



LINN



Nielsen arranged Hans Abrahamsen
Symphony No. 6 & Commotio

ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC SOLOISTS ENSEMBLE
RYAN WIGGLESWORTH



Symphony No. 6 & Commotio

Carl Nielsen (1865–1931)

arranged Hans Abrahamsen (b.1952)

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RYAN WIGGLESWORTH conductor

Symphony No.6 'Sinfonia semplice'

1. Tempo giusto 13:31
2. Humoreske: Allegretto 3:50
3. Proposta seria: Adagio 6:14
4. Tema con variazioni 11:06

Commotio, Op.58

5. Part I: Adagio 4:34
6. Part II: Andantino quasi allegretto 7:42
7. Part III: Andante sostenuto 3:49
8. Part IV: Crotchet = 80 7:37

Total Running Time 58:38

Nielsen arranged Hans Abrahamsen

In 2025, the 100th anniversary of Nielsen's Sixth Symphony – his last – encourages us to revisit the composer's later period in two exceptionally crafted arrangements by fellow-Dane Hans Abrahamsen. Nielsen knew that his life would be shortened by his serious heart condition, and yet far from withdrawing into settled compositional parameters, the final years saw him embarking on a path of surprisingly bold compositional discovery. Abrahamsen's approach here is to distil two vastly different scores with sharpened commentaries, colours and affirmations of Nielsen's distinctive language. Remarkably true to the essence of the original, he underscores Nielsen's vision with unerring respect and a lightly veiled homage to works he knows to be masterpieces.

Notwithstanding its subtitle – 'Sinfonia semplice' – Nielsen's Sixth Symphony is also an emotionally evasive one. Written while the composer was already suffering the ill health that would eventually kill him, it has been viewed by some as a pessimistic work, its ironic tone pointing to the composer's dissatisfaction with both life and music. In an article written shortly before the symphony's completion, Nielsen stated that 'it is no enviable fate to be an artist'; the composer Robert Simpson has compared the symphony's finale to a grinning skeleton. But – such is the ambiguity of musical irony – there is an alternate reading in which Nielsen is simply clowning; that the mockery and silliness (the cartoonish emphases on triangle and bassoon; the parade of caricatures that make up the final movement's Theme and Variations) can all be taken at face value.

Abrahamsen's transcription, written for the Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen, certainly allows more of that light-hearted side to come through. Its emphasis is

on clarity. As in that arrangement, Abrahamsen neither adds nor composes; only edits and pares away. Nielsen's double winds are cut almost in half and his ten brass reduced to a trio of horn, trumpet and trombone. The three percussionists (essential for the symphony's most characteristic passages) are retained, but the strings are trimmed to the one instrument per part arrangement typical of the contemporary sinfonietta line-up.

Finally, the bassoon, which plays an almost concertante role in Nielsen's score, sees a lot of its music given to the less stentorian combination of cello and double bass. In place of the missing wind and brass, Abrahamsen substitutes piano and harmonium which, alongside an almost complete removal of octave doubling, has profound effects on the work's texture and timbre. Everything becomes lighter and a little more bell-like, from the staccato vamping of the first movement to the pinging accents added to the fugue subject of the third (more influences from the Baroque!), while the harmonium adds a carnivalesque touch.

However, that lightness should also not be taken only at face value. There may be something fairy tale-like in Abrahamsen's brightly tinkling arrangements, but as any compatriot of Hans Christian Andersen knows well, fairy tales are frequently darker than their naive surfaces suggest. Elsewhere in his output, Abrahamsen has employed such crystalline weightlessness to imply psychic dissolution or scattering: the colder side to winter's white glow. The end of his Ophelian song cycle *let me tell you*, to give one acclaimed example, sees Ophelia withdraw from the world by stepping into a snow-covered landscape: 'an overarching mental state of snow' that the composer Robert Kirzinger has compared to Schubert's *Winterreise*. Abrahamsen's Nielsen transcriptions may not yet set us among the drifts, but they do reclaim his predecessor's robust romanticism for a less certain, more fragile world.

Commotio for organ was Nielsen's last major work. Finished in February 1931, it received several private performances in the spring and early summer of that year before Emilius Bangert, a former pupil of Nielsen's, gave its public premiere in Aarhus on 14 August. Although already unwell, Nielsen was able to be there, but died three days before Bangert's second performance, in Germany, on 6 October, and this concert became an impromptu and moving tribute.

Appropriately, that last performance took place in the Marienkirche, Lübeck, where the German-Danish composer Dietrich Buxtehude had been organist and Kapellmeister from 1668 to 1707. Appropriate because Nielsen's model for *Commotio* was the organ music of the German Baroque by such composers as Buxtehude and, of course, J. S. Bach, whose ghost is unmistakably present. The 25-minute piece is written in a severe contrapuntal style that Nielsen believed was the only valid way to write for the instrument. It is shaped around two fugues 'to which an introduction, intervening movements and coda cling like climbing plants to the tree-trunks of the forest'. The result is an imposing final statement that its composer said 'must rather be gazed at with the ear than embraced by the heart'. Bangert, for his part, called it 'the only really "great" organ work at all in contemporary music'.

Despite Nielsen's insistence that the organ was an instrument in its own right, and not a kind of orchestra, *Commotio* has received two – very different – orchestrations in the twenty-first century. The version by Bo Holten for the Odense Symphony Orchestra (2007) remains true to the monumental nature of Nielsen's original: rich, passionate and surging. By comparison, Hans Abrahamsen's version, made just five years later for the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, is practically weightless. Abrahamsen untangles Nielsen's dense counterpoint by careful doubling of strings and solo woodwinds, while the brass and timpani are

judiciously drawn into the background. Abrahamsen asks for eighteenth-century horns and trumpets, with natural tuning, and period timpani, which should be played with mallets rather than modern beaters. These may seem curious stipulations for an arrangement of a work that was, after all, composed long after Baroque practices had been left behind. Abrahamsen's intention, however, is not historical verisimilitude but a nod towards the roots of Nielsen's own composition, as well as an acknowledgement of how the practice of transcription itself forces a telescoping of past into present. The result is a work that somehow sounds in three centuries at once, or outside of time altogether.

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RYAN WIGGLESWORTH conductor

Ryan Wigglesworth took up the position of Chief Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in September 2022. He was Principal Guest Conductor of the Hallé from 2015 to 2018 and Composer in Residence at English National Opera (ENO). He held the Daniel R Lewis Composer Fellowship with the Cleveland Orchestra for two seasons (2013/14 and 2014/15) and was Composer in Residence at the 2018 Grafenegg Festival. In close partnership with the Royal Academy of Music, he founded the Knussen Chamber Orchestra, which made its Aldeburgh Festival and BBC Proms debuts in 2019.

In recent seasons, he has appeared with leading orchestras throughout Europe, the USA and Japan, including the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra and BBC Symphony Orchestra, and is a regular guest at the Proms and Edinburgh International Festival.

Also active as a pianist, recent play/direct projects have included concertos by Mozart and Beethoven, and he regularly appears in recital partnering Mark Padmore, Lawrence Power and Sophie Bevan.

One of the leading composers of his day, his first opera, *The Winter's Tale*, was premiered at ENO in 2017. Other works include commissions from the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra and BBC Symphony Orchestra, and song cycles for Sophie Bevan, Mark Padmore and Roderick Williams. His Magnificat was premiered by the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Edward Gardner in 2022, and received its UK premiere with the Hallé in March 2023.

Born in Yorkshire, he studied at New College, Oxford, and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. Between 2007 and 2009, he was a lecturer at Cambridge University, where he was also a Fellow of Corpus Christi College. In 2019, he took up the position of Sir Richard Rodney Bennett Professor of Music at the Academy.

HANS ABRAHAMSEN

Hans Abrahamsen's works are created in a dialogue with what has already been composed; existing works form the basis for new ones.

In the beginning of his career, the composer worked within the framework of the New Simplicity movement of the 1970s, but the 'cool images of music' broke

down. In the latter half of the 1970s, the composer moved into a new phase where Romantic-inspired German titles reflected that the music had become mood-setting. Works like *Winternacht* and *Märchenbilder* combine proportion and adherence to musical rules with poetic expression. Abrahamsen has a strong sensitivity to whether his music is reminiscent of existing pieces. In the 1990s, this sensitivity became burdensome, leading to a pause in his own composing during which he focused on reworking music by other composers.

A more recent key work, *Schnee*, traces backwards through music history with its ten canons, while simultaneously influencing subsequent work such as *let me tell you* for soprano and orchestra. Along with his Horn Concerto and *Vers le silence*, the left-hand piano concerto *Left, alone* forms an important trilogy. Following his Hans Christian Andersen opera *The Snow Queen*, Abrahamsen is now working on his second opera, based on Karen Blixen's *The Dreamers*.





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