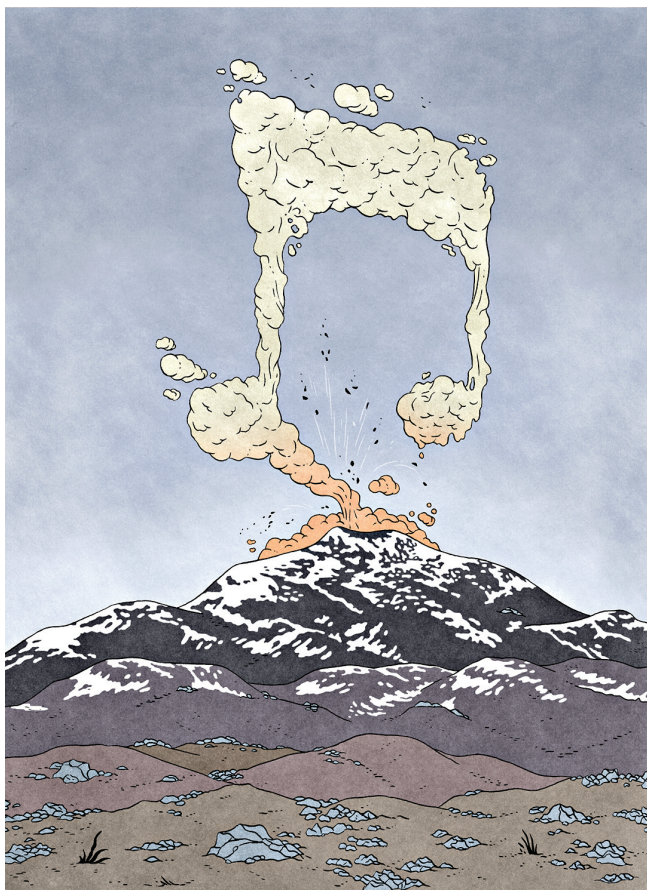


## NORDIC FIRE

*The Los Angeles Philharmonic celebrates the music of Iceland.*

BY ALEX ROSS



SON FOR SON, *dóttir for dóttir*, Iceland may be the most musical nation on earth. It has a population of three hundred and thirty-two thousand—about the same as that of Corpus Christi, Texas—and an international musical presence that is out of all proportion to its size. In April, the Los Angeles Philharmonic hosted the Reykjavík Festival, which sprawled across eight days of programming. There were around fifty musical compositions, six nonclassical groups, and nearly a hundred and fifty Icelandic participants. The corridors of Disney Hall were blonder than usual. Local hotel receptionists contended with names containing þ and ð. A huge installation by the Icelandic artist Shoplifter, consisting

of a hovering mass of multicolored hair extensions, occupied one of Disney's lobby spaces, setting a characteristic Icelandic tone of epic whimsy. And the country's preëminent musical figure had not yet arrived: in a postlude to the festival, Björk will perform at Disney at the end of May.

The explanation for the Icelandic music surge is difficult to pin down, but it may have to do with the persistence of a communal, close-knit culture, which resists reducing music to a faceless digital utility. The country has some two hundred choirs, nearly a hundred music schools, a world-class orchestra (the Iceland Symphony), and an unknown number of bands. Much of this activity is supported by the government, which

prizes culture instead of punishing it. At a pre-concert talk, the musicologist Árni Heimir Ingólfsson said, "Iceland won its independence from Denmark only in 1944, and, like so many young countries, it has legitimized itself through culture." Because so many Icelanders have studied singing or learned to play an instrument, classical music has a less isolated position in their society. It was no stretch for the L.A. Phil to reach out to Björk and members of the bands Sigur Rós and Múm, who already knew most of the principals on the classical side. Sigur Rós performed in three programs, with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the L.A. Phil providing accompaniment. Before the band took the stage, the orchestra played on its own.

No pop idol will ever rock as granitically hard as Jón Leifs, with whom the modern history of Icelandic music begins. On the final night of the orchestral series, the convulsive dissonances of Leifs's *Organ Concerto*, completed in 1930, startled a hall full of Sigur Rós fans. Leifs was a visionary musical thinker who tried to capture volcanoes, geysers, and Norse gods in sound, and largely succeeded. He was also an irascible curmudgeon who entertained theories of Aryan supremacy. He lived in Germany for most of the Nazi period, his career hampered by his brazen modernist tendencies and by his marriage to Annie Riethof, a German Jewish pianist. A performance of the *Organ Concerto* in 1941, in Berlin, led to mass walkouts and denunciations in the press. Somehow, he and Riethof survived, escaping to Sweden in 1944.

The concerto not only unleashes spectacular sounds—screaming organ-and-brass chords at the outset; ritual hammer blows on the timpani, bass drum, and tam-tam—but also possesses an intricate structure, in the form of thirty variations on a passacaglia theme of dour folkish character. There are problems of balance: at the L.A. Phil, one saw the strings more than one heard them. The finale is protracted to the point of exhaustion, as the music hits a climactic wall and then runs into it again and again. Yet Leifs's maniacal overemphasis is integral to his work's aesthetic, which might be described as one of sublime derangement. The English organist James McVinnie conquered the daredevil solo part, and the ever

*Icelandic composers are united by a feeling for landscape.*

more masterly Salonen—who, earlier in the month, led the L.A. Phil in what seemed to me a definitive rendition of Sibelius's elusive Sixth Symphony—gave shape to the chaos.

Contemporary Icelandic composers tend not to imitate Leifs, which is just as well, given his habit of running ideas into the ground. They do, however, echo his feeling for landscape, exchanging blood-and-soil philosophy for cosmopolitan environmentalism. At the festival, scores alluded variously to earthquakes, glaciers, long nights, weather phenomena, and—inevitably—a volcanic eruption. (The last was heard in a delightful children's program called *Maximus Musicus*, telling of mice that go on tourist expeditions in an orchestra's baggage.) Other pieces dwelled more generally on elemental textures, such as fixed harmonies, drones, and shimmering patterns. Players were often asked to abandon the standard twelve pitches: glissandos, microtones, whistling harmonics, and other breathy noises proliferated. The effect was usually more evocative than assaultive. A few too many composers favored moods over ideas, anticipation over event; this may be the downside of inhabiting a bohemian-friendly culture in which artists seldom assume antagonistic roles.

Anna Thorvaldsdottir, a thirty-nine-year-old composer who divides her time between Iceland and England, is a particularly artful purveyor of Icelandic atmospherics. Her short tone poem "Aerality" leans on sustained notes, yet its sonorities are so alive with ever-changing instrumental filigree that it simultaneously achieves a state of stasis and of transformation. The thirty-eight-year-

old composer and conductor Daniel Bjarnason, who also served as the festival's co-curator, contributed a majestically brooding symphonic triptych titled "Emergence." (This and other recent Icelandic works can be heard on a new Sono Luminus album entitled "Recurrence," with Bjarnason leading the Iceland Symphony.) The fifty-seven-year-old Haukur Tómasson employed a brighter palette in his Second Piano Concerto, with much of the solo part—virtuosically executed in L.A. by Víkingur Ólafsson—given over to crystalline scampering in the treble clef. Even here, though, abyssal tuba notes exposed a sonic substratum.

The Sigur Rós element of the equation felt more strained. The band first gained fame in the late nineties with airy, falsetto-driven soundscapes; its recent work is heavy with guitars and drums, verging on black metal. A starry array of composers supplied arrangements of their songs—Bjarnason, David Lang, Missy Mazzoli, and Nico Muhly, among others—but much of their effort disappeared beneath the band's bass-heavy roar. (Owen Pallett fared best with an impish wind-and-brass scoring of "Starálfur.") Disney's hypersensitive acoustics have never responded well to amplified music, and to my ears the sound became oppressive, although the gentleman who did a paganistic touchdown dance in the aisle next to me obviously disagreed. I wish that I had found the courage to do the same during the Leifs.

THE L.A. PHIL balanced all that Nordic thunder with events of more intimate potency. The superb chorus Schola Cantorum Reykjavík prefaced the orchestral concerts with a selection

of a-cappella pieces, including Leifs's Requiem, which is as spare and sad as the Organ Concerto is savage. The group cast an even deeper spell in a free concert at the First Congregational Church, a handsome Gothic Revival pile near MacArthur Park: the program featured "Hvöld," an ethereally dissonant work by Hörður Áskelsson, the chorus's director. Just as restorative was a series of early-evening appearances by Nordic Affect, a Reykjavík early-music quartet that has compensated for the lack of an Icelandic Baroque by commissioning scores for period instruments. Here, too, Anna Thorvaldsdottir stood out. Her "Shades of Silence" begins with droning strings and with barely audible sounds produced by plucking, brushing, and rubbing the strings of a harpsichord. Eventually, chiming figures emerge from the cloud of timbre. You seem to be present at the birth of music itself.

The festival had many other highlights: Puridur Jónsdóttir's "Cylinder 49," in which Schola Cantorum sang an old Icelandic song into ceramic teacups, replicating the distortions of an Edison-cylinder recording; Úlfur Hansson's "Þýð," in which the audience was asked to hum drones in support of Nordic Affect's playing. As with past festivals, the L.A. Phil has masterminded an experience too absorbingly complex to be summarized in brief. In the coming months, this most imaginative of orchestras faces a crucial decision about its future: Deborah Borda, who has served brilliantly as its president and C.E.O. since 2000, is moving on to the New York Philharmonic, and the organization is seeking a new leader. The internal memo should be brief: "Change nothing." ♦

THE NEW YORKER IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS INC. COPYRIGHT ©2017 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

VOLUME XCIII, NO. 11, May 1, 2017. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 13 & 20, June 5 & 12, July 10 & 17, August 7 & 14, and December 18 & 25) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Elizabeth Hughes, chief business officer; Risa Aronson, vice-president, revenue; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman emeritus; Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president & chief executive officer; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; James M. Norton, chief business officer, president of revenue. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO THE NEW YORKER, P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Please write to The New Yorker, P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684, call (800) 825-2510, or e-mail [subscriptions@newyorker.com](mailto:subscriptions@newyorker.com). Please give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. If during your subscription term or up to one year after the magazine becomes undeliverable, you are ever dissatisfied with your subscription, let us know. You will receive a full refund on all unmailed issues. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within four weeks after receipt of order. For advertising inquiries, please call Risa Aronson at (212) 286-4068. For submission guidelines, please refer to our Web site, [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com). Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to The New Yorker, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. For cover reprints, please call (800) 897-8666, or e-mail [covers@cartoonbank.com](mailto:covers@cartoonbank.com). For permissions and reprint requests, please call (212) 630-5656 or fax requests to (212) 630-5883. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without the consent of The New Yorker. The New Yorker's name and logo, and the various titles and headings herein, are trademarks of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. Visit us online at [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com). To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines, visit [www.condenast.com](http://www.condenast.com). Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684 or call (800) 825-2510.

THE NEW YORKER IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OR LOSS OF, OR FOR DAMAGE OR ANY OTHER INJURY TO, UNSOLICITED MANUSCRIPTS, UNSOLICITED ART WORK (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DRAWINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TRANSPARENCIES), OR ANY OTHER UNSOLICITED MATERIALS. THOSE SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS, PHOTOGRAPHS, ART WORK, OR OTHER MATERIALS FOR CONSIDERATION SHOULD NOT SEND ORIGINALS, UNLESS SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO DO SO BY THE NEW YORKER IN WRITING.



Copyright of New Yorker is the property of Conde Nast Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.