

‘TIME BLOWN UP HERE AND THERE’: FORM AND RHYTHM IN HANS ABRAHAMSEN’S *LET ME TELL YOU* EXPLORED

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Abstract: Hans Abrahamsen and Paul Griffiths’s *let me tell you* has been received with unusual adulation since its premiere in 2013. This article explores the work’s place within the broader context of European literature, music and art, before shifting to a consideration of the piece’s subtle hybrid form and its unique rhythmic structures. Abrahamsen’s great interest in close (but not exact) symmetrical relationships is considered at some length, and the influence of figures ranging from St Augustine to Joyce, Bach to Webern, Caspar David Friedrich to Per Kirkeby is also observed. Extensive conversations with the composer in recent years provide primary material, and Abrahamsen’s fascination with the musical properties of time – its construction and its destruction – displayed in these conversations has informed the decision to structure the article around these twin properties of form and rhythm.

I

Commissioned by the Stiftung Berliner Philharmoniker, and premiered in Berlin in December 2013, Hans Abrahamsen’s *let me tell you* has swiftly established itself as a twenty-first-century masterpiece. The commission arose from a correspondence between the work’s dedicatee, the soprano Barbara Hannigan, and its poet, Paul Griffiths, who intended the work as birthday present for his wife. It was thanks to Hannigan’s association with the Berliner Philharmoniker that the work was premiered by them.¹ Since its premiere, it has received performances by some of the most prestigious orchestras in the world: among others, Boston Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris and Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks.² Furthermore, the work has received a unanimously positive critical reception, receiving the accolade from one critic as a ‘21st-century

¹ Hans Abrahamsen, Barbara Hannigan and Paul Griffiths, *Barbara Hannigan in Conversation with Hans Abrahamsen and Paul Griffiths*, added by Digital Concert Hall, 21 December 2013, www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/16874#watch:16874-4 (accessed 24 May 2019).

² Music Sales Classical, *Hans Abrahamsen: Performances*, www.musicsalesclassical.com/Calendar.aspx?cpn=1&ps=100&Composer=Hans+Abrahamsen&WorkTitle=Let+me+tell+you&SearchMode=1 (accessed 22 May 2019).

Nordic masterpiece³ and a popularity with audiences that has seen ‘the kind of ovation typically awarded star virtuosi’.⁴

Given this exceptional reception, it is perhaps surprising that this enthusiasm has not been reflected in academic circles: as yet, the composer has received dispiritingly little scholarly attention. There is a number of musicological articles on the composer in Danish, and an extremely small (albeit growing) number published in English- and German-language journals; further primary literature exists in the form of interviews with the composer on websites such as YouTube and the Berliner Philharmoniker’s Digital Concert Hall. These resources cannot, however, be said to provide the kind of in-depth musical analysis of Abrahamsen’s work that it warrants. I am grateful to Hans Abrahamsen for his immense generosity in discussing *let me tell you* with me over the course of an entire day in Copenhagen in May 2019, and to Paul Griffiths, with whom I corresponded via email in November 2021.

This article will focus on two issues that I consider particularly pertinent to the piece: form and rhythm. I will argue that it is extremely close, near symmetrical proportions that define Abrahamsen’s approach to rhythm, and that this quality has a strong expressive bearing on *let me tell you*. Throughout I seek to address broader aesthetic considerations that can locate Abrahamsen’s position in contemporary music and his relationship with the traditions that have preceded him. This will, I hope, provide a means of understanding how his highly idiosyncratic compositional voice has come into being.

II

The text of *let me tell you* is by the critic and novelist Paul Griffiths and is a reworking of excerpts of his 2008 novel of the same name.⁵ The novel employs a lexicon derived entirely from that used by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*; the song cycle employs only those words used by the character Ophelia. Two aspects of the novel, I believe, must have been of particular interest to Abrahamsen: the topics of time and snow, both of which are important in his work.

Time, as a topic, is most prominent in the third song in the cycle:

There was a time, I remember, when we had no music,
a time when there was no time for music,
and what is music if not time –

time of now and then tumbled into one another,
time turned and loosed,
time bended,

time blown up here and there,
time sweet and harsh,
time still and long?⁶

³ Andrew Clements, ‘LSO/Rattle/Hannigan review – Abrahamsen’s masterpiece soars’, *Guardian*, 11 January 2019, www.theguardian.com/music/2019/jan/11/lso-simon-rattle-barbara-hannigan-barbican-review (accessed 24 May 2019).

⁴ Anthony Tommasini, ‘Review: “Let Me Tell You” Has Its New York Premiere’, *The New York Times*, 18 January 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/arts/music/review-let-me-tell-you-has-its-new-york-premiere.html (accessed 24 May 2019).

⁵ Paul Griffiths, *let me tell you* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008).

⁶ Hans Abrahamsen, *let me tell you* (Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 2013), iii [score], https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/let_me_tell_you_48313 and www.musicsale-scclassical.com/composer/work/48313 (accessed 1 February 2022).

This text is derived from an unassuming passage towards the opening of the novel:

There was a time when I could sing, and then I would sing and sing. My father would love to have me sing to him, at the end of a hard day. But that's all over. Now he would say, if one should ask, that he's no time for music. And what is music if not time: time of now and then tumbled in to one another, time turned and loosed, time sweet and harsh, flowers of time?⁷

The passages highlight time's ontological and topological ambiguity. Griffiths remarked that he likes 'a comment of [St] Augustine's that we all experience time but cannot say what it is':⁸

What is time? Who can explain this easily and briefly? Who can comprehend this even in thought so as to articulate the answer in words? Yet what do we speak of, in our familiar everyday conversation, more than time? We surely know what we mean when we speak of it. We also know what is meant when we hear someone else talking about it. What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know.⁹

'The protagonist', Griffiths says, 'of *let me tell you* – novel or song cycle – does try to say what' time is.¹⁰ A more salient influence than St Augustine might be found in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which also make extensive reference to the *Confessions* and whose tone seems palpable in Griffiths' text. The *Four Quartets* are especially relevant here in their consideration of the relationship between music and time, which both Griffiths and Eliot assert are intrinsically connected, Eliot remarking in 'Burnt Norton' that 'music moves / Only in time',¹¹ a view mirrored in Igor Stravinsky's famous postulation in the *Poetics of Music* that:

All music, whether it submits to the normal flow of time, or whether it disassociates itself therefrom, establishes a particular relationship, a sort of counterpoint between the passing of time, the music's own duration, and the material and technical means through which the music is made manifest.¹²

III

It is the presence of snow in Griffiths' novel, however, that surely must have been most appealing to Abrahamsen. Snow features, to varying degrees, in Abrahamsen's *Winternacht* (1978), *Zwei Schneetänze* (1985), *Schnee* (2008), *Schneebilder* (2013), *Drei Märchenbilder aus der Schneekönigen* (2018) and *The Snow Queen* (2018). One might add to that list his *Märchenbilder* (1984), whose third movement seems to pre-empt Abrahamsen's later 'flying' style (as found, for example, in the third movement of *Drei Märchenbilder aus der Schneekönigen*), and *Flowersongs* (1973), which Abrahamsen says has 'clear links... to Canon 2a from *Schnee*'.¹³ Many of these works are linked musically. *Schnee*, *let me tell you* and *The Snow Queen* all open with a melody found in the upper stave of [Figure 1](#). This melody is, Abrahamsen

⁷ Griffiths, *let me tell you*, p. 26.

⁸ Private correspondence with the author, 18 November 2021.

⁹ St Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 230.

¹⁰ Private correspondence.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 2015), volume I, p. 183.

¹² Igor Stravinsky, *The Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons* (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), p. 32.

¹³ Music Sales Classical, *Flowersongs: Hans Abrahamsen*, www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/21793/Flowersongs--Hans-Abrahamsen/ (accessed 31 January 2022).

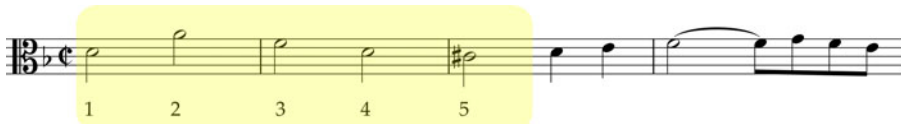


Figure 1:
The subject of Contrapunctus I (J.S.
Bach, *Die Kunst der Fuge*).

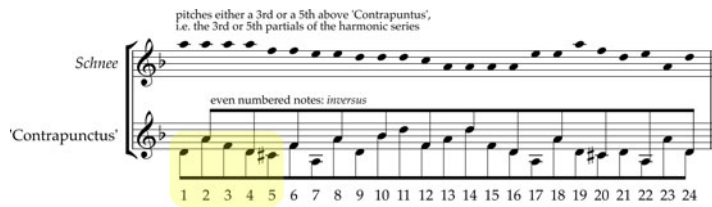


Figure 2:
The construction and genealogy of
the 'snow' melody.

says, 'almost like snow that is falling down'.¹⁴ It is, in a slightly round-about way, derived from the opening five pitches of the subject of Contrapunctus I from J. S. Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge*, BWV 1080.

As he explained, Abrahamsen takes these opening pitches – D, A, F, D, C sharp – and, using a method similar to Per Nørgård's Infinity Series, constructs a much longer melody (the 'Contrapunctus' melody, seen on the lower staff of Figure 2).¹⁵ In it, the even numbered notes play the inversion of the entire melody. The melody in the upper staff (the 'snow' melody) is then chosen from pitches either a 5th or a major 3rd above the 'Contrapunctus' melody. The 'snow' melody, in effect, could be described as the heard harmonics (the 3rd or 5th partials of the harmonic series) of the unplayed, silent fundamentals of the 'Contrapunctus' melody; this in turn helps to explain its typically delicate orchestration.

In the novel *let me tell you*, the snow scene takes place in the final chapter, in which Ophelia takes command of her own destiny, leaving the castle and walking out into a snow storm:

I go out now. I let go of the door, and do not look to see my hand as I take it away.
Snow falls. So: I will go on in the snow. I have my hope with me, and a staff in my hand.
I look up, as if I could see the snow as it falls, as if I could keep my eye on a little of
it and see it come down, all the way to the ground.
I cannot. The snow flowers are all like each other, and I cannot keep my eyes on one.
I have given up and gone on.¹⁶

The passage in the song cycle similarly appears at the very end, in the seventh and final song.

I will go out now.
I will let go the door
and not look to see my hand as I take it away.

¹⁴ William Robin, 'Hans Abrahamsen: Fame and Snow Falling On a Composer', *The New York Times*, 9 March 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/arts/music/hans-abrahamsen-fame-and-snow-falling-on-a-composer.html (accessed 31 January 2022).

¹⁵ Private conversation with the author, May 2019.

¹⁶ Griffiths, *let me tell you*, p. 137.

Snow falls.
 So: I will go on in the snow.
 I will have my hope with me.

I look up,
 as if I could see the snow as it falls,
 as if I could keep my eye on a little of it

and see it come down
 all the way to the ground. I cannot.

The snow flowers are all like each other and I cannot keep my eyes on one.
 I will give up this and go on.
 I will go on.¹⁷

The text is rich in allusion. Most apparent is the closing paragraph of James Joyce's 'The Dead', the final story in *Dubliners* (1914):

It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland... His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.¹⁸

The points of comparison between these two texts are numerous. Both snow scenes come at the end of both novels, marking the apotheosis, in muted tones, of their respective narratives. In both 'The Dead' and *let me tell you*, snow acts as a prompt for their respective protagonists' solitary decision to journey: in 'The Dead', Gabriel's to 'set out', and in *let me tell you*, Ophelia's to 'go out'. Furthermore, the metaphor upon which Joyce's closing sentence is hinged (in which snow falling and the descent to death are compared) creates an atmosphere of palpable pathetic fallacy that also exists, I believe, in Griffiths' text, and one that is acutely enhanced in Abrahamsen's setting.

The sense of a solitary acceptance of the need to journey is also found in 'Der Abschied' in Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908–09), setting an adaptation by Hans Bethge of 'Seeing You Off' by the Tang poet Wang Wei (王維, c. 699–759).¹⁹ A trope in many Tang poems, the text sees the parting of two friends, one of whom expresses their unflinching resolve to depart: 'Ich geh, ich wandre' ('I go, I wander'; in Wang's original poem, 'then you go with no more questions asked'),²⁰ the friend says, recalling Ophelia's determination that she 'will go on'. In Mahler's setting the parting seems to be given the (perhaps autobiographical) association of a journey from one world to the next, the composer notably attaching the line 'Ewig... Ewig... ' to the end of his cycle.²¹ The muted, valedictory sense of closure in both Mahler's *Das Lied* and Abrahamsen's *let me tell you* suggests that, to Abrahamsen, this passage also concerns mortality. Indeed, the parallel between Ophelia, who 'will let go the door' and 'go on', and Laurence Oates, who died in the Antarctic on the *Terra Nova* Expedition of 1912, is not hard to miss: Oates' last

¹⁷ Abrahamsen, *let me tell you*, iii.

¹⁸ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 225.

¹⁹ Wang wrote two poems with this name; the first line of the poem in question is 'I get off my horse and give you ale to drink'. Peter Harris, ed. and tr., *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 217.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ This line is quoted in Abrahamsen's *The Snow Queen*: 'Eternity... Eternity...'. Hans Abrahamsen, *The Snow Queen* (Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 2018), pp. 414–24 [score], www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/57908/Snedronningen-Hans-Abrahamsen/ (accessed 31 January 2022).

words, recorded by R. F. Scott, were 'I'm just going outside and may be some time.'²² And, of course, the quality of existential, snowy wandering is omnipresent in Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* (1828), setting text by Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827).

Through the association with poetry set by Mahler and Schubert, *let me tell you* points to a latent Romanticism in Abrahamsen's work and to the significant role that fairytales play in it. The very word ('Märchen') appears in two of Abrahamsen's pieces: *Märchenbilder* and *Drei Märchenbilder aus der Schneekönigen* (which in turn is in homage to Robert Schumann's *Märchenbilder*, op. 113, 1851). It was no surprise, then, that Hans Christian Anderson's *The Snow Queen* (1844) would provide the story for Abrahamsen's only opera.

These interests, manifested in a highly pictorial approach to word-painting, may help point to the fingerprints of Abrahamsen's style, but they are not entirely unique. Two artistic figures whose work is similarly aesthetically situated are the composer Anton von Webern (1883–1945) and the Danish artist Per Kirkeby (1938–2018), both of whom have exerted a significant influence on Abrahamsen. He remarked to me that his work is 'like Webern', and strict integrity of musical material is a prerequisite for both composers, not to mention a shared interest in symmetry and canon. But it is the common fascination with nature that is perhaps more meaningful. Webern's early sketches for the Quartet, op. 22 (1928–30), for example, could come straight out of those by Abrahamsen, replete as they are with markings concerning the 'coolness of early spring', 'snow and ice, crystal clear air' and 'the children on ice and snow'.²³

Winter imagery was also important to Per Kirkeby, whose initial studies in arctic geology at the University of Copenhagen (1957–64) led him to research expeditions to both Greenland and the Arctic.²⁴ Kirkeby's depiction of winter imagery is, like Abrahamsen's, infused with Romanticism: *Fram* (1983), for instance, sees the depiction of 'ragged shards' of ice that 'pay homage to Caspar David Friedrich's Romantic masterpiece *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24)',²⁵ and the *Untitled (Greenland)* (1995) series employs a genre and medium popularised by Romantic watercolourists.

IV

I will now shift my attention to the complex and highly efficient form of the song cycle, and the form's relationship with large-scale harmonic trajectories. Table 1 organises the components of the piece's form and describes large-scale harmony. Since I believe that the piece can be understood as a formal hybrid, I offer several options for its analysis.

Table 1 shows a number of important formal parallels with the work of other composers:

- a) with Mahler's Symphony No. 5 (1901–02) in the unequal organisation of movements into 'parts';

²² R. F. Scott, *Scott's Last Expedition* (London: John Murray, 1964), p. 155.

²³ Julian Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 188.

²⁴ A catalogue of Kirkeby's paintings lay open in Abrahamsen's study when I visited: it was, he said, informing his work on the Horn Concerto (2019).

²⁵ Achim Borchardt-Hume, *Per Kirkeby* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), p. 21.

Table 1:
Formal hybridity and dualistic orbits in *let me tell you*

Song	Bar	Durations					Form(s)						Tempo(s)	Large-scale harmonic trajectory, involving two harmonic orbits (α and β) around B \flat - and G $+$ respectively	
		Conceptual durations, drawn from Abrahamsen's sketches	Performance durations from Andris Nelsons, Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks recording (2016, Winter & Winter, 9102322)	As a three-part song cycle	As a seven-movement song cycle	As a rondo form	As a sonata-rondo form (type-4 sonata form)		As a multimovement symphonic form						
		Parts (N.B. 3:2:2 ratio)	1:1:1 '8-minute relationship'	Odd n: 'increasing in duration'	Even n: 'decreasing in duration'									α orbit key (function within orbit)	β orbit key (function within orbit)
Let me tell you how it was	1	12'	N/A	4'		3'51"	I (past)	1	A	Exposition	p ^{ff}	N/A	<i>Adagio mesto</i>	B \flat - (α tonic)	N/A
O but memory	1		8'		3'	2'52"		2	B		S ¹	First movement	<i>Andante; più mosso</i>	N/A	G $+$ (β tonic)
	58									N/A	N/A	Inter-movement TR;		V: see Figure 3	Modulatory: see Figure 3
There was a time	1			5'		6'		3				Slow movement		B \flat - (somewhat obscured; α tonic)	N/A
Let me tell you how it is	1	8'	8'		2'	2'04"	II (present)	4	A	Development	p ^{ff}	N/A	Walking but limping 'in limping time'	G \flat + (α submediant)	N/A
Now I do not mind	1			6'		6'14"		5	C		S ²	Bipartite 'presto' (scherzo) movement		(pivot: α H relation)	D $+$ (β dominant)

Continued

Table 1:
Continued

Song	Bar	Durations					Form(s)						Tempo(s)	Large-scale harmonic trajectory, involving two harmonic orbits (α and β) around B \flat - and G $+$ respectively	
		Conceptual durations, drawn from Abrahamsen's sketches					Performance durations from Andris Nelsons, Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks recording (2016, Winter & Winter, 9102322)	As a three-part song cycle	As a seven-movement song cycle	As a rondo form	As a sonata-rondo form (type-4 sonata form)				
		Parts (N.B. 3:2:2 ratio)	1:1:1 '8-minute relationship'	Odd n : 'increasing in duration'	Even n : 'decreasing in duration'										
I know you are there	1	8'	8'		1'	1'02"	III (future)	6	A	Recapitulation	p ^{rf}	N/A		B \flat – (α tonic)	N/A
I will go out now.	1			7		10'43"		7	D		S ³ (with strong S ¹ resemblance)	<i>Adagio</i> finale	<i>Adagissimo</i>	N/A	G $+$ (β tonic)

- b) with Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* – a cycle of six songs for two voices and orchestra, but designated 'eine Symphonie' in the first published edition²⁶ – in its formal hybridity and valedictory finale apotheosis;²⁷
- c) with Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874) and Igor Stravinsky's *Agon* (1957) in the employment of a supra-structure ritornello, unequally distributed interpolations of which appear amid other movements: respectively the 'promenade', and the 'prelude' and two 'interludes';
- d) and with works such as Antonín Dvořák's *Violin Concerto* (1879) and Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* (1942-45)²⁸ in the employment of an inter-movemental transition (TR).

I choose these examples not as an exercise in observing mere analogoussness with earlier works, but as a way of locating the formal paradigms that may have been exerting an influence on Abrahamsen, and, as such, identifying the rhetorical function of each component of the form.

It is important to note that the first, fourth and sixth songs form a kind of large-scale ritornello (Abrahamsen's word),²⁹ which heralds the beginning of each of the three parts into which the work is divided, and also has the function of announcing that Part I concerns the past, Part II the present and Part III the future. In terms of proportion, the durations of the songs are also organised so that odd-numbered songs increase in duration by approximately a minute upon each iteration, and even-numbered songs decrease in duration by the same amount; this has the added benefit that the ritornello, therefore, halves in duration upon each iteration.



Before leaving a discussion of formal properties, it is appropriate to pause briefly in order to make an important observation about the structural function of fermatas in *let me tell you*, and how their use alters the perception of time. Fermatas are significant as they are Abrahamsen's only means to break one of the most basic organising rules of his piece: that all temporal durations are organised in accordance with pulse and metre. In *let me tell you*, there are five fermatas: one at the end of each part (in bar 82 of the third song, 174–75 of the fifth song and 121 of the seventh song), and two in the middle of the third song at bars 42 and 66 (see [Table 2](#)).

The last three fermatas function in a way extremely common in Western art music, effectively extending the silence at the end of the piece. The effect is more nuanced, however, than merely inviting the performer to prolong the silence before the applause: rather, Abrahamsen feels, it provides a 'window' into another kind of time, a kind of 'infinite' time without metre.³⁰ In this way the sense of ending at the end of each part of *let me tell you* is defined by not only the resolution of its tonal ambitions but also the dissolution of and liberation from its metrical organisation: the music aspires towards

²⁶ Gustav Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1912) [score].




²⁷ Michael Talbot, *The Finale in Western Instrumental Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 117.

²⁸ The *Symphony in Three Movements* is well known to Abrahamsen: during figures K–W of *Nacht und Trompeten* (1981), the first movement (figures 79–81) and, in particular, the third movement are quoted extensively.

²⁹ Private conversation with the author, May 2019.

³⁰ Private conversation with the author, May 2019.

Table 2:
The placement of fermatas across the structure of *let me tell you*

Song no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
							

‘infinite’ time. This also connects to a desire common in Abrahamsen’s music for the perceived suspension of time itself: scores and sketches commonly ask that ‘time stands still’ or ‘stops’.³¹ Whether this can be read in Christian terms, as eternity, is not entirely clear.

The first two fermatas (in bars 42 and 66 of the third song) are much more unusual. In these instances Abrahamsen employs fermatas to break and, to quote from the poem being set at that point, ‘loosen’ his metrical system. The temporal organisation becomes a striking means of word-painting; by employing fermatas to provide a ‘window’ into a kind of time that is not governed by metre, Abrahamsen can portray the sense of time’s topological warping discussed earlier (‘time blown up here and there’).

V

In terms of large-scale harmony, *let me tell you* charts a territory that can be described as the coexistence of two related albeit distinct harmonic ‘orbits’, one focused on B♭ minor, and its diatonically related keys, and one on G major, and its (hereafter α and β respectively). Generally speaking, the ritornello songs are associated with α , other songs, excepting song 3, with β . On the largest structural level, α plots a trajectory that can be described as I–V–I–VI–I. β ’s large-scale trajectory is even more familiar: I–V–IV–V–I, in effect a large-scale perfect cadence. Figure 3 depicts these trajectories.

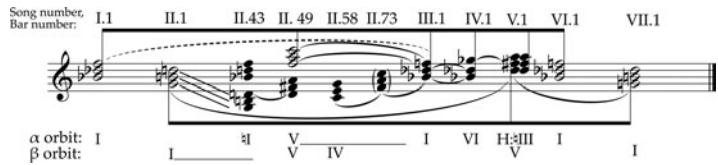
Abrahamsen notes that he thinks harmonically in a manner that is, to use his word, ‘Schenkerian’³² – albeit a kind of Schenker that is more concerned with *Ursatz* than *Urlinie*. In other words, Abrahamsen is more concerned with large-scale harmonic relationships, their balance, resolution and *near*-symmetrical arrangement, than with the resolution of a set of large-scale voice-leading procedures.

I describe the large-scale harmonic trajectory as the coexistence of two harmonic orbits, not as a more complex single trajectory, as no attempt is made to link α and β by any strategy other than the simplest step of parsimonious voice leading (see, for example, from bar 49 of the first song to the first bar of the second song), or a simple overlap of harmonies, as from bar 12 of the sixth song to the beginning of the seventh song. While the coexistence of two tonal systems within one large-scale form may be rare, it is not without precedent: Schumann’s String Quartet No. 1, op. 41 (1842), for example, alternates between two orbits related by neo-Riemannian leading-tone

³¹ See Abrahamsen, *The Snow Queen*, pp. 456, 467 and 483, and Hans Abrahamsen, *Vers le Silence* (Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 2021), p. 108 [score], www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/61925/Vers-le-Silence-Hans-Abrahamsen/ (accessed 1 February 2022).

³² Private conversation with the author, May 2019.

Figure 3:
Large-scale harmonic currents in *let me tell you*.



exchange: A minor and F major. It is important to note that in *let me tell you* there is one crux point of overlap between the systems: in the second part of the fifth song, from bars 112 to 175 the prevailing β -dominant harmony (that is, D major) can also be understood in terms of α 's hexatonic pole, the flattened mediant.

VI

Having considered some essential features of *let me tell you*'s large-scale structure, I will shift my attention now to questions of the small-scale: namely, rhythm. The genesis period for Abrahamsen's highly idiosyncratic rhythmic writing came during the years in which he did not compose new pieces, broadly corresponding to the 1990s, and these techniques inform most of his post-2006 works.

Abrahamsen's rhythms operate in a zone somewhere between the additive–divisive binary famously postulated by Curt Sachs in 1953. In other words, he frequently employs additive time signatures (or two bars of unequal duration that rhythmically function as one super-bar divided in two) but divides them in an irregular, complex manner.³³ The rhythmic system can be best described as the relationship of extremely close proportions that operate at two levels: horizontally (that is, across time, concerning micro- to macro-structure), and the vertically (that is, simultaneously, or polyrhythmically). I will discuss each 'level' in turn, using the final song, 'I will go out now', as my example.

Bars 41–42 present a stunning evocation of snow falling, played by two piccolos (see [Example 1](#)).

In the first bar of the example the polyrhythmic relationship between the two parts can be described as 7:5, in the second as 10:7. The durational ratio of each note between the two parts in the upper voice can be described as 49:50 [\approx 1:1],³⁴ in the lower voice as 1:1.³⁵ This passage, therefore, exemplifies Abrahamsen's dual interest in close rhythmic proportions: the moderately complex 'vertical' (polyrhythmic) proportion of 7:5, and the exceptionally complex 'horizontal' proportion of 50:49.

The ratio 50:49 has important structural implications in the following passage. The counterpoint is such that a chromatic scale is hocketed between the two instruments in accordance with the polyrhythm described above. [Example 2](#) shows how this passage would appear if it was written as a single line.

³³ Curt Sachs, *Rhythm and Tempo: A Study in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1953).

³⁴ Because 7 quavers \times 7 septuplet semiquavers = 49, and 5 quintuplet demisemiquavers \times 10 quavers = 50. The ratio 50:49 is musically almost imperceptible, hence my suggestion that 49:50 \approx 1:1.

³⁵ Because 10 quavers \times 10 quavers = 1, and 14 quavers \times 14 quavers = 1.

Example 1:

Hans Abrahamsen, *let me tell you*,
Song 7, bars 41–42, piccolos 1 and 2.

Example 2:

The hocketing counterpoint of
Example 1 expressed as a monody.

Example 3:

Hans Abrahamsen, *let me tell you*,
soprano and violin melody, vii. 61–
69.³⁹

This forms the basis of the violin and soprano melody in bars 59–109 of this final song, albeit rhythmically augmented by approximately ten times.³⁶ The ratio 49:50 is accounted for in the alternation, between each bar, of tempos of MM84 and MM86.^{37,38}

Example 3 shows that the violin and soprano melody (my example shows only bars VII. 61–69) is a rhythmic augmentation of Example 2: the septuplet demisemiquavers and quintuplet demisemiquavers both convert into quavers, and are superimposed on to a framework of alternating bars of 5/4 at MM84 and 7/8 at MM86.

Abrahamsen underpins this texture with a durationally constant pulse in the two percussion parts, a constancy allowed by the fact that one 5:7-tuplet quaver at MM84 \approx one 7:10-tuplet quaver at MM86, a metric modulation clearly stated in the score.

³⁶ Because 1 septuplet demisemiquaver at MM=60 sounds at MM=840; the tempo in bar VII.60 is MM=84.

³⁷ This is in fact approximate, because $84 \div 49 = 1.71428571429\dots$ and $1.71428571429\dots \times 50 = 85.7142857143\dots$ just below 86.

³⁸ Maazel's metronome – that is, beats per minute.

³⁹ Bar 4 of this example: sic erat scriptum!

Example 4:
 Hans Abrahamsen, *let me tell you*,
 Song 1, bars 6–7, soprano.

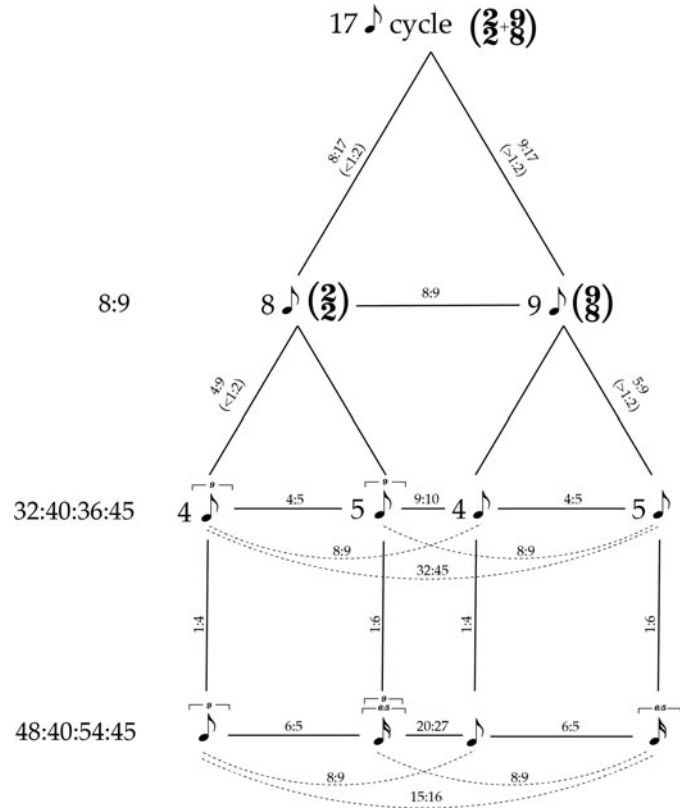


Figure 4:
 Rhythmic hierarchies and ratios in
 Song 1, bars 6–7.

Before making a few comments about the musical effect and thought behind this rhythmic construct, I will briefly examine an example from the ritornello songs. I take only two bars of the soprano part from the first song as my example: (Example 4).

Figure 4 provides an analysis of these rhythms in terms of rhythmic hierarchy. Each level denotes a degree of division. The top level denotes the highest common rhythmic factor, a 17-quaver-beat cycle. Branching lines denote that the higher level may be divided in two ways; vertical lines denote that there is only one option for division. I mark next to these lines the nature of the division, plus the resultant ratio between the upper and lower levels. Horizontal lines or curved lines mark the ratio of the values they are connecting; on the left of the diagram, I write the ratio for the entire level.

Figure 4 shows that the majority of proportions are nearly equal to either 1:2 (4:9, 5:9, 8:17, 9:17) or 1:1 (4:5, 5:6, 8:9, 9:10, 15:16).⁴⁰ While (presumably deliberately) there is no overarching ratio that accounts for all relationships, it is the quality of near-symmetry that

⁴⁰ There are no ratios of 6:7 or 7:8, so the projected series 4:5, 5:6, 6:7... is in fact a cul-de-sac.

creates a sense of rhythmic unity and musical flow and satisfies Abrahamsen's desire for universal integrity. These rhythms are complex, and difficult to perform, yet there is a kind of mathematical beauty in them, their near-symmetry possessing a quality of natural or biological perfection that would be impossible if simple rhythmic ratios were employed.

Abrahamsen states that:

My imagination works well within a fixed structure. . . The more stringent it is, the more freedom I have to go down into detail. Form and freedom: perhaps much of my music has been an attempt to bring the two worlds together.⁴¹

The role of 'freedom' is especially interesting here and connects to Abrahamsen's treatment of the fermata. Indeed, composed rubato is an important component of his rhythmic language. He said that, especially in his alternation of MM84 and MM86 (which, importantly, is a non-exact metric modulation), he was seeking to find a common ground between, as he put it, 'Furtwängler and Toscanini':⁴² in other words, a 'mathematical' realisation of the kind of large-scale rubato favoured by Wilhelm Furtwängler.

Furtwängler is an important figure in orchestral tradition⁴³ and by mentioning him in relation to his own rhythmic structures Abrahamsen identified his relationship with tradition as an important strand in his compositional thinking. Abrahamsen's work frequently re-evaluates 'traditional' practice: a harmonic trajectory that is dualistic not singular; a form that is seemingly a hybrid of a multiplicity of 'traditional' forms; a rhythmic construction that is fascinated with proportions that are nearly, but not, 'traditional' proportions of 1:1 and 1:2 (derived from, for example, 8+8-bar phrase or quaver-demisemiquaver relations); and an approach to performance practice that refers to, but rethinks, the rubato techniques employed by Furtwängler, canonic in the (Austro-German) performance tradition. These qualities point to the Romanticism of Abrahamsen's music, discussed earlier with reference to his choice of extramusical imagery.

VII

'And what is music if not time?' asks the soprano in *let me tell you*. In this article I have discussed the hybrid formal make-up of *let me tell you*, identifying formal similarities with earlier works to locate its relationship with musical tradition, the coexistence of a dualistic harmonic trajectory within this form, the structural, melodic and rhythmic implications of near-symmetrical proportions and the impact and significance of non-metrical factors (namely, fermatas and rubato) on *let me tell you's* relationship with time and tradition. I have also discussed the appeal of the themes of time and snow found in Griffiths' text, and the implications that these interests have on Abrahamsen's own style.

Several people to whom I have spoken, perhaps out of an analyst's irresistible desire for music to conform to overly neat structuralist principles, assumed that Abrahamsen's music accorded with the complex realisation of essentially one governing mathematical principle that permeated all levels of temporal organisation. This is in fact

⁴¹ Anders Beyer, 'Hans Abrahamsen', *Oxford Music Online*, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:10246/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000046325> (accessed 25 May 2019).

⁴² Private conversation with the author, May 2019.

⁴³ Given Furtwängler's relationship with the Berliner Philharmoniker, it is perhaps no surprise that he was on Abrahamsen's mind when composing *let me tell you*.

not the case, but if there is one principle that affects all levels (including harmonic) of Abrahamsen's work, then it is an intense fascination with extremely close, near-symmetrical proportional relationships. It is this slightly chaotic – a word I use carefully, with all mathematical connotations intended – friction that drives the music forwards. But mathematics is not everything in Abrahamsen. Anders Beyer writes that:

Abrahamsen's music possesses a particular epic quality. He likes to tell stories, to create musical images for the listener. . . It is as if works talk to each other, new works borrowing material and structure from old.⁴⁴

Both points here are true. Indeed, as Abrahamsen told me, *let me tell you* quotes from Mozart's *Maurerische Trauermusik* and Abrahamsen's own *Schnee*, employs a vocal technique borrowed from Monteverdi and Rihanna, alludes to chords in Stravinsky's *Le Baiser de la Fée*, features a pastiche 'pop' song and pays homage to Terry Riley's *In C*. Given the disparity and eclecticism of these sources, one might think that Abrahamsen is a composer like Messiaen or Knussen, apparently assembling works from pre-existing sources.⁴⁵ Yet, Abrahamsen's work presents an exceptional degree of integration, so much so that he describes his working method as 'almost like serialism' in his preference for integration.

Ultimately, though, the most salient feature of his work is its pictoriality. All the processes Abrahamsen employs are at the service of his text, his desire to portray the kind of time it describes. Per Kirkeby, whose work I discussed earlier in this article, remarked that:

I am a modern painter. I paint pictures and not landscapes. I will not allow myself to be inferred by this nice, clean image as the painter of nature. But neither can I just paint as a protest against this image. I cannot sell my art as a provocation. So I cannot do anything else but what I do. I can write, and collect some of my writings into books, at least thereby saving myself from this image. And perhaps some people may read them and also reflect that all that stuff about 'landscape' and 'romantic' may be rather more complicated that it seems.⁴⁶

Abrahamsen's approach is perhaps rather less unabashed, but the connection between the two cannot be missed.

⁴⁴ Beyer, 'Hans Abrahamsen'.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Yves Balmer, Thomas Lacôte and Christopher Brent Murray, *Le Modèle et l'Invention: Olivier Messiaen et la technique de l'emprunt* (Lyon: Symétrie, 2017).

⁴⁶ Per Kirkeby in Borchardt-Hume, *Per Kirkeby*, p. 143.