

Reading the surface: an introduction to *Muohta*

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Surfaces can be deceptive. Sometimes they hide or obscure more going on beneath or beyond them; sometimes a surface may be more forthcoming, hinting at, indicating or pointing towards something more than itself. Surfaces are rarely just surfaces: almost always they signify or symbolise very much more.

In Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, there is a crucial early exchange between the work's two key protagonists, the Franciscan friar William of Baskerville and his Benedictine novice charge, Adso of Melk. In response to Adso's surprise that he was able to discern that a certain horse had recently been in the vicinity, William explains that

At the cross-roads, on the still-fresh snow, a horse's hoofprints stood out very neatly, heading for the path to our left. [...] the print in that place and at that hour told me that at least one of all possible horses had passed that way. So I found myself halfway between the perception of the concept 'horse' and the knowledge of an individual horse. [...] I could say I was caught at that moment between the singularity of the traces and my ignorance, which assumed the quite diaphanous

form of a universal idea. [...] And so the ideas, which I was using earlier to imagine a horse I had not yet seen, were pure signs, as the hoofprints in the snow were signs of the idea of 'horse'; and signs and the signs of signs are used only when we are lacking things.”¹

The tracks made by the horse, and the context of those tracks, enable William to ‘read’ the surface of the snow and deduce both the animal’s identity and its behaviour. He thereby becomes able to understand and interact more meaningfully with the world around him. So while surfaces certainly can be deceptive, if we are prepared to read them more closely they can become deeply informative, revealing broader facts and concepts.

This idea has been common knowledge to the Sámi people since time immemorial. Reindeer herding is a primary, pivotal activity for the Sámi, and snow – its presence or absence, its location, and its qualities – is a crucial factor in the way this herding is carried out. The Sámi language has therefore developed to incorporate a large number of ways to succinctly indicate and describe the nature of snow conditions and their implied impact upon the way the community plans and carries out its activities.

Being so integrally and intimately connected to daily life and work, it is not surprising that the Sámi snow-related lexicon that has thus evolved is vast. Inger Marie Gaup Eira has described no fewer than 318 distinct terms, some of which “are said to be as old as the Sámi language itself, and their use has been passed down from generation to generation until the present”.² Eira summarises these terms as “snow related concepts” that “contain a set of characteristics belonging to reindeer herding and snow physics, and their multidimensional content shows that some concepts

¹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, pp. 24, 28.

² Inger Marie Gaup Eira, *The Silent Language of Snow*, p. 105.

are based on the physical characteristics of snow and can therefore be compared with international snow classification, while others have elements connected to the different herding strategies.” This unique lexicon is therefore a combination of the universal (descriptive) and the specific (prescriptive), melding the two such that, in many cases, the concepts they embody “are complex ... in the sense that a term contains and includes many factors simultaneously, such as information of snow, snow conditions, snow physics, weather, temperature, location, time, and impacts of animals and humans.”³

Eira classifies these words into four basic types according to the focus of each word’s definition.⁴ These types correspond respectively to the *air* (precipitation, wind, rain, etc.), the *ground* (dry/wet, hard/soft, thick/thin, etc.), *ice* (in trees, on the ground, on things, melt-freeze layers, etc.) and factors connected specifically with *reindeer herding*, principally tracks made by the reindeer, other animals and also humans.

Composed in 2017, Nils Henrik Asheim’s *Muohta* for choir and string orchestra directly embraces and seeks to embody this unique vocabulary. The title of the work uses the most commonplace Sámi word for snow, indicating Asheim’s primary aim which was “to achieve a collection that would mirror my own personal experience of snow (typically from childhood), both connected to pleasure and challenge, and also the possible metaphorical aspect of snow (covering the world in white, covering traces, freezing time, melting between your hands etc., and all the sorts of meaning this can hold) and [...] also represent in some way the entity

3 Ibid., p. 89. For an in-depth comparison of Sámi terms with scientific and physical classifications, see Eira et al., ‘Traditional Sámi snow terminology and physical snow classification — Two ways of knowing’, *Cold Regions Science and Technology* 85 (2013): 117–130.

4 See Eira, *The Silent Language of Snow*, p. 134.

of the Sámi cultural relation to the snow-element.”⁵ A simple example of this ‘mirroring’ of personal experience can be heard in the way Asheim utilises the performers, using the strings to provide an abstract environment or ‘landscape’ that is then ‘inhabited’ by people or other creatures represented by the choir.

As the basis for each of the work’s sections, Asheim selected an additional 18 more nuanced words from the Sámi snow lexicon, shown here together with their definitions:⁶

1. **ulahat** – a snow-covered winter road that is barely visible;
2. **čadgit** – the first light and sparse snow flakes appearing before a snowfall;
3. **áinnádat** – fresh snow covering tracks, without making them disappear completely;
4. **časttas** – relatively small undulations in snow created by wind;
5. **muovllahat** – snow so deep that you have to wade to get through;
6. **rádnu** – game trail in the snow, in particular from hare;
7. **goahpálat** – moist snow that sticks to your clothing and other things;
8. **veadahat** – an area partially or fully exposed after the wind has blown the snow away;
9. **doavdnji** – the first ski or sledge conditions of the season;
10. **seañšaš** – corn snow, the porous bottom layer that you use for melting into water;
11. **čiehpa** – indent in the snow where grouse or other animals sleep;
12. **skárta** – thin, ice-like snow on the ground, frozen into lichen and moss;
13. **muohtaruvvi** – strong, densely drifting snow;
14. **gaskageardni** – solid layer of ice or snow between loose layers of snow;
15. **jolas** – trails in the snow, revealing animals have followed one another;
16. **sabádat** – tough skiing conditions in frosty weather, especially in

⁵ Email to the author, 20 January 2020.

⁶ The English translations of these definitions were made by Mía Eriksen.

- severe frost or fresh snow;
17. **sievlla** – snow that is moist through to the ground, causing you to sink;
 18. **njeadggahat** – an area the wind has covered with snow.

Taken together, the collective nature of these 18 words constitutes a microcosm of the enormous diversity of the Sámi snow lexicon. Although Asheim’s source for these words was an iPhone app,⁷ most of the words used in *Muohta* are also included in Eira’s extensive list. Asheim’s selection includes words from all four of Eira’s classifications; the way they are positioned to form the structure of *Muohta* creates what could be called a ‘linguistic symmetry’ (Table 1). Words relating to tracks in the snow begin and close the work, and appear at regular intervals throughout (sections 1, 3, 6, 11, 15 and 18). Air words are used near the start and end (sections 2 and 16), while ice words occur twice towards the conclusion of the work (sections 12 and 14). The remaining eight sections of *Muohta* are occupied with words exploring snow on the ground (sections 4–5, 7–10, 13 and 17).⁸

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
tracks	air	tracks	ground	ground	tracks	ground	ground	ground	ground	tracks	ice	ground	ice	tracks	air	ground	tracks

Table 1. *Muohta*, structural word associations.

Asheim employs these 18 words in a variety of ways. For the choir, the sounds of the words are important, becoming the sung text; for the strings, it is the definitions of the words that are paramount, functioning as descriptive and behavioural inspirations for musical material. However, these are not so much separate roles as priorities, and throughout *Muohta* there is a clear sense that the

⁷ <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/muohta/id520568312>.

⁸ Considering the specific definitions of the two ice words, these could be regarded as an extension of the ground words.

choir and strings are not just intimately connected but are in fact twin facets of the same expressive ‘voice’. Though distinct, they extend into each other’s territory, the voices contributing to the strings’ allusive and descriptive creation of the sonic landscapes, the strings imitating the vocal and phonetic sounds articulated by the singers. As such, the distinction between them is minimised and they meld together, just as the Sámi are inextricably interconnected with their habitat. Each section of the piece thereby functions as a form of what could be described as ‘abstract programme music’, exploring the word and its definition with a combination of descriptive and figurative approaches. This is hinted at in the subtitle of the work, “Language of snow”, implying a translation of these snow types into a musical language.

However, it is important to stress that there is no attempt to be quasi-naturalistic in the manner of, for example, Olivier Messiaen’s *Catalogue d’oiseaux*, where specific birds are depicted within a schema intended to evoke the passing hours of the day in real-world habitats. In keeping with the less definitive nature of snow forms, Asheim’s approach is altogether more subjective. As such, the correlation between the word definitions and their sonic analogues is an impressionistic one. Furthermore, these impressions are decidedly fleeting: with a relatively short overall duration of a little over 20 minutes, each section of *Muohta* is very brief, for the most part ranging between 45 and 90 seconds. Asheim’s reference to the piece as a “collection” is therefore entirely apt, comprising short tableaux or windows into a series of adjacent worlds, each one akin to a miniature snowglobe that Asheim shakes up and briefly watches before moving on to the next.

Though abstract and impressionistic in nature, Asheim’s musical language often has an inviting immediacy that is not difficult to read. For example, in section 6, *ráđnu*, we hear a parallel for the

traces of animal trails in its network of sonic impressions, largely made up of whispered or indistinct notes and tremolos. Likewise in *čiehpá*, section 11, the emphasis of this word's definition on being a place where animals sleep can be heard in the gentle, nocturnal atmosphere of the music, filled with soft sustained pitches and light tapping sounds. By contrast, Asheim taps into the playfulness implied in the skiing-oriented *doavdnji* by making section 9 an overlapping sequence of downhill sliding and scurrying, peppered with exuberant wild shouts. An opposite level of pace is heard in section 5, *muovllahat*, where the impression of difficult, deep snow is conveyed in laborious music. Rising syllabic phrases in the voices sound as if they are hauling themselves up, while upward scales in the strings are covered in tenuto lines, making each ascent strenuous rather than simple.

As previously indicated, the structure of *Muohta* is such that its individual sections comprise what can be regarded as a 'linguistic symmetry' due to the nature of the words' associations. Yet this is not the same as a *musical* symmetry, and in this respect the structure of the work has more to do with an alternation of contrasts from section to section. In general, a quiet section is usually followed by a louder one (the exception to this comes at the start and end: the first and last pair of sections are both quiet – another instance of symmetry), with the main body of the work oscillating between moderate and loud.

In addition to providing the work with an underlying linguistic connection, Asheim has also included an aural one, an idea first presented at the very start of *Muohta*. Always within 6/4 metre, it is characterised by slow, short, regular repetitions in the strings. Harmonically, the note E is an omnipresence, used as both a drone and a pivot note for various chord progressions (including C major, E minor, A minor and C# minor – though in many cases the

13. muohtaruivi

154 *♩* ***f*** *♩* = *60* *med holtæmme, veldig intens*

S
 mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi

A
 mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi

T
 mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi

B
 mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi

Vin.1

Vin.2 *pizz.* *f*

Vla. *pizz.* *f*

Vcl. *pizz.* *f*

Cb. *pizz.* *f*

Detailed description of the musical score for "13. muohtaruivi". The score is for a string quartet and vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass). The music is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 60 beats per minute. The vocal parts have lyrics in Norwegian. The string parts include first and second violins, viola, violoncello, and double bass. The score features dynamic markings such as *f* (forte) and *pizz.* (pizzicato) for the strings. The vocal parts have lyrics: "mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi", "mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi", "ru-i-vi", "mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi", "mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi", "mu-oh-ta-ru-i-vi". The string parts include first and second violins, viola, violoncello, and double bass.

triads are made more complex with additional pitches). Moving through these progressions is a steady but angular melodic line, heard in the choir during the opening bars of the piece (Ex. 1).

Altos (+ Basses octave lower) Sopranos (+ Tenors octave lower)

C Em Am Em G C#m C Em C#m A

Ex. 1. *Muohta*, melody and simplified harmonies in bars 1–10.

This idea is used as the basis for several of the sections throughout *Muohta*, forming what Asheim has likened to “ritornellos”.⁹ The ritornello is presented in its simplest and clearest form in the first section, *ulahat*, as just described, where it acts as a prologue of sorts, establishing the essence of *Muohta*’s soundworld, in which the choir and strings are fundamentally connected. It also provides hints of *ulahat*’s definition, the suggestion of a slow trudging through a dark, snow-covered landscape along a trail that, at the section’s close, appears to be suddenly erased, making progress come to a halt.

The subsequent ritornellos are transformed according to their associated word definitions. In section 4 much of its original clarity is retained. The repetitions – extended now also to the voices – lose their synchronicity, forming various overlapping patterns akin to the undulations implied by its associated word, *časttas*. In the midst of these, traces of the melody are briefly heard, enough to preserve its basic identity. Section 8, *veadžahat*, reduces the ritornello further, the repetitions erased, replaced with blank, pitchless sweeps except for the first violins whose pizzicato notes are so high that their pitch focus is all but lost. The melody dominates,

⁹ Email to the author, 20 January 2020.

its notes now dispersed among the voices as individual sustained notes, permeated by additional accented staccatos that hint at the lost rhythmic repetitions. On top of this – or, rather, far below it – an acrobatic double bass solo plays out, ostensibly separate from everything else but harmonically in sympathy with the voices.

Section 12, *skárta*, is by far the most distorted ritornello. The 6/4 metre is present and the pivot note E is obvious, but the rest is much less so. The clearest signs of the ritornello melody and harmonies are to be found in the vocal parts, in a series of sustained pitches, each of which is subjected to a quartertone clash, blurring the note. However, these pitches are often drowned out by loud, accented cries of ‘skárta’ that persist throughout this section. Even more distortion comes from the strings; again, harmonic traces of the ritornello are to be found but they are embedded within dense clusters, rendering them extremely difficult to hear and adding to the overall confusion that typifies this remarkable passage of music.

The last ritornello comes in the final section of the piece, *njeadggahat*, which acts as an epilogue. The clear, halting repetitions from the opening section return, now conveying slightly different harmonies (and occasionally complicated with passing notes). The opening pitches of the melody, preceded now by a D, are sung by the voices as a meditative repeating rising line in octaves, bringing *Muohta* to an end.

As indicated above, *Muohta* is not intended by Asheim to be a naturalistic or ‘authentic’ representation of the various kinds of snow definitions associated with the words used in the piece. While there are times when a connection seems more obvious, as previously discussed, equally there are occasions when the relationship is more ambiguous. *Skárta* is a good example of this: the word implies “thin, ice-like snow on the ground, frozen into lichen

and moss”, none of which necessarily suggests the powerfully aggressive response heard in the music for this section. Asheim’s response is a subjective one, impressionistic and personal.

The musical surface of the piece can be read in more ways than just the obvious, however. While the choice of snow as artistic subject matter is hardly unusual for a composer from Norway, the use of Sámi terminology – and the way these terms are used by Asheim – is significant. Norway’s relationship with its Sámi community (estimated to be as many as 60,000 people, around 1% of the country’s population) has been a difficult and damaging one. The long-lasting enforced policy of Norwegianization struck a devastating blow to Sámi culture and identity. Hansen et al have noted how “[f]ailure to comply with this assimilative process often led to stigmatization and discrimination [...]. This was particularly evident in the school system where, until the late 1960s, Norwegian was the only language of instruction.”¹⁰ The policy was only discontinued as recently as the 1980s, and it is fair to say that the process of healing, reparation and reconciliation is not merely ongoing, but is still in its early stages.

Asheim’s decision to make Sámi words the basis for *Muohta* is therefore a bold and challenging one. For Norwegian and international audiences alike, the words and their meanings will be almost entirely unknown, and may well appear arcane. This is to some extent mirrored in Asheim’s treatment of these words, not presenting them clearly but instead fragmenting them into their component syllables and phonemes. Yet while this further distances us from their coherence, it equally allows the voices to linger over the words, savouring their component sounds. This approach, and the way these verbal sounds are then situated within sonic

¹⁰ Hansen, Ketil Lenert, et al. ‘Ethnic discrimination and bullying in the Sami and non-Sami populations in Norway: the SAMINOR study.’ *International journal of circumpolar health* 67:1 (2008), p.100.

'habitats' inspired by assorted snowscapes, is intriguing, inviting us to piece the fragments together and explore how to make sense of them. It highlights the mystery and beauty of both the words themselves and their remarkably precise and intricate definitions. More simply – though, perhaps, most importantly – *Muohta* emphasises the very fact of these words' existence, and through them celebrates the history and culture of the Sámi people, most especially their intimate understanding of and relationship with the natural world. In addition to the specific challenge this presents regarding Norway's present and future relationship with the Sámi, it also reiterates the global need for reflection regarding our communal relationship with the planet, at a time when climate change continues to provoke furious disagreement and debate.

Muohta is not a 'message' piece; it is neither a political statement nor a manifesto. At its most superficial level, it is simply music that revels in and marvels at the wonder and beauty of snow in its multiplicity of forms and variations. But if we are prepared to look and listen more closely, we can read its surface and find deeper meanings and implications. In *The Name of the Rose*, William of Baskerville recognises "the evidence through which the world speaks to us like a great book",¹¹ and finds answers in the surface of the snow. By contrast, in the snow surfaces of *Muohta* we find questions – questions that, for both Norway and the whole world, urgently need to be addressed.

11 Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, pp. 23.

4. Sasitas

...forholdsvist små, bølgeformede snøfinner dannet av vind

37

Mark "s" etter *é*

pp

[mark "a"]

S: *é - a - a -*

A: *é - a - s - ta - s s s s s s s s s s s s*

T: *é - a - s - ta - s é - a é - a é - a é - a é - a é - a é - a*

B: *é - a - s - ta é - a - s - ta*

ta ta ta ta ta ta ta

37

pp *Isato, Rautondo*

Vln.1 *pp* *Isato, Rautondo*

Vln.2 *pp* *Isato, Rautondo*

Vla. *pp* *Isato, Rautondo*

Vcl. *pp* *Isato, Rautondo*

Ch. *pp* *Isato, Rautondo*

pp