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## Snowscape at SFCMP

BY [JOE CADAGIN \(/AUTHOR/JOE-CADAGIN\)](#), *October 25, 2017*

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S.F. Contemporary Music Players performing Hans Abrahamsen's *Schnee* | *Credit: Stephen B. Hahn*

As a child, I used to spend hours gazing at a Hiroshige woodblock print hanging in the living room of our Michigan home. It's titled [\*\*\*Yabu Lane Below Atago\*\*\*](#) (<https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/202221.html>) and depicts a snow-covered street in 19th-century Edo (present-day Tokyo). A group of pedestrians, whose paper *kasa* umbrellas give them the appearance of mushrooms, leave footprints in the white powder with their wooden *geta*. Above them, three swallows flit between the falling flakes, passing beneath bamboo branches that sag gracefully under the weight of accumulated snow. The print perfectly captures the emotions I associate with new-fallen snow: that strange mixture of serenity, emptiness, and quiet oblivion.

<https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/202221.html>) It's a feeling I haven't experienced since moving to sunny California — that is, until I heard **Hans Abrahamsen**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans\\_Abrahamsen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Abrahamsen)'s *Schnee* (Snow, 2006–08), performed Saturday by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players at Taube Atrium Theater. The Danish composer recently became an international success following the premiere of his orchestral song cycle *let me tell you*, which won the 2016 Grawemeyer Award. His earlier work *Schnee* doesn't have the same impassioned, Romantic-leaning character of his big hit. It's a wintery, hour-long tone poem of sorts scored for two pianos, violin, viola, cello, flute, oboe, clarinet, and percussion. Each of the five movements consists of two lengthy canons, though Abrahamsen's music is indebted less to Bach than to Morton Feldman or John Cage — small, quiet gestures unfold at a glacial pace, tracing sparse, desolate soundscapes.



**Hiroshige's *Yabu Lane Below Atago***

In the hypnotic first pair of canons, which reminded me of my Hiroshige print, pianist **Kate Campbell** (<http://www.katecampbellpiano.com/>) entered with an inquisitive little melody in the keyboard's upper octaves. This tinkling theme was backed by a steady accompaniment provided by violinist Hrabba Atladottir and cellist Helen Newby, who played a steadily repeating high A with delicate, *sul ponticello* bowing marked "icy" in **the score** (<http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/1/34990>). The resulting timbre, thin and grainy, elicited all the tactile sensations of snow — the sand-like consistency of fresh powder. At one point, it almost sounded like the ringing of distant jingle bells, as if some horse-drawn sleigh were approaching.

But this is not to say that Abrahamsen's work is some schmaltzy Christmas wonderland. It's something far subtler — an empty white expanse speckled here and there with pointillistic dots. In a few simple brush strokes, the composer opens up a kind of meditative space for the listener to occupy, perhaps reflecting on winters past.



Composer Hans Abrahamsen | *Credit: Lars Skaaning*

As the piece progresses, however, Abrahamsen experiments with more active textures. The second pair of canons felt slightly out of place, with sonorities reminiscent of typewriters or ticking clocks. Allegra Chapman plunked out a syncopated rhythm on prepared piano while the woodwind players layered on Steve Reich-style ostinatos. Occasionally, Tod Brody would emit a blustery air tone on alto flute, kicking up a cloud of snow in the form of sparkling piano glissandi. This colorful gesture — along with some *actual* jingle bells — returned in the scherzo-like fourth pair of canons. In conductor Steven Schick's hands, the unruly counterpoint took on the jubilant, carnivalesque atmosphere of a bustling *Weihnachtsmarkt*.

Balancing this joyful image of winter were evocations of the crushing ennui that inevitably sets in come late January. In the third pair of canons, especially, I could feel my seasonal affective disorder flaring up for the first time since I left Michigan. Strings and woodwinds drooped feebly before moaning out a monotonous, three-note motive. Later, pianists Campbell and Chapman plodded through a series of jazzy blocked chords, muddled by dissonance. All the while, percussionist Christopher Froh rubbed pieces of paper on various surfaces, producing a sound that reminded me of cars passing through the brownish slush that lines city streets once the snow melts.

## Hans Abrahamsen - Schnee



But the movement was particularly tragic given events earlier in the performance, when a gentleman in the front row suffered a heart attack or other medical emergency and had to be rushed to the hospital. The ensemble and venue staff handled the situation with aplomb, though the incident likely colored the audience's interpretation of the piece once Schick picked things up again following the unfortunate interruption.

SFCMP's engrossing performance of *Schnee* points to a larger revival of pictorial, nature-based composition. Abrahamsen and his colleagues on the new music scene (including Israeli composer Chaya Czernowin, who recently completed a similar set of icy ensemble works titled *Winter Songs*) have begun to revisit programmatic music without reverting to tired musical clichés — though Abrahamsen does ironically quote Vivaldi's "Winter" from *The Four Seasons*.

Other composers have come to rely too much on modern-day multimedia to impart an extra-musical program. This is certainly true of California-based Nicole Mitchell, whose *Procession Time* was given its world premiere on the first half of the program. The work, scored for flute, clarinet, piano, and cello, was held back by an amateurish video that Mitchell made herself. Behind the players flashed a poorly edited montage of protestors, adobe huts, ocean waves, and various children and adults of different ethnicities. Occasionally, the video would pan Ken Burns-style across pixelated, low-resolution images of canvases by abstract painter Norman Lewis, whose art served as inspiration for the piece.

It wasn't at all clear what message Mitchell was trying to convey. In the end, the montage distracted from what was, in terms of music, a well-constructed chamber piece. The composer's style, while conservative, has playful elegance, mixing the refined neoclassicism of Martinů and Stravinsky with

folksy, often grotesque touches from Shostakovich and Bartók. She should let her music speak for itself.

French  
compos  
er

Philippe

e

Leroux'

s 2016

*Postlude*

*à*

*l'épais*

("Postlude to

the

Thickness") for

flute, clarinet, piano, violin, and cello is a nine-minute piece bursting with all the kaleidoscopic whimsy of

Joan Miró's ***Carnaval de Arlequin***

(<https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/rca19408-carnaval-darlequin-carnival-harlequin>). Much of the work is a mesmerizing exploration of instrumental color — every so often my head would shoot up from my notebook to see what combination of players could possibly be making the noises I heard.

Violinist Aladottir and cellist Stephen Harrison posed question-like melodic lines that slid upward at the end, only to be answered irritably by bass clarinetist Peter Josheff, who produced some fantastic growling and squawking sounds.

As in Abrahamsen's piece, there were some glimpses of the natural world in the form of avian motives — the sound of fluttering wings in Campbell's piano part, for instance, or Brody's Messiaen-variety birdsong on the piccolo. SFCMP's splendid interpretation, displaying technical virtuosity and brimming with energy and humor, was a pleasant reminder of why audiences continue to patronize new music.



Philippe Leroux | Credit: Joël Perrot



Nicole Mitchell | Credit: Kristi Sutton Elias

## Philippe Leroux: Postlude à l'épais. Valade, Meitar



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### COMMENTS