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In Search for Eluding Beauty: The Semantic Subtexts and Compositional Strategies in Bent Sørensen's Trilogy *Papillons*

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Abstract. The article is devoted to analysis of Bent Sørensen's trilogy *Papillons*, which includes in itself three cycles differing from each other in terms of their instrumentation, albeit, all of them feature the participation of the piano — *Pantomime*, *Rosenbad*, and *Mignon*. The compositions were created at the same time (during the years 2013–2014), were based on the same musical material, and possessed the same number of movements arranged in different orders of succession. The present research is focused on the semantic subtexts and the compositional-dramaturgical regularities within the trilogy. During the course of the analysis, the intertextual connections with various sources (Schumann's piano cycle *Papillons*, Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and Karen Blixen's *Ehrengard*) are revealed, the leading themes are labeled (the interconnection between art and love, the motives of departure and disappearance), the semantic potential of the structural variability of the cycles is disclosed, the role of the piano part and the means of transformation of the instrumental context are examined. The trilogy's uniqueness of genre and the specificity of its narrative strategies stipulated by the controlled aleatory qualities of the form and the various principles of perception of the selfsame material is registered. With the consideration of the utmost importance for Sørensen of questions regarding the impact of music on people, the title of the trilogy is also interpreted in connection with the phenomenon of the “butterfly effect.”

Keywords: Bent Sørensen, contemporary Danish music, the trilogy *Papillons*, *Pantomime*, *Rosenbad*, *Mignon*, the structural variability of the cycles

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В поисках ускользающей красоты: смысловые подтексты и композиционные стратегии в трилогии *Papillons* Бента Сёренсена

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу трилогии Бента Сёренсена *Papillons*, включающей три отличных по инструментальному составу цикла с участием фортепиано — *Pantomime*, *Rosenbad* и *Mignon*. Сочинения создавались одновременно (2013–2014), основывались на одном и том же музыкальном материале, имели одинаковое количество частей, располагающихся в разной последовательности. В фокусе исследования находятся смысловые подтексты и композиционно-драматургические закономерности трилогии. В ходе анализа выявляются интертекстуальные связи с разнообразными источниками (фортепианным циклом Шумана «Бабочки», романом Гёте «Годы учения Вильгельма Мейстера», новеллой Карен Бликсен «Эренгард»), обозначаются ведущие темы (взаимосвязь искусства и любви, мотивы ухода и исчезновения), раскрывается смысловой потенциал структурной вариативности циклов, рассматривается роль партии фортепиано и способы преобразования инструментального контекста. Отмечается жанровая уникальность трилогии и специфичность её нарративных стратегий, обусловленных контролируемой алеаторикой формы и разными принципами представления одного и того же материала. С учётом первостепенной важности для Сёренсена вопросов воздействия музыки на людей название трилогии интерпретируется также в связи с феноменом «эффекта бабочки».

Ключевые слова: Бент Сёренсен, современная датская музыка, трилогия *Papillons*, *Pantomime*, *Rosenbad*, *Mignon*, структурная вариативность циклов

Introduction

Bent Sørensen is one of the leading Danish composers of our time who has obtained international recognition due to his unique compositions and original world perception. In 2018, he received for his triple concerto *L'isola della città* the prestigious Grawemeyer Award, which is given for outstanding achievements in the sphere of contemporary academic music. At the present time, Sørensen teaches composition at the Danish Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen and directs the Society of Danish Composers.

The Danish master's musical output includes compositions of the most diverse genres: from operas and orchestral works, to solo, ensemble and choral works. At the same time, the genre foundations of many of his compositions are reimagined. Such, for example, is the piece for orchestra, chorus, actors and audience, *Sounds Like You* (2009), whose protagonists are situated not on the stage, but in the hall among the audience, or *St. Matthew Passion*, the conception of which is based on the unity of religious and sensual love, which leads to a dramaturgical dual process.

The Danish master's work has not yet received in-depth comprehension in world musicology, however, in recent times it has come into the focus of the research of Russian scholars. During the years 2022–2024, a number of articles by Ekaterina Okuneva appeared wherein the composer's artistic method and aesthetical viewpoints were examined, [1; 2] and the peculiarities of his instrumental concertos, [3] musical theater, [4] and vocal-dramatic works [5] were researched.

At the center of attention of the present article is Sørensen's trilogy *Papillons*, which is distinguished by an original conception. It includes three instrumental cycles created upon commissions by the Stenhammar Quartet and Katrine Gislinge in 2013–2014: *Pantomime*, *Rosenbad*, and *Mignon*. The works are intended for different instrumental ensembles, albeit with the mandatory participation of the solo piano. *Pantomime* was written for piano and an ensemble of string, wind and percussion instruments, *Rosenbad* is scored for piano quintet, and *Mignon* — for piano, string orchestra, two string quartets and two solo violins placed in different spots of the concert stage.¹ All the cycles contain seven movements each and are based on identical musical material, albeit appearing in different order of succession. In connection with this, of special interest are the trilogy's compositional and informatory aspects, as well as the specific features of its musical narrative. The composition has never formed the subject matter for a special research before, either in

Russian music scholarship, or in other countries.² The factual information about *Papillons* has been obtained from Sørensen's program notes to the cycle *Pantomime*,³ information contained in the compact-disc booklets, [6; 7] as well as from personal correspondence with the composer.

About the Poetics of the Titles

The reliance on programmatic characters presents an important trait of the Danish composer's instrumental music, whose sources of inspiration are quite varied, since they include nature, painting, literature, music, the composer's memories and dreams, and many other things. The trilogy's very title — *Papillons* — points to the neoromantic tendencies in Sørensen's music. In Romantic art, the image of a butterfly manifests the absence of any precise boundaries between form and formlessness, meaning and absurdity, life and death. The butterfly serves as the personification of the brevity and fleetingness of life, as well as its remarkable frailty. It is not attached to any concrete spatial coordinates, its freedom is illusory: its existence is ordained, and the brief moment of its life and beauty may disappear at any moment. This symbolism correlates with the world of Sørensen's music, in which the sounds are tenuous, elusive, and “it seems that everything may disappear upon the slightest tangency.”⁴

The trilogy's title, first of all, may be associated with Robert Schumann's famous cycle for piano. According to Sørensen, the idea of the title came to him at the moment when his

¹ The presence of an orchestra and a solo piano part makes it possible to interpret this composition as a piano concerto.

² In Ekaterina Okuneva's article *Semantic and structural potential of autoreferentiality in the music of Bent Sørensen* [2] the trilogy is examined rather synoptically within the perspective of the phenomenon of self-derivation.

³ Sørensen B. *Pantomime – Papillons* (2014). Programme Note. Wise Music Classical. URL: <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/49378/Pantomime---Papillons--Bent-S%C3%B8rensen/> (accessed: 20.04.2025).

⁴ Povlsen J. Komponisten og drømmefangeren, Bent Sørensen. *Koda*. 2018. 26 Juni. URL: <https://www.koda.dk/om-koda/nyheder/komponisten-og-drommefangeren-bent-sorensen> (accessed: 20.04.2025).

wife Katrine Gislinge was playing Schumann's opus 2.

It is wellknown that the latter composition was inspired by images from Jean Paul's novel *Flegeljahre* (1805). The writer defined the genre of his book as an autobiography. Its chief protagonists — the twin-brothers Walt and Vult, — according to literary scholars, [8; 9] personified the inner multiplicity of the writer's "I,"⁵ which could not avoid attracting Schumann's attention. Their reflection in the composer's world became Florestan and Eusebius.

The plotline basis of *Papillons* was taken from the final chapter of Jean Paul's novel, which Schumann communicated about in his letters to his friends. It must be reminded that both brothers are in love with the girl Wina, but do not fathom that they are rivals to each other. The truth is revealed to Vult at a costumed ball, when, disguising his identity under a mask, he pretends that he is Walt, and Wina answers him with reciprocity. After this, Vult leaves the hall. The next morning, after waking up, Walt tells his brother that he dreamed an incredible dream about love. Vult, taking a flute into his hands and playing it, leaves the house. Walt hears the sounds of the flute vanishing at the distance, not understanding that in this manner his brother is parting from him forever.

Although, according to Daniel Zhitomirsky's observation, Schumann's music does not contain a literal manifestation of the plotline, but merely presents the "inner theme" — the theme of fanciful contrasts of life in the perception of the intricate artistic soul," [10, p. 280] still, in the final number of the piano

cycle, the composer demonstrates in a rather visible manner not only the "counterpoint" of life, combining the waltz theme from the first number with the theme of the *Großfatertanz*, but also the theme of the brothers' parting. For this end, he turns to special compositional techniques. At the conclusion of the number, the waltz theme changes rhythmically, at first: its descending motives, moving in quarter notes, appear belatedly at a duration of one eighth note later. This effect leads to a distorted sound of the theme, which seems to reach us from afar. Then, in the ascending seven-note motive one pitch is subtracted at a time, so that the theme disappears in the literal sense of the word (see Example No. 1). In the final measures, Schumann provides an arpeggio of the tones of a dominant triad, the pitches are summed up into a vertical sonority, and then are gradually eliminated one after another, and the chord "evaporates," similar to the waltz theme.⁶

The ideas of disintegration, departure, evanescence, and elusive beauty form the poetics of many of Sørensen's compositions. His works rather frequently possess one single semantic foundation, which "may be defined as the focusing on that which is absent, revealing itself in the search for harmony forfeited forever, events that have remained in the past, music that has ceased to sound." [4, p. 65] As it may be perceived, the disappearance of music manifested in the final number of Schumann's suite also finds a peculiar interpretation in the Danish composer's trilogy. However, Sørensen expresses it not by means of subtractive processes (as Schumann does), but by means of "timbral-acoustic transformation

⁵ According to Vera Kotelevskaya, the poetics of the paired protagonists in Jean Paul's novel is based on the search for one's second "I." The idea of the supplementing of the alter ego receives a multilevel realization in the novel, becoming actualized within the systems of anthropology (the creation of twin-characters), letters (the existence of a real and a fictional writer), and reading (the formation of an intertextual dialogue). [9, p. 27]

⁶ In a letter to the editor of one of the Vienna-based journals, the composer demonstrated special attention towards the conclusive lines of Jean Paul's novel in which the departing sounds of the flute were described.

Example No. 1

Robert Schumann. *Papillons*. No. 12, fragment

of the sound environment.” [3, p. 169] In the conclusion of each cycle, he makes use of a special noise effect: all the musicians, except for the pianist, switch to playing sandpaper blocks. The friction of the emery paper against the wooden bar creates a rustle reminding of the rustling of butterflies’ feathers in which the sound of the music fades away.

Each cycle of the trilogy, as has been mentioned before, also possesses its own title, enriching the respective composition with additional semantic overtones. The title of *Mignon* refers us to the character of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, 1795–1796) — the “enigma-girl” in love with the main protagonist of the book without any reciprocity on his side and passionately longing for her native land. Her image appeared at the dawn of the Romantic Era and concentrated in itself the spirit of its epoch. Having passed

beyond the scope of the novel, it became the symbol of the yearning for an unattainable ideal, the longing for unrealized dreams. The image of a mysterious adolescent girl, in a remarkable way manifested the combination of the masculine and the feminine, the childlike and the adult, the innocent and the sinful, the sublime and the mundane. This unique combination became the source of countless interpretations that appeared in the 19th century. The image of Mignon was imprinted in the vocal works of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, Hugo Wolf and many other composers. Sørensen has also turned to it. In 2012, under the impression of one of Mignon’s songs, he wrote the piano nocturne *Mitternacht mit Mignon*. His theme lay at the basis of the *Andante* movement opening up *Mignon*.

The title *Rosenbad* is inspired by Karen Blixen’s⁷ novelette *Ehregard* (1963), also

⁷ Karen Blixen (1885–1962) was a Danish writer, who published her books in English under the names of Isak Dinesen, Osceola, and Pierre Andrézel. She was nominated numerous times for the Nobel Prize, but never received it. The greatest fame to her was brought by the novel *Uot of Africa* and the short story *Babette’s Feast*, which were adapted for the screen by Sydney Pollack (1985) and Axel Gabriel (1967).

known by its title *The Secret of Rosenbad*.⁸ This is one of the writer's last works, and it formed a peculiar answer to Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's novelette *Forførerens Dagbog* (*The Seducer's Diary*, 1843), included in his famous treatise *Enten – Eller* (*Either / Or*). The main heroine of the novelette is the young girl Ehrengard, whom the artist Cazotte decides to seduce. Under his protection, Ehrengard is invited in the position of Princess Ludmilla's companion to the Rosenbad castle, the entourage and conditions of which favor the artist's plans. Rosenbad is described in the book as "a rococo hermitage," [11, p. 225] each corner of which is filled with voluptuousness. In the castle situated on a mountain side on the shore of a lake, there was a combination of "the charm of remoteness, reverie and decay," [Ibid., p. 228] which was also emphasized by its name, in translation from the German meaning "a bath of roses."

In Blixen's novelette, art and seduction appear as phenomena that are correlated,⁹ and for this reason Cazotte does not aspire to physical contact with Ehrengard, but is aimed at spiritual possession. The personification of his secret spiritual relationship with the girl was supposed to be demonstrated in a picture where the latter was swimming naked.

The guarantee of her spiritual fall from grace would be the blush that would cover her cheeks, as soon as she sees the picture. However, the seducer, imperceptibly for himself, turns into a victim himself.

Despite the rather substantial difference between Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and Blixen's novelette *Ehrengard*, which stimulated Sørensen's artistic imagination, there does exist a number of common elements between them. First of all, the commonality between the authors' artistic positions is perceptible: both books present the motion from an aesthetic illusion to reality, from the faith in the exclusivity of art to the faith in the superiority of life over art. The female characters in Goethe's and Blixen's works present themselves as being enigmatic, and their behavior — as inexplicable up to the end.¹⁰ The books are also united by the presence of the mysteries of birth: в *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* it has to do with Mignon herself, and in *Ehrengard* — the dynastic heir of the Fugger-Babenhausen family, in both cases, the heroines accept the shame of another's sin on themselves. Finally, the prototype of the image of Cazotte, as Mads Bunch showed in his article written on the basis of his studies

⁸ This work has been adapted for the screen twice — in 1982 (by film director Emidio Greco) and in 2023 (by film director Bille August). The action of the novelette takes place in the fictional country of Babenhausen, the monarchs of which, so not to tarnish the moral principles of the state the epitomes of which they exemplified were compelled to hide from their subjects the appearance into the world of the dynasty heir before the set nine months after the wedding. Through the efforts of the Grand Duchess, Princess Ludmilla and Prince Lothar took shelter in the solitary castle of Rosenbad, while the lady-in-waiting Ehrengard and the artist Cazotte became their confidants.

⁹ For Cazotte the process of seduction presents itself as an analogy to artistic inspiration. In one of his letters, he discourses in the following manner: "You call an artist a seducer and are not aware that you are paying him the highest of compliments. The whole attitude of the artist towards the Universe is that of a seducer. For what does seduction mean but the ability to make, with infinite trouble, patience and perseverance, the object upon which you concentrate your mind give forth, voluntarily and enraptured, its very core and essence? Aye, and to reach, in the process, a higher beauty than it could ever, under any other circumstances, have attained? I have seduced an old earthenware pot and two lemons into yielding their inmost being to me, to become mine and, at that same moment, to become phenomena of overwhelming loveliness and delight." [11, p. 219]

¹⁰ It must be noted that Ehrengard's deed in the final section of the novelette has been interpreted by researchers in various different ways.

of Blixen's archive, is not only Kierkegaard, but also Goethe. [12]¹¹

The title of another part of the trilogy — *Pantomime* — appeals to a type of wordless stage art, wherein the plasticity of the body is the main artistic means.¹² A specific indication of the pantomime is the presence of the dramatic element generating the expression of the motions. In the arts of choreography and theater, pantomime may be likened to a “song without words” in music. In both instances, there arises a peculiar “minus-technique” referring to the poetics of absence that comprises the basis of Sørensen's artistic thinking.

Thereby, the leading themes of the trilogy can be considered to be the interconnection of art and love, as well as the nostalgia for the unattainable fullness of existence, expressed by motives of disappearance, departure, absence. It must be emphasized, that these are the key aspects of the romantic world-perception. And this is not a coincidence. The trilogy may be considered a Sørensen's “monument to love” towards his wife Katrine Gislinge. The composition is dedicated to her, and the piano part was also written especially for her. The premieres of all the cycles were also carried out with the participation of this performer.¹³

About the Structural Variability of the Compositions of the Trilogy

According to Sørensen, the cycles were composed practically simultaneously. In 2016 at the Klang Festival in Copenhagen,

the compositions were presented to the audience in the following order: *Rosenbad*, *Mignon*, *Pantomime*. However, in reality, their successive order is not essential. The works are frequently performed separately. In each of the cycles the piano carries the function of the soloist. Its musical material remains unchangeable, however, considering the different instrumentation of each work, the composer places it in different instrumental contexts.

Upon reliance on the overall musical material, the order of the movements in the compositions varies¹⁴ (see Table 1). Sørensen noted that the disposition had been thought out by him in advance.¹⁵ It can be seen from Table 1 that each cycle contains a stable block comprised of three movements — *Andante*, *Fluente*, *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo* (in the table they are highlighted in red), the order of succession of which remains unchangeable. This block either begins the composition (*Mignon*), or comprises its center (*Pantomime*), or is moved to the end (*Rosenbad*). There is a thematic connection between the indicated movements that is expressed in each piece differently. In *Pantomime* the *Fluente* and *Molto espressivo* movements are constructed virtually on the same material, but in different timbral and textural settings. The fourth movement is performed by the solo piano, and the fifth — by wind and string instruments with percussion (without piano). The theme of the instrumental ensemble (with the exception of the initial motive assigned to the oboe) sounds in a ghostlike and fantastic

¹¹ This is already indicated by the coincidence of the names of the artist and the writer — Johann Wolfgang.

¹² In the program notes to *Pantomime* the composer indicated the title came to him during the process of the composition of the music, and the melodies evoked in his imagination snapshots from silent movies.

¹³ The premiere of *Rosenbad* took place on February 28, 2014 in Berlin. The first performance of *Pantomime* occurred on May 14, 2014 in Kolding (Denmark), and the premiere of *Mignon* happened on May 31, 2014 in Copenhagen as part of the *KLANG Festival*.

¹⁴ The comparative juxtaposition of the order of the movements is eased by the immutability of their tempo characteristic features.

¹⁵ From the letter to the authors of the article from January 15, 2025.

Table 1. The Order of the Movements in the Compositions Comprising Bent Sørensen's Trilogy

<i>Rosenbad</i>	<i>Mignon</i>	<i>Pantomime</i>
I Allegretto	I Andante	I –
II Calmo con delicatezza	II Fluente	II Scherzando
III Scherzando	III Moderato cantabile molto espressivo	III Andante
IV Andante	IV Allegretto	IV Fluente
V Fluente	V –	V Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
VI Molto espressivo con disperazione	VI Scherzando	VI Calmo con delicatezza
VII –	VII Calmo con delicatezza	VII Allegretto

manner due to the technique of applying string harmonics. In *Rosenbad* the motive from the *Fluente* movement appears at the end of the *Andante* movement, as if forestalling the following movement. The viola and cello also play harmonics. In *Mignon* a fragment of the theme from *Fluente* appears at the end of the *Moderato cantabile* movement. It becomes dispersed between the solo violin and the first violins of the string quartet and the string orchestra, and its separate tones are doubled by the second violins from the selfsame ensemble gliding in glissandos. As a result, the contours of the motive are barely perceived, while it in itself acquires an even more phantom-like character.

Returning to the logic of the arrangement of the cycles, let us note that the rest of the movements are interconnected pairwise by means of contrast of tempo. The *Allegretto* movement and the one not indicated by the tempo character (highlighted in green color) enframe *Rosenbad* and *Pantomime*,

but, at the same time, interchange in a cross pattern the functions of the introduction and the conclusion with each other. In *Mignon* they are both placed at the center. The movements marked *Calmo con delicatezza* and *Scherzando* (highlighted in blue in the table) stand adjacent to the movements comprising the stable blocks of *Pantomime*. In *Rosenbad* and *Mignon* they are situated, respectively, at the beginning and the end of the cycle and are shifted in relation to each other.

Thereby, the trilogy as a whole is based on the principle of controlled aleatoric technique. In his program notes, Sørensen indicated that such a structural conception may be perceived in varied ways: as three stories recounted by one person, or as one story told by three people.¹⁶ The composer noted the cinematographic quality of such a form.

The plot device, within the frameworks of which the same story discloses itself from various angles is frequently applied in cinematography and literature.

¹⁶ Sørensen B. *Pantomime* — *Papillons* (2014). Programme Note. Wise Music Classical. URL: <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/49378/Pantomime---Papillons--Bent-S%C3%B8rensen/> (accessed: 20.04.2025).

One of the most well-known examples of this is Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950, based on Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's short story *In a Grove*), after the publication of which there appeared in contemporary mass culture the concept of the "Rashomon effect." The principle signifies a multifold interpretation of events (at the same time, the interpretations frequently have a contradictory character) emphasizing the subjectivity of perception and the unreliability of the function of memory. According to art critics, Kurosawa's film has provided an impulse towards a new genre in cinematography in which the events are recreated from different angles. Among the most famous films of recent years is Ridley Scott's movie *The Last Duel* (2021).¹⁷ In literature, such a technique is intrinsic to detective genres (for example, Agatha Christie's stories *Cards on the Table* and *Five Little Pigs*. Frequently it leads to a nonlinear type of narration, such as in the book by Serb writer Milorad Pavić, *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel*.

In his trilogy, Sørensen unconsciously¹⁸ extrapolates the "Rashomon effect" into the sphere of music. At the same time, he recurses to the traditional art of arrangement and transcription, adapting the same musical material to different other instrumental ensembles. However, here this type of work forfeits its purely applied status, becoming an important element of artistic strategy. A crucial significance in this strategy is given to the piano part.

About the Role of the Piano Part

The piano part serves as the focal point of the entire musical narration. In a certain sense, it may be considered the main protagonist or, more precisely, the soul of the trilogy, if we consider the inseparable connection of the image of a butterfly with the Ancient Greek *psūchē*. Not coincidentally, Sørensen endows the piano texture in his works with the qualities of airiness, lightness and openness. The music unfolds in a high register, predominantly in the first, second and third octaves, rather seldom exceeding these limits.

Sørensen's piano style is tangent in some of its aspects with the peculiarities of piano writing of the romanticist composers. This is indicated by such features as the attention towards the phonic aspect of harmony, the passing beyond the boundaries of specific piano timbres, poly-timbral thinking, the aspiration towards endowing the textural voices with melodic qualities, their rhythmic refinement and subtlety. At the same time, the individuality of the piano style is stipulated by the contrasts of dynamics (with the predomination of soft nuancing, the upsurges of the *forte* dynamic mark lead to the effect of an abruptness of the delicate musical texture), the sonoristic types of texture, the imitation of playing techniques intrinsic to other instruments.

The most illustrative examples of the synthesis of romantic and individual features may be seen

¹⁷ The film is based on real historical facts. At its basis lies the legal action that took place in 1386 regarding the rape of Marguerite de Carrouges, which led to duel between her husband, Jean de Carrouges, and her offender, Jacques le Gris. The movie is divided into three parts, respectively titled as "The Truth of Jean de Carrouges," "The Truth of Jacques le Gris" and "The Truth of Marguerite." In each of them, the same events are presented from different angles.

¹⁸ In his correspondence with the authors, the composer noted that when writing and assembling together the movements in various ways, he did not think of this artistic effect.

in the movements marked *Fluente* and *Calmo con delicatezza*. In the texture of *Fluente*, two strata are clearly distinguished: the melodic line in octave doubling and the figuration with the predominance of wavelike motion (circular intonations). The design of the musical texture brings in associations with the arabesque (from the Italian word *arabesco*, meaning “Arabic”), which during the 19th century became an independent musical genre. However, the fast tempo, the subdued dynamics, and the adherence to one register create difficulties in the differentiation of these layers. The music is perceived as a single sonoric-coloristic stream, at the surface of which we observe the emergence of at times well-known elements of classical and romantic idioms, for example, the diatonic sequence of seventh chords (see mm. 13–14 of Example No. 2).

The specific sound aura of the movement marked as *Calmo con delicatezza* is determined by the technique of string tremolos and the predominance of the softest dynamics with dynamic nuancing from *ppp* to *p*. The piano “imitates” this means of playing. The intricacy of the vibrating fabric creates associations with

the tremor of the wings of a butterfly, and for this reason, the transition occurs from a pitch-centered differentiated sound to a noise-type rustling of sandpaper blocks in *Mignon*.

Generally, Sørensen endows the piano part almost with a metaphysical meaning, noting that it seemingly “is ‘sending’ its butterfly wings out to the musicians.”²⁰ In this case, it is referred to the barely perceived impulse wave emanating from the soloist and creating an impact on the instrumental environment, similar to the way the fluctuation of butterfly wings puts the air in motion. This is manifested in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it is demonstrated in the diverse “reaction” of the contextual instrumental environment to the musical material in the piano, which either echoes it or contrasts its own sounds to it. The dialogue quality (coupled with the soloist’s function) appearing because of it endows even the *Rosenbad* movement, which is chamber-like in its small ensemble of performers, with features of the concerto genre. On the other hand, the composer aspires towards a peculiar visualization of his idea, which is most apparent in *Mignon*. The instrumental ensemble

Example No. 2

Bent Sørensen. *Rosenbad*. Fifth Movement, mm. 10–15¹⁹

The musical score for Example No. 2, measures 10–15 of the Fifth Movement of *Rosenbad* by Bent Sørensen, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 10–12) and the second system (measures 13–15) both feature a piano (Pno.) part. The notation includes a variety of note values, rests, and dynamic markings: *p*, *ppp*, *mp*, and *pp*. The key signature consists of two sharps (F# and C#). The score illustrates a complex texture with multiple layers of notes, including octaves and wavelike motions, as described in the text.

¹⁹ The score of the composition was presented to the authors of this article by Bent Sørensen.

²⁰ From the letter to the authors of the article from January 15, 2025.

of the composition includes two string quartet groups, sitting on both sides of the piano, in order for the configuration of butterfly wings to appear. In addition to that, Sørensen recurses rather often to effects of stereophonic sound. For example, in the fourth movement, marked *Allegretto*, the string quartet groups first sound conjointly, and then one after the other. In the latter case, the musical material is distributed between them, and Sørensen incorporates the technique of overlapping: each quartet begins its retort from the particular sonority on which the other one finished playing. Taking into account the allocations of the musicians in various parts of the concert stage, there occurs the effect of displacement of sound. The aforementioned impression of the impulse wave arises due to the fact that the phrases of the respective quartet groups contain in themselves imprecise imitations of the piano part.

Concerning the Instrumental Context

The dissimilarity of the “narratives” disclosed by the pianist depends not only

on the variability of the form, but, what is more important, on the differing instrumental context, which endows each cycle with singularity. Comparative analysis shows that Sørensen in his work frequently demonstrates himself as a researcher studying various means of presentation of the selfsame material. In his adaptive practice, the composer is guided by several principles.

First of all, he turns to the technique of *timbral and textural reintonating of the musical material*, which stipulates the characteristic individual sound of each cycle. As an example, let us compare the beginning of the *Andante* movement. The third movement of *Pantomime* starts with peals of bells and crotales, against the background of which the oboe and bassoon sound a one-measure-long motive repeated many times. Its intonational specificity is defined by a leap of a minor sixth and the subsequent descent of a major second (Example No. 3). The combination of the timbres, the song intonation, the key of *F major* — all of these present attributes of a pastoral modus.

Example No. 3

Bent Sørensen. *Pantomime*. Third Movement, mm. 1–5

The musical score for Example No. 3, Bent Sørensen's *Pantomime*, Third Movement, measures 1–5, is presented in a standard orchestral format. The tempo is marked *Andante* with a metronome indication of ♩ = 52–60. The key signature is one flat (F major). The score includes staves for Oboe (Ob.), Bassoon (Fg.), Percussion (Perc.), Piano (Pno.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The Oboe and Bassoon parts feature a melodic line with a minor sixth leap followed by a major second descent, marked *ppp poss., molto lontano sempre*. The Percussion part includes a rhythmic pattern with Gongs/Bells, marked *ppp lontano*. The Piano, Violins, Viola, and Cello parts play a simple harmonic accompaniment, marked *ppp lontano*.

In *Rosenbad* the same movement (namely, the fourth) begins with intervals of major and minor seconds being played in a glissando manner, which are followed by a motive of the interval of a sixth. However, it is dispersed between the viola and the second violin and becomes “shaded” against the background of the more expressive melodic line of the first

violin (Example No. 4). Its contours remain just as ambiguous after numerous repeated manifestations. And only when the piano comes in, the motive is passed on to the first violin and becomes distinctly audible. In general, unlike *Pantomime*, in *Rosenbad*, due to the specific timbre of the string instruments, a lyrical tone predominates to a greater extent.

Example No. 4

Bent Sørensen. *Rosenbad*. Fourth Movement, mm. 1–11

Andante ♩ = ca. 52 - 60
con sordino: Ton-wolf

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 5. In measure 1, Violin I has a glissando marked 'gliss.' with dynamics 'ppp poss.' and 'pp'. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello are silent. The piano enters in measure 6. The second system contains measures 6 through 11. In measure 6, Violin I has a glissando marked 'gliss.' with dynamics 'ppp poss.' and 'pp'. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello are silent. In measure 7, Violin I has a glissando marked 'gliss.' with dynamics 'ppp poss.' and 'pp'. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello are silent. In measure 8, Violin I has a glissando marked 'gliss.' with dynamics 'ppp poss.' and 'pp'. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello are silent. In measure 9, Violin I has a glissando marked 'gliss.' with dynamics 'ppp poss.' and 'pp'. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello are silent. In measure 10, Violin I has a glissando marked 'gliss.' with dynamics 'ppp poss.' and 'pp'. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello are silent. In measure 11, Violin I has a glissando marked 'gliss.' with dynamics 'ppp poss.' and 'pp'. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello are silent.

In the *Andante* movement from *Mignon* (the first movement), Sørensen connects the initial measures of *Rosenbad* with those of *Pantomime*. He assigns the major and minor seconds to the solo violins, whereas the two string quartet ensembles alternately present the main motive (Example No. 5). However, the latter also acquires a vagueness of intonating due to the instilment of glissandi. As a result, the sound aura of the beginning of the movement becomes

diffuse, as if the initial motive appears in a haze or mist.

Thereby, the perception of the selfsame material differs substantially. The combination in *Mignon* of musical elements from *Rosenbad* and *Pantomime* sounding disjunctively brings to a levelling of the pastoral attributes. The indistinctness of the contours of the main motive creates the effect comparable to defocus of vision. As a result, the impression is made

Example No. 5

Bent Sørensen. *Mignon*. First Movement, mm. 1-5

Andante ♩ = 52 - 60

I

The musical score is written for a full orchestra and string quartets. The tempo is marked 'Andante' with a metronome marking of 52-60 beats per minute. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into three systems. The first system includes Violin solo 1, Violin solo 2, Violin Quartet I, Viola, Violoncello, Piano, and Contrabass. The second system includes Violin, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The third system includes Violin, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score shows the initial measures with glissandi and con sord. markings.

as if one and the same picture is in one case viewed accurately, as if a person suffering from astigmatism were wearing glasses, and in another case, as if the same person was without glasses. At the same time, the accentuation on string instruments in *Rosenbad* and *Mignon* enhances the introspective character of the music, which also makes it possible to speak of a peculiar change of the narrative perspective, presuming a transition from an outward to an inward focalization (from depiction to reflection).

Another important principle that Sørensen applies in his adaptive practice is the technique of *temporal transformation of the thematic material*. We shall demonstrate it with the example of the *Allegretto* movement (the fourth movement of *Mignon*, the seventh movement of *Pantomime*, the first movement of *Rosenbad*). The initial theme presents a rather extended cantilena melody beginning with the melodic motion along the *C Major* triad and in each cycle assigned to different instruments (Example No. 6). The musical material of the piano

Example No. 6

Bent Sørensen. *Rosenbad*. First Movement, mm. 1–6

Allegretto ♩ = ca. 72

Violin I *p espressivo* *mf*

Violin II *pp* *mp*

Viola *pp* *mp*

Violoncello *p espressivo* *mf*

Allegretto ♩ = ca. 72

Piano *ppp sempre legato*

Violin I *p*

Violin II *pp*

Viola *pp*

Violoncello *p*

Pno.

fulfills a background function, since it is based on general forms of motion. It must be noted, nonetheless, that in his organization, Sørensen turns to the artifices of the repetitive technique. The basis of the piano part is comprised of a short pattern equivalent to the length of 2.5 measures or 10 metric beats (Example No. 6). Upon its repetition, the composer recourses to variation and subtraction, eliminating a set of notes,²¹ so that upon each new appearance, the pattern becomes shortened in an arithmetic progression (9 beats, 8, 7, etc.).

In *Pantomime*, the theme is initially assigned to the oboe part, its statement lasts for 25 measures. Upon its repetition (at rehearsal letter A), it passes onto the part of the violins, and its length becomes reduced to 14 measures by means of truncation of the material (at which time all metric-rhythmic transformations are absent). Upon its next appearance (at rehearsal letter C), it once again passes to an oboe, but this time it states in an irregular rhythmic diminution²² (being shortened to the length of 21 measures long).

In *Rosenbad* the initial theme is assigned to the first violin (Example No. 6). It is sounded twice (Sørensen excludes its exposition from rehearsal letter A) with analogous massive and rhythmic changes (lasting, respectively, 25 and 21 measure).

In *Mignon*, the theme is assigned to the first violin parts of both string quartet groups, however, it does not appear at once, but is heard only starting from measure 19, when the repetitions of the pattern in the piano part become exhausted, the texture is saturated with acerbic sonorities, and the growing

tension is poured out into deafening repetitions of the note *G-sharp*. In this context, the cantilena theme becomes barely audible, being thrust into the background. Thereby, the temporal shift brings to a change of perspective of perception in the correlation between the relief and the background.

No less important is the fact that, in comparison with *Rosenbad* and *Pantomime*, the initial length of the cantilena theme in *Mignon* is shortened to 16 measures (due to an irregular diminution of the durations). Just as in *Rosenbad*, the theme is stated twice. Upon its repetition (beginning from rehearsal letter C), it is passed onto the violins of the string orchestra. Its scale is preserved in relation to analogous places in the other compositions of the trilogy (21 measure), but it becomes expanded in relation to its own initial exposition.

Consequently, while in *Pantomime* and *Rosenbad* we can trace the tendency towards the theme's diminution (through its truncation, reduction of its durations, disappearance), in *Mignon* we observe the reverse process, leading to an augmentation of the theme, which, as it should be observed, upon repeated statements, returns to its prominent function.

In the examined cases, the instrumental context is based on musical material that is the same for the different movements. The qualitative renewal appears when the piano part is translocated into *an absolutely new sound environment*. It is referred both to the transformation of timbre and texture and to the new musical material. For example, in the seventh movement of *Rosenbad* and the first movement of *Pantomime*,

²¹ The process of subtraction is achieved in various ways. On the one hand, because of the gradual elimination of sounds, and on the other hand — by means of combination of tones (the adjacently situated pitches are unified into sonorities). During the indicated changes, the metrical beats are shifted, and the same pitches or sonorities become placed on various parts of the measure.

²² The durations become shortened in comparison with the original either by a dotted half or a dotted quarter.

the melancholy, pensive theme in the piano part at rehearsal letters D, E and F is accompanied by gliding seconds marked by harsh changes of the dynamics. They drown out the soloist by their dissonant sharpness and aggressive qualities (Example No. 7).

In the fifth movement of *Mignon*, a background to the selfsame theme is presented by the sound of human voices —

the composer instructs the musicians to leave their instruments aside and to sing with closed mouths the lengthily held tertial sonority of *G-sharp-B* (see Example No. 8). Thereby, the interaction of the soloist with the instrumental environment in the described situations has a fundamentally opposite character, in the first case demonstrating disharmony, and in the second case — harmony.

Example No. 7

Bent Sørensen. *Pantomime*. First Movement, mm. 86–91

The musical score for Example No. 7, measures 86–91, is presented for the following instruments:

- Ob.** (Oboe): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *ff*, *pp*, *f*, *p*.
- Fg.** (Fagott): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *ff*, *pp*, *f*, *p*.
- Claves**: Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *p*, *f*, *ff*, *f*.
- Perc.** (Percussion): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *p*, *f*, *ff*, *f*.
- Pno.** (Piano): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *mp*, *ppp*, *p*.
- Vln. I** (Violin I): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *ff*, *pp*, *f*, *p*.
- Vln. II** (Violin II): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *ff*, *pp*, *f*, *p*.
- Vla.** (Viola): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *ff*, *pp*, *f*, *p*.
- Vc.** (Violoncello): Measures 86–91, dynamics include *f*, *pp*, *mf*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *ff*, *pp*, *f*, *p*.

The score includes various dynamic markings (*f*, *pp*, *mf*, *mp*, *p*, *ff*, *ppp*) and glissando markings (*gl.*, *gliss.*) across the woodwind and string staves.

Example No. 8

Bent Sørensen. *Mignon*. Fifth Movement, mm. 86–91

86

Vln. solo 1

Vln. solo 2

Vln.

Vln.

Quartet I

Vla.

Vc.

Pno.

Vln.

Vln.

Orch. Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

Vln.

Vln.

Quartet II

Vla.

Vc.

About the Peculiarities of the Narrative and the "Butterfly Effect"

The carried out analysis makes it possible to assert the uniqueness of Sørensen's trilogy in terms of genre. On the one hand, the present composition is the result of the editing and transcription activity directed at adapting the musical material to a different environment of performers. And, indeed, each cycle of the trilogy may be played independently from each other and self-sufficiently, so for this reason, it may be quite reasonable to examine *Mignon*, *Pantomime*, and *Rosenbad* as authorial transcriptions, i.e., as versions of the selfsame musical text intended for different casts of performers.

On the other hand, the trilogy as an integrality is based on the aleatoric quality of form. According to the classification of aleatory forms suggested by researcher Marina Pereverzeva, Sørensen's composition should be relayed to the type of *variable* composition, a characteristic feature of which is freedom in the succession of exposition of thought, which is the order of the sections (the movements) "changes according to the composer's conception, but, at the same time, the quantity of the 'versions' of the form is limited by particular conditions (for example, by the strict allocations of certain sections and the connection between the elements) or the authorial instructions (an unchangeable number of movements) not affecting the overall conception of the composition, but merely allowing for a difference between the means of its manifestation." [13, pp. 329–330]

Basing each of the cycles on the same musical material, the Danish master spells out the variants of the placements of the movements. Notwithstanding the mobility of the structure, as well as the change of the performing ensemble, the composition, nonetheless, does not lose its unique image. As a result, *Mignon*, *Pantomime*, and *Rosenbad* are perceived by the listener

are different variants of the selfsame narrative presented not only by different performers, but, as the analysis has shown, from different points of view.

All of this gives grounds for speaking about the formation in Sørensen's music of new narrative strategies formed under the influence of both contemporary compositional methods and cinematographic forms of presentation. It must be reminded that in the middle and the second half of the 20th century, the avant-garde principles were conducive towards the departure from the traditional narrative on the part of many composers. Most vividly this tendency made itself known in the art of musical theater, wherein the storyline-plotline structure of narration with a linear logic of development began being consciously avoided. In instrumental music, the traditional means of narrative (as presentations of interconnected material with a particular succession of themes and images) were superseded by the aleatory principle of composition. In the late 20th century, the interest towards narrative structures returned, once again, but the latter became enriched with conceptions based on a new psychology of perception of time and space.

Bent Sørensen, as it seems, has not remained aloof from these influences. He develops a new type of narrative, which may be paradoxically labelled "a tale without a story," or a plotless narrative. And, indeed, narrative as such, which presumes a particular *storyline* process or sequence of events, is absent in the *Papillons* trilogy. While attempting to provide the composer's music with the most precise characterization, Andrew Mellor emphasizes its paradoxical qualities, remembering Claude Debussy's words: "Music is a dream from which one draws back the veils." [7, p. 4] And later he continues: "Sørensen has drawn back the veils only to see <...> that the most important questions of life and love have no concrete answers; that the best an artist can do

is pose the questions themselves as eloquently as possible.” [Ibid.]

As has been mentioned before, the Danish composer’s world of music is specific. His aesthetics aspires to impress something departing, eluding, breaking down, or absent from view. As a result, the listeners’ attention is focused not on the subject (of history), as it is intrinsic to the traditional narrative, but to the context surrounding it, the atmosphere of the emotions aroused by it. In this regard, parallels arise with the artistic movement of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries — Impressionism. Just as the artists of the mentioned trend, Sørensen attempts to catch the beauty of the instance (in this regard, the title of *Papillons* is quite symbolic). But being a 21st century composer, he has a longing not for the beauty of the present moment, but for the beauty of the irrevocably lost time.

In the trilogy, there is no history in terms of a chain of unfolding events that may be expressed in verbal formulations. It is rather a cycle of pictures and moods, memories of the same thing presented from different points of view, variations on the theme of love and art, which to a certain extent brings it closer to Schumann’s suite composition. It is particularly for this reason that the reordering of the movements does not alter the dramaturgy of the whole. The aleatoric qualities of the form based on the “Rashomon effect,” in this case, are called only to bring to highlight the subjectivity of perception and the precariousness of our memory. After all, when trying to call to memory something, we base ourselves, first of all, on our inner sensations.

When attempting to answer the question, what does Sørensen’s music narrate, it must be emphasized that besides the already aforementioned interconnection between love and art, it also speaks of itself. This self-reflexive message is confirmed by the appellation to a romantic past fading, similar to the sounds of the flute on which the departing Wult plays at the end of Jean Paul’s novel.

The specificity of the musical material of the trilogy, its transformation (for example, its contraction and expansion in the *Allegretto* movement), its placing into a new timbral-sonic context making its perception, at times, more concise, and at other times, more blurred (just as in the *Andante* movement), create a narrative at an immanent-musical level. The result of the reflection, it must be highlighted especially, remains unchangeable: regardless of what is the order of the movements, at the conclusion of each cycle, a sandpaper blocks is brought in, in the noise created by the friction of which the sound of the music becomes dissolved, and it disappears.

“The question as to where the music goes after it is played fascinates me,” the composer said about the premiere of his composition *Sounds Like You*, “Also how the audience in a concert hall, with its huge variety of thoughts, can create shared concentration.”²³ These reflections are woven through Sørensen’s entire late period of creativity. The composer is concerned about the effect of music on people.

From this perspective, the title of the trilogy possesses another — unexpected — semantic subtext: it may be correlated with the phenomenon known as the “butterfly effect.” In natural science, this conception is connected with chaotic systems and presumes

²³ Sørensen B. *Sounds Like You*. Programme Note. Wise Music Classical. URL: <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/37023/Sounds-Like-You--Bent-S%C3%B8rensen/> (accessed: 20.04.2025).

that a certain insignificant action in one spot may lead to significant consequences in another (for example, a wing stroke of a butterfly in Iowa may evoke a hurricane in Indonesia²⁴). The occurring changes, as a rule, become reflected in our future. As it appears, the “butterfly effect” in Sørensen’s trilogy is connected particularly with the perceptive

phenomenon. The placement of the unchanged material (the piano) into varied contexts means inevitable changes in the listener’s perception. And for this reason, the Danish master’s composition not only narrates to us of the past, but also about how music impacts people, changing their world and their perceptions of it in the future.

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²⁴ In literature the butterfly effect is demonstrated most vividly in Ray Bradbury’s science fiction short story *A Sound of Thunder* (1952), the main protagonist of which, while traveling in time, accidentally flattened a butterfly, which led to irreversible changes in the future.

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