

YOUNG CLASSICAL WRITERS PRIZE 2021



The New Beauty of Hans Abrahamsen's *let me tell you*

by **Frederick Lloyd** (age 21) - specially commended

Eight years after it was first performed, Hans Abrahamsen's 2013 song cycle *let me tell you* remains perhaps the most gorgeous piece of music of the twenty-first century. The work for orchestra and solo soprano is based on a 2008 novel of the same name by novelist and librettist Paul Griffiths, which retells Ophelia's story not only from her point of view, but entirely in her words. The book is composed solely of the 483 words spoken by the character in *Hamlet*, rearranged and recontextualised to give voice to a woman who is silenced all too soon in Shakespeare's play.

Abrahamsen uses fragments of Griffiths' book throughout the seven songs which comprise the piece, but does not share the author's constrained approach. This is a thoughtful work rather than an intellectual exercise, and, despite concluding with a wondrous evocation of snow, it avoids the coldness which can seep into much modern music. The composer does not replicate the book's limited palate, instead using a large orchestra to imbue the music with warmth and colour. Piercing high winds float above silvery string harmonics in the opening few bars, whilst the middle section of the music is marked by growling brass and agitated *glissandi*. The most imaginatively singular piece of orchestration is Abrahamsen's use of percussion, with the stillness of the finale underpinned by the barely perceptible brushing of a piece of paper against a drumskin. In an excellent YouTube video on the piece, the composer David Bruce compares the softness of the cycle's ending with autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), a tingling sensation experienced by some when they hear quiet rustling or tapping. Whether or not you are receptive to this phenomenon, this slow descent into silence is an exquisite effect which begs the audience to listen closely and rewards them richly if they do.

The beating heart of *let me tell you* is the Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan, the dedicatee and first performer of the work. Hannigan's natural affinity with contemporary music has led to many fruitful collaborations, particularly her work in the operas of George Benjamin, but it is in Abrahamsen's piece that her virtuosity and artistry are most fully present. The demanding vocal writing asks much of the singer, with enormous vocal leaps and soaring high notes requiring formidable feats of breath control and pitch precision.

Hannigan deftly combines this technical skill with an enormous amount of characterisation and humanity, and her performance is what allows Ophelia to be so present in the piece. One recurring vocal effect is the *stile concitato*, a Baroque ornamentation involving the rapid repetition of a single note. There is a great sense of delicacy whenever this effect is heard, with the soprano fluttering and stuttering her way through the musical soliloquy. The composer creates moments of frantic movement and ones of crystalline stillness, blending the two in order to present a mercurial portrait of a restless yet determined mind.

What draws me inexorably back to this music is the almost unbearable beauty of it. In the final third of the piece, the orchestra seamlessly slips into microtonality, used not as a declarative challenge to conventional Western harmony, but as a natural mode of expression for the topic being presented. The accompaniment seems to slip and melt around the soprano, haloing her in delicious soft sound. The singer ponders at one point 'what is music if not time?', and in *let me tell you* Hans Abrahamsen appears to freeze time for our enjoyment. Like the structure of a snowflake, the intricacy of this music does not obfuscate its beauty – it is what makes it beautiful in the first place.

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