

## CD Review: Barbara Hannigan in Hans Abrahamsen's *let me tell you*

by Daniel Hathaway



Released on January 8, just a week before her U.S. premiere of the work with The Cleveland Orchestra, Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan's recording of Hans Abrahamsen's *let me tell you* with Andris Nelsons and the Bavarian Radio Orchestra should count as one of the most important new music CDs of 2016.

Everything about this recording project is interesting. It's the result of a commission by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Danish Arts Foundation that forged a close collaboration among the librettist, Paul Griffiths (the Welsh-born former music critic of *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*), the composer, Hans Abrahamsen (a Dane obsessed with the idea of snow), and the soloist, Barbara Hannigan (a well-known conductor as well as a singer whose repertory ranges from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*).

Also interesting is that the libretto is drawn from Griffiths' 2008 novel of the same name, which uses only the 481 words that Ophelia utters in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Hamlet*. They're rearranged here into seven brief poems that touch on the ideas of "memory, time, light, music, glass, and snow" (Cleveland Orchestra program notes).

The resulting composition, for large orchestra used in exquisitely-wrought combinations of instruments and only occasionally in full force, is a captivating piece that impresses on first hearing and sticks in the mind and memory.

Abrahamsen, who has written works entitled *Winter Night* (1978), *Two Snow Dances* (1985, for recorders), *Schnee* (2008, for two pianos and percussion), *Snow Pictures* (2013, for piano quartet) and is at work on an opera based on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, sets the bar high for the solo soprano, and Hannigan — who performs

the piece from memory in concerts — fully embraces all its challenges. The composer calls for some very high singing (clearly and effortlessly accomplished), extended techniques that recall Claudio Monteverdi's *trillos* (riveting), and a style of text declamation that would challenge any singer (easily dispatched and understandable even when words are stretched out seemingly beyond intelligibility).

Abrahamsen's writing is vivid, evocative, and in one climax during the fifth stanza ("You have made me like glass — like glass in an ecstasy from your light"), a riot of transparent color raining down in cascades. The piece ends in a ravishing denouement of microtonal writing ("Snow falls. So: I will go on in the snow. I will have my hope with me.")

Hannigan has made this piece completely her own, and radiates its charm, power — and even its ambiguity and elusiveness — to the listener.

*let me tell you* is available on the [Winter & Winter](#) label. Barbara Hannigan will perform the work with Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra in Severance Hall on January 14 and 15, 2016, and at Carnegie Hall in New York on January 17.

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