repetition which places it more clearly within a lineage of

[4] Discussions of *Ny Enkelhed* can be found in Jean Christensen, 'New Music of Denmark', in *New Music of the Nordic Countries*, ed. John D. White (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 1–120; Jens Brinker, *Contemporary Danish Music 1950-2000*, trans. James Manley (Copenhagen: Danish Music Information Centre, 2000); Kevin Ernste, 'Hans Abrahamsen's *Winternacht*: Reflections on an Etching by M.C. Escher' (PhD dissertation: University of Rochester, 2006); Poul Nielsen, 'Omkring den ny enkelhed', *Dansk Musik Tidsskrift* 40/5 (1966), 138–42; Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, 'Nyenkelhet ännu en gång', *Nutida Musik* 22/3 (1978), 31–6; Erling Kullberg, 'Det andet oprør: Reaktionen mod modernismen', *Caecilia* 1 (1991), 57–96; Søren Møller Sørensen, 'Ny musik, men ikke modernisme: To unge komponister i de danske 1970ere—Karl Aage Rasmussen og Hans Abrahamsen', *Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning* 26 (1998), 35–57. For broader examinations of issues surrounding New Simplicity (mostly from a German perspective) see Radoš Mitrović, 'Nova jednostavnost kao oblik kritike postmodernizma', *Muzika: Časopis za muzičku kulturu* 19/1 (2015), 8–19; Frank Hentschel, 'Wie neu war die "Neue Einfachheit"?', *Acta Musicologica* 78/1 (2006), 111–31; and for a more contemporaneous view see Otto Kolleritsch, ed., *Zur Neuen Einfachheit in der Musik* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1981).

[5] Kullberg, 'Det andet oprør', 75-85.

responses to American minimalism; alongside its rational manipulation of pitch material, Kullberg suggests that this piece has an expressive sensibility that is at odds with the purer, concretist approach of Christiansen. He also observes how additional, individual influences give each composer's music a particular flavour: for example, the importance of the Theatre of the Absurd for Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's work, or the poly-stylism which forms a significant element within some of Ib Nørholm's output.[6]

Abrahamsen places his own engagement with *Ny Enkelhed* within this poly-stylistic context; recently he has commented how his approach, which he describes as a reaction against composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen whom he viewed as part of his father's generation, grew out of the greater exposure in that period to a variety of different genres of music.[7] Although he does, retrospectively at least, also adopt the term 'Concretism' for a work such as *Winternacht* (1978), he goes on to observe how even this and earlier compositions involved stylistic pluralism, where echoes and memories of other musics come into play.[8] These different emphases illustrate the way in which *Ny Enkelhed* was far from a clear-cut movement with a single aesthetic around which all the composers coalesced. It was also a series of responses born of a specific time and place, and when considering Abrahamsen's more recent music – coming after his period of relative silence between 1990 and 1998[9] – it is less useful to continue to characterize it in those terms. Although that cultural, historical (and, to a degree, technical) context *is* important in understanding the genesis and development of Abrahamsen's language, the label seems only of limited value when applied to works written some thirty years later in a different musical landscape and with their own set of expressive concerns; asked whether 'New Simplicity' retains its relevance,

[6] Kullberg, 'Det andet oprør', 88-95.

[7] Marco Frei, '"Es darf in der Musik keinen Totalitarismus geben"', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 177/4 (2016), 8.

[8] Ibid., 10.

[9] For discussion see, for example, ibid., 10-11.

Abrahamsen himself has commented: 'No, I don't think we can talk about New Simplicity any more [….] It was to do with reaction in the 1960s. Terry Riley in the States, Cornelius Cardew and his Scratch Orchestra in England – these were movements of their time. Ligeti and even Stockhausen pared down their complexity in the end. The need for that kind of reaction has passed'.[10]

As Abrahamsen implies, his recent works thus ask a series of new questions. As one of several composers of his generation who first emerged as a part of a reaction to a dominant musical narrative of the twentieth century, his music – along with a number of his Danish contemporaries – yet displays a clear continuity with that tradition, specifically as it remains concert repertoire written for conventional forces situated within an ongoing classical, new-music context; it also represents a new and individual direction. So whilst the sense of adherence to any particular 'movement' has long vanished – even if it ever actually gave rise to the straightforward groupings of composers which accounts of the twentieth century often suggest – identifying the compositional strategies at work in this music still has a wider application. One such broader issue is the relationship between form and content, and the extent to which formal devices are a key component of musical meaning. Inevitably this turns upon a question of perceptibility, and how and whether musical features identified 'outside time' might directly be heard 'in time'– a topic which lies beyond the scope of this discussion.[11] However, the significance of these constructional aspects for a full understanding of Abrahamsen's compositional language remains, as his use of tight and often formalized structure emerges as one of a number of creative paradoxes: this is music that

[10] Kate Molleson, 'Interview: Hans Abrahamsen | Kate Molleson', 14 January 2015, <http://katemolleson.com/interview-hans-abrahamsen/> (accessed 13 December 2017).

[11] For a number of *Ny Enkelhed* composers, an important dimension was a much greater foregrounding of the way their music was made: the title of Christiansen's 1964 work – *Perceptive Constructions* – makes this new-found emphasis apparent (I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this article for this observation).

foregrounds its sense of becoming, of its use of processes, even as it presents a finished, highly-polished beauty.

As a result, in what follows the emphasis will be on the 'structural' and in particular on that use of process. Although a number of Abrahamsen's recent pieces draw directly upon works written much earlier, with some overlap in terms of approach and compositional technique, within the last decade or so there is a new, clear sense of common purpose. Thus three large-scale compositions from this period are the focus here: *Schnee*, *Wald* (2009), and the Double Concerto (2011), with additional examples drawn from *Let me tell you* for comparison; whilst *Schnee* has already been subject to some detailed examination, as have sections of *Wald,* the manifold complexities of *Let me tell you* really deserve their own dedicated discussion alongside a broader analysis of the poetics involved.[12] Rather than providing a complete reading of any individual work, the approach here is to draw out a number of common strands under the twin headings of Transformations and Doubles, before examining the way in which those processes can interact through a consideration of Abrahamsen's individual approach to variation form in *Wald*. Finally, the extent to which the interplay of all these elements give rise to types of paradox and illusion will be considered as a strategy to understanding the wider cultural work that this music undertakes.

Transformations

The relationship between Abrahamsen's 1978 composition *Winternacht* and M.C.Escher's 1955 lithograph *Three Worlds* has been examined in detail by Kevin Ernste: the second

[12] For discussion of *Schnee* see Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 422-4 and also Richard Powell, 'Articulating Time: Listening to Musical Forms in the Twenty-First Century' (PhD dissertation: University of York, 2016), 122–7 & 140–55; for *Wald* see Christopher Chandler, 'Recontextualization and Variation: Associative Organization in Hans Abrahamsen's *Walden* and *Wald*' (PhD dissertation: University of Rochester, 2017). *Schnee* and the Double Concerto are briefly discussed in Matthew Ertz, 'Recent Music of Hans Abrahamsen', *Notes* 70/1 (2013), 190–3.

movement of *Winternacht* brings together images of three different musics (by Schubert, Beethoven and Chopin) alongside characteristically systematic pitch structures.[13] Abrahamsen has made explicit the influence of Escher's graphic art on the transformational techniques found in his more recent output, with Escher's interest in paradoxes and impossible worlds also finding echoes in some of its broader concerns. As an example, consider woodcuts such as *Day and Night* (1938) or the two works entitled *Sky and Water* (1938). In the former, two intersecting flocks of geese fly across a mirrored landscape: black geese fly right to left into the daytime, their form gradually created out of the checkerboard fields of the ground below and at the point of crossover also becoming the background against which the white geese – flying in the opposite direction – are seen. In both *Sky and Water I* and *II* the transformation takes place vertically: white fish on a black background at the bottom of the picture gradually lose definition, becoming initially the tessellating pattern, and then the ground against which black birds are gradually revealed in increasing detail towards the top, and *vice versa*.

The musical equivalent becomes one of the primary structuring techniques for the canons in *Schnee*. Abrahamsen explains the conception:

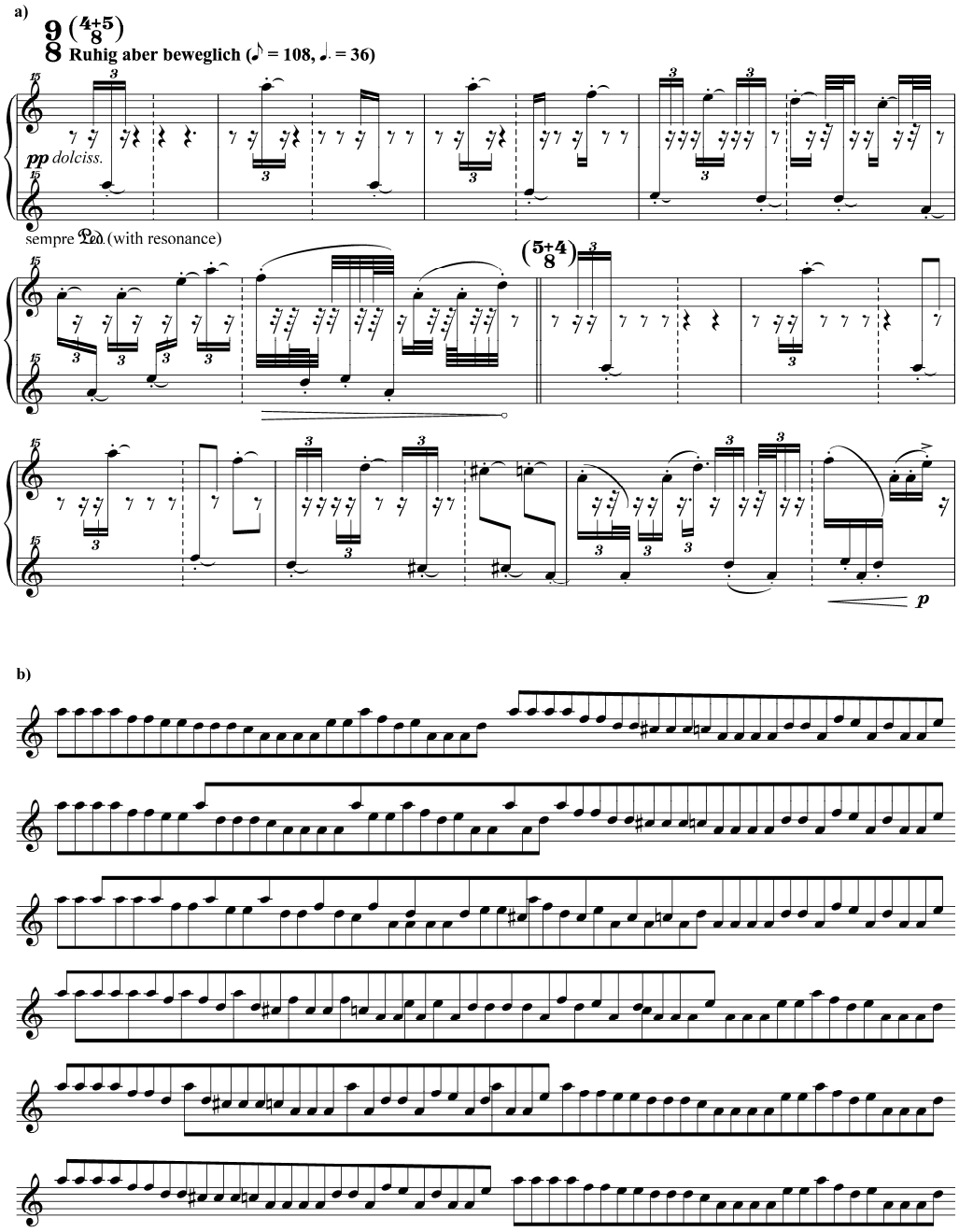
> In *Schnee*, a few simple and fundamental musical questions are explored. What is a *Vorsatz*? And what is a *Nachsatz*? Can a phrase be answering? Or questioning?
>
> The guideline or rule for the canons is very simple: We start out with an answering *Vorsatz*, followed by a questioning *Nachsatz*. Throughout the time of the piece, these two are intertwined more and more, as more and more *dicht geführt* canons, until, at the end, they are interchanged. Now the question and then the answer.[14]

[13] Ernste, 'Hans Abrahamsen's *Winternacht*', 29–36.

[14] Hans Abrahamsen, 'Hans Abrahamsen - Schnee (2008) - Music Sales Classical', <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1/34990> (accessed 14 December 2017).

Canon 1a presents this idea the most clearly. This movement involves two very closely related melodic strands played by piano, along with what initially seems an accompaniment of repeated, very high string harmonics from violin, viola and cello. The melodies, each given a precisely-calculated, gradually-accelerating rhythm, are shown in Example 1a. They are first played consecutively, before the music pauses briefly and then repeats – each presentation of the two melodies is restated directly. On the next iteration the second melody overlaps with the first by two bars, creating a more complex resultant melodic stream. This process continues through subsequent passes, with the second melody moving two bars earlier each time; by the fourth run-through it starts one bar before the first, and by the sixth the two melodies have slid past each other completely. As Abrahamsen puts it: 'So the initial phrase becomes the closing phrase, and vice versa – rather like the world of Escher's pictures, where a white foreground on a black background on one side of the picture becomes a black foreground on a white background on the other'.[15] The resulting pitch order is shown in Example 1b; although both melodies contain the same number of pitches, the initial decisions about the rhythmic profile of each line creates small variations in the symmetry of the overlapping process as it unfolds. The musical result is also less straightforwardly linear than Abrahamsen suggests: the form becomes a kind of arch shape, with the central statements presenting the material in a more compact, denser form; this is mirrored by the string figuration which similarly thickens before returning to the opening, repeated quaver idea.

[15] Hans Abrahamsen, 'Schnee (2008)' <http://www.winterandwinter.com/index.php?id=1607> (accessed 14 December 2017).

Example 1. Abrahamsen, *Schnee*, Canon 1a: a) piano melodies, bars 1-10; b) crossover process. *Schnee*, music by Hans Abrahamsen, © Copyright 2008 Edition Wilhelm Hansen. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.

The process is of course complicated by the high level of similarity between the melodies involved: unlike Escher's *Sky and Water*, which involve distinct objects (which are nonetheless able to tessellate), here there are two variant images of the same idea, and the

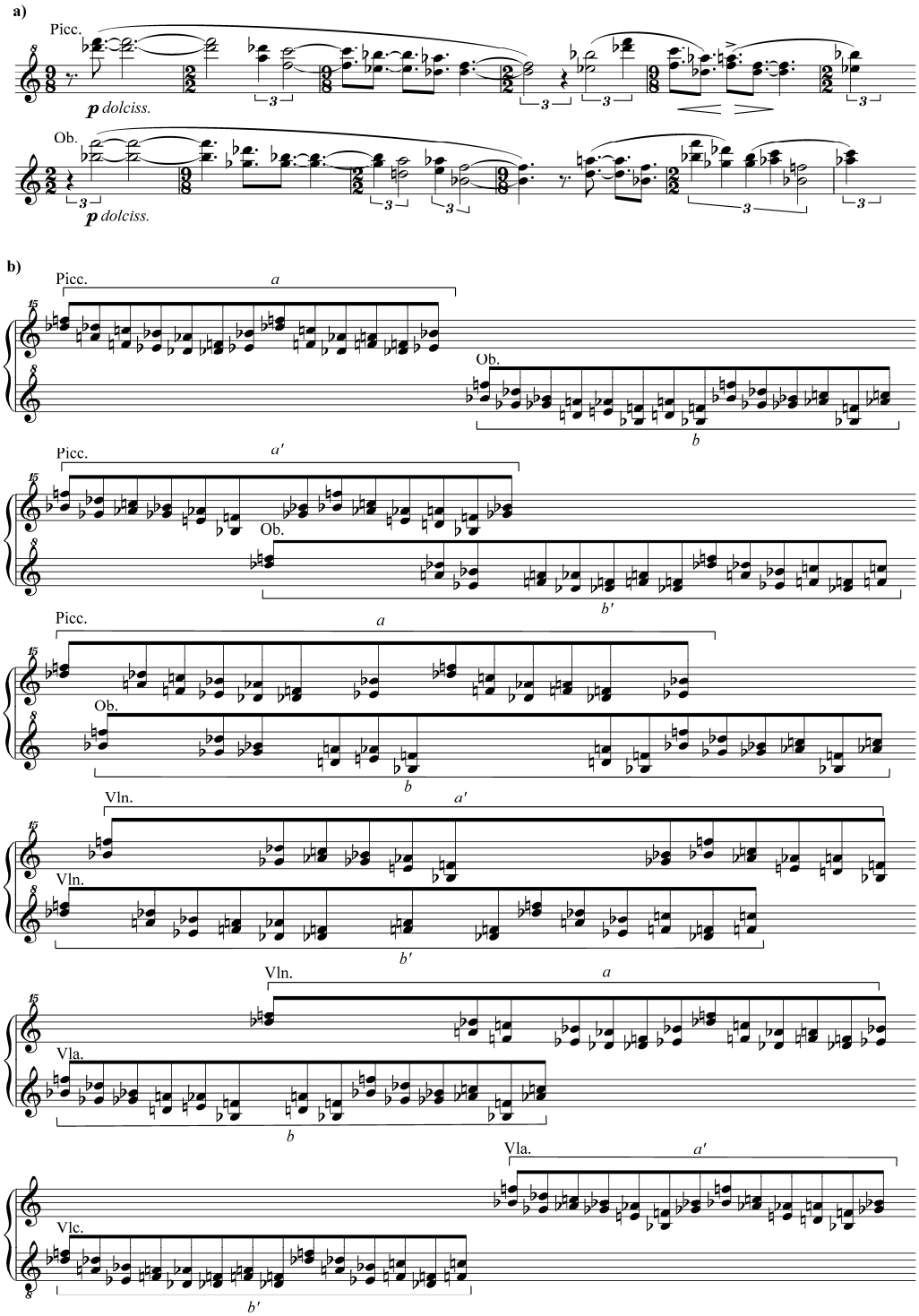
detail of the transformation is correspondingly less clear, particularly without some prior knowledge of its unfolding. The question again arises whether such a process might be expected to be followed 'in time'; Abrahamsen seems to play with this very idea, as details of the construction – in particular, the use of a repeated A♮ – mask the clarity of overlap. Instead, the overall trajectory becomes the focus: gradually changing one melodic strand into another is, like many musical devices, one that determines the overall shape and the smaller scale simultaneously – the process unfolds the form and *vice versa*.

A more complex use of this same compositional technique can be found in *Let me tell you*. The first, fourth and sixth movements of the cycle – which explicitly mark the progress of time, from 'Let me tell you how it was', through 'how it is' to 'how it will be' – present differing views of the same musical ideas, and again, despite their spaciousness and direct expression, they are, as Abrahamsen describes, as constructed as anything in *Schnee* – indeed, they start from the same material.[16] Taking the first movement, the long, sinewy lines that appear first of all on two piccolos answered by two oboes, before charting a gradual descent in register to end on violas and cellos, again involve two closely-related melodies shown in Example 2a; as is immediately apparent, the upper lines are transposed and slightly inflected versions of the material from Canon 1a of *Schnee*, now without note repetitions.[17] Again the melodies gradually interpenetrate by gradually overlapping two bars at a time

[16] William Robin, 'Hans Abrahamsen: Fame and Snow Falling on a Composer - The New York Times', 3 September 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/arts/music/hans-abrahamsen-fame-and-snow-falling-on-a-composer.html> (accessed 14 December 2017); see also Abrahamsen's comments in Katherine Cooper, 'Hans Abrahamsen - Let Me Tell You | Presto Classical', 17 February 2016, <https://www.prestoclassical.co.uk/classical/articles/1439--hans-abrahamsen-let-me-tell-you> (accessed 14 December 2017)

[17] There are interesting echoes here of György Ligeti's Piano Études: the '*Schnee* melodies' are reminiscent of the accented lines found in *Désordre*, whilst the use of stacked harmonies and resulting 'non-diatonic diatonicism' in this movement resembles *Fém* (amongst others). The relationship between Abrahamsen's music and that of his one-time teacher has not yet been the subject of detailed study; for Abrahamsen's own comments see Hans Abrahamsen, 'Object og illusion. 1: Hans Abrahamsen om Ligeti', *Dansk Musik Tidsskrift* 63/3 (1989), 82–84. For discussion of the Ligeti Études see, for instance, Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (London: Faber, 2003), 277–314.

before passing entirely through each other, but here this process is further complicated by a two-fold switching process. The first takes place between the lower, quasi-harmonising voices: as Example 2b shows, with each run-through the upper voice remains the same, but the intervals forming each diad are exchanged so that perfect fifths become major thirds / diminished fourths and vice versa. Thus, in effect, each statement presents a long chain of incomplete minor triads; for line *a*: B♭min, G♭min, Fmin, and so on. These triads are rooted on six pitch-classes: B♭, D♭, D♮, E♭, F♮, G♭, and the resulting tonal sense hovers around a B♭ centricity, with the F♮ that sounds throughout the movement – first from the celeste, then from harp and xylophone / marimba – being continually recontextualized by those shifting harmonic sands. The second process involves the rhythm given to each melody: *a'* uses the rhythm of *b*, and *b'* that of *a* (subject to very small changes principally to accommodate the different number of notes); the web of similarities between the two melodies is thus denser than the comparable music of *Schnee*. This time, as the two phrases are of different lengths, the interlocking process is necessarily somewhat asymmetrical, but Example 2b illustrates the emergent sense of consistent pacing: line two, for instance, shows how *b'* enters after six diads, and is divided 1, 2, and 11 by the interlocking; the comparable reverse process is in line four, where *a'* again enters after six diads and is divided 1, 2, and 10.

Example 2. Abrahamsen, *Let me tell you*, I: a) opening melodies; b) crossover process. *Let me tell you*, music by Hans Abrahamsen, © Copyright 2013 Edition Wilhelm Hansen. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.

As with Canon 1a of *Schnee*, the working out of the transformation defines the length of the movement, although here two further important musical features also shape the overall form. The first is the appearance of the vocal line, starting from bar 6, which uses the lower pitches of the second melody (*b* / *b'* on Example 2b) and presents them twice over through the course of the movement (in order *b'* – *b*, *b* – *b'*, with a brief 'coda' after each pair which takes just the last few pitches of the other melodic strand). The second is the introduction, at bar 25, of lower brass and woodwind – a striking moment in this movement, not only underpinning the high treble register used so far, but also creating its distinctive harmonic soundworld. Given Abrahamsen's concern with structure and extracting the most from limited material, it is not surprising that these harmonies are also derived from the same source: an inversion of *a'* and then *b'* around B♭, again presented in its entirety.

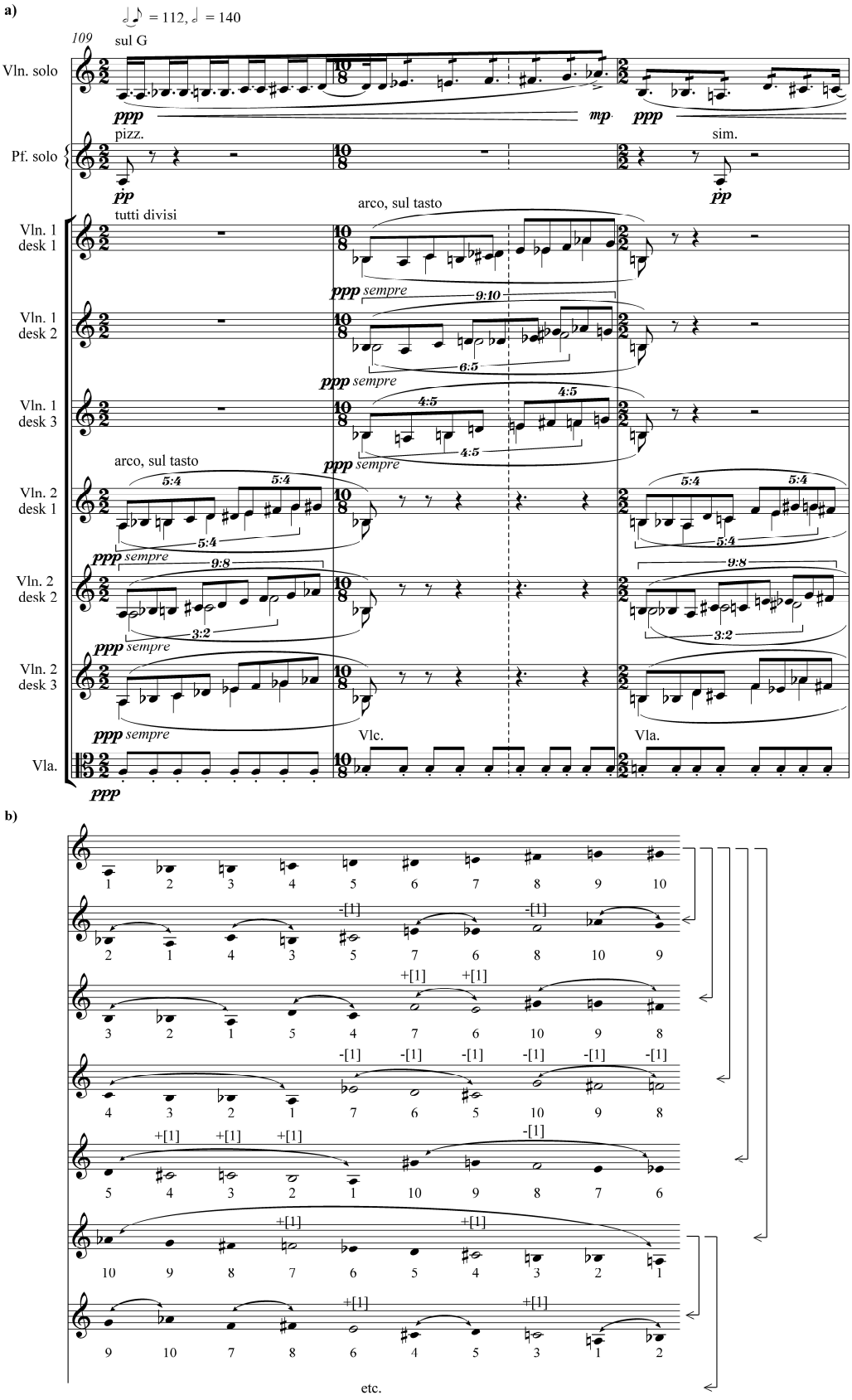
Other types of transformation are less closely tied to the generation of musical form, instead providing control of the note-to-note details of larger gestures. For example, the second movement of the Double Concerto, 'Schnell und immer unruhig', uses two distinct processes to create much of its material. The first of these is a type of permutational approach most conspicuous in the second half of the movement, though it is also found in a more limited form earlier on. From bar 109 the ensemble is *divisi* into 22 solo lines, and the violin sections play alternately as blocks; each block involves the superimposition of equal divisions of the bar into 3, 4, 5 and 8, 9, 10 sets of notes (effectively six different tempo layers), and the bar length itself alternates between 2/2 and 10/8 – this type of compression / rarefaction is almost a signature of Abrahamsen's music of this period. Initially these blocks traverse an octave between *a*♮ and *g*♯', and each constituent line uses several different modes to do so: thus, a four-note line might, as in bars 109 and 111, divide the octave most simply into four minor thirds, creating a diminished seventh chord, or use one of many other alternatives (for example, in bar 110 a similarly symmetrical [0,1,6,7], see Example 3a). The situation is at its

most complex with the division of the bar / octave into ten (violin 1 and 2 first desks), and the mechanism through which those pitch structures are created is shown in Example 3b. For each bar a different mode is used (usually running A–G♯, but also once each B♭–A♭ and A♮–G♮), in every case dividing the notional octave into semitones interspersed with two steps of a tone. The order of these pitches is permuted according to a straightforward process: compared to the initial ascending line in bar 109, each subsequent bar involves reversing the order of a group of pitches which gradually increases in number. Thus, bar 110 (line two of Figure 3b) switches three two-note groups and two one-note groups (which therefore retain their original position); bar 111 (line three) switches two three-note and two two-note groups, and so on, working up to a simple switch of all ten at the half-way position. Here the retrograde of the original is achieved, and the process resets and repeats, finally leading back to a straightforward ascending scale. A similar system is used for all of the six 'levels' of bar subdivision.[18]

The overall effect of this superimposition of multiple tempo layers and divisions of the octave is to create a perpetually-changing kaleidoscope of chromatic material. Two processes give this a larger-scale direction, however; the first is the way in which the starting unison note of each new bar is controlled: these duplicate, in augmentation, the 10-note pattern just discussed, rising A–B♭–B–C–D, then falling A♭–G–F♯–F–E♭, and are reinforced by repeated notes from violas and cellos – an application of the same material to different temporal levels. The second is the control of the solo parts: the violin initially takes a chromatic scale (twelve

[18] Such an approach has similarities with the processes of change ringing, where a starting linear structure is subjected to gradual transformation through the application of a series of switches of order. The technique that Abrahamsen uses here is a departure from the swapping of adjacent places found within common change-ringing patterns, but the underlying idea of generating pitch material in this way seems important within Abrahamsen's recent music (I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this article for emphasising this connection). There are other permutational art forms which can also be brought into this creative orbit, an example being the sestina and its modern-day revival by writers such as Raymond Queneau; for an introduction, see David Bellos, 'Mathematics, poetry, fiction: The adventure of the Oulipo', *BSHM Bulletin: Journal of the British Society for the History of Mathematics* 25.2 (2010), 104-118.

notes played over two bars) and subjects it to a comparable permutational process. At bar 119, as the orchestra repeats the material of the last ten bars transposed a tone higher, piano and violin continue their ascending lines, now doubled at the tritone; as the movement draws towards its close, the two solo instruments reach higher and higher, with extra parallel notes added, before being left alone over sustained harmonics from lower strings. The permutational techniques in this section of music are most apparent within these solo lines: it is hard at the given speed to 'track' the orchestral layers as they pass by, but the global effect of heterophonic chromaticism throughout the ensemble comes through clearly, and the gradual thinning and overall ascent in register imparts forward momentum. The details here might not be as clearly foregrounded as they are in the passages from *Schnee* or *Let me tell you* discussed earlier, but the emphasis on clarity and logic is retained.

Example 3. Abrahamsen, Double Concerto, II: a) bars 109-11; b) transformation process. Double Concerto, music by Hans Abrahamsen, © Copyright 2011 Edition Wilhelm Hansen. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.

Earlier in the movement a further type of process is involved. At its heart is a kind of rhythmically elastic, tetrachordal melodic line that takes as its starting point the first two gestures of the entire work; initially appearing on solo violin doubled by muted piano, as the movement progresses it transfers into the orchestral parts before returning to just the solo instruments, thereby acting as a kind of 'cantus firmus' for the first 107 bars. Its rhythmic complexity is increased by Abrahamsen's technique of compression and rarefaction, so that bars of 9 tuplet quavers in the time of 10 alternate with 9 in the time of 8, laid over a constant quaver pulse from the accompanying strings. Initially it appears that an alternating five- / six-bar 'tactus' is at work: transpositions of the tetrachord (G–B♭–C–E♭ to D–F–G–B♭, then to F–A♭–B♭–D♭) take place at bars 6, 12 & 17, coupled with changes in orchestration to the accompanying open fourths; an 'extra' bar is added before the triggering of an ascending / descending modal line from solo violin at bar 22 (prefiguring bar 109). In fact, the construction here cuts across these much more obvious markers, creating a kind of larger-scale rhythmic counterpoint where the realignment of recognisable rhythmic patterns with these textural changes occurs only occasionally, most obviously at bars 33 and 65.

Example 4 shows the 48-quaver pattern which opens the movement, and illustrates how the passage of music in bars 17–37 is derived from it. The statement beginning at bar 17 is the result of the following transformation: after transposition down a perfect fourth, the uppermost two pitches remain, all F♮s become rests, D♮ is mapped onto F♮, and any new notes introduced are D♮, thus completing the tetrachord. The next line applies an inversion of this process to this new iteration: D♮s and F♮s remain, G♮s become rests, B♭ maps to G♮, new notes are B♭. This is expressed more formally in Example 4, with the notes of the mode, reading upwards, notated one to four; the remaining lines in this passage derive from the initial statement, either using substitution-transposition or transposition alone. There are 18 statements of such 48-quaver patterns in the first part of this movement; the final two, bars

97–107, present a straightforward inversion of the opening and also mark an obvious return to the opening sonority of solo violin and muted piano; it would be tempting to see this as the inevitable outcome of the preceding manipulations, but the music doesn't support such a reading. Instead, Abrahamsen presents a perpetually-changing, rhythmically-charged line which is overlaid with more obvious markers of formal contrast such as texture and scoring.

Example 4. Abrahamsen, Double Concerto, II: transformation of melodic line.
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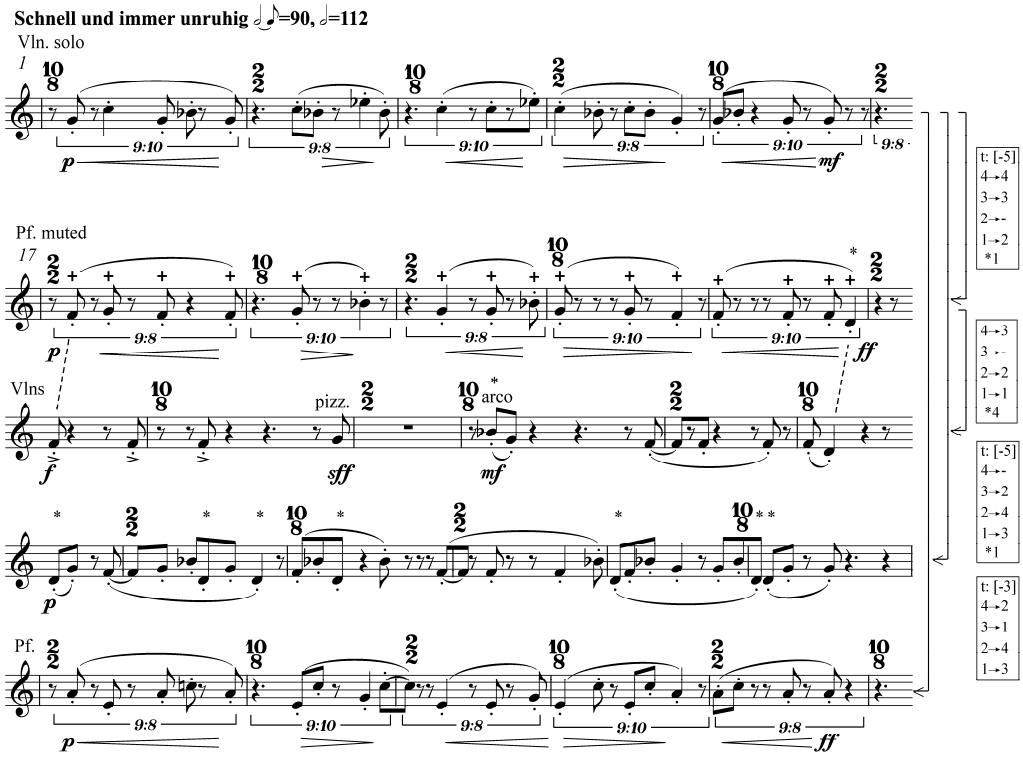


This approach, where processes generate pitch material which is then sculpted into larger structures, is found in both parts of this movement. However, as we have seen, Abrahamsen may apply such processes on different temporal levels, and there is thus in so much of his music an underlying sense of continual transformation; it is this characteristic dynamism that forms a creative counterpoint to the crystalline purity that is also so clearly projected – a perpetual negotiation that seems one of its defining features.

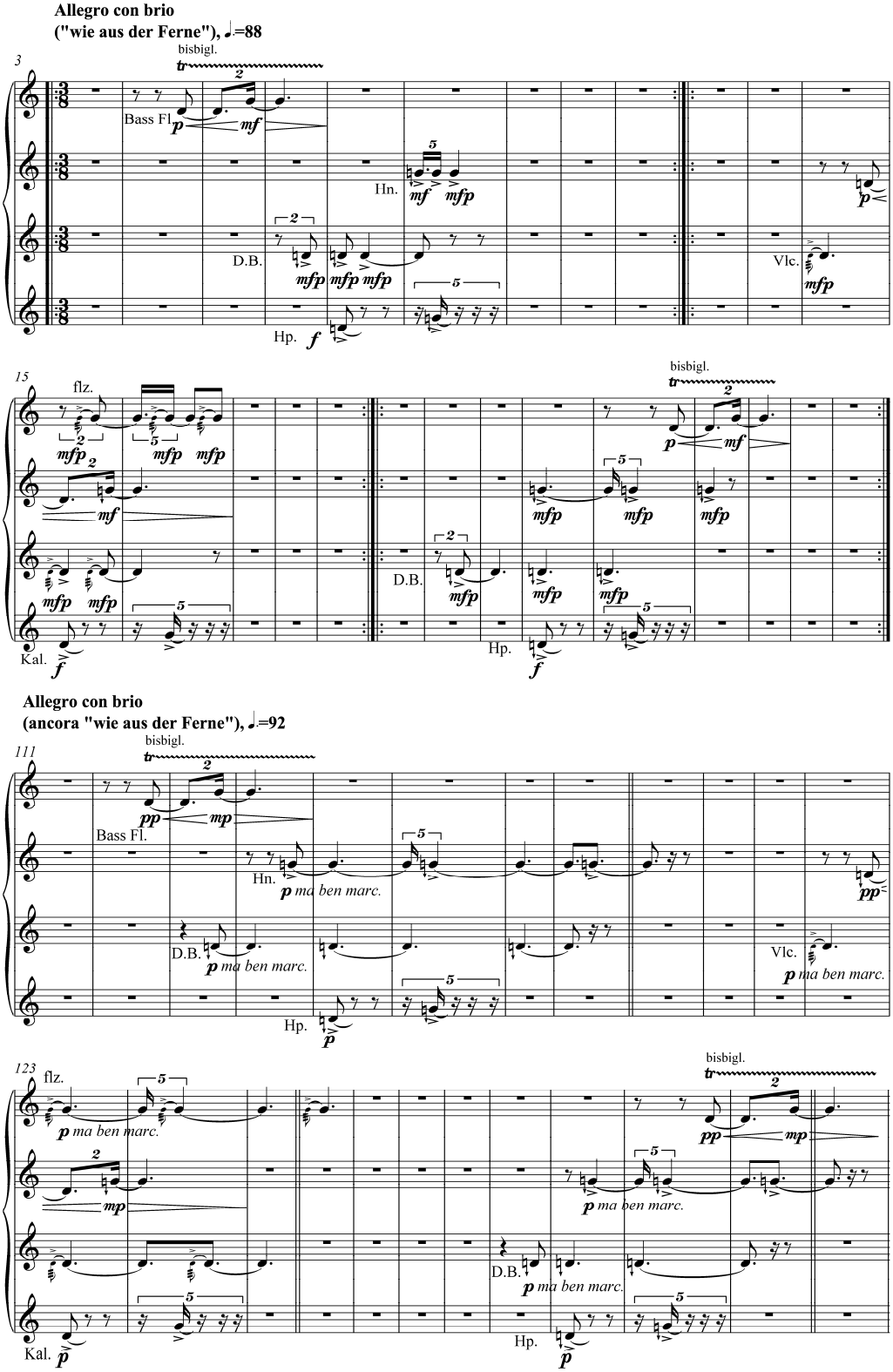
Doubles

Repetition is a key strategy in Abrahamsen's recent works. As Christopher Chandler observes in his examination of the relationships between *Walden* and *Wald*, a number of different forms of 'recomposition, recontextualization, and varied repetition play a prominent part in his compositional language'.[19] Processes of variation – which, of course, imply a certain level of repetition against which change can be judged – will be examined in more detail below, but another very important part of how Abrahamsen structures his music across multiple timescales, from individual cells to larger sections, involves restatement: particularly distinctive is the way in which, in many cases, material just heard is immediately repeated, as if being re-presented – this is best thought of as a type of 'doubling'. Of course, any repetition happens within a different context from the first appearance, even if literally 'note-for-note' in the score, but Abrahamsen also seems to play more self-consciously with ideas of identity. This is comparable to a kind of game using mirrors, which can either replicate the image exactly or distort it to a lesser or greater degree. With the inevitable passing of time that separates any such doubling, this game becomes also one of memory: is what we have just heard in fact 'the same' as the previous presentation?

The most obvious examples are the medium-scale repetition of sections of music, often involving a systemized number of bars. A conspicuous instance comes in Canons 1a and 1b of *Schnee*, where each statement of the two melodic strands is immediately repeated; it might at first appear counterintuitive to 'freeze' the gradual transformation in this way, but this allows each new alignment to be clear, to be fully assimilated, before moving on to the next. A similar approach occurs at the beginning of *Wald*. Again, a call and answer gradually move through each other so that they end by exchanging places, and again, each alignment is repeated in its entirety. The repeated passages oscillate between nine and eight bars in length

[19] Chandler, 'Recontextualization and Variation', 93.

– a grid-like approach to musical construction that has already been observed in respect of transformation processes. The first part of this work involves four smaller-scale sections, each of which recurs in what Abrahamsen calls ‘Variation 1’, and this opening section is there repeated in a modified form, and now with the grid structure compressed; Example 5 shows the comparable passages. Alternating between eight and seven bars and with the repeat marks removed, the effect here is to present the original call and response material in a rescaled form – more condensed, with the transformation happening at a faster rate.

Example 5. Abrahamsen, *Wald*: Call and response material, bars 3-28 & 111-134, and alignment with grid structure. *Wald,* music by Hans Abrahamsen, © Copyright 2009 Edition Wilhelm Hansen. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.

This interest in grid structures, scale, and the associated use of repetition is reminiscent of Morton Feldman's music, in particular that composed in the late 1970s and the 1980s, and this technique of combining repetition with rhythmic rarefaction and compression is significant within all of Abrahamsen's works under examination here. An example of the type of elasticity that can result has already been identified in the second movement of the Double Concerto (the alternation of bars of 9:10 and 9:8 against a common quaver pulsation); in the fourth movement, a similar use of repetition in relation to a modified grid structure is the primary structuring mechanism. The main ideas are quite simply described: a series of ascending and descending scalic figures, played *pp* on very high harmonics, accompany a long melodic line involving many repeated notes, heard twice from solo piano and once from solo violin; Example 6 shows the beginning of each melodic statement. On the first time through, alternating 9/8 and 2/2 bars (thus 9 / 8 quavers) are used to create a 7–7–5–5–7–7 barring pattern, with the ascending / descending lines moving in a consistent quaver motion, controlled through another alternating 8 / 9 series. The second run-through initially appears somewhat more complicated: the barring structure is a mirror of the first, 5–5–7–7–5–5, alternating 3/4 and 4/4, and the basic underlying pulsation is a quintuplet / triplet quaver, through a metric modulation the same speed as the initial quaver motion; Abrahamsen now notates this as two alternating tempi, though this is perhaps more an effect for the eye than for the ear, and bars thus alternate between ten and nine quintuplet / triplet quavers. What this means is that this whole statement is almost exactly the same total length (325 tuplet semiquavers rather than 323 semiquavers), and musical events also happen in approximately equivalent places within that structure: for example, a running semiquaver figure from first violins appears in bars 10–11 of the first iteration and bars 9–10 of the second.

Example 6. Abrahamsen, Double Concerto, IV: piano / violin melody.
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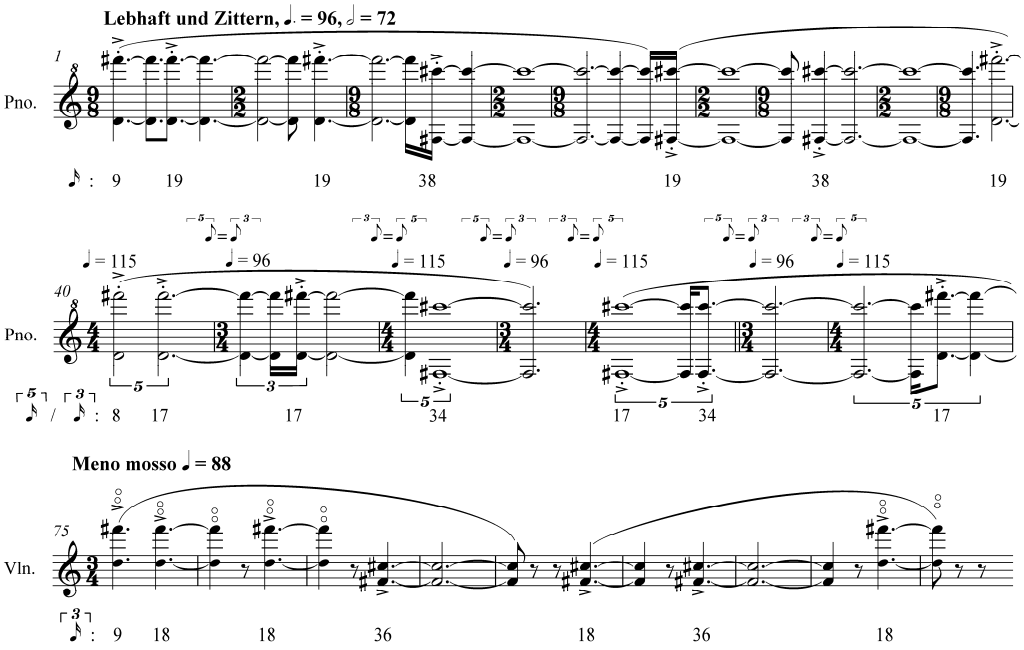
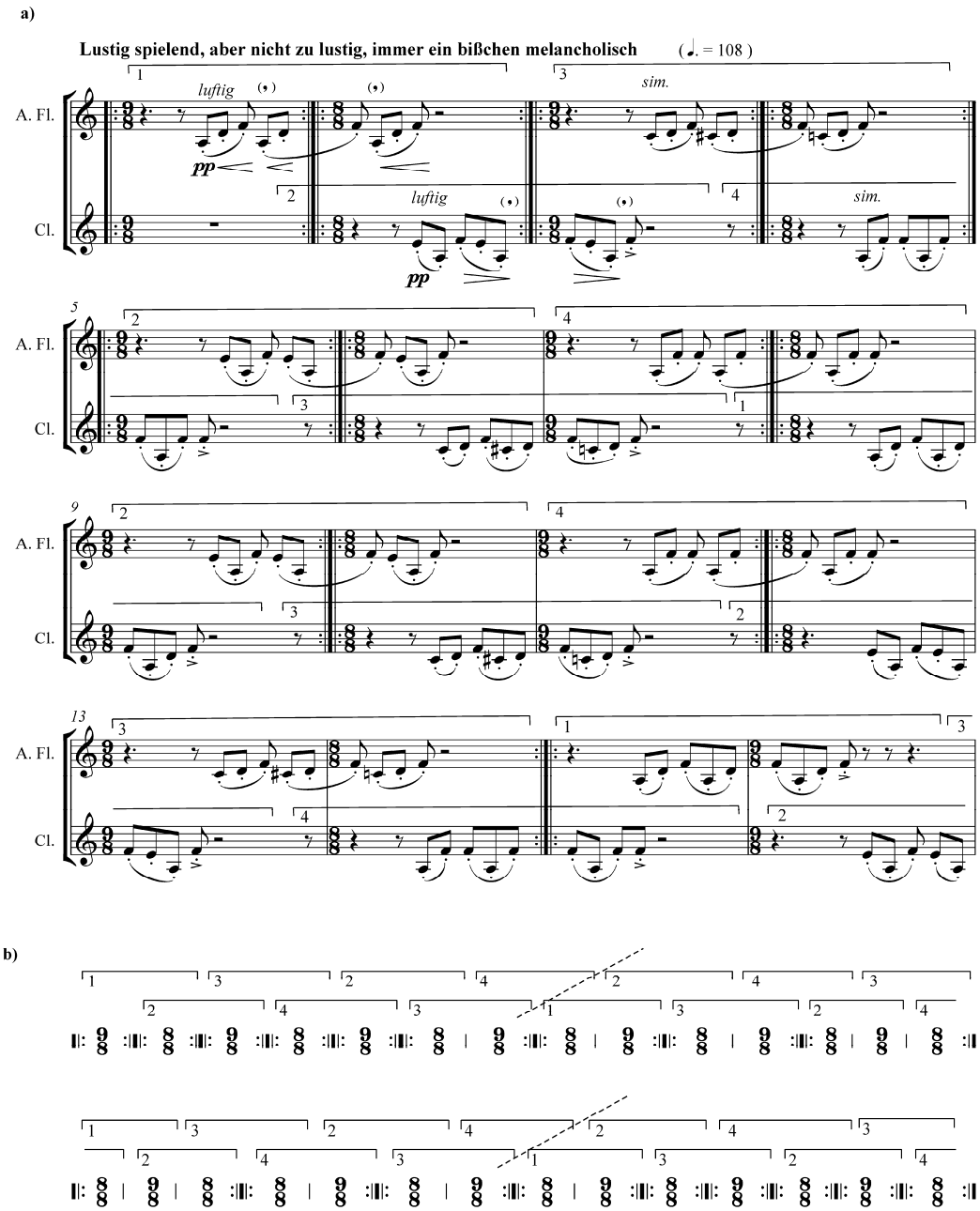


The third version of the melody is less rapid (with a stepped *meno mosso* as the passage continues), the accompanying scalic material in triplet quavers is taken over by the solo piano, and the orchestra creates a sustained backdrop from slower-moving harmonics. The solo violin – having previously played the descending scalic patterns and, on the first time through, two five-note motifs taken from the first movement of the work – now takes up the basic melody. Despite having exactly the same underlying construction as the first two iterations, the change in scoring and the feeling of a slower unfolding in this third section of the piece means that there is a clear contrast – in effect this movement is a bipartite form created from a tripartite structure: the final section acts as the modified 'double' of the first two. At the same time this movement is a kind of variation form (also important within Abrahamsen's compositions, as we shall see later on); controlled by small manipulations of scale, it plays with ideas of repetition and identity in a subtle and allusive manner.

Extensive use of smaller-scale repetition at the level of individual cells can be found in music such as Canon 2a of *Schnee*; here again this is coupled with a direct control of scale, with similar material being re-distributed so as to occupy more or less time. This Canon presents a remarkable soundworld, combining winds with muted piano to create a fast-moving whirlwind of a movement: precise, rhythmically pointed, and crystalline. The basic material involves rapid repeating loops initially given to flute and clarinet, with piano and cor anglais providing an accenting rhythmic counterpoint.[20] It is again tightly constructed – Example 7a shows the beginning of the movement, with each looping pattern labelled – and there is again a characteristic alternation between two 'neighbouring' time signatures; in this case the underlying quaver pulsation is kept as the constant. Example 7b illustrates the systematic way in which the patterns occur in this first section, bars 1–28, as well as the mirroring that takes place every seven bars; at the midpoint, bar 15, the articulation of the two lines swaps over and the pattern repeats. Cutting across this somewhat is the 'repetition grid' which behaves palindromically: repeats take place at one-bar, then two-bar and finally three-bar intervals before being reversed. The duplication of the 8/8 bar at the mid-way point means that on the second run-through the flute and clarinet material is placed differently across the barring; at bar 28 the unfinished lines are simply cut off by a sudden, sustained silence.

[20] There is a connection with *Winternacht*, which in the second movement uses an arpeggio figuration explicitly borrowed from the 'Moonlight' Sonata as one of Escher's 'Three Worlds' that is evoked; see Ernste, 'Hans Abrahamsen's *Winternacht*', 29–36.

Example 7. Abrahamsen, *Schnee*, Canon 2a: a) opening; b) repetition grid of first section. *Schnee*, music by Hans Abrahamsen, © Copyright 2008 Edition Wilhelm Hansen. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.

The remainder of the movement is constructed similarly, with a gradual reduction of bar length to 5 / 6, and then 3 / 4 quavers before the process is put into reverse. The use of small-scale doubling is key to generating the music, with the effect of the repetition grid creating something of a paradox. Far from providing familiarity through rehearing the same material,

the cutting across of the predictable melodic cells creates *instability*, as it becomes extremely difficult to grasp any clear rhythmic pattern. The interaction of two related systematic processes gives rise here to an overall sense of non-systemisation, of a lack of clear structure.

Larger-scale doubles abound. Within *Schnee* this is particularly clearly pronounced – each canon has its own. As Abrahamsen explains:

> When I saw these novel, quasi three-dimensional pictures at the start of the nineties, I was very interested, and especially by the old stereoscopic technique from the late 19th century, where two almost identical pictures, photographed with just a small spatial displacement between them (like two stereo microphones), are placed next to one another. If one looks at them in an unfocussed way, one sees a magical three-dimensional picture in the middle, as the sum of the other two. So now I played with the idea of whether this was also possible in music, given that it already happens naturally through our listening with two ears.[…] At any rate, that's what I attempt here [in *Schnee*], partly on a small scale, as in the repetitions of Canon 1a, and partly on a large one, since Canon 1b is a 'double' of 1a […], but this time for all nine instruments. It is basically the same music, but with many more canonic levels superimposed. So the two form a pair, and should be heard as such. They are like two big musical pictures which, heard with distant, unfocussed ears, may produce a third, three-dimensional picture.[21]

In other pieces, whole sections from the same work or even from elsewhere can be re-sited.[22] For example, as has already been noted, in *Let me tell you* there are three different versions of

[21] Abrahamsen, 'Schnee (2008)'.

[22] The works discussed here makes less explicit reference to music by other composers than can be found amongst Abrahamsen's earlier output, and as a result what follows is confined to a consideration of self-referral. Of course, any such internal-external boundary remains porous, and Abrahamsen often plays with invocations of broader musical tropes, but a proper examination of this

the music which introduces each large-scale section of the piece; whilst they use the same underlying construction, they progressively reduce in length – the last is quite considerably shorter – and one conspicuous change is that the second version is constructed around a sustained G♭ rather than retaining the F♮ centricity of the outer two.[23] The Double Concerto draws on a wider range of music. The third movement is a recomposed version of *Efterårslied* (1992, rescored in 2009), which itself incorporates pre-existing material, from Bach's *Art of Fugue* and a song by Oluf Ring – *Sig nærmer tiden* ('My time to leave approaches')[24] – while the first movement reworks Abrahamsen's more recent *Liebeslied* (2010) directly. In this opening, the first five bars of *Liebeslied* are first rescored for the new, larger ensemble, and then repeated transposed down a tritone – with gestures redistributed orchestrally. The remainder of the movement continues with a rescored *Liebeslied* at the original pitch, although as that itself involved a large degree of internal repetition, the form that results appears as a set of reflections of the opening bars. While *Liebeslied* articulates a (pseudo)-ternary A (5 bars), A' (3 bars), A (5 bars), this new form is more unbalanced: A (5 bars), A transposed (5 bars), A' (3 bars), A (5 bars). The whole movement is thus generated from a single melodic gesture, which itself – in a moment of internal referral – becomes the departure point for the process in the second movement: the first nine notes begin the repeating pattern which structures it (see Example 4, above).

In this way, Abrahamsen's use of repetition appears as an approach to material that is inherently 'economical' – where the maximum potential is extracted from a deliberately-restricted starting point. But these doublings, which, as we have seen, may take place on

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issue lies far outside the scope of the present discussion; see, for example, Ståle Wikshåland, 'Tradisjonsløshet som siste skrik?', *Studia Musicologica Norvegica* 14 (1988): 74–88.

[23] The relationship between this music and the opening of *Schnee* means that these movements are – at least in terms of construction – already 'double'.

[24] Abrahamsen describes *Efterårslied* as a 'quodlibet'; Hans Abrahamsen, 'Hans Abrahamsen - Efterårslied (1992) - Music Sales Classical', <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1/21848> (accessed 14 December 2017).

different timescales, do not just *extend* that material – although that can be the effect, with considerations of scale an important aspect here – they also transform it. As a result, the music manipulates ideas of similarity and difference that inform the more explicitly transformational approaches examined earlier. How identity is shaped therefore emerges as an important broader concern within these works, with Abrahamsen's use of process tending toward a questioning of apparent stability. It is the way in which these individual processes can be combined and deployed to broader expressive ends that now needs to be considered.

Variations – *Wald*

Abrahamsen describes *Wald*, scored for 15 players distributed in balanced groupings of two or three instruments to form seven 'half-circles' around the conductor (the piano/ celeste placed in the middle), as a 'series of variations'.[25] The concept of variation is implicit in much of Abrahamsen's approach, with material often evolving and being re-presented in always-changing versions, but now that also becomes a focus for the whole work; as a result, *Wald* is a particularly good example through which to examine the interaction of processes to create larger-scale form, and to illustrate the ways in which Abrahamsen employs those techniques of transformation and doubling already discussed alongside a range of other compositional strategies.[26]

[25] Hans Abrahamsen, 'Hans Abrahamsen - Wald (2009) - Music Sales Classical', <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1/43185> (accessed 14 December 2017).

[26] Chandler discusses both the variation form of *Wald* and a significant part of the compositional detail in his examination of relationships between this work and *Walden*, and employs Dora Hanninen's theory of 'associative organisation' in order to examine the disposition of material and the ways in which it is manipulated, principally in relation to the outer sections of the piece (Chandler, 'Recontextualization and Variation', 44–93). What follows considers the music in less formal terms than Chandler's, with the primary focus on how compositional techniques are variously combined to produce music of great allusive complexity.

Wald sets out to evoke an experience of the forest, both directly and, as Abrahamsen discusses in his note to the piece, mediated through Thoreau's *Walden* and nineteenth-century conceptions of that experience such as those found in Schumann's *Waldszenen*, Op. 82:

> For [Schumann and Thoreau] 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.[27]

This is not the place to undertake a detailed discussion of a number of interesting parallel strategies between this work and Schumann's, but rather to note the way in which *Wald* hovers ambiguously between evocation and representation. Much of the piece is very quiet and still, with horn fourth-calls initially exchanged between bass flute and French horn; after a section that Abrahamsen marks as 'Night-Music' there is an outburst of activity 'like a sudden awakening', before the galloping music to which Abrahamsen refers, and a concluding return to a more serene soundworld. How this maps onto the composed variation form can be seen in Figure 1; the Theme and the first two Variations use the same palette of four types of material, labelled i-iv, although there is a complicated network of relationships both between the initial statements and the way in which those are subsequently modified, as will be discussed in a moment. Variations III and IV use very closely-related material to create the Night Music section, whereas Variation V is tripartite – again involving internal relationships and connections to material heard elsewhere. The closing section is once more made up from two notionally distinct 'variations', and we thus have one of a number of

[27] Abrahamsen, 'Hans Abrahamsen - Wald (2009)'.

paradoxes with this work, as the theme-plus-variations conception of the piece conceals itself within an emergent four-part form, creating a large-scale ambiguity which mirrors the smaller-scale processes of allusion and restatement.

Figure 1. Abrahamsen, *Wald*: formal sketch.

Section	Bars	Tempo marking	
'Theme'	**1-108**		
i)	1-36	♩.=88	*Allegro con brio ("wie aus der Ferne")*
ii)	37-72	𝅗𝅥 =66	*Poco meno ma maestoso, poco grottesco e ironico*
iii)	73-90	♩.=100	*Allegro vivace e agitato ("aufgeregt")*
iv)	91-108	♪ = 88	*Meno mosso, soave e fluente*
Variation I	**109-267**		
i)	109-170	♩.=92	*Allegro con brio (ancora "wie aus der Ferne")*
ii)	171-237	𝅗𝅥 =77	*Poco meno, maestoso ma poco lamentoso*
iii)	238-253	♩.=100	*Allegro vivace e più agitato ("sehr aufgeregt")*
iv)	254-267	♪ = 88	*Meno mosso, soave e fluente*
Variation II	**268-408**		
i)	268-321	♩.=94	*Allegro con brio (sempre "wie aus der Ferne")*
ii)	322-381	𝅗𝅥 =82	*Un poco meno, lamentoso e melancolico*
iii)	382-401	♩.=100	*Allegro vivace e agitato ("wieder aufgeregt")*
iv)	402-408	♪ = 88	*Meno mosso, soave e fluente*
Variation III	**408-442**	𝅗𝅥 =32	*Adagio misterioso ("Nachtmusik")*
Variation IV	**443-473**	𝅗𝅥 =32	*Stesso tempo*
Variation V	**474-581**		
a)	474-489	♩.=64	*Con nuova energia ("wie ein plötzliches Erwachen")*
b)	490-521	♩ =144	*Vivo furioso ("vielleicht eine Jagd")*
c)	522-581	♩ =165	*Presto volante ("galoppierend, immer vorwärts")*
Variation VI	**582-594**	♪ = 66	*Andante mesto*
Variation VII	**595-605**	♪ = 64	*Più lento*

These start right at the beginning. As Abrahamsen observes in his note, the piece grows out of the opening of his 1978 wind quintet *Walden* (the link to Thoreau is explicit there);[28] thus, rather as with the Double Concerto, this piece reuses – doubles – previous music. The original material (the first 16 bars of *Walden*) acts as a kind of progenitor to a variety of different versions of the motif. In *Walden* a horn-call fourth, B♭–E♭ is initially answered by a rising third, D–F, from flute, clarinet and bassoon – in a comparable way to Canon 1 of

[28] Abrahamsen, 'Hans Abrahamsen - Wald (2009)'.

Schnee, the response gradually 'moves through' the call, so that on the fourth iteration their positions are completely exchanged.[29] In *Wald* this material is simplified to involve only two pitch classes – the D–G call heard alternately from bass flute / horn is answered by the same rising fourth from harp / kalimba, alongside pulsed sustained notes from horn, bass flute, double bass and cello, the whole underpinned by a combination of sextuplet and quintuplet D–G double stops, quasi-tremolando, from violins. Important here, however, is the interplay between the conventionally-tuned diad and one a sixth tone below (equivalent to the seventh harmonic) – so that, for example, the initial response from harp, horn and double bass sounds lower (see Example 5, above).

Part ii of the 'theme' expands this initial diad a semitone outwards in both directions, employing a C♯–F♯, D–G, E♭–A♭ hexachord. Now each fourth call is answered by a rising, apparently rhythmically elastic hexachordal figure – initially a straightforward scale, but gradually transformed through another 'shifting' technique; as Chandler has shown in some detail, each of the fourth intervals embedded within the line is subject to its own systematic 'displacement process'. For example, in moving from the first to the second statement the C♯–F♯ diad moves one crotchet earlier, whilst the E♭–A♭ comes one triplet crotchet later; the result is a pitch order that runs C♯–D–F♯–E♭–G–A.[30] The overall effect of this passage is of a doubled, distorted version of the opening – Abrahamsen marks it 'poco grottesco e ironico'. This leads to a sudden 'clarification' in part iii: now using only a tetrachord D–F–G–A (the D–G diad remains embedded), rapidly-moving even-note patterns in several simultaneous subdivisions of the beat are dispersed across the ensemble, punctuated by occasional *sforzando* pitches from strings. More of a contrast is presented by the final type of material, bars 91–108, with a slower-moving sense of gradual flow created through the total chromatic,

[29] As Chandler has shown, the process here is one of gradual phase shifting: the horn begins its call every 20 crotchets, whereas the flute, clarinet and bassoon use repeating periods of 16⅔, 16 and 15 crotchets respectively; Chandler, 'Recontextualization and Variation', 28-9.

[30] Chandler, 'Recontextualization and Variation', 73–4 & 76.

and much use of paired semiquavers to build oscillating lines which appear slowly to descend; a low *B♭'* from piano provides a clear anchor – a contrast to the predominantly treble register used to this point. The fourth motif is still present, although now forming part of longer and more lyrical three- or four-note lines; otherwise, the relationship between this music and that heard at the very beginning initially seems tangential, as if from a different place altogether.

These four types therefore make up what Abrahamsen calls his 'theme', and as Figure 1 shows, in the two variations that follow they are again presented in the same order. However, they are also subject to variation. Section iv is the least transformed, as each time the basic gestures remain intact and the soundworld strongly defined (for instance, each version arrives on the same low accented B♭ from harp and piano), but the others undergo some significant changes, which are briefly outlined in Figure 2.[31] One approach used in both Variations I and II is the transformation of scale through the manipulation of grid structures that was observed earlier in this and a number of other works. Figure 2 shows the barring: whilst Variation I has a similar number of total beats, Variation II is significantly shorter. [32] However, this is complicated by the way in which either similar material is spread across an altered barring structure – as mostly happens in the Theme and in Variation I – or a significantly different amount of material is involved. For example, section i in the Theme involves four call-response gestures, each aligned with the repetition grid, and immediately repeated; in Variation I there are six such gestures spread across the gridlines, now involving eight fewer beats, whereas Variation II presents just one call and one response – a kind of 'slow motion' version. For section iii, Variation I involves exactly the same amount of material as in the

[31] Chandler has explored in detail many of the variation processes involved; the current discussion focusses on those aspects that contribute most clearly to perception of musical form, and particularly the manipulation of scale.

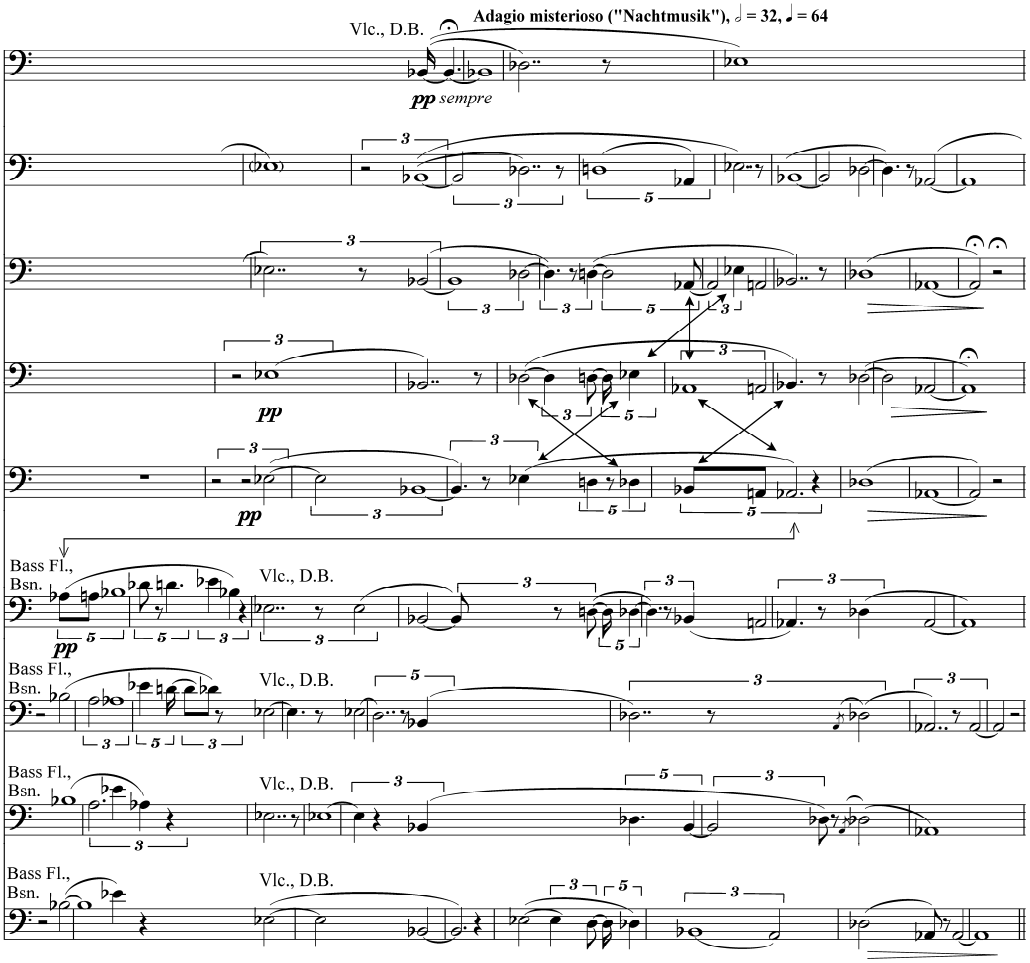
[32] In the absence of repeated bars to define the 'grid', double barlines in the score have been used as markers.

Theme, arranged similarly within the barring, but the different repetition structure modifies how that appears on the micro-level; Variation II, by contrast, consists of twenty bars without any repetitions, which means that, in something of a paradox, more musical material now takes up less time. It is this complex relationship between different versions of a limited palette of ideas that give the first third of *Wald* a particularly elusive and intangible quality – whilst individual gestures are straightforwardly defined, the ways in which they return and the sense of progress and scale that are involved are all rather more complex.

Figure 2. Abrahamsen, *Wald*: initial theme and variation process.

		i)	ii)	iii)
Theme	**Tempo**	♩. = 88	𝅗𝅥 = 66	♩. = 100
	Phrase structure	2-bar 'introduction' 4 call-response, each repeated	2-bar 'introduction' 4 call-response, each repeated	horn – trumpet / violin alternation: 4-2, 3-2, 3-4 (bars)
	Grid (bars)	3/8 I 2 I: 9 :I: 8 :I: 9 :I: 8 :I	2/4 I 2 I: 8 :I: 9 :I: 8 :I: 9 :I	12/8 I 1 I: 2 :I: 3 :I 4 I: 3 :I I: 2 :I 3 I
	Length	70 (2 + 68) ♩. [36 bars of material]	70 (2 + 68) 𝅗𝅥 [36 bars of material]	28 𝅝. [18 bars of material]
Variation I	**Tempo**	♩. = 92	𝅗𝅥 = 77	♩. = 100
	Phrase structure	2-bar 'introduction' 6 call-response	8 call-response (intertwined)	horn – trumpet / violin alternation: 4-2, 3-2, 2-3 (bars)
	Grid (bars)	3/8 I 2 I 8 I 7 I 8 I 7 I I 8 I 7 I 8 I 7 I	2/4 I 7 I 8 I 7 I 8 I I 7 I 8 I 7 I 8 I 7 I	12/8 I 2 I: 2 :I: 1 :I 1 I: 2 :I I 1 I: 1 :I 1 I: 2 :I 3 I
	Length	62 (2 + 60) ♩.	67 𝅗𝅥	24 𝅝. [16 bars of material]
Variation II	**Tempo**	♩. = 94	𝅗𝅥 = 82	♩. = 100
	Phrase structure	6-bar 'introduction' 1 call-response ('slow motion')	7 call-response (intertwined)	through-composed (horn throughout); sustained pitches added
	Grid (bars)	3/8 I 6 I 6 I 6 I 6 I 6 I I 6 I 6 I 6 I 6 I	2/4 I 8 I 7 I 8 I 7 I I 8 I 7 I 8 I 7 I	12/8 I 20 I
	Length	54 (6 + 48) ♩.	60 𝅗𝅥	20 𝅝.

The two principal types of material remaining are those that make up the 'Nachtmusik' section, Variations III and IV, and the 'sudden awakening' that leads into the invocation of the hunt, Variation V. The first of these is much more straightforward: it is predominantly monophonic, involving in Variation III a slow-moving melody from cello and double bass, with Variation IV adding interpolations from bassoon and bass flute; long sustained pitches, initially in the bass, later in the high treble register, support the melody, with occasional notes from celesta, piano, trumpets and horns punctuating the texture. This passage clearly evokes Bartók's Night Music, and in particular the fourth-saturated cello and double-bass solo line of the Concerto for Orchestra; it begins from the *B♭'* which is the end goal of the fourth section of the Theme and first two variations, and is built from a hexachord of the type used in part ii of the theme: two three-note chromatic clusters separated by a perfect fourth, here D♭–D♮–E♭–A♭–A♮–B♭ (the initial fourth motif permeates many aspects of the music). The melodic line at the heart of these variations is a prime example of transformation by gradual process; Example 8 shows a way in which this can be understood as modifications of an initial statement – pitches are interpolated and removed, their order is reversed or repermuted, and in Variation IV retrograde versions of a decreasing amount of the line already heard are inserted (and marked by the change in instrumentation). The result is the creation of a meandering melodic line where much remains familiar, but again Abrahamsen plays with identity and difference – a kind of variation in miniature, indicative of the type of ambiguity achievable even when the most apparently straightforward material is presented in a clear, unadorned way.

Example 8. Abrahamsen, *Wald*: Variations III and IV, bars 408-73, 'Nachtmusik'.
Wald, music by Hans Abrahamsen, © Copyright 2009 Edition Wilhelm Hansen. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.

In complete contrast, what follows is dense both on the surface and in terms of its deeper construction, and connects with the types of pre-compositional pitch structures on display in Abrahamsen's work of the 1970s.[33] This Variation is tripartite, with the first part most clearly evoking the agitated flock of birds that Abrahamsen mentions in his programme note.[34] The initial 'sudden awakening' combines fast rising fifth gestures from strings – strongly

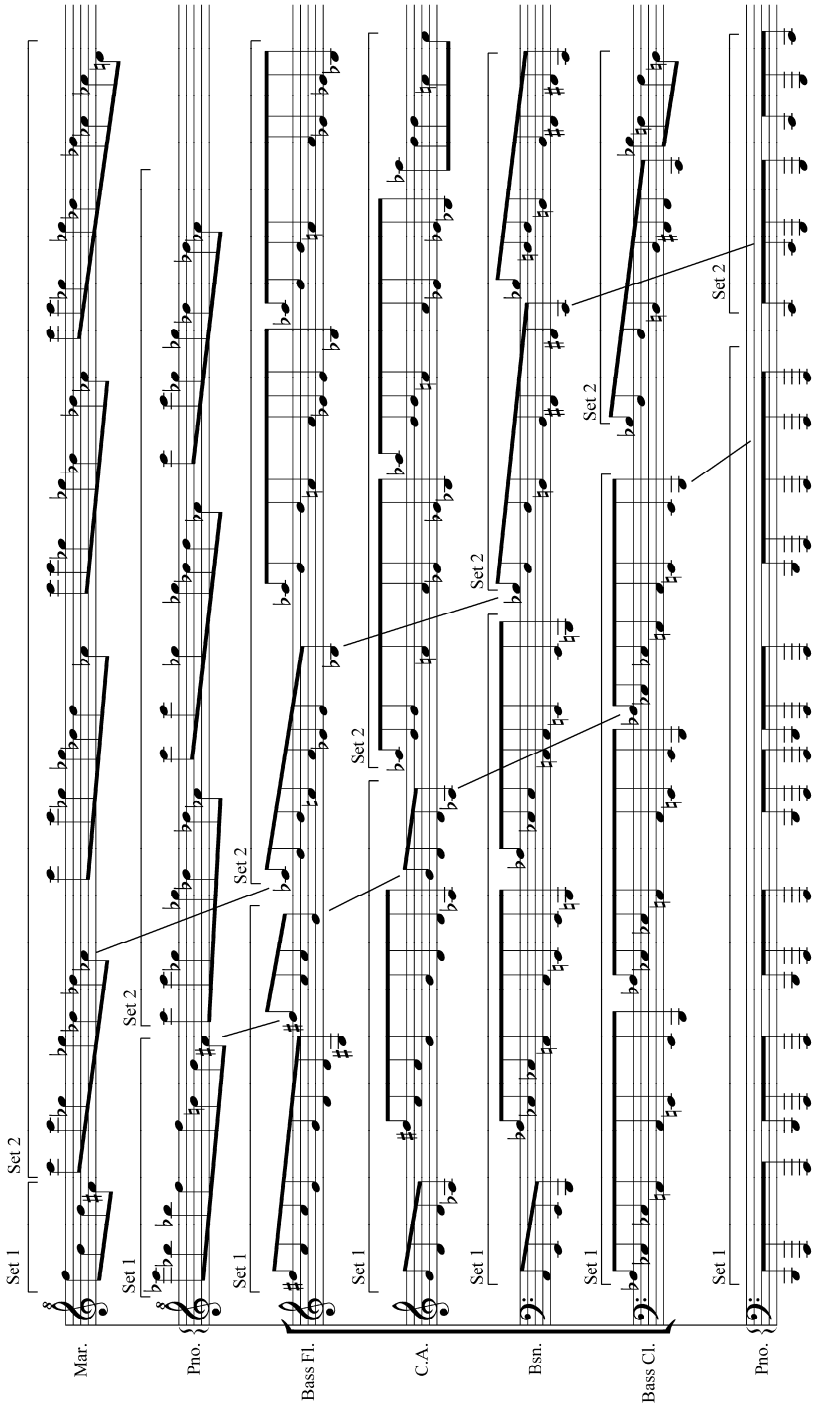
[33] See, for example, Ernste's discussion of the first movement of *Winternacht* ('Hans Abrahamsen's *Winternacht*', 10–28); the same music is also considered in Ståle Kleiberg, 'Hans Abrahamsens musikk, poetisk billedkraft i musikalsk form', *Studia Musicologica Norvegica* 14 (1988): 89–114.

[34] Chandler, in contrast, reads the material first presented as part iii of the Theme as representative of flocks of birds ('Recontextualization and Variation', 45 & 82).

reminiscent of the basic motif of Schumann's 'Vogel als Prophet' from *Waldszenen* – with pairs of *sforzando* falling fourths from the remainder of the ensemble. Each of the stacked-fifth lines, e.g. A♭–E♭–E♭–B♭–F♮, is built on one of the pitches of a diminished tetrachord A♭–C♭–D♮–F♮; changes of pitch centre mostly align with new gestures, creating a shifting harmonic underpinning. The descending fourths delineate a rather more complex underlying structure, which is comparable to those used to generate the *lydstyrt* ('diving sounds') that occur in works such as *Winternacht* or *Lied in Fall.*[35] This pitch material is shown in Example 9, along with the principal instruments involved in presenting each of the seven layers: there are two fixed-octave sets of pitches, built from stacks of perfect or augmented fourths. In an effect somewhat reminiscent of a Shepard Tone, the continual looping back of each instrumental line gives the effect of descent without any overall motion – an illusion that again connects to Escher's visual art, and specifically lithographs such as *Ascending and Descending* (1960) or *Waterfall* (1961). Each pair of instruments plays the material in canon, and complete statements of each set occur through the texture as a whole – two such examples are indicated in Example 9. The music begins 'in flight', already someway through articulating Set 1, perhaps a result of working from the midpoint – the two clearest complete statements of each set – outwards. The rhythmic complexity that results from the overlaying of the instrumental strands, involving the simultaneous use of multiple tuplet divisions of the beat and unpredictability as to the appearance of individual fourth pairs, means that the underlying structural principle is not immediately obvious: the density and rapidity of the result mitigates against tracking the process involved.

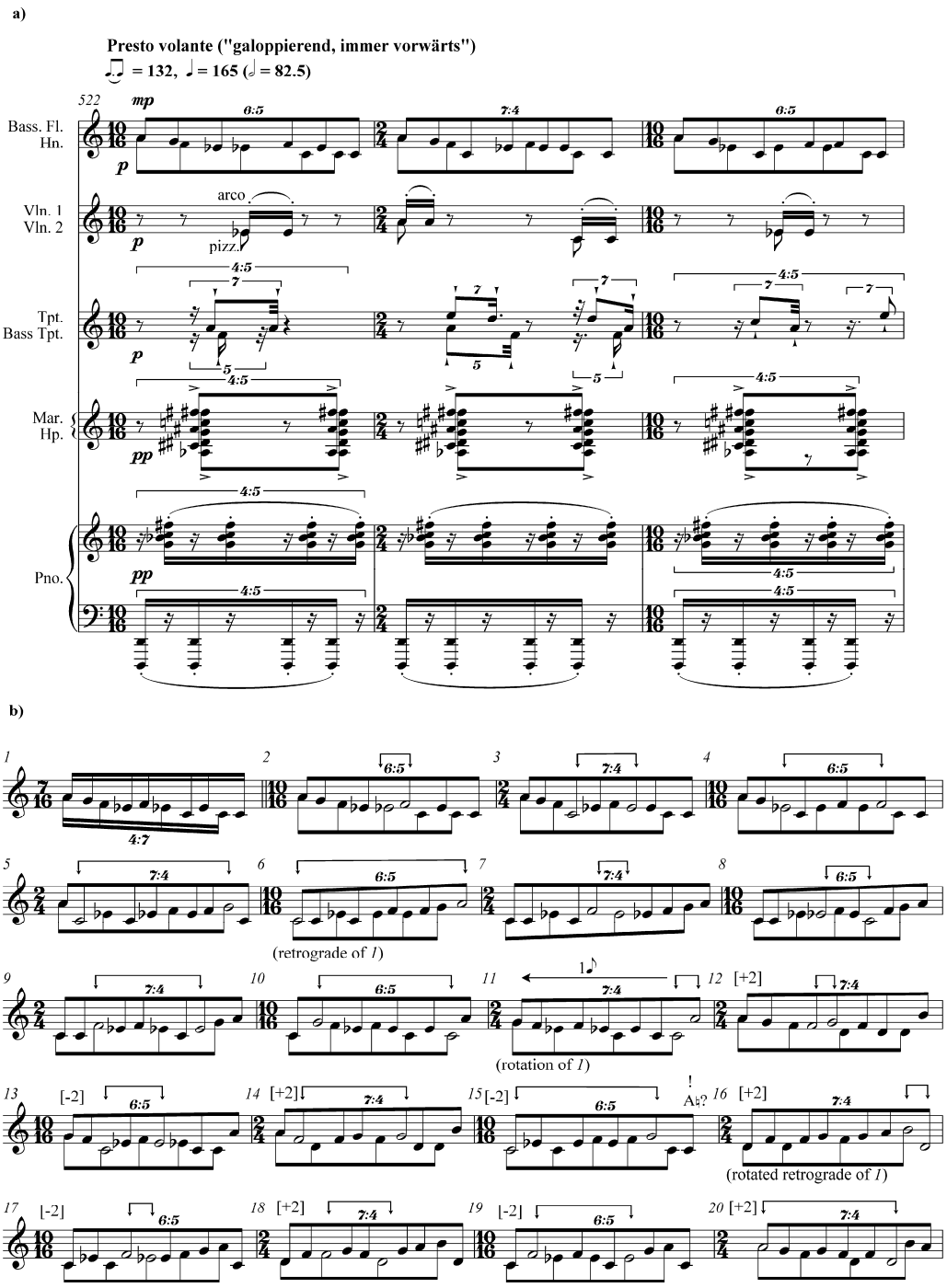
[35] See Christensen, 'New Music of Denmark', 85; and Ernste, 'Hans Abrahamsen's *Winternacht*', 11.

Example 9. Abrahamsen, *Wald*: pitch structure, bars 474–489.



The subsequent part of this variation, marked ‘vielleicht eine Jagd’ thus represents something of a clarification. Held together by a fast, continuous semiquaver pulsation, it emphasizes three adjacent fourths: A–D, B–E and C–F♯, each of which forms part of a fixed-octave pitch collection made up of stacked perfect / augmented fourths; the first of these, in descending order D–A–E♭–B♭–F, is a subset of Set 2 used previously. Each sonority is projected for only

a few bars at a time – the clarity of the uppermost pitches and the swift alternation between them results in a greater sense of diatonicism. Strings continue to play rising arpeggios of stacked fifths, and now the trumpets also emphasize another pitch collection, E–D–C–A–G–F, and it is this set that comes to the fore in the final and most extended part of this variation. This music is again constructed around alternating time signatures: initially 10/16 and 2/4, with bars mostly subdivided into even groups of notes (6, 5, 4 and 7 & 4 respectively), then, from bar 562, 10/16, 6/8, with subdivisions of 4, 5, & 6. Example 10a shows the way in which three strands of material are overlaid: whilst harp, piano and marimba maintain a continuous, even oscillation between chromatic sonorities, again made up predominantly of stacked fourths, trumpets project a more complex rhythmic pattern continuing with the six-note diatonic pitch collection; much clearer, however, is the pentatonic material introduced initially by bass flute, horn and violins that gradually transfers to most of the rest of the ensemble. This idea is derived from part iii of the 'Theme' section, as is the underlying tetrachord – as it progresses that is revealed directly, and it will be no surprise that the continually-changing melodic profile is the result of systematic transformation. Example 10b illustrates how the ten-note resultant pattern of each bar undergoes a switching process which spreads from the inside out, producing a series of 'variations' of the original, including retrograded and rotated forms. Although the alternation between transpositions from bar 532 onwards cuts across this, making it more difficult to track its progress aurally, the process here generates an evolving series of patterns which, in combination with the other instrumental layers and the final *più mosso*, propel the music forwards until its sudden interruption mid-flow.

Example 10. Abrahamsen, *Wald*: a) layered material bars 522–4; b) transformation process bars 521–40. *Wald,* Music by Hans Abrahamsen, © Copyright 2009 Edition Wilhelm Hansen. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.

What follows – the 'aftershock' of Variation VI – returns us to the world of the Theme, with bars 589–94 presenting a thinned-out version of part iv, bars 91–108; the descending chromatic material from piano, harp and percussion are now missing, leaving the bass

clarinet and viola lines much more prominent. Before that, a brief passage combines longer, angular melodies with accented stabs from piano and harp, echoed by kalimba; the A♭–D centricity suggests both a stretching of the opening perfect fourth by a semitone, and the condensing of the first two parts of the Theme – the fourth and its chromatic expansion – into just a few bars. The emphasis placed on an E♭–G♭–A♭–B♭ tetrachord characteristic of part iii in the subsequent four bars reinforces this idea of compression. All this can be seen as yet another type of transformational process: a simple recall reaching back over almost the whole length of the work; as Chandler puts it, 'this is a different sort of recontextualization… it is clearly not repeated material, but it does have its origins in the contextual criteria of earlier material'.[36] The final section, which in the score Abrahamsen identifies as a further variation, thins the music down even more. From an initial E♭ centricity via a number of accented pitches which reinvoke the Night Music of Variation III and IV, the piece ends on an implied cadence, where a rare triad, G♭-major, 'resolves' onto an open fifth F–C; as a result, this final sonority is given new ambiguity – is it the point of resolution itself, or does it form a quasi-dominant of B♭ minor? And how might it relate to the D–G sonority with which the whole work opened?

So *Wald* ends almost where it began, but of course during the last twenty minutes our understanding of its initial material has been changed, distorted, subject to sudden interjections, and taken in new and unexpected directions. Everything might appear calm again, but, in line with a Romantic conception of the natural world that is self-consciously evoked here – and the model of Schumann's *Waldszenen* is once again useful in this context – we are changed internally by that confrontation as our 'farewell' takes place in a radically-altered context to our 'entry'. Key here is the allusive sense of form that Abrahamsen creates

[36] Chandler, 'Recontextualization and Variation', 90. Chandler has also shown the way in which these final two sections of the music continue and recontextualize transformations set in motion in the Theme and first two Variations.

in this work, allowing for straightforward repetition of clearly-identifiable material, more complex transformation processes that take that material in unexpected directions, and sudden contrasts and dislocations which grow unpredictably from common seeds. The bringing together of multiple perspectives and techniques in this way creates a complex and challenging view of a traditional formal practice – the variation – and Abrahamsen's music in *Wald* therefore once again reinvents and reinvigorates, drawing a new and enchanting world out of those familiar building blocks.

Paradoxes and Illusions

Several creative ambiguities thus emerge from an examination of Abrahamsen's recent output. The first turns upon the relationship between the intuitive and the systematic. Whilst smaller-scale systems abound – and common processes are often found across a number of works – on the larger scale there is rather less of this self-conscious framing of the systematic, with solutions to the question of developing form being more varied and specific to individual pieces. Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, Abrahamsen himself has expressed this the other way around: 'The tighter I now shape the form, the more freedom remains for the detail. Form and freedom: where possible I want to try to unite these two levels with my music.'[37] However, the 'tightness' of form of which he speaks should not simply be equated with systemisation, and the reuse of material and of particular compositional techniques suggests that the originality or otherwise of the detail is subservient to larger-scale concerns of shape and expressive potential – it is perhaps those, after all, that remain the primary compositional questions to be solved in any individual work.

Bound up with the use of systems, however, is the relationship that develops between the apparent simplicity of some of the compositional approaches adopted here, and the

[37] Frei, '"Es darf in der Musik keinen Totalitarismus geben"', 11 (my translation).

complexity of the resulting music. Although the 'New Simplicity' label may no longer be useful – if indeed it ever was – Abrahamsen continues to pose the question of how music can be complexly simple, or simply complex. First of all, there is an apparent willingness to juxtapose passages of straightforward clarity with those whose form is much harder to grasp on an initial acquaintance – compare, for example, the second and third movements of the Double Concerto. More profoundly, however, his works suggest the interplay and ambiguity inherent in such ideas. Abrahamsen comments that his return to composing after nearly ten years represents the finding of an answer to exactly this problem of how to combine the complex and the 'naïve'; his recent output, he says, 'is anything but simple, even if a part of it appears almost to be naïve…. [The canons in *Schnee*] are metrically and rhythmically extremely complex, sometimes also microtonal, but they are also essentially very simple. This kind of naivety is sometimes like the attempt to return back to something to make a different world out of it.'[38] Abrahamsen suggests here how the complex and simple are intertwined – in fact, that they coexist within the same space – rather than being manifestations of contradicting aesthetic positions they have sometimes been held up to be.

Such a paradox may not be unique to Abrahamsen's music, but is one that he appears to embrace. Particularly characteristic of his recent output is the creative use of such apparent contradictions. Thus there are games played with repetition, where material is re-presented, doubled, sometimes refracted so that questions of identity are put into question. There are passages where literal restatement is destabilising rather than stabilising, or where gradual, consistent change produces outcomes that are inherently unpredictable. And there is the interaction of multiple structuring devices to create forms that remain ambiguous and resistant to any straightforward characterisation or overall sense of trajectory.

[38] Frei, '"Es darf in der Musik keinen Totalitarismus geben"', 11.

Writing some twenty years ago about compositions that preceded Abrahamsen's 'hiatus', Gavin Thomas commented on the creation of what he called – going back to the visual work of Escher – 'illusions'; he suggested that in a piece such as *Winternacht* the way that different types of music were used meant that they became 'simply images in a potentially infinitely reflecting hall of mirrors'.[39] Examination of the more recent works indicates that, despite changes in compositional technique and a tangible shift in soundworld, this idea remains a useful lever to understand their construction. These illusions operate on two levels. The first is more obviously comparable to the visual devices in some of Escher's graphic art, and involves setting up analogous aural structures to manipulate perception; these include the control of pitches to create a pseudo Shepard tone, or putting into question the status of questioning and answering phrases. The outcome is the creation of a music that misdirects the ear, with part of the delight it produces coming from recognising that process whilst submitting to it nonetheless. But there is also a deeper level in which it creates illusions, and these are not necessarily mapped directly onto audible structures. Instead, key here is the idea of illusion as a kind of deception, in which a false impression is initially created – and for the mind as much as the ear. The music can thus call into question what constitutes simplicity and what complexity, or undercut distinctions between rational system and subjective intervention, or between repetition and variation. This continual, ongoing suspension and deferral of first appearances is a recurrent and important idea here. In his discussion, Thomas praised Abrahamsen's works for their 'precision, clarity, and originality',[40] and those are certainly terms that apply to those pieces examined here. But, as we have seen, they can also involve the exact opposites: processes are neither always wholly precise nor consistent, large-scale forms need not remain clear, and works often draw upon existing repertoire in a

[39] Gavin Thomas, 'Something Amiss with the Fairies', *The Musical Times* 135, no. 1815 (1994), 267-72 (p. 270). Elsewhere Abrahamsen has suggested that his works are 'pictures of music'; see, for example, Björn Gottstein, 'Hans Abrahamsen – Geraueschen', 2008 <www.geraueschen.de/12.html> (accessed 27 October 2017), Kullberg, 'Konstruktion, intuition og betydning', and Wikshåland, 'Tradisjonsløshet som siste skrik?'

[40] Thomas, 'Something Amiss with the Fairies', 271.

complex and self-conscious way. It seems that it is the creative interplay of those many paradoxes that go some way to giving the music its undeniable strength and maybe also finally its strange and revealing beauty.

Thus Abrahamsen's work allows a number of differing perspectives to come together and cohabit. It negotiates its own particular territory between apparently distinct categories and illustrates how a music can be both immediately appealing and still reward detailed attention to its construction. It provides a space in which directness of expression can combine with a delight in the use of rational processes, and where that immediacy of emotional response is sublimated into a framework which shapes it and gives it additional meaning and depth. On the other hand, it illustrates the ways in which those apparently logical and coherent processes can give rise to instability, and puts into question the predictability of straightforward systems. It also engages with concepts of identity – with material repeated, modified, and transformed – suggesting a fluidity that seems characteristically twenty-first century in outlook. All this tends towards a common concern with the potential released by finding multiple solutions to complex questions. Whilst intimations of the broader cultural work that Abrahamsen's music can undertake must remain only tentative, as examinations of its poetics, cultural context and its wider reception are essential for any such understanding, it seems that, in our current, seemingly fractured societies, a music which can suggest ways in which apparently competing narratives can coexist, recombine in creative ways, and finally reach new alignments and accommodations is something that we increasingly need.