

Icelandic Music for solo guitar

Many years ago, I started investigating what pieces existed from Icelandic composers written for guitar (both solo and in chamber music context) and soon I developed an urge to record the Icelandic repertoire for classical guitar, starting with the solo repertoire. In 2005, I contacted one of Iceland's most famous composers, Karólína Eiríksdóttir, and got a commission grant for her to dedicate me a piece, and out came the Sonata in 4 movements, written in 2005, of which I gave a Paris debut in 2008. In January 2010 I presented a concert program of about 50 min of Icelandic music written for solo guitar at Dark Music Days, Iceland's most renowned festival of contemporary music. In April that same year I was invited to play at the Mostly Nordic Chamber Music Series in Seattle, USA, with excellent reviews and interest from the present guitarists for the repertoire. There, I played the program which I played in Iceland, but adding a very nice multi-movement piece of Hafliði Hallgrímsson, which I discovered shortly after the concert in Iceland (which is featured here on my suggested program). With time passing, I have discovered yet more gems for the guitar from the society of Icelandic composers, all culminating to my first recording of Icelandic music, a dream that has finally come true. It will be a 1 CD album of around 70 minutes of music. However, there is more interesting Icelandic guitar repertoire out there, and my future plans is to commission more works from the young generation of very talented Icelandic composers, and still not having contemplated the chamber music context, I could imagine that I would produce a 2nd CD with Icelandic music.

The following is the program I recorded on my CD of Icelandic music for solo guitar, which I will present on my tour of Brazil in 2012. Here you will find info on the composers and their own short insight or commentaries on their own work.

Oliver Kentish: Berceuse (2007)

Born in London in 1954, Oliver Kentish trained as a cellist at the Royal Academy of Music. He came to Iceland in 1977 and is active as a composer, with close on two hundred compositions in most genres listed at the Iceland Music Information Centre. Commissions include a work for baritone and orchestra, *My People* which was a gift to the Icelandic people from the British government on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Icelandic independence. Dedicated to the then President of Iceland, Ms Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, it was premiered in 1994 by Michael J. Clarke and the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Osmo Vänskä.

Recipient of several prizes and official awards, his music has been performed widely in the Scandinavian countries, Europe, Russia and the United States and his music has featured on several CDs both in Iceland and abroad.

"I composed this piece as an examination piece for one of the students of the "New" Music School in Reykjavík in 2007. As the title refers, Berceuse being a cradle song, it is simple and tonal (I would even prefer calling it a "song" rather than "piece"), yet dreamy and a bit sad in character."

Þorsteinn Hauksson: Toccata (1987)

Thorsteinn Hauksson (b. 1949) is a widely performed composer of symphonic, instrumental, vocal, ballet and computer works. His works have been nominated on three occasions for the prestigious Nordic Council Music Prize. Hauksson received his training at Stanford University in California and University of Illinois after his studies at the Reykjavik Conservatory. He also spent two years for further research and work at IRCAM in Paris. Thorsteinn Hauksson is a full time composer and after several years in Paris and Southern France he now lives in Berlin and Iceland.

“Toccata was composed in the year 1987 for the guitarist Jósef Ka-Cheung Fung. It was part of the Nordic Ensemble concert tour in China the same year. As the name implies, I used the perpetuum mobile concept to some extent, a favorite compositional device amongst toccata writers. This work requires extreme agility and difficult hand stretches on the part of the player and it surely is a sign of great competence and technical mastery when this work is included in the repertoire of the guitarist.”

Haflíði Hallgrímsson: The Jacob’s Ladder (1984)

One of the most important figures in the current flowering of Icelandic music is Haflíði Hallgrímsson, born in 1941 in the small town of Akureyri on the north coast of Iceland. He began playing the cello at the age of ten and studied in Reykjavik and Accademia Santa Cecilia in Rome.

On returning from Rome, he continued his studies in London with Derek Simpson at the Royal Academy of Music and was awarded the coveted Madame Suggia Prize in 1966. The following year he began composition studies with Dr. Alan Bush and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. On leaving the Academy, he remained in Britain, eventually making his home in Scotland on being appointed Principal Cellist with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. Although he admits to some major influences, Hallgrímsson’s musical style is entirely original, showing sensitivity to line and colour, shape and texture.

“A well known allegorical painting by Marc Chagall, depicting the famous scene from the Old Testament, of the Dreams of Jacob, was the initial inspiration for the JACOBS LADDER for solo guitar. As to the composition progressed, the frets on the neck of the guitar took on a symbolic significance as the Steps in the famous ladder. The hands of the guitarist can well be seen in this poetic context as the angels ascending and descending the ladder. The five movements are directly evocative of each title and it’s poetic possibilities. The harmonic language is simple and well-suited to the guitars sonorities.”

Jón Ásgersson: From 10 Icelandic Folk Songs (1998)

- **Vikivaki**
- **Kvæðalag**
- **Sofðu unga ástin mín**

Jón Ásgeirsson attended the Reykjavík College of Music, studying with Árni Kristjánsson, Dr. Victor Urbancic and Jón Þórarinnsson. He continued his education at the Royal Scottish College of Music in Glasgow, and at the Guildhall School of Music in London. In 1996, he was appointed Professor of Music at the College of Education in Iceland. Since his return to Iceland, Mr. Ásgeirsson has been a productive composer. Among his works are the operas Þrymskvida (The Lay of Thrym) and Galdra Loftur, the ballet Blindisleikur (Blindman's Bluff), the symphonic poem Lilja, and numerous choral works. The opera Galdra-Loftur, premiéred in 1996 at the Reykjavik Art Festival, is based on a play by Jóhann Sigurjónsson, a passionate tale of a man and his longing for the unknown. In 1995 the Reykjavík Folk Dance Society premiéred Íslenskir söngdansar for choir, orchestra and folk dancers, based on old tunes intended for dancing.

Mr. Ásgeirsson has frequently drawn his subject matter from the traditional music heritage of Iceland, particularly evident in his earlier works, such as Folk Songs, Lilja, and Ancient Dances, as well as arranging a number of folk songs for ensembles and choirs. He arranged the Ten Icelandic Folk Songs for guitar in December 1998 for Arnaldur Arnarsson, and were premiered in Seyðisfjörður, Iceland in July 1999. According to him, it is very easy to transcribe for the classical guitar, "you just have to observe what fits for the left hand."

Snorri Sigfús Birgisson: 2 Guitar Fantasies (2003)

Snorri Sigfús Birgisson was born in Copenhagen in 1954. Early musical studies with Gunnar Sigurgeirsson and then enrollment at the Reykjavík College of Music where his teachers were Hermina Kristjánsson, Jon Nordal, Arni Kristjánsson (piano), and Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson (composition). Piano studies with Barry Snyder at the Eastman School of Music (1974-1975). Studies in composition with Finn Mortensen, electronic music and sonology with Lasse Thoresen and sonology with Olav Anton Thommessen in Norway in the following year. Studied composition with Ton de Leeuw in Amsterdam from 1976-1978. Since 1980 Birgisson has been living in Reykjavík, where he is an active composer, performer and music teacher. He has composed solo works, chamber works, symphonic pieces and choir music.

"Two Fantasies was composed in the summer of 2003 for Pétur Jónasson, who premiered it on February 9th of 2004. The two pieces are conceived as one unit but can be performed separately. – The first movement is extroverted, active, and with frequent changes of pulse, whereas the second movement is slow, introverted and meditative."

Karólína Eiríksdóttir: Sonata (2005)

Karólína Eiríksdóttir was born in Reykjavík, Iceland, and studied piano as a child. She later studied composition at the Reykjavik College of Music with Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson and at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with George Wilson, Leslie Bassett and William Albright. She graduated with Master's degrees in music history and research (1976) and in composition (1978), and took a teaching position at the College of Music in Reykjavik.

Karólína's works have been performed in France, England, Vienna, Tokyo, the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Spain and Argentina. She served as chairman of the board

of The Iceland Music Information Centre and of The Society of Icelandic Composers, and is now active on the boards of the Reykjavík Arts Festival and Iceland Academy of the Arts. She has to her name several solo works for guitar, commissioned by various guitarists. Notable is her four-movement guitar concerto, written for the Argentinean guitarist Sergio Puccini, premiered in June 2001.

“The Sonata was written for guitarist Ögmundur Þór Jóhannesson, who premiered the piece at The Festival de Musique Provence –Islande on July 8th 2006. The Sonata consists of four movements: Toccata, Fugue, Air and Ballade. “

Hugi Guðmundsson: Equilibrium (2000)

Hugi Guðmundsson (1977) studied composition in Iceland and at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen with Bent Sørensen, Hans Abrahamsen and Niels Rosing-Schow. He later finished a master’s degree in electronic music at the Institute of Sonology in The Hague. He has received several awards and recognitions for his works, including the Icelandic Music Awards, Kraumur Awards, nomination to the ISCM Young Composer Award and three honorary recommendations at the International Rostrum of Composers. Hugi Guðmundsson works as a composer in Copenhagen, Denmark.

“Equilibrium is the oldest piece I still keep in my list of works, written at the age of 22. It has a very special meaning for me because it was commissioned by my former guitar teacher, Pétur Jónasson, who influenced me greatly during my teenage years. It is a very special feeling for a student when a teacher suddenly sees him as an equal. The title of the piece comes from the material of the piece, which balances around the centre of the strings.”

Kjartan Ólafsson : Variations on 20 Years (2004)

Kjartan Ólafsson (1958) graduated in 1984 from the Reykjavík College of Music with a Bachelor of Music degree in composition. He continued his studies in Utrecht in Holland, at the Institute of Sonology, where he concentrated on electronic music, and later at the Sibelius Academy in Finland where his composition teachers were Einojuhani Rautavaara and Paavo Heininen. Kjartan received his Licentiate of Music diploma (PhD) from the Sibelius Academy in 1995. Since 1988 Kjartan has developed a composing system based on Artificial Intelligence technique called CALMUS (Calculated Music), which is a computer program especially designed for composition of contemporary music. www.listir.is/calmus/

Kjartan Ólafsson currently works as a composer, teacher, producer of contemporary music festivals in Iceland *ErkiTíð* and Dark Music Days, and as a researcher and developer of CALMUS. He is currently the president of the ISCM - Icelandic Section and chair of the Society of Icelandic Composers. In 2005 he was appointed professor of composition and theory at the Iceland Academy of the Arts.

“Variations on 20 years is dedicated to the memory of the guitarist Kristján Eldjárn and especially written for the guitarist Pétur Jónasson who premiered it in Rome in 2007. Many quotes from Kjartan’s work over the last 20 years appear throughout the piece, forming a chronological order.”

Atli Heimir Sveinsson: Veglaust Haf (1989)

Atli Heimir was born 1938 in Reykjavík, Iceland and started piano lessons at the age of 10. He studied piano with Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson at the Reykjavík College of Music and took his diploma in 1957. He went on to study at the State Academy in Cologne, Germany, from 1959, studying composition with Günter Raphael and Rudolf Petzold, instrumentation with Bernd Alois Zimmermann, conducting with Wolfgang von der Nahmer and piano with Hermann Pillney and Hans Otto Schmidt. He also took private lessons with Gottfried Michael Koenig. He took his diploma in composition and theory in 1963, a year in which he also attended summer courses in Darmstadt, making the acquaintance of Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez, György Ligeti and Bruno Maderna. In 1964 he studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen, Henri Pousseur, Christoph Caskel and Frederic Rzewski. In 1965 he went to the Netherlands and studied electronic music with Gottfried Michael Koenig in Bilkoven.

He was president of the Icelandic Composers Association from 1972 to 1983. In 1976 he received the Nordic Council Music Prize for his Flute Concerto. Since 1992 Atli Heimir Sveinsson has received an honorary salary from the Icelandic Parliament. Atli Heimir was elected a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music in 1993. His Symphony Number Two premiered in Reykjavík on June 1, 2006.

“Ocean with no paths [Veglaust Haf], consists of short musical pictures describing the ocean in some of its attitudes. I am born and raised on an island surrounded by the ocean, and the sea is an important part of our life. We Icelanders are sailors and fishermen. The ocean can be incredibly beautiful, and sometimes terrifying and dangerous. I hope I have succeeded to transfer the visual impressions into music. “