WEDS@7: PALIMPSEST
HANS ABRABHAMSEN’S SCHNEE (2008)

Conducted by Steven Schick
With premiere work, ESCHEN
by Ph.D. Candidate Felipe Rossi

Wednesday, April 24th, 2019 | 7 p.m.
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall
Schnee: Ten Canons for Nine Instruments

In the 1990’s, during a prolonged period of writer’s block, the Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen occupied his creative life by arranging the work of other composers. Perhaps the seed for his masterful work Schnee (Snow from the German), finished in 2008, was planted during that time. The precision of Abrahamsen’s musical language in Schnee—an hour-long work in canonic structures, some of which are only 1/72 of a bar apart—creates a structure rooted in logic. At the same time, a sense of poetry, established from the very beginning by the high, cold, airy sound of the violin and the falling motives of the piano, shapes the ephemeral beauty of this music.

~Steven Schick

Here is Schnee in Hans Abrahamsen’s words:

“I arranged some of J.S. Bach’s canons for ensemble—in total seven single standing works from his entire life span. I became totally absorbed into this music and arranged them with the intention of the music being repeated many, many times, as a kind of minimal music. Obviously, I didn’t know which durations Bach had in mind, but by listening to his canons in this way, a profound new moving world of circular time was opened to me. Depending on the perspective on these canons, the music and its time can stand still or move either backwards or forwards. In my own work, an ongoing idea has persisted, of at some point writing a work consisting of a number of canonical movements that would explore this universe of time.”

“There is a pulse in the strings that is very high and very airy….like air. And the melody is almost like snow falling down.”

“I was inspired by snow—the snow as the element falling, but also the snowy landscape. The stillness of the snow and the transition before the spring. It represents feelings of cold, warm, movement, growing, decay.”

“In the ’70s, my music was somehow more pluralistic. In Schnee this pluralism disappears. Somehow this music comes down to its essence.”

“When are writing, you are writing the small things about your life.”

“For me the musical language is the most precise.”

“But I am sure that this will be my last about ‘Schnee’ and ice, and winter. Winter is, in a way, what can you say? Everything has been frozen.”

“Before the spring.”

“Es ist Schnee, es ist Schnee!”

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Eschen - Five Canons for Nine Instruments

Eschen (German for “ashes”) arose out of my longstanding interest in bare and tightly constrained formulas of expression. With the explicit intention to establish connections with the other piece in this program, Eschen is not only an anagram of Schnee but is also a study on canons that uses the same instrumentation and spatial disposition as its companion piece.

Despite their multiple correlations, the canonical strategies in Eschen are designed in a different way from those of Schnee. Abrahamsen tends to work with carefully assembled algorithmic procedures, creating allusive collages and lattices of quotation. Eschen, by contrast, works by erasure, operating in the realm of the vestigial and the leftover. If Schnee is a delicate white-on-white watercolor, Eschen is charcoal hatching or an Etch-a-Sketch drawing.

I. Mambo-Jumbo [contrapunctus primus: canone per augmentationem]
A snippet of a danzón from Pérez Prado is reflected in a sequin through a fractured prism. Instruments start to interrogate one another with patience and poise. The music then tips over into a more nuanced development, forming a Grisey-en-grisaille, rather slavishly.

II. Tendrills [contrapunctus secundus: canone perpetuum cancrizans]
Three palindromic musical gestures are submitted to recurrent rhythmic transformations while a spiral form stretches out and twines around an ostinato-like host. Bending movements generate two counter-twisted helices finally leading to an ephemeral divertimento-hommage to musicians like Nancarrow, Ligeti and Lennie Tristano, who, by perforating time, sought to recompose the prestissimo with maelstroms of particles crashing up against the limits of the possible.

III. Whitten [contrapunctus tertius: canone al rovescio et cancrizans]
A brief series of slenderly contrasted re-imaginings (all loosely based on a monophonic conductus by Perotinus) are invisibly linked together. A musical garden of misleading images, all made of shades fading to white in which the only thing apparent is repetition. A continuous largo with barely perceptual colors creates feeble scarifications on time, in a movement both cyclical and inexorable. It is a slow process that appears to be working on the timbre from within.

IV. Iota Cell Cry [contrapunctus quartus: canone anagrammatico all’unisono in memoriam Cecil Taylor]
Frenzied lament-like figurations on two pianos obsessively pervade the whole piece while jittery and stumbling rhythmic motifs bounce among all other instrumentalists’ hummingbird hands. Each of the “88 tuned drums” has its own unit structure, often doubled with various cabinets of echoes and multiple resonance chambers. At the same time the rest of the band surges forward or halts without any clear warning, conjuring nearly the same physical affect I felt the last time I listened to Cecil Taylor, through the front window of his apartment, down the street from the Brooklyn DMV.

V. Aetherna [contrapunctus quintus: canone a 2 per tonos – quaerendo invenietis]
A sublimated sarabande made of obscured solos ascends languidly. Yet it remains constrained until a quasi-Mahlerian low note is sledgehammered, bringing forth multiple grains of raw material. Almost as if shavings were falling from a workbench or a rite was taking place under a broken electron microscope. Finally, a short twist happens in the spirit of a kōan.

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~Felipe Rossi

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