Hans Abrahamsen
“let me tell you,” for soprano and orchestra
Text by Paul Griffiths

HANS ABRAHAMSEN was born on December 23, 1952, in Copenhagen, Denmark, and lives there. He wrote “let me tell you,” on texts by Paul Griffiths derived from his novel of the same name, at the instigation of soprano Barbara Hannigan. It was commissioned by the Stiftung Berliner Philharmoniker with the support of the Danish Arts Foundation. The score is dedicated to Barbara Hannigan, who sang the world premiere with the Berlin Philharmonic under Andris Nelsone’s direction on December 20, 2013, at the Philharmonie. The first American performances of “let me tell you” were given by Barbara Hannigan with Franz Welser-Möst conducting the Cleveland Orchestra on January 14 and 15, 2016, in Cleveland, followed by the New York premiere at Carnegie Hall on January 17. These are the first BSO performances of any work by Hans Abrahamsen.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO SOPRANO, the score for “let me tell you” calls for three flutes (first doubling alto flute and piccolo; second doubling piccolo; third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets in A and B-flat, bass clarinet (doubling E-flat clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, percussion (three players: I. xylophone, marimba, vibraphone, glockenspiel, bass drum, Reibeckstein [friction stick]; II. marimba, vibraphone [with bow], tubular bells, whip, Japanese wood block, Reibeckstock; III. glockenspiel, tubular bells, paper on bass drum, whip, tam-tam), timpani, harp, celesta, and strings. Abrahamsen additionally calls for the first and second violins to be separated antiphonally, i.e., to the left and right of the conductor, respectively, with cellos and double basses behind the first violins and violas behind the seconds. The duration of the piece is about thirty-five minutes.

FRANCISCO: For this relief much thanks: ’tis bitter cold, And I am sick at heart.

—Hamlet, Act I, scene 1

Hamlet is a winter’s tale, set in a gray Danish landscape in which nearly all hearts are icy and bleak in the aftermath of the death of the king-that-was, Hamlet’s father. Shakespeare’s Ophelia is a bit of a cipher, whose descent into genuine madness parallels Hamlet’s feigned mental imbalance. In Hans Abrahamsen’s let me tell you, sung in Ophelia’s own words, the theme of winter, the specific motif of snow, are present not only in the text but in the sparkling, gelid sonic textures of the orchestra. Hamlet’s related themes of memory and time and love are contemplated and invigorated in this crystalline environment.

let me tell you takes its title from Paul Griffiths’s novel. Griffiths, the famed novelist, music critic, and librettist whose operatic credits include those for Tan Dun’s Marco Polo and Elliott Carter’s What Next?, published the novel, his third, in 2008. The book is remarkable in many ways, but its greatest virtuosity lies in Griffith’s use only of the 480-some words that Shakespeare allocates to Ophelia in the play. The author stretches this vocabulary into a 130-page novel, told in Ophelia’s voice, that folds in other styles such as fragments of a play, poems including variously bawdy or cajoling and convincingly Cavalier sonnets, letters in others’ voices, and surprising narrative excursions falling well outside the scope of the play. (He even quotes a Beatles lyric.) The constraints of Ophelia’s vocabulary necessitate frequent reuse of words, idioms, and phrases that circle back into the flow of the language in ways analogous to the development of musical motifs. The occasional stretching of homonyms—Ophelia’s “bore” apparently to stand in for “boar,” for example—as well as the invention of names such as the Beckettian “Do-Do” and “Be-Be” lends a winking flexibility and humor to Griffith’s self-imposed rules. We also experience a broadening of Ophelia’s personality that explores a melancholy only hinted at in Shakespeare.

It was in early 2010 that the origin story for Hans Abrahamsen’s let me tell you began. Paul Griffiths’s wife Anne contacted the Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan about doing something for Griffiths’s birthday involving let me tell you, without the author’s knowledge. Hannigan already knew and admired the novel. Hans Abrahamsen’s name came up early in the conversation: Griffiths had contacted the composer expressing his love of Abrahamsen’s long ensemble piece Schnee (“Snow”), and in the back-and-forth of their correspondence sent the composer a copy of let me tell you. These threads all came together rather quickly, and it was Hannigan’s idea, following appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic, to suggest that orchestra as the work’s commissioning body. And so it happened, with support from the Danish Arts Council, leading to the premiere sung by Hannigan and conducted by Andris Nelsone at the Philharmonie in December 2013. Immediately seen as a significant new work, the piece was recently honored with the prestigious 2016 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition.

Hans Abrahamsen played horn at a high level and earned his degree in music theory from the Royal Danish Academy of Music. He first published his compositions as a teenager, but expanded his studies by working
privately with Per Nørgård and Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen; later he also worked with György Ligeti. He went on to join the faculty of the Royal Danish Academy. As a composer Abrahamsen has sought to find his own sonic and expressive world, a concern reflected in his choice of teachers. Early on he broke with dominant methods of the day, refining his expressive voice through simplification, but without adhering to pre-defined styles. Like many young composers, he was involved in an alternative new-music performance group, and was also concerned with political issues. At the same time, he has engaged with and honored composers of the past, recasting works of Bach, Schumann, Satie, Debussy, and Nielsen in new ensemble guises. Orchestration is no mere window dressing for his musical thinking, but a significant foundational philosophy. Abrahamsen’s intimate familiarity with and delight in the particularities of individual and combined instruments verges on a kind of alchemy—part science, part magic, equal doses experience and curiosity. Although the solutions of orchestration must be solved anew from one piece to the next, the individuality of his approach shines through and provides a measure of the stylistic cohesion of his catalog as a whole.

Abrahamsen composed several orchestral works in his twenties, including Strattifications (1975), which was premiered by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, and Nacht und Trompeten (“Night and Trumpets”), a commission from the Berlin Philharmonic instigated by Hans Werner Henze and premiered when Abrahamsen was only twenty-nine. He has written a number of concertos, including Lied in Fall (1987) for cello and chamber orchestra for Christopher von Kampen and the London Sinfonietta. The Double Concerto for violin, piano, and orchestra was composed for violinist Baiba Skride and pianist Lauma Skride, who gave its first performances in October 2011 with the Royal Danish Philharmonic and then the Swedish Chamber Orchestra. His Left, alone, for piano left-hand and orchestra, was written for pianist Alexandre Tharaud on commission from West German Radio and a consortium of orchestras including the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Danish Philharmonic, and the Rotterdam Philharmonic. The premiere took place just this past month, with Mr. Tharaud as soloist with the WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln led by Ilan Volkov, who has been a consistent champion of the composer’s music. The 2000s have been especially busy for Abrahamsen. In addition to let me tell you and Left, alone, he wrote, among other works Ten Sinfonias for the Iceland Symphony Orchestra (premiered in 2012), Four Orchestra Pieces for the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, and his most celebrated piece prior to let me tell you, the ensemble work Schnee. The imagery of snow and winter, which factors in let me tell you, has been a recurrent theme in Abrahamsen’s music, along with other natural phenomena.

let me tell you is Abrahamsen’s first work for voice and orchestra, though among his orchestrations is a 1998 cycle of four Evening Songs by the Classical-era Danish composer C.F.E. Weyse. He had written very few vocal works prior to the present piece, but worked very closely with soprano Barbara Hannigan, who is both a virtuoso and a highly committed teacher, to learn the capabilities of vocal production generally and the specific qualities of Hannigan’s own voice and style. Hannigan has made a reputation for close study of the music she performs, making her an intense but ideal collaborator for a composer with Abrahamsen’s concern for detail. She sang through an enormous amount of repertoire for Abrahamsen, explaining “who broke the rules, and why”—such as the placement of certain vowels on high notes, phrasing, breathing, and so forth. In that regard, she said in an interview preceding the Berlin Philharmonic’s premiere of the piece, let me tell you is a challenge particularly in the final movement, where “everything stretches, everything expands…. It’s as if she [Ophelia] becomes taken over by everything. Joyful, exhilarating, painful.”

let me tell you is in three big parts, each of which is subdivided into sections. Part I is focused on time and memory; Part II, love; and Part III, what Abrahamsen calls a “snow landscape,” an overarching mental state of snow, as in Schubert’s Winterreise. (At the end of Griffiths’s novel, Ophelia is in a state of suspension, deciding whether or not to continue forth into the snow-covered landscape.) At the start of the piece, flutes, violins in harmonics, and celesta establish a crystalline sheen that seems to be present (even if inaudible) throughout the piece. Into this environment the soprano sings, “Let me tell you how it was,” the rhythm of her phrasing precise but supple, as though the tempo is controlled by her breath alone. (Intricately interlocking rhythmic phrases and counterpoint, likely perceived at first blush as an almost improvisatory flexibility, reflect Abrahamsen’s highly developed sense of craft and structure.) Musical strata proceed at different rates, with the vocal part suspended as if in a cloud, but even the soprano’s sustained notes have an inner, pulsing life. The second section of Part I, “O but memory,” is contrastingly fast and encompasses a wide range, with startling leaps into the high register: “some things we know and some we do not.” In the third section, “There was a time,” the orchestra for the first time provides a constant foundation in the bass range. Layers of register and tempo—that is, time—are further separated and defined.
Part II begins with a modified echo of the soprano’s first phrase, but with a dark and murky orchestral canvas in contrast with the icy opening of Part I. The whole of Part II is anchored in a more direct, human emotional expression. The first section, “Let me tell you how it is,” is warmly sensuous; the second, “Now I do not mind,” initially features a pulsing texture overlaid with instrumental tics and sparks; the soprano’s part is breathless and antic. The end of the second poem is a texture of sustained overlapping scales with glinting high woodwinds. Part II implicitly evokes the arm’s-length passion Ophelia maintains for Hamlet. Part III is the snow landscape. The first section, “I know you are there,” is a kind of prologue to the long, achingly beautiful song of resigned dissolution that is “I will go out now.” The music has a strongly German-Romantic sensibility undermined and enriched by several factors. Its almost static slowness and its use of natural (that is, non-equal-tempered) harmonic tunings that clash strangely with one another lend it an atmosphere redolent of Ophelia’s burgeoning mental and emotional distance from the world. The snow is overwhelming, reflecting and scattering Ophelia’s sense of self: “I will give this up and go on. I will go on.”

Robert Kirzinger
Composer and annotator ROBERT KIRZINGER is Assistant Director of Program Publications of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Hans Abrahamsen

“let me tell you”
Text by Paul Griffiths (after his novel “let me tell you,” 2008)

I PART

1.
Let me tell you how it was.
I know I can do this.
I have the powers:
I take them here.
I have the right.
My words may be poor
but they will have to do.
There was a time when I could not do this:
I remember that time.

2.
O but memory is not one but many—
a long music we have made
and will make again,
over and over,
with some things we know and some we do not,
some that are true and some we have made up,
some that have stayed from long before,
and some that have come this morning,
some that will go tomorrow
and some that have long been there
but that we will never find,
for to memory there is no end.

3.
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?
II PART

4.
Let me tell you how it is,
for you are the one who made me more than I was,
you are the one who loosed out this music.
Your face is my music lesson
and I sing.

5.
Now I do not mind if it is day, if it is night.
If it is night,
an owl will call out.
If it is morning,
a robin will tune his bells
Night, day: there is no difference for me.
What will make the difference is if you are with me.
For you are my sun.
You have sun-blasted me,
and turned me to light.
You have made me like glass—
like glass in an ecstasy from your light.
like glass in which light rained
and rained and rained and goes on,
like glass in which there are showers of light,
light that cannot end.

III PART

6.
I know you are there.
I know I will find you.
Let me tell you how it will be.

7.
I will go out now.
I will let go the door
and not look to see my hand as I take it away.
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.