

THE PIANO WORKS OF PÁLL ÍSÓLFSSON (1893–1974)
A Diverse Collection

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, The City University of New York

2010

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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Abstract

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Adviser: Professor Emeritus Peter Basquin

The piano works of Páll Ísólfsson (1893–1974) form a diverse collection of twenty-six pieces that consists of nineteen character pieces, one set of variations, and six liturgical pieces. They were composed during 1920-1970, and now for the first time, the collection can, in this dissertation, be appreciated in its entirety. The important steps taken along the way have included publication, recordings, research and concert performances.

The character pieces divide into four groups according to stylistic influence and maturity. Most of the earlier pieces fall into the “humorous burlesque” or “sentimental lyric” group; the other two groups belong to traditional dance genres, as well as works that express “Weltschmerz” through the tonal and harmonic language of late-nineteenth-century Romanticism.

Ísólfsson’s only large-scale work for piano, *Tilbrigdi*, consists of a theme and seventeen variations and is a virtuosic tour de force. The work, a tribute to the composer’s father, is a comprehensive essay on variation techniques and is a fine addition to the catalogue of variation sets for piano solo. The six liturgical pieces which complete the Ísólfsson collection represent the composer’s religious views and his thorough and admiring position towards the music of J. S. Bach.

The premise of the dissertation is that the piano works are sophisticated compositions and that as a collection they form an ambitious and diverse repertoire that belongs to the piano

literature of the northern European and Scandinavian countries. To support this, I evaluate Ísólfsson's collection in a larger perspective that entails comparing it with similar works by other composers; furthermore, information as to the style and standing of his piano works in his native country, Iceland, is presented with the aid of a questionnaire and a list of representative works by a selection of his contemporaries; finally, the collective reception history of Ísólfsson's piano works is discussed both in light of the anti-Romantic sentiment in Iceland's music circles around the middle of the twentieth century and subsequently with regard to published reviews about performances of the collection.

PREFACE

Musicology is a relatively young discipline in Iceland. As music developments in the country have until recently tended to lag somewhat behind mainstream currents, the music scene has during the past four decades swayed its focus towards contemporary composers and performers rather than dwelling on the accomplishments of previous generations.

Research into the history of Icelandic music is, however, an evolving field, with many areas waiting to be explored. This dissertation is the first study of the piano works of Páll Ísólfsson (1893–1974). The purpose is to make a contribution to the knowledge of Icelandic piano music by presenting Ísólfsson's diverse collection from a historical and stylistic perspective.

This study is a continuation of my previous research into Icelandic piano music.¹ That research, completed in 1989, sparked general interest in the genre and resulted in the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service sponsoring my production of a series of radio programs on the history and development of Icelandic piano music, broadcast in 1991. Subsequently, the first festival of Icelandic piano music was held in 1992.²

Because of the scope of the subject, however, I had to limit the attention given in my 1989 Master's thesis to each composer's body of work. Thus, only five of Ísólfsson's six published solo piano works were discussed: the two *Gleitur* and the *Thrjú Píanóstykki* (Three Piano Pieces), op. 5. My decision to briefly mention Ísólfsson's seventeen variations on a theme by Ísólfur Pálsson — *Tilbrigði um stef eftir Ísólfi Pálsson*, instead of analyzing them was partly due to the limited scope of the study.

Another issue regarding the variations was that I could not place them in a convincing context as a natural continuation of Ísólfsson's earlier piano works. I was bothered by the extensive gap between the early character pieces which appeared in the 1920s and this late work, published in 1974, in terms of both the compositional style and the writing for the piano. I determined there had to be a missing link between the early works and the variations.

¹ Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, "Icelandic Piano Music: History and Development" (Master's thesis, City University, London, 1989).

² At the festival I was invited to give the opening lecture on the basis of my previous work, referred to as "the most important item from the subject literature" by Marek Podhajski, ed., *Icelandic Piano Music I* (Akureyri: Akureyri Music School, 1992), 57.

The missing link turned out to be a collection of fourteen pieces entitled *Svipmyndir* (Album Leaves). In 1993, as part of the centennial celebration of the composer's birth, these works were published by the Iceland Music Information Center in 1994 under the supervision of pianist Örn Magnússon.

One of the decisions resulting from my 1989 research was that at some point in the future I would devote my attention to the piano music composed in Iceland under the influence of Romanticism. Therefore, when the opportunity arose for further research at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, it seemed logical to focus on Ísólfsson, whose piano collection I found intriguing.

Thus, when I began my research in preparation for the DMA dissertation in 1998, the objective was to include all known piano works by Ísólfsson composed for piano solo. As my work progressed in 1999, two additional manuscripts came to the fore. In 2000, I performed Ísólfsson's piano works in recital; and in 2001, my performance of the complete piano works known at the time was issued internationally on a commercial audio CD by the Swedish company BIS Records AB. A copy of the CD is enclosed with the dissertation.

In the fall of 2007, as I was tying loose ends together in preparation for concluding the dissertation, six additional but unknown manuscripts surfaced. This happened during my examination of Ísólfsson's miscellaneous and non-music-related documents at the manuscript collection of the National and University Library. For some reason these manuscripts had escaped being filed among the composer's autograph manuscripts.

I was pleased with this finding and now welcome the opportunity to present and evaluate the "whole picture," so to speak, of Ísólfsson's piano works, from the early works to the crowning achievement of the *Tilbrigði*.

Since this is the first study of Ísólfsson's piano works, the works themselves are my primary source of information. Although it is probable that the majority of them were composed between 1920 and 1960, I attempted to organize them sequentially. This was problematic, for, with few exceptions, none of the works are dated. Also, as Ísólfsson generally did not use opus

numbers to classify his catalogue of works, a sequential order could be inferred only by basing it on the information available.

I was fortunate in being able to access most of the original manuscripts or photocopies of Ísólffsson's piano works. This enabled me to trace the composition history of, for instance, the *Ballata*, also known as *Preludium*, of which there exists more than one version. Another advantage to examining the manuscripts was that I could assess the accuracy of the available published editions of the piano works.

Other helpful primary sources were photocopies of Ísólffsson's handwritten and typed letters, diaries, lectures, articles, concert programs, and concert reviews. These added to my understanding of the composer's life, his personality and general views. Unfortunately, there are no recordings available of Ísólffsson playing his piano works, but there are several recordings of organ performances in which he plays his own works and those of other composers. These were used to help envision Ísólffsson's approach to keyboard playing as well as to depict him as performer.

In order to compensate for the lack of musicological research on Ísólffsson and his piano works, I found it necessary to seek additional information by conducting a series of interviews in Iceland during June and July 1999. These were based on a two-part questionnaire that I devised. I chose eight music professionals who were connected to the subject of the study in various ways.³

All participants agreed to be interviewed on condition of a written informed consent in accordance with the guidelines of the Committee of the Protection of Human Subjects. Some participants chose to submit written answers to the two-part questionnaire, and a few chose to do so in addition to the interview. Subsequently, all participants have reviewed their comments and approved their translation and publication as an integral part of this study.

Part One of the questionnaire had eleven questions that were answered by all participants. Part Two included two to five questions. Each of these was tailored to the professional experience of the participants as well as their relationship to Ísólffsson. There was,

³ See Appendix II for names and professional credentials of interview participants and questions from both parts of the questionnaire.

however, one common question asked of all the participants in the interviews: “Is there anything else you wish to add to this interview?”

The most important written sources supportive of the study were, in addition to the brief biography by Jón Thórarinnsson,⁴ the two conversation books written by Matthías Johannessen in which the composer recounts various aspects of his life.⁵ Other sources include the documentary film *Páll Ísólfsson, Tónskáld* (Composer Páll Ísólfsson), which was made by Ósvaldur Knudsen about the life and work of the composer and broadcast on the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service in 1972,⁶ and Ísólfsson’s organ performances preserved on the 2CD recording entitled *Páll Ísólfsson: Aldarminning (1893–1974)* (Páll Ísólfsson: Centennial) (Reykjavík: Spor TD-020, 1993).

The dissertation is divided into four chapters which examine Ísólfsson’s piano collection from many perspectives, in order to support my assessment that, Ísólfsson emerges as a fine composer, who’s ambitious and diverse works are a valuable contribution to the Romantic piano literature of the northern European and Scandinavian countries.

Chapter 1 is entitled: “Páll Ísólfsson: An Introduction.” The aim of the chapter is to depict a portrait of Ísólfsson the man and the musician. It begins with a brief overview of the early years and subsequent studies in Leipzig, following which Ísólfsson’s laying the groundwork for musical life in Iceland as organist, composer, teacher and music administrator, is discussed.

Chapter 1 also gives insight into Ísólfsson’s personality as well as his organ and piano playing based on his own account and those of his colleagues and relatives. Finally, a view of the composer in retrospect entails a short discussion of his compositions, with an emphasis on the piano works and his influence upon succeeding generations of Icelandic musicians, placing his achievements into a perspective.

Chapter 2 is entitled: “The Piano Works: Character Pieces.” It traces the long-delayed appearance of Ísólfsson’s diverse collection and proposes a timeline that organizes the works

⁴ Jón Thórarinnsson, *Páll Ísólfsson* (Reykjavík: Helgafell Press, 1963).

⁵ 1. Matthías Johannessen, *Hundathúfan og hafid* (The Dog-tussock and the Ocean: Conversations with Páll Ísólfsson) (Reykjavík: Bókfells Press, 1961). 2. *Í dag skein sól* (The Sun was Shining Today: Conversations with Páll Ísólfsson) (Reykjavík: Bókfells Press, 1964).

⁶ Ósvaldur Knudsen, *Páll Ísólfsson, tónskáld* (Composer Páll Ísólfsson) (INBS, M-2474-20:08-2", February 1972), filmstrip.

according to their year of composition or discovery (when known) or alternatively, according to when a piano piece first appeared before the public. The chapter subsequently discusses Ísólffsson's style and compositional approach with regard to the special qualities of his music as well as acknowledging the influence of Grieg and Reger and his cultural heritage. The most substantial part of Chapter 2 features the nineteen character pieces in perspective, how they divide into four groups according to style, influence and maturity.

Chapter 3 is entitled: "The Piano Works: Variations and Liturgical Pieces." It places the *Tilbrigði* variations in perspective, proposing them as a tribute to Ísólffsson's father as a result of examining the historical background and performance history. The *Tilbrigði* in analysis section of Chapter 3 features a sectional analysis of the whole work as well as a discussion of each variation with reference to its main aspects. Towards the end of the *Tilbrigði* presentation, in this chapter, is a brief discussion of the notion that the work be regarded as a fine addition to piano variations literature.

The remainder of Chapter 3 entails the six liturgical pieces which complete the Ísólffsson collection. These represent the composer's religious views and his thorough and admiring position towards the music of J. S. Bach.

Chapter 4 is entitled: "Evaluation." This concluding chapter opens with the question whether there is more to know about Ísólffsson's piano collection before the final evaluation. It subsequently adds the views expressed by the questionnaire participants regarding the positioning of the collection as well as presenting representative romantic works by Ísólffsson's compatriots such as Sveinbjörnsson and Leifs.

Lastly, the collective reception history of Ísólffsson's piano works will be discussed in light of the anti-Romantic sentiment in Iceland's music circles around the middle of the twentieth century. An important part of the reception history will be presented in the form of reviews of the music in performance, published in Icelandic national newspapers and international media, which leads to a final evaluation.

Following Chapter 4 are three Appendixes and a Bibliography. The Appendixes are: I. Manuscripts and published piano works cited by Páll Ísólffsson and other Icelandic composers; II.

Interviews: a list of the eight interview participants and their professional credentials; the questionnaire: Part One; Part Two; III. Selected review excerpts of *Páll Ísólfsson: Complete Original Piano Music*. BIS-CD-1139, BIS Records AB (© 2000 and © 2001); Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, piano. The Bibliography divides into: A. Books, articles and dissertations; B. Ísólfsson's writings and career documents (photocopies); C. Audiovisual sources. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

This study could not have been accomplished without the graceful help and wonderful support of my adviser, Professor Peter Basquin, my first reader, Professor L. Michael Griffel, and my second reader, Professor John Graziano. I would also like to thank my family and all my friends and colleagues who participated in the study, in particular Thurídur Pálsdóttir, Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, Jón Thórarinnsson, Örn Magnússon, Jón Ásgeirsson, Jórunn Vidar, Gísli Magnússon, and Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson.

Special thanks go to Robert von Bahr of BIS Records AB in Sweden for issuing my Páll Ísólfsson CD; furthermore, I am grateful to the several individuals and institutions that assisted my work in various ways along the way, in particular, Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, Björn Steinar Sólbergsson, Halldór Haraldsson, Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, Jón Nordal, Jónatan Gardarsson, Kjartan Ólafsson, Kjartan Óskarsson, Margrét Hjaltested, Marteinn Hunger Fridriksson, Mist B. Thorkelsdóttir, Nicholas Milton, Njáll Sigurdsson, Sigfrídur Björnsdóttir, Smári Ólason, Thórunn Gudmundsdóttir, Tryggvi Baldvinsson, the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, the Iceland Academy of Arts Library, the Iceland Music Information Center, the Icelandic National Broadcasting Station, the National and University Library and the Nordic House Library.

Lastly I must thank everyone at the City University of New York Graduate Center's Music department, in particular Professor Norman Carey; Professor Sylvia Kahan; Professor Agustin Anievas; Professor and Dean Joel Lester, who encouraged me to apply to the doctoral program, and, of course, my cheerful friends Peg Rivers and Jacqueline Martelle.

To Styrkár and Kjartan Örn

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CHAPTER 1

Páll Ísólfsson: An Introduction

Early years

Páll Ísólfsson was born on October 12, 1893, in Stokkseyri, a small fishing village on the southwest coast of Iceland. His parents were Thurídur Bjarnadóttir and Ísólfulur Pálsson.¹ Ísólfsson was the oldest of their eleven children, of whom eight survived past infancy.² His exposure to a variety of music was greater in his upbringing than was usual among the average Icelandic child at the time because of an avid musical interest sustained by generations of his family.

Ísólfsson's father, Ísólfulur (1871–1941), was a remarkable man, creative in thought and inventive. He played the organ at the local church, conducted the church choir, and had learned the trade of organ building and repair as well. When Ísólfsson was four, his father brought a harmonium into the home. Ísólfsson mentions later that his favorite early memories were of his father playing and improvising at the instrument in the evening:

He could only focus momentarily on music each day, since as breadwinner of a large family he had other duties to fulfill, such as farm work and fishing. I remember him also playing works by Beethoven, Bach, Haydn, Handel, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. These were, of course, simplified versions³ but sounded fine to my ears.⁴

Ísólfulur himself composed songs but was not able to extend them into larger works because of his lack of formal music education.⁵ Two of Ísólfulur's brothers, Bjarni and Jón, were also musically inclined. Bjarni became Stokkseyri's first organist in 1876, and Jón taught many local youngsters to play the organ. In 1902, Jón moved to the capital city of Reykjavík and started

¹ Ísólfsson described his parents thus: "My mother was friendly and loving but remained quiet, my father was an introvert." Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 12.

² Margrét Gudmundsdóttir, "Dr. Páll Ísólfsson," *Tónlistardagar Dómkirkjunnar* (Október 1993) (Music Days of the Reykjavík Cathedral), 5.

³ The *Organtónar* collection and the ten volumes of the *Harmonium Album* featured well-known classical works transcribed for keyboard, and were common in Icelandic homes in the late-nineteenth century.

Jakobsson and Jónsson, *Fidlar og tónmenntalíf í Sudur-Thingeyjasýslu*, 30.

⁴ Matthías Johannessen, *Hundathúfan og hafid* (The Dog-tussock and the Ocean: Conversations with Páll Ísólfsson) (Reykjavík: Bókafélagið, 1961), 44–5.

⁵ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

his own instrument import business. Later Jón became cashier of the main bank of Iceland, the Landsbankinn.⁶

At the end of the nineteenth century, Stokkseyri and the neighboring village of Eyrarbakki, were relatively cultural villages compared with similarly populated areas.⁷ Their geographical location on the southwest coast made them suitable ports for ships sailing from overseas. Foreign influences, particularly Danish, were common. There was one venue in Eyrarbakki where music was performed on a regular basis. This was the home of Danish vendor Thorgrimsen and his family and was named Húsid (the House). Ísólffsson reminiscences:

There was no piano in Stokkseyri, and when my father and I went to Eyrarbakki, we always stopped by at Húsid. There I heard piano playing for the first time and was both surprised and glad to hear those magic tones. There I was introduced to the piano sonatas by Beethoven as well as works and songs by Schubert and Schumann.⁸

Ísólffsson began studying the organ with his father at the age of eight. Soon he was asked to perform preludes and postludes at the Stokkseyri church services. Between the ages of twelve and fifteen he began to try his hand at composing small pieces but felt ill-equipped to write them down on account of his lack of music education:

I heard all kinds of tones inside my head, relentlessly they kept reappearing, little tunes that meant a lot to me. I have been able to use them for inspiration for my compositions to this day. I think that my ability to create music would have developed earlier had I received good music education in my younger years.⁹

It is certain that Ísólffsson's father, Ísólfur, played a central role in the composer's early musical environment. This was also true of pianist Haraldur Sigurdsson (1892–1984), who, according to Jón Thórarinsson, influenced Ísólffsson in his early years:

Páll and Haraldur were almost the same age and they grew up in neighboring homes, so to speak. There was however a basic difference in their family circumstances. Páll Ísólffsson's family was poor and his serious music studies abroad began late, only when he was in his twenties. Haraldur Sigurdsson's family was financially secure since his father's position was that of the local county magistrate.¹⁰

⁶ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

⁷ "In 1852 a primary school had started which served in common Eyrarbakki and Stokkseyri. Reykjavík, which had the status of an administrative centre for the country, had no primary schools from 1848 until 1862, when one was established by special legislation. In 1870 more villages followed suit." Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 256.

⁸ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 45–6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ Jón Thórarinsson, letter to Grímsdóttir, March 15, 2000.

Haraldur's musical gifts were obvious from a young age, and following a successful audition with composer Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson (1847–1927),¹¹ in 1907, his family was able to send him to Denmark in 1908 in order to further his piano and organ studies at the Royal Copenhagen Conservatory. Later Haraldur went to study with a former Liszt pupil, Ms. Rappoldi-Kahrer in Dresden and subsequently married an Austrian singer whom he met during his studies.

Haraldur Sigurdsson performed in concerts and became professor of piano at the Royal Copenhagen Conservatory.¹² According to Thórarinnsson: "Páll looked up to Haraldur in his youth and there is no question that Haraldur was his role model in many ways. Later the two became lifelong friends despite living in different countries."¹³ It is revealing to read Ísólfsón's recounting of his first meeting with Sigurdsson:

One summer I heard that Haraldur had arrived from Copenhagen to dwell at his home at Kaldadarnes on a semester break. I was at the time working at the Eyrarbakki general store. I was excited to meet Haraldur; his reputation as a musical wunderkind was known to all and his name was surrounded with magic. Mrs. Nielsen at the Húsid encouraged me to visit Haraldur but I was shy and worried that I might even faint upon meeting this Paganini of the piano. What should I say?

Then Gudmundur, organist at the Church of Eyrarbakki, came to my assistance. He invited me to stay in his house overnight and promised to accompany me to visit Haraldur the next day. When I woke up in Gudmundur's house, he had already brought Haraldur to the house, probably thinking it would make me less nervous to meet him there.

Meeting Haraldur was very pleasurable, he played the harmonium for us and was very nice and polite to me. Hearing him play bewildered me, what sounds he extracted from the instrument. I was exhilarated, these were the sounds of paradise, just imagine if he had played the piano for me.¹⁴

Ísólfsón moved to Reykjavík in 1908 at the age of fifteen to work and to study music with his relative Sigfús Einarsson, the Cathedral organist. In order to learn something more "practical" than composing music and playing the organ, Ísólfsón studied the trade of music printing. His first public appearance as organist was at a concert in 1912 at the Reykjavík Cathedral. During

¹¹ Sveinbjörnsson, who finished studies for the priesthood at the Latin School in Reykjavík before traveling abroad, studied piano and harmony privately with Vilhelm Carl Ravn in Copenhagen during 1869–70 and sang in the Music Society Choir, under the leadership of composer Niels Gade. During 1872–73 Sveinbjörnsson studied piano privately in Leipzig with Carl Reinecke. Sveinbjörnsson spent most of his working years in Edinburgh during 1872–1919 as a piano teacher, pianist, and composer and visited his country of origin only occasionally, for the most part, to give concerts.

¹² Information based on the script of Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson's radio program on Icelandic National Broadcasting Service entitled "*Tónstíginn: Tónleikahald á þriðja áratugnum*" (The Scale: Concerts during the 1930s) (Reykjavík, December 2, 1997).

¹³ Thórarinnsson, letter, 2000.

¹⁴ Matthías Johannessen, *Í dag skein sól* (The Sun Was Shining Today: Conversations with Páll Ísólfsón) (Reykjavík: Bókafélagið, 1964), 112–15.

his Reykjavík years Ísólfsón met most of the musicians in the city and heard some of the local concerts. He said that this cultural environment excited his wish to study abroad in Europe's music center, Germany.¹⁵

In Reykjavík Ísólfsón lived with his uncle Jón Pálsson (1865–1946).¹⁶ One quiet evening, Jón's wife, Anna Adólfsdóttir, asked her husband what his plans were for young Páll, since she was not convinced that the trade of music printing suited him at all. Jón then sought information regarding organ studies in Germany for Páll. Jón had previously paid for the organ-building studies in Copenhagen of his younger brother, Ísólfur, Ísólfsón's father.¹⁷

Fortunately for Ísólfsón in 1913, Jón sponsored him to travel abroad for further music studies. The numerous letters that Ísólfsón wrote to his uncle during his stay abroad show how grateful he was to receive this opportunity. Ísólfsón goes to great lengths in the letters to Jón to detail all his expenses so as to assure his uncle that his money is being well spent. Thus Jón Pálsson proved himself to be a major benefactor in Ísólfsón's life by supporting him financially through his studies.

Leipzig

In the years 1913–20 Ísólfsón furthered his music education at the Leipzig Conservatory. It is illuminating to read Ísólfsón's recounting of the beginning of his studies at the Conservatory: "Now it was time for me to appear at the entrance examination. I had rarely played on other instruments than the harmonium and just played on a piano a few times. I was very nervous."¹⁸ In a letter to his uncle Jón dated October 9, 1913, Ísólfsón writes: "Now the entrance exam is over and it went fine, or at least beyond my expectations. I played halfway through a piece by Mendelssohn and then they asked me to stop."¹⁹

¹⁵ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 85.

¹⁶ Jón Pálsson had studied the organ although his future career was to be in the banking business. He made an important contribution to the preservation of the Icelandic national heritage with his pioneering wax cylinder recordings of songs and interviews, during 1903–12. Cited in Ólason, "Organ, trómet og harpan söng," 380.

¹⁷ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

¹⁸ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 98.

¹⁹ Ísólfsón's letter to Jón Pálsson, October 9, 1913.

At the Conservatory Ísólffsson chose the organ as his main instrument and the piano as a second instrument. Ísólffsson said later that he chose the organ because it sounded like the surf of the ocean: "When I was a young boy I used to love walking down to the shore and sit on a cliff listening to the sound of the ocean surf. Playing on the organ made me feel close to my origin, the ocean of my childhood."²⁰

Ísólffsson's organ teacher at the Leipzig Conservatory was Karl Straube. Straube, who became organist at the Thomaskirche in 1902 and served as Kantor during 1918–40, was very supportive of Ísólffsson. According to Ísólffsson, "Straube was a great organist and considered one of the best Bach interpreters at the time. It was very difficult to be accepted as his student so I have considered myself very lucky to this day. Straube was not only a magnificent teacher to me but a father figure as well."²¹

It is possible that Straube also felt some kinship with Ísólffsson because of similarities in their background. Straube, too, was the son of an organist and instrument maker. He received his early training from his father and other Berlin organists, but he never had a formal music education. His knowledge came from practical experience and from the thriving musical and intellectual life of Berlin. Indeed Ísólffsson could not have found a more suitable teacher and role model, for Straube had become known in music circles as "der Organistmacher"²²

Karl Straube would lend Ísólffsson and his other students books by authors such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to help them gain knowledge and understanding of life in general. Straube also emphasized that his organ students would build excellent technique in order to be able to interpret masterworks with authority:

I am currently practicing very difficult finger exercises which are necessary. These exercises have to be executed with a certain hand movement; the hand has to move on the keyboard according to certain rules. Another important issue, which my teachers are very strict about is that one should play expressively but not with brilliant technique devoid of musical feeling. I think that my teacher [Straube] likes the expressiveness in my organ playing for I have noticed how he scolds the other students when they do not play well but he does not utter an unkind word to me.²³

²⁰ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

²² Douglas A. Lee, "Karl Straube," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 18, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 204.

²³ Ísólffsson's letter to Jón Pálsson, February 6, 1914.

Ísólffsson also studied piano with Robert Teichmüller, an excellent piano teacher who emphasized independent relaxation of each finger and made technical piano studies by Biehl, Beringer, Heller, and Czerny a part of his training. He found this technique useful, too, in playing the organ.

Ísólffsson mentions in a letter dated October 21, 1913,²⁴ that he understands the German language surprisingly well, although some professors at the Conservatory are harder to understand than others because of how fast they talk. Another hurdle that he mentions is the fact that now he has to relearn musical terms (such as intervals) in German.

In this context it is important to remember that Ísólffsson had very little formal schooling behind him when he arrived in Germany. He was basically self-taught in languages and mathematics, and therefore it is noteworthy that he did so well at the Leipzig Conservatory right from the beginning. This is clear from a letter dated February 6, 1914: “The theory lessons are going well and Professor Grisch has often remarked on my excellent progress. I think even that he finds my theory solutions among the best.”²⁵

Hans Grisch, who taught Ísólffsson harmony and fugal counterpoint at the Conservatory, was pleased with his student and called him “den melodiereichen Ísólffsson.” Judging from Ísólffsson’s letters during the fall of 1913 his music studies at the Leipzig Conservatory were highly stimulating:

I think that my creativity has increased since I arrived here; I have composed a few menuets and the beginning of a first movement of a sonata in A-flat minor. Furthermore I have plans in my head for another sonata in B minor and variations in F minor as well as some other things. The problem is that these forms are difficult and I have not been taught to work with them.²⁶

Another quote from a letter written a month later also shows his creative enthusiasm blended with self-doubt: “I have composed variations on a theme by Beethoven but I am not sure that he would have liked them since Beethoven mastered the variation form like no other composer.”²⁷

Stephan Krehl, Arthur Seidl, and Arnold Schering taught Ísólffsson music history, form, and esthetics, and Max Reger gave lectures on analysis: “It was unforgettable to listen to Reger

²⁴ Ibid., October 21, 1913.

²⁵ Ibid., February 6, 1914.

²⁶ Ísólffsson’s letter to Jón Pálsson, November 25, 1913.

²⁷ Ibid., December 31, 1913.

analyze and explain the classical masterworks; his lectures radiated intelligence and knowledge.”²⁸

In the years 1917–19 Ísólfsson served as Straube’s assistant and deputy at the Thomaskirche when he himself had to fulfill other professional obligations. “This proved to be a valuable experience for me since I had to play at services every Sunday and to perform with the Gewandhaus Orchestra every week. I could not have been hired on a permanent basis though, because of my immigration status as a foreigner.”²⁹

According to Marteinn H. Fridriksson, former organist and cantor at the Reykjavík Cathedral, Ísólfsson’s work experience at the Thomaskirche is even more important in retrospect: “Dr. Páll Ísólfsson was the first grand Icelandic organist. Subsequently there have been others to follow his lead, but the connection formed through his work to the strong tradition of the Thomaskirche has been invaluable for the Icelandic music community.”³⁰

There are many copies of concert programs remaining from this period that detail Ísólfsson’s performing activities. There is, for instance, a program dated December 17, 1918, for the fourth symphonic concert at the Leipzig Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. In this concert Ísólfsson performed on the organ in the *Second Symphony* of Fritz Volbach. The Orchester Fürstliche Hofkapelle zu Gera played this work under conductor Hofkapellmeister Heinrich Laber. Also listed on this program as soloist was the renowned cellist Emanuel Feuermann.³¹

By the time Ísólfsson returned to Iceland in the early 1920s he had received more professional music education and performing experience than any Icelander before him. In this context, the comments of composer Jón Thórarinnsson on Ísólfsson’s decision to return to his homeland are illuminating:

It would have seemed natural for Ísólfsson to try and build his professional career abroad, judging from the glowing remarks his teacher Karl Straube wrote in a reference letter at the end of his studies: “exceptionally virtuosic organist— a musician of great thought.”³²

²⁸ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 114.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁰ Marteinn H. Fridriksson, interview entitled “Tómasarkirkjan í Leipzig: Vagga Íslenskrar kirkjutónlistar” (The Thomaskirche in Leipzig: Cradle of Icelandic Church Music), *Reykjavík Daily Morgunblaðid*, June 6, 1988, 16.

³¹ Source: copies of Ísólfsson’s concert programs.

³² Jón Thórarinnsson, *Páll Ísólfsson* (Reykjavík: Helgafell Press, 1963), 43.

Instead he chose to settle in Iceland, where music was still in the infantile stage and everything had to be built from the ground up; in fact, the groundwork was yet to be laid.³³

Laying the groundwork for musical life in Iceland

In 1920 the total population of the capital city of Reykjavík was 17,679 inhabitants.³⁴

Classical instrumental music was still not widely heard or known except for the occasional brass ensemble performance.³⁵ There was, however, a strong choir and singing tradition among the nation. The one Icelandic professional musician who could conceivably have prepared the ground for musical life in Iceland before Ísólffsson returned from Germany was pianist and composer Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson.

Thórarinsson reflects on Sveinbjörnsson:

There is no doubt that at the beginning of the twentieth century Sveinbjörnsson had more knowledge of most musical subjects than any other Icelander and his compositions [songs, piano works, chamber works, cantatas, incidental music, and works for choir, including the Icelandic national anthem] were superior to anything his fellow countrymen had produced as to the scope of his works, the musical ideas, and his workmanship.³⁶

Sveinbjörnsson's works were published in several editions in England and Denmark, including Paterson & Sons, the London Music Publishing Company and Wilhelm Hansen Edition,³⁷ which underscores that his music was in much demand there.³⁸

The question that arises is whether Sveinbjörnsson, who was arguably the "first" Icelandic composer, could have been a role model in any way for Ísólffsson. The two musicians worked together at least once in Reykjavík when Ísólffsson participated in Sveinbjörnsson's church concert on July 18, 1919.³⁹ Also during 1922–24, when Sveinbjörnsson had moved to

³³ Thórarinsson, written answers to interview questions, 1999.

³⁴ Ingólfur Kristjánsson, *Harpa Minninganna: Árni Thorsteinsson tónskáld, minningar* (Musical Memoirs, composer Árni Thorsteinsson) (Reykjavík: Ísafold Press, 1955), 354.

³⁵ In 1876, the first Reykjavík brass ensemble, *Lúdurtheytarafélag Reykjavíkur*, was founded by Helgi Helgason.

³⁶ Thórarinsson, *Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson*, 110.

³⁷ Thórarinsson, *Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson*, 235.

³⁸ In 2007, to celebrate the 160th anniversary of Sveinbjörnsson, a CD was issued by NAXOS featuring a selection of piano and chamber works performed by pianist Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, violinist Audur Hafsteinsdóttir, and cellists Sigurgeir Agnarsson and Sigurdur Bjarki Gunnarsson. The CD is entitled *Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson: Chamber Music and Music for Piano*, © Naxos 8.570460.

³⁹ Kristjánsson, *Harpa Minninganna*, 401.

Iceland with the intention to spend his final years there, he was undeniably the “Grand Old Man” of the Icelandic music community.⁴⁰

According to Thórarinsson, it is probable that Ísólfsón associated with him on some occasions during this period.⁴¹ Moreover, Ísólfsón conducted a brass ensemble at Sveinbjörnsson’s funeral in Reykjavík in 1927 and organized a Sveinbjörnsson memorial concert on behalf of the Iceland National Broadcasting Service⁴² in 1957.⁴³ Jón Thórarinsson comments:

Sveinbjörn and Páll were almost fifty years apart in age. During Páll’s youth Sveinbjörn’s compositions were next to unknown in Iceland except for the National Anthem *Ó, guð vors lands*. Páll spent many of his developing years in Germany while Sveinbjörn lived in England and then later traveled to New Iceland in Canada and the United States. His successful career in England had come to an end at that time.

They probably interacted during the two years that Sveinbjörn spent in Iceland in his old age [but] I think it is out of the question that Sveinbjörn was in any way a role model for Páll. Their careers were as dissimilar as their compositions despite some common factors.⁴⁴

Pianist Örn Magnússon suggests, on the other hand, that “perhaps Ísólfsón would not have become a professional musician if Sveinbjörnsson had not paved the way.”⁴⁵ Composer Hallgrímsson maintains that “Sveinbjörnsson’s self-imposed exile was of course a great cultural loss for the Icelandic nation. A person with his knowledge, education, and creativity would have made a huge impact upon the progress of musical matters in the country.”⁴⁶

Were there any other Icelandic musicians contemporary, and on a par, with Ísólfsón who were prepared to participate in building up the music scene in Iceland? Indeed, there was the previously mentioned pianist Haraldur Sigurdsson. There were also two of Ísólfsón’s fellow students at Leipzig who had joined him there for music studies: Jón Leifs, composer and pianist (1899–1968), and Sigurdur Thórdarson, composer and conductor (1895–1968).

Sigurdsson and Leifs chose to build their careers abroad for the most part although each of them made important contributions to the Icelandic music scene. Sigurdsson concertized

⁴⁰ Thórarinsson, *Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson*, 192.

⁴¹ Thórarinsson, letter, 2000.

⁴² Hereafter referred to as the INBS.

⁴³ Thórarinsson, *Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson*, 205; 237.

⁴⁴ Thórarinsson, letter, 2000.

⁴⁵ Örn Magnússon, interview, June 1999.

⁴⁶ Cited in Helgason, *Tónmenntasaga Íslands: Íslensk tónmenntaritun* II, 88.

regularly in Iceland whereas Leifs conducted the Hamburger Philharmonisches Orchester in the first symphonic concert in 1926.⁴⁷ Years later, in 1945, Leifs moved back to Iceland. He worked actively on composers' rights and founded Tónskáldafélagid (the Icelandic Composers' Society) in the same year, together with Ísólffsson, Thórdarson, Runólffsson, and Pálsson.⁴⁸ Thórdarson worked in Iceland for thirty years as conductor of the Reykjavík Male Choir and as manager at the INBS.

One thing is certain: the work that awaited Ísólffsson in his home country was immense. Aside from a one-year stay in Paris during 1924–25, when Ísólffsson studied French organ music in Paris with Joseph Bonnet,⁴⁹ he devoted his career of fifty years to building a future for music in his native country. This included performing and organizing concerts on the organ and piano, playing at church services, conducting choirs, brass ensembles, and orchestral groups, composing, teaching, and working as music administrator.⁵⁰

Thurídur Pálsdóttir, Ísólffsson's daughter, reminiscences:

My father worked very hard but did not receive much monetary compensation during the very early years. His only regular income was the yearly amount of five thousand kronas, which was his compensation for directing the Reykjavík Brass Ensemble. Later of course, he supported his family with the regular income received for serving as organist of the Free Church and the Reykjavík Cathedral as well as the principal of the Reykjavík Music School and music director of the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service.⁵¹

My mother, Kristín Nordmann,⁵² came from a cultured family and played the piano herself. She was an invaluable support to Ísólffsson's professional life. For instance, when students came to my father for organ studies, Kristín taught them piano during the first

⁴⁷ Göran Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, trans. Peter Lyne (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre, 1991), 40.

⁴⁸ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, "Music in Iceland During the Twentieth Century with a Special Emphasis on the Beginning and Development of Electronic Composition in 1960–90" (Ph.D. dissertation, Aalborg Universitet, Institut for Musik og Musikterapi, 1997), 77.

⁴⁹ Joseph Bonnet (1884–1944). A French composer and organist. One of the major French pipe organ players, selected in 1906 to become the organist at St. Eustache, Paris. In 1911 he had the privilege of succeeding Guilmant as concert organist at the Conservatoire de Paris. Other positions and honors included Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia music fraternity in 1917; founded the organ department of the Eastman School of Music in 1921; position at the L'École César-Franck in 1937 and professor at the Conservatoire musique du Québec à Montréal in 1943. Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Bonnet (accessed April 10, 2010).

⁵⁰ Ísólffsson was fortunate in that his work was within the realm of music. His predecessors, Cathedral organists Pjetur Gudjohnsen (1812–77) and Jónas Helgason (1839–1903), had to augment their income by working as county magistrate (Gudjohnsen) and blacksmith (Helgason). Cited in Stephensen, *Dómkirkjan*, 166; 170.

⁵¹ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁵² Páll Ísólffsson married twice. His children from the first marriage to Kristín Nordmann (1898–1944) were Einar (1925–96), Jón (1923–93), and Thurídur (b. 1927). In 1947, Ísólffsson married Sigrún Eiríksdóttir and together they had one daughter, Anna Sigrídur (b. 1947).

two years. These students were usually organists from churches in the countryside. The piano teaching in the home was, of course, intrusive to our privacy.

The year 1930 was a year of celebration for the Icelandic nation as well since it marked a millennium of Althing rule. Jón Thórarinsson states that the year was a turning point in the history of Icelandic music. On that occasion grand festivities were held at the site of the ancient Althingi — Thingvellir — and the *Althingishátíðarkantata* (Althing Festival Cantata) by Páll Ísólfsson for mixed choir, soloists, and orchestra was premiered. The cantata had been awarded first prize in a national music competition in 1930 by an international jury that included Danish composer Carl Nielsen. According to Thórarinsson, the cantata was at that point in time the weightiest composition ever performed in Iceland.⁵³

In the fall of 1930 a music school was founded, Tónlistarskólinn í Reykjavík (Reykjavík Music School), and Ísólfsson became its first principal. This was important in the opinion of pianist Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson since Ísólfsson's presence at the new music school assured high standards⁵⁴ and “initiated academic education in music.”⁵⁵ It was fortunate that well-qualified musicians from Europe were willing to immigrate to Iceland to teach at the new music school. These included Dr. Franz Mixa (1902–1994), Dr. Victor Urbantschitsch⁵⁶ (1903–58), and later Dr. Róbert Abraham Ottósson (1912–74), and in 1933, one of the first Icelandic professional pianists, Árni Kristjánsson (1906–2003). This meant that Ísólfsson's team of teachers was first-class from the beginning.

Sadly, Ísólfsson was criticized by nationalists for hiring foreign musicians to teach at the school. His response was that professional qualifications were more important than nationality.⁵⁷ Ísólfsson's struggle to ensure valid foundations for music life in Iceland was not unprecedented, as the following quotation shows:

⁵³ Jón Thórarinsson, *Páll Ísólfsson* (Reykjavík: Helgafell Press, 1963), 16.

⁵⁴ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

⁵⁵ Gísli Magnússon, interview, 1999.

⁵⁶ He later changed his name to Urbancic to facilitate Icelandic pronunciation and writing in relation to his acquisition of Icelandic citizenship. Cited in I. Eythórsdóttir, “Erlendir tónlistarmenn á Íslandi á 20. öld,” grein II: “Stríðsgróðinn — evrópsk hámenning” (Foreign Musicians in Iceland in the Twentieth Century, article II: “The Warprofit – European High Culture”), available at <http://www.musik.is/Pistlar/ingibjorg1.html> (accessed July 30, 2006).

⁵⁷ Margrét Gudmundsdóttir, “Dr. Páll Ísólfsson,” 10.

The year 1882 saw the birth of Finnish music life as it is today. In that year Martin Wegelius (1846–1906) founded the Helsinki Institute of Music — now the Sibelius Academy. The story of his fight to establish a permanent home for musical education in Finland is a fascinating one, including the fact that this most extraordinary man went abroad to find young first-rate teachers, and that when he found that there were no textbooks available, he sat down and wrote them himself.⁵⁸

Composer Jón Ásgeirsson stresses that the new music school laid the foundation for the music scene in Iceland today:

Ísólffsson taught me a course in the history of music and I did also receive a few lessons wherein he analyzed organ works by J. S. Bach, Max Reger, and César Franck. These classes were especially entertaining and in the history lessons Ísólffsson was unforgettable, telling many tales. His friendly sense of humor was legendary. As an example of Páll's musical knowledge and good ears, I can tell a story dating from when I was studying counterpoint with Dr. Victor Urbancic:

I had brought my four-part fugue to the class and Dr. Urbancic was playing through the piece when Páll, principal of the Reykjavík School of Music, entered after knocking at the classroom door. He said that he had heard consecutive fifths in the fugue. Dr. Urbancic was surprised since he did not usually miss such mistakes in the works of his students. So he played through the fugue again and Páll stood by the window gazing out. In the middle of the fugue Páll said 'there' and on closer inspection it became clear that the consecutive fifths happened on a line break. The mistake had thus been harder to detect. Páll received our total admiration for hearing music so well.⁵⁹

The INBS was founded towards the end of 1930 and Ísólffsson was appointed its director of music, a post he held until 1959. Ísólffsson's musical influence through the radio was immense for he programmed classical music for broadcasting on a regular basis.

Ísólffsson's influence on music life in Iceland was furthermore asserted through his work with Tónlistarfélagid í Reykjavík (the Reykjavík Philharmonic Society). Renowned musicians who performed under its auspices; for example, names such as Adolf Busch and Rudolf Serkin were frequently encountered on concert programs and visits by foreign artists of such stature were an invaluable inspiration to the Icelandic musicians.⁶⁰

Ísólffsson was associated with Tónlistarfélagid from its beginning in 1932, both as music advisor and performer. In his own words: "The concerts of Tónlistarfélagid brought Iceland closer to the international culture scene. It is not sufficient to listen to music performances on the radio:

⁵⁸ Denby Richards, *The Music of Finland* (London: Hugh Evelyn Ltd., 1968), 3–4.

⁵⁹ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

⁶⁰ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

that is like receiving the Holy Communion via the telephone. People need to meet artists personally and witness live concert performances.”⁶¹

The contributions of pianist Árni Kristjánsson to the concerts of Tónlistarfélagid, should not be overlooked. He was active on the performing scene in Iceland for several years and performed with such musicians as tenor Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and violinists Adolf Busch and Pina Carmirelli. He succeeded Ísólffsson as principal of the Reykjavík Music School in 1956 and, in 1959, as music director of the INBS.

Among other posts Ísólffsson held during his career were those of organist at the Frikirkjan í Reykjavík (The Reykjavík Free Church) in 1926–39, Professor of Church Music at the University of Iceland in 1934–46, and Cathedral organist in Reykjavík in 1939–68:

When Páll became organist at the Cathedral, an outstanding period began in its musical history. He was later to be considered, on an international level, one of the most esteemed interpreters of Bach’s music; a man who was at the same time a fine choir director, a composer of great stature, a strong and unforgettable personality, intelligent, and with an excellent sense of humor. Additionally, he was someone people liked working with very much.⁶²

Ísólffsson also fought for the establishment of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, a dream that came true in 1950. As well as being on its initial Board of Directors, he conducted the Iceland Symphony Orchestra on various occasions, such as at the opening of the National Theatre in 1950.⁶³ According to Thórarinnsson, he also served as an unofficial music advisor to the Icelandic government.⁶⁴

During his lifetime, Ísólffsson received various honors for his work. In 1945 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Oslo, and was chosen a member of the Royal Swedish Music Academy in 1956. He also received many local and foreign decorations and was made honorary member of numerous artists’ associations.⁶⁵

Ísólffsson passed away on November 23, 1974, at the age of eighty-one. Jón Thórarinnsson sums up the answer to the question as to how to assess Ísólffsson’s position in the history of Icelandic music: “Páll Ísólffsson was an epoch-making person in the history of Icelandic

⁶¹ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 195–96.

⁶² Stephensen, *Dómkirkjan*, 180.

⁶³ Jónatan Gardarsson, *Páll Ísólffsson: Aldarminning (1893–1974)* (Páll Ísólffsson: Centennial, liner notes for CD recording, 13.

⁶⁴ Jón Thórarinnsson, interview, 1999.

⁶⁵ Gardarsson, *Páll Ísólffsson: Aldarminning (1893–1974)*, 14.

music and asserted much influence on all music matters during four decades around the middle of the twentieth century. His contribution to laying the groundwork and cultivating today's flourishing music scene was by far the weightiest coming from any one individual."⁶⁶

The man and the musician

It seems certain that Páll Ísólfsson's persona was larger than life in all respects. Such a key figure in the cultural life of a small country is bound to encounter resistance. His towering presence was not to the liking of everyone; therefore it is interesting to note Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson's remark that Ísólfsson's persona may have overshadowed the composer Ísólfsson, or at least made it more difficult for his professional contemporaries to judge his work fairly.⁶⁷ This view is echoed by composer Ásgeirsson: "Those people existed of course who felt left out in the cold as to the accessing of opportunities and resources. Collisions are not unheard of when 'large personalities' crave their space and anyone can have an opinion on such matters."⁶⁸

In the book *Hundathúfan og hafid* there is a quote from Ísólfsson that somehow opens a window to understanding his persona:

Even though I appear to be an ever-so-happy person and even frolicsome, underneath this surface there is a depressed individual. There is sadness in my soul which I could not hide as a child. I sought solitude during those moments, my refuge was the ocean.

If I was feeling particularly sad, I hid underneath the cliffs, lying there alone and forgotten, thinking about the meaning of life, with my eyes reflecting the blue sky and listening to the ocean surf. Sometimes I would shed a tear without knowing why. This sadness has accompanied me in this life ever since and we have made an agreeable pact.⁶⁹

On the other hand the single characteristic mentioned by everyone who knew Ísólfsson was his humor and ability to entertain others with mimicking and funny stories, even tricks. Pálsdóttir, remembers this entertaining aspect: "My father was the life of the party among friends, at home, however, he was pleasant but mostly serious and occupied with his work."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

⁶⁷ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

⁶⁸ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

⁶⁹ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 70.

⁷⁰ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, *Líf mitt og gleði* (My Life and Happiness), ed. Jónína Michaelsdóttir (Reykjavík: Oddi, 1986), 45.

Ísólfsón's ability to work well with different people was important. Sveinbjörnsson remarks: "Ísólfsón would not have been able to live in Iceland in the 1920s with a pompous attitude; this was his forte, and he approached people on their level, whatever it was. His common roots helped him adjust to situations; he wanted matters to run smoothly, did not like arguments. His 'joie de vivre' was notable in all respects."⁷¹

Ásgeirsson reminiscences about his first meeting with Ísólfsón when Jón was only ten years old. Ísólfsón had greeted the boy warmly, invited him to the living room and asked about his plans. The boy told him about his wish to study the organ. Ísólfsón told him that he would not have time to teach him but promised to find a teacher. Ásgeirsson tells this story to the credit of Ísólfsón, that he would not find himself above accommodating a boy in a courteous manner.

Ásgeirsson feels that World War II had a tremendously depressing influence on Ísólfsón. The years in Iceland from 1938 until 1950 were probably difficult in many ways for an artist of his stature. Fortunately, Ísólfsón's life included the friendships of leading philosopher Sigurdur Nordal⁷² as well as several painters, poets, and musicians. These important friendships probably helped him to dedicate himself to creative work during this period. After 1950, things improved as Iceland got back in touch with the outer world, culturally speaking.⁷³

Ísólfsón was a highly respected organist, both in Iceland and abroad. It goes without saying that Iceland in the early 1920's was not the "ideal" place for an excellent organist. There were only one or two pipe organs available in the country, and in the countryside there were small harmoniums.⁷⁴ How well he managed to build an international reputation as a concert artist is, therefore, admirable. Another fact to consider in this context is that traveling to and from Iceland

⁷¹ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

⁷² Sigurdur Nordal (1886–1974) was one of the most influential scholars of the twentieth century in the field of Icelandic studies. Through his writings on Icelandic literature, ancient and modern, articles and lectures, as well as his tuition at the University of Iceland, he molded the understanding and interpretation of Icelandic literature and culture to a greater extent than almost any other Icelander. Nordal's influence was felt far beyond the bounds of academia; throughout his life he played an active part in Icelandic cultural debate, and he was respected and recognized by scholars in the fields of Icelandic and Nordic studies throughout the world. He was one of the champions of the "Icelandic School" in research into Icelandic medieval literature, and has remained an important influence on medieval research until the present day. See <http://www.hi.is/Apps/WebObjects/HI.woa/wa/dp?id=1004839> (accessed on July 26, 2008).

⁷³ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

during these years was more easily said than done. The main travel method was by sea and this was time-consuming.

As organist of the Reykjavík Cathedral Ísólffsson's duties were manifold, and as a performing artist he traveled several times abroad to give concerts: in Scandinavia, Germany, Britain, the United States, Canada, and the USSR. He was considered one of the best Bach interpreters of his time. His repertoire included major organ works such as Bach's *D minor Toccata and Fugue* and the *C minor Passacaglia*.

When LP recordings for HMV and Parlophone-Odeon were released in the early 1960s with Ísólffsson's Bach performances, music critics for the magazine *Gramophone* made laudatory comments about them. In these articles Ísólffsson was compared favorably with organists such as Fernando Germani and Walter Kraft.⁷⁵

Ísólffsson also performed many organ works by Max Reger, including the *D minor Toccata and Fugue* and the *F-sharp major Sonata*, op. 33. The *Variations über Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Sagen* by Franz Liszt, the *Rhapsodie* in A major by Camille Saint-Saëns, and the *D minor Sonata* by Felix Mendelssohn are all listed on Ísólffsson's programs, as are works by composers such as Dietrich Buxtehude, Girolamo Frescobaldi, Johannes Brahms, Alexandre Guilmant, and Oskar Merikanto.

There are eight excellent reviews from Danish newspapers about two of Ísólffsson's debut concerts in the Jerusalemkirke on March 15 and April 5, 1919, in Copenhagen. These reviews document the young organist at the height of his powers. His playing is described as technically enviable: "Hr. Ísólffssons Orgeltechnik aftvinger den dybeste Respekt" (Hovedstaden); virtuosic: "stor Virtuositet" (Børsen); stylish and nuanced: "stiltro og velnuanceret" (Berlinske Tidende); a sense of a beautiful sound: "Sans for smuk Klangvirkning" (Berlinske Tidende); and with an inventive registration: "Registrering opfindsom" (Dagbladet).⁷⁶

In a *Musical Times* article, dated July 1946, a performance by Ísólffsson at St. Mark's Church in London was reviewed favorably: "In this recital for the Organ Music Society on June 6, the Buxtehude *Passacaglia* at once showed him to have the irreplaceable asset of a clean, true

⁷⁵ Gardarsson, *Páll Ísólffsson: Aldarminning (1893–1974)*, 14.

⁷⁶ Source: Ísólffsson's private collection, photocopies of eight typed transcripts of concert reviews.

organ legato as a base for his technique. His spacing was bold, his phrasing lively but not exaggerated; his registration a nice compromise between the historical and the modern.”⁷⁷ Pianist Gísli Magnússon remembered listening frequently to Ísólffsson’s organ playing at the Reykjavík Cathedral: “His organ playing was well formed and he sat still at the instrument, even during loud and fast passages.”⁷⁸

Ísólffsson’s pianism was at a high level, at least during the first decade of his career. A copy from one of Ísólffsson’s concert programs lists, for instance, his performance of Christian Sinding’s *Variations for Two Pianos* in E-flat minor and J. S. Bach’s *Concerto for Two Pianos*, BWV 1060, with pianist Ernst Schacht in 1924.⁷⁹ Ísólffsson’s frequent public appearances and tours as pianist accompanying singers are also well documented. Pálsdóttir recalls:

I heard my father’s piano playing often. He accompanied my singing in concerts and recordings. He also played with other singers and foreign musicians who visited the country. His piano playing was heavier than is usual with pianists; that, in my view, explains his proficiency at the organ. He did not perform solo works for piano in concerts as far as I know. His piano playing was rather romantic, it sounded almost orchestral.

His technique was excellent, his fingers loose, and the posture relaxed. My father’s hands were not big, but well shaped. He improvised frequently on the organ and on the piano in the style of the old composers. The piano was his instrument in the sense that he knew it well. My father thought that the Beethoven piano sonatas were superior compositions. He also liked pianists such as Rudolf Serkin and Ignaz Friedman but did not regard himself a pianist.⁸⁰

Pianist and composer Vidar remembers Ísólffsson’s piano playing: “His playing was even, like organ playing, and his rhythm was especially steady. Furthermore, his entries were accurate.”⁸¹ Pianist Sigurjónsson never heard Ísólffsson play solo works on the piano, only accompanying other musicians: “He was not a very agile pianist but rather heavy in his playing. I heard him play the organ many times and I was surprised to witness his facility on that instrument.”⁸²

⁷⁷ Source: Ísólffsson’s private collection, photocopies of eight typed transcripts of concert reviews: *Musical Times*, photocopy of concert review, July 1946.

⁷⁸ Gísli Magnússon, interview, 1999.

⁷⁹ Source: Ísólffsson’s private collection, copies of concert programs and flyers.

⁸⁰ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁸¹ Jórunn Vidar, interview, 1999.

⁸² Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

Ásgeirsson remembers hearing Ísólfsson's piano playing frequently when he studied with him: "Ísólfsson had good piano technique, performed a lot but practiced less."⁸³ Pálsdóttir said on the other hand: "I find it interesting how much my father practiced despite working so much days and evenings. When he arrived home in the evening, he used to play the piano for two or three hours; this memory still remains in my ears."⁸⁴ As these anecdotal evidence show, Ísólfsson knew the piano intimately and maintained his playing facilities through his career, although the organ remained his primary performing instrument.

It is interesting to learn that Ísólfsson never really saw himself as a composer per se, but first and foremost as an organist. According to Sveinbjörnsson, Ísólfsson said: "I compose music because there is need for it."⁸⁵ Thórarinsson remarks that Ísólfsson never boasted about his compositions but always responded positively when asked to compose works for various occasions.⁸⁶

Pálsdóttir observed: "The total number of Páll's compositions doesn't reflect accurately upon the magnitude of his creativity, he did not have time to compose more. It was mainly when asked to compose a work for a specific occasion that he took time out. My mother made sure he had the quietude necessary."⁸⁷ In the conversation books Ísólfsson talks about his composing process:

There are certain childhood memories of the shore that spark my imagination toward composing music. The smell of tar used to protect the surface of the fishing boats or even beautiful poems, moods. Other composers' music does also kindle my spirit. It is not unusual to be inspired by the works of other artists. Bach reputedly needed to listen to other composers' music in order to get started.

Still there are various 'wise guys' who state that they are never influenced by anything, not to mention never having learned anything from others. Those people will not succeed. Arrogance and art are opposites, as is clear from the fact that a fine artist is open to all kinds of influences but arrogant persons are like well-locked safes.⁸⁸

Ísólfsson said that he composed both at the piano and also away from the instrument:

⁸³ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

⁸⁴ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁸⁵ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

⁸⁶ Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

⁸⁷ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁸⁸ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 51.

I have tried to rid myself of the instrument during the composing process and write down my thoughts though sometimes I have to use the piano. To compose a work without an instrument requires a lot of practice and knowledge.⁸⁹

Sometimes it is as if a complete song is whispered in my ear. When I composed the song “Í dag skein sól” (Today the Sun was Shining), I was on a holiday in Nordtunga. When I felt inspired, I was fishing salmon by the river. When I rested on the riverbank, the song “materialized” in my head and I wrote it down immediately. I am used to carrying music sheets on my travels everywhere, which has proved useful.⁹⁰

The composer in retrospect

Ísólfsón’s compositions are substantial in variety and scope. There are numerous works for orchestra, organ, piano, and choir, as well as more than fifty songs and incidental music.

Ísólfsón’s works for orchestra are five: *Introduction and Passacaglia* (1938); *Myndabók Jónasar Hallgrímssonar, tíu lög fyrir strokhljómsveit* (the Jónas Hallgrímsson Picture Book, Ten Pieces for String Orchestra) (1945); *Theatre Overture* (1949); *Lyric Suite* (1960); and *Festival March* (1961).

There are three cantatas for soloists, chorus, and orchestra beside the 1930

Althingishátíðarkantata, namely the *Skálholt Cantata* (1953) and two *University Cantatas* (1938; 1961). In addition, there are four works composed for specific theatre productions as well as two works for chorus and orchestra.

The organ works include *Twelve Choral Preludes*, op. 3 (1924), *Introduction and Passacaglia* in F minor (1938),⁹¹ *Ostinato et Fughetta* in D minor (1965), and *Chaconna* (1938).

The *Chaconna* is based on a fourteenth-century offertory, *Thorlákstídir*.⁹² As the organ works proved difficult for other organists in the country, Ísólfsón was for many years their sole exponent.⁹³ Vidar feels that “the organ works are superior among Ísólfsón’s compositions, unique and illuminating.”⁹⁴ Thórarinsson comments: “One can sense in the organ works the deep seriousness that existed in Páll’s personality; this was usually hidden behind his daily humorous facet.”⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 51–2.

⁹¹ The *Introduction and Passacaglia* was composed in 1938 to be performed at a Nordic music festival. Andrússon, “Tónlistarsaga Reykjavíkur,” 260.

⁹² The impetus to compose the *Chaconna* came when Ísólfsón was invited to perform an Icelandic organ work at an organists’ conference in Stockholm. Ibid., 260.

⁹³ Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

⁹⁴ Jórúnn Vidar, interview, 1999.

⁹⁵ Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

According to Ásgeirsson, Ísólffsson's songs and works for choir were "an important addition to Icelandic music and fit well into the common music activities in Iceland during the first decades of the twentieth century. These were, in fact, the only music that the local musicians could perform and much of it beautiful works with strong character. It is therefore no surprise that the public came to know the songs and choir works well."⁹⁶

Thórarinsson finds that the songs "show Ísólffsson's lyrical gift and some of his later songs exhibit dramatic strength."⁹⁷ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson remarked: "I think the songs are very good compositions and in many ways carry more weight than the piano works; there is more of them. In my opinion one learns more about Páll through his songs than the piano works"⁹⁸

The piano works divide into nineteen character pieces, a set of variations in E-flat major on a theme by Ísólffsson's father, Ísólfur Pálsson, and six liturgical keyboard pieces. All piano works of Ísólffsson demonstrate his knowledge of the instrument and its possibilities as a solo instrument. Indeed, the very fact that he took the time to compose numerous varied and ambitious piano works throughout his busy career underscores his affinity for the instrument.⁹⁹

Composer Helgason wrote in 1993: "There is no question that Páll's piano pieces are among his best compositions."¹⁰⁰ Gudmundsdóttir agrees that "the compositional style of [Ísólffsson's] instrumental works is more ambitious than [that of] many of his songs."¹⁰¹

Thórarinsson finds the piano works to possess "a lighter character than the organ works and, perhaps just as importantly, the most charm."¹⁰² Magnússon comments that "Ísólffsson's song collection is important of course but the organ works are his Magnum Opus. I think, however, that many of the piano works are more personal and sincere, one feels suffering in his expression."¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

⁹⁷ Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

⁹⁸ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

⁹⁹ Pálsdóttir also recalled that her father had begun to compose an opera under the title "Helga Fagra" ("Helga the Beautiful"), but lacked time to finish the work. Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

¹⁰⁰ Helgason, *Tónskáld og tónmenntir: Íslensk tónmenntaritun*, III, 62.

¹⁰¹ Thórunn Gudmundsdóttir, "Historical and Stylistic Aspects of the Solo Songs by Páll Ísólffsson and Jón Leifs" (DMA dissertation, Indiana University, 1999), 115.

¹⁰² Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

¹⁰³ Örn Magnússon, interview, 1999.

The first generation of pianists in Iceland did not find the piano works easy to play, with the exception of Sigurdsson, Vidar, and Sigurjónsson.¹⁰⁴ In addition, one important thing to remember is that Ísólffsson composed the piano works on his own initiative. There was no one requesting them, and around the middle of the twentieth century, pianists were not interested in performing them. His piano works were considered old-fashioned in the 1950s, as Jón Ásgeirsson remarks: “Past 1950 all Romantic music was pushed aside, even despised.”¹⁰⁵

Kathleen Dale comments in her article of 1943 that the solo piano works of Grieg received a similar treatment in England during the same period:

But in the musical life of this country Grieg’s standing as a composer is not an enviable one. Many charges are leveled against his music: that it is too popular to be taken seriously; that it is too national in color to be considered favorably outside his country; that it abounds in mannerisms and that it lacks formal balance and design, his solo piano works, with the possible exception of the *Ballade*, are not accounted as attaining to the standard required by recitalists.¹⁰⁶

Grieg’s piano works have since enjoyed a revival, especially by recent and current generations of Norwegian pianists, and this too has been the case with Ísólffsson’s piano works.

Páll Ísólffsson influenced the succeeding generations of Icelandic musicians both directly through his successful career as organist, teacher, and composer and indirectly through his work as music administrator. Ísólffsson’s general advice to his students seems to have been to encourage them to seek further education abroad. Magnússon comments that “the fact that Ísólffsson builds upon European tradition in his compositions in a non-revolutionary way was a deciding factor in how his students subsequently approached their trade.”¹⁰⁷ Gudmundsdóttir maintains that:

Páll Ísólffsson was a pioneer in improving the quality of musical education in Iceland. He saw the Western and perhaps especially the central European tradition in music as the highest form of musical culture. Ísólffsson probably thought that a nation that had not had any music other than that of hymns and folk songs for centuries needed to know music of the highest quality, through listening and performing. However, he did not think that the music making needed to be limited to foreign music. Icelanders needed their own music, written by Icelandic composers.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Kathleen Dale, “Edvard Grieg’s Pianoforte Music” *Music and Letters* 24, no. 4 (October 1943): 193–94.

¹⁰⁷ Örn Magnússon, interview, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Gudmundsdóttir, “Historical and Stylistic Aspects,” 21.

Thus Ísólffsson's influence on his theory and composition students was reflected in the emphasis on craftsmanship and professionalism of the highest order rather than the encouragement of experimentation. The craft he knew intimately was the tonal and harmonic language of late-nineteenth-century Romanticism as well as the strict counterpoint of the Baroque era.

The two students, influenced by Ísólffsson in their early compositions were, Thórarinn Jónsson (1900–74)¹⁰⁹ and Hallgrímur Helgason (1914–94),¹¹⁰ who studied in Berlin and Leipzig, respectively, following their studies at the newly founded Tónlistarskólinn í Reykjavík. The influence of Ísólffsson's songs can also be detected in some of the songs of Thórarinnsson (b. 1917), and Vidar (b. 1918). Ísólffsson's manner of weaving traditional music from the Icelandic heritage¹¹¹ into late-nineteenth-century Romanticism, noted in some of his songs such as "Hrosshár í Strengjum" ("Horsehair Strings"), became a source of inspiration to Ásgeirsson (1928), and Vidar, although their musical language is based on twentieth-century stylistic trends.

It is illuminating to compare Ísólffsson's career profile on a surface level with those of some of his former fellow students in Leipzig. Their entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* provide preliminary information on the career profiles in question: Karl Hasse, German composer, conductor, and musicologist (1883–1960);¹¹² Mihail Jora, Romanian pianist, conductor, and music critic (1891–1971);¹¹³ Jaroslav Kvapil, Czech composer, teacher,

¹⁰⁹ According to Bergendal: "[Jónsson's] most remarkable work is without doubt *Forleikur og tvöföld fúga fyrir nafnid BACH* (Preludium and Double Fugue on the Name BACH) for solo violin. Its ingenious and strict contrapuntal construction is reminiscent of Páll Ísólffsson's archaic tradition." Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, 50.

¹¹⁰ For a discussion of Helgason and his *Sonata*, for piano, op. 1, see Chapter 4, 180-83.

¹¹¹ Iceland's music heritage can be divided into various types of compositions: *Tvísöngur*, a two-part polyphonic genre, sung in parallel fifths, to both sacred and secular texts (see example 2); *Rímur*, simple narrative chants, characterized by meter changes and irregular accents, and *Víkivaki*, a song-dance (group-dancing to vocal accompaniment); *sálmur* (hymns); *vísur* and *thjóðlög* (secular quatrains and folk songs). These works tend to have modal overtones. "It is somewhat difficult to generalize about the tonality of *Tvísöngur*. Nevertheless, a great majority of the (*Tvísöngur*) songs may be associated with the Lydian mode." Cited in Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, *A Short History of Icelandic Music to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Reykjavík: IMIC, 1980), 35. For further information on Iceland's music heritage see <http://ismus.musik.is/Apps/WebObjects/ISMUS.woa/2/wo/mne61yUcNKrbWENL6EPbmM/0.Look.12> (accessed June 12, 2010).

¹¹² Hanspeter Krellmann, "Karl Hasse," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), vol. 8, 293-94.

¹¹³ Viorel Cosma, "Mihail Jora," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), vol. 9, 709.

conductor, and pianist (1892–1959);¹¹⁴ Jón Leifs, Icelandic composer and conductor (1899–1968);¹¹⁵ Sigurdur Thórdarson, Icelandic composer and conductor (1895–1968);¹¹⁶ and Günther Ramin, German organist, choral conductor, and composer (1898–1956).¹¹⁷

These musicians, like Ísólffsson, studied with one or more of the following professors at the Leipzig Conservatory: Max Reger, Karl Straube, and Robert Teichmüller. Music studies with these leading faculty members seem to have exerted similar influences upon all these students. For example, an affinity for both German late-nineteenth-century Romanticism and the music of J. S. Bach is mentioned as a prevalent feature in their careers and compositions as well as an emphasis on craftsmanship and traditional approaches to composition.

Perhaps most importantly, all of them were said to have been instrumental in building up the music scene in their local environment upon returning from their studies.¹¹⁸ This they did by founding and directing music schools and academies, establishing composers' societies, teaching, conducting, and composing. In due course, most of them received national and international recognition for their contributions in the form of honorary doctorates and decorations.

It is apparent that Ísólffsson's career profile has many parallels with those of the other musicians. What remains an open question is whether the disadvantaged musical background and subsequent Iceland-based career, when compared with those of his former fellow students, hampered his professional accomplishments. In my view, Ísólffsson's decision to return to Iceland did prevent him from building a comprehensive career in Europe.

In retrospect, it may seem fair to conclude that somehow Ísólffsson's many professional assets and natural gifts became his heaviest burden. For, as he sought to fulfill the many expectations that awaited him upon returning to Iceland, his inner urge to realize his potential as an organist and composer was probably very strong. It is likely that a greater degree of

¹¹⁴ Jan Trojan, "Jaroslav Kvapil," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), vol. 10, 328.

¹¹⁵ Amanda M. Burt, "Jón Leifs," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), vol. 10, 630.

¹¹⁶ Amanda M. Burt, "Sigurdur Thórdarson," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), vol. 18, 790.

¹¹⁷ David K. Rycroft, "Günther Ramin," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), vol. 15, 574.

¹¹⁸ In some way, Günther Ramin is an exception, for he did not return to his hometown of Karlsruhe but became Straube's successor both at the Leipzig Conservatory and at the Thomaskirche. One of his main achievements there was the rebuilding of the "Thomanerchor."

selfishness and less of a feeling of obligation to his society might have led to Ísólfsón composing more works and performing more frequently in concert. One can regret that this was not the case. Yet, at the same time, there is immense gratitude from the Icelandic nation for his lifetime achievement.

CHAPTER 2

The Piano Works: Character Pieces

A long-delayed appearance of a diverse collection

Ísólffsson's twenty-six works for piano solo form a diverse collection that divides into nineteen character pieces, one set of variations, and six liturgical pieces. The character pieces are *Burlesca*, *Intermezzo*, and *Capriccio*, published under the title *Thrjú Píanóstykki* (Three Piano Pieces) op. 5;¹ *Glettur* (Humoresques) I and II;² *Lítill vals* (Little Waltz); *Ösku-menúett* (Ash-Minuet); *Ég beid thín* (I Waited for You); *Intrada*; *Einu sinni var* (Once Upon a Time) I and II; *Romanze*; *Mazurka*; *Nocturne*; *Saknadarstef* (Elegy); *Impromptu* in F minor; *Stef* (Thema) in F-sharp minor; *Impromptu* in B minor and *Ballata*.

The composer made an alternate version of three of the character pieces under a different title. Thus the *Intermezzo* exists in a 1931 version as an unpublished manuscript entitled *Melódía*; and the *Ballata* is the original version prepared by the composer for publication in the *Svipmyndir* (Album Leaves) compilation, but a later version entitled *Preludium* was chosen for the 1994 *Svipmyndir* edition.³ The *Intrada* was originally published under the title *Tileinkun* (Dedication) but later prepared by the composer for publication with minimal changes as *Intrada*; finally it should be noted that the unpublished manuscript fragment entitled *Stef* (Thema) has the title *Impromptu* II partly crossed out.

The only large-scale work for piano by Ísólffsson is the set of seventeen variations in E-flat major on a theme by the composer's father, entitled *Tilbrigdi um sönglag eftir Ísólfr Pálsson* (Variations on a Song by Ísólfr Pálsson), dedicated to pianist Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson. The six liturgical pieces are: *Invention*, *Sálmforleikur* (Chorale Prelude) in D major, *Sálmforleikur* (Chorale Prelude) in E-flat major, *Minnisblad* (Memento), *Lilju-lag* (Lilja-Melody), and *Heims um ból* (Silent

¹ Páll Ísólffsson, *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5 (Reykjavík: Sigfús Eymundsson Bookstore, 1925).

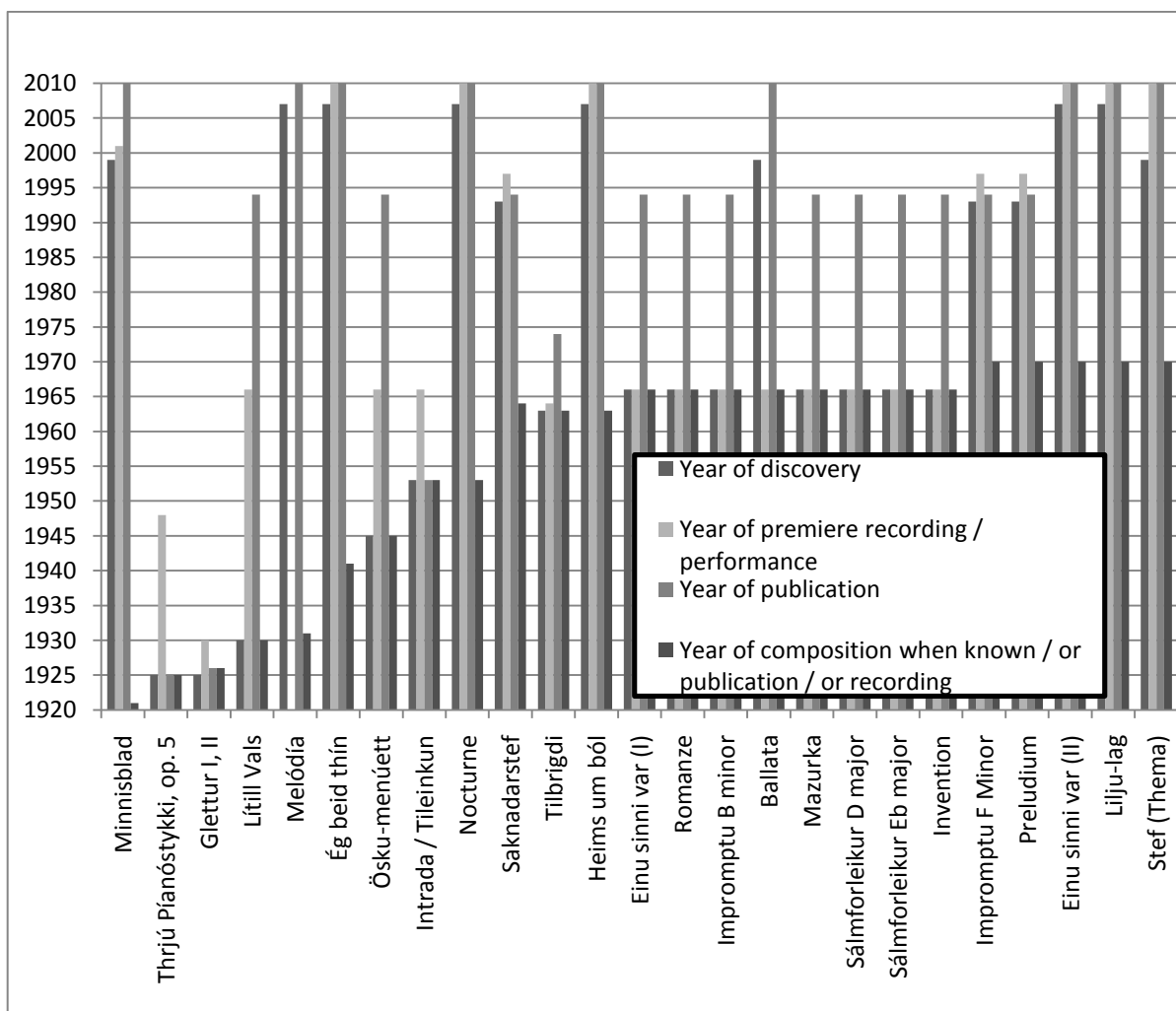
² Páll Ísólffsson, *Glettur* (Reykjavík: Sigfús Eymundsson Bookstore, 1926).

³ Páll Ísólffsson, *Svipmyndir — Lög fyrir Pianoforte* (Pieces for Pianoforte) (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Center, 1994).

Night). The *Minnisblad* exists in an unpublished manuscript dated 1921 and also in a 1953 published version as a song in a different key from the original entitled *Sálmur* (Hymn).

According to Ísólfsón's daughter Pálsdóttir, Ísólfsón frequently worked on his compositions over a long period. Although most of Ísólfsón's piano works are not dated, it is nevertheless possible to propose a timeline (see figure 2.1 below), that organizes the pieces according to their year of composition or discovery (when known) or, alternatively, according to when a piano piece first appeared before the public in a premiere performance, premiere recording, or publication.

Figure 2.1 A Timeline of Ísólfsón's Piano Works, 1920–2010



On a surface level the timeline indicates that Ísólffsson's compositional activity during 1920–60 could be described as showing piano works that are few in number and far apart. However, as the discussion of each piece in Chapters 2 and 3 will reveal, the works tied to a certain year were created to accommodate particular circumstances. Such circumstances would, for instance, entail a birthday of a family member (the *Lítill vals*), the passing of a friend (the *Saknadarsteð*), or an anniversary publication (the *Intrada / Tileinkun*).

Therefore, in order to get a complete picture of Ísólffsson's compositional activity during the period, it is pertinent to include the pieces listed on the timeline past 1960, as most were probably composed well prior to that year but have surfaced in manuscript without a dated signature. These, lacking particular circumstances as a *raison d'être*, would have landed in Ísólffsson's desk drawer. Thus the appearance of the diverse collection of Ísólffsson's piano works was delayed for a long time, for although the seeds of most of the works were planted during Ísólffsson's years of study in Leipzig during 1913–20, it is only almost a century later that the collection can be appreciated in its entirety.

The *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5, and the two *Glettur* were published in 1925 and 1926, respectively. Prior to their publication, the *Glettur* were premiered by Haraldur Sigurdsson and subsequently recorded on the Columbia Records label in 1930. As a result, the *Glettur* immediately became popular among the Icelandic audience.

The op. 5 pieces took much longer to reach the public, as they were premiered in concert in 1948 by Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson. They were subsequently recorded both for the INBS and for commercial labels. Therefore, it is safe to assert that Ísólffsson's *Glettur* and op. 5 were his only piano works known to the public well into the second half of the twentieth century.

In 1953, Ísólffsson's sixtieth anniversary was a turning point as he finished preparing his *Söngljód I*⁴ for publication, in which his first dated keyboard manuscript, the *Minnisblad* (1921), appeared transcribed as a song entitled *Sálmur*, and the *Tileinkun* was published in the periodical *Helgafell*. However, it was not until ten years later, at Ísólffsson's seventieth anniversary concert in

⁴ Páll Ísólffsson, *Söngljód I* (Reykjavík: Sigfús Eymundsson Bookstore, 1953).

1963, that five pieces from the *Svipmyndir* compilation were premiered by Jórunn Vidar together with the *Tilbrigdi*, premiered by Sigurjónsson.⁵

The two INBS recordings made by Sigurjónsson and Vidar of these works in 1964 and 1966, respectively, were especially important for Ísólffsson as they gave him a much anticipated perspective on the music silently kept in the drawer for many years. The 1973 issuing of *Tilbrigdi*,⁶ again in Sigurjónsson's performance, was an attempt to document the work, but both pianist and composer agreed that it did not surpass the 1964 recording.⁷ It is not confirmed whether Ísólffsson witnessed the 1974 publication by Helgafell of the *Tilbrigdi*⁸ prior to his passing during that same year, but the publication was yet another step in the direction toward making his music accessible.

Twenty years later Ísólffsson's centenary was celebrated by the 1994 publication of *Svipmyndir* by the Iceland Music Information Center⁹ and supervised by pianist Örn Magnússon. The works from the *Svipmyndir* album were performed in concert by Magnússon in 1997 and subsequently issued the same year on CD by the IMIC.¹⁰ In 2000, I performed the complete piano works of Ísólffsson, as known in 1999, in concert and recorded them on the Swedish label BIS Records AB in 2001.¹¹ The CD includes the *Tilbrigdi*, the *Svipmyndir* with the *Ballata* instead of the *Preludium*, and the *Minnisblad*.

The current research, begun in 1999, has led to the discovery of eight additional manuscripts, two of which were brought to my attention in 1999,¹² the *Minnisblad* and the *Stef*, the other six were discovered by myself in 2007 and are published for the first time in this dissertation. The six manuscripts to surface most recently are: *Melódía*, *Ég beid thín*, *Einu sinni*

⁵ According to Sigurjónsson the official premiere of the *Tilbrigdi* was in 1964 (see discussion in Chapter 3, 105).

⁶ This recording is identified in the Hafnarfjörður Library: LP 786.2, 1973, Icelandic Piano Music — Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, Menningarsjóður (Cultural Fund), 1973.

⁷ This recording is identified in the INBS Library: TD-927, 1964.

⁸ Páll Ísólffsson, *Tilbrigdi um sönglag eftir Ísólff Pálsson* (Variations on a Song by Isolfur Palsson) (Reykjavik: Helgafell Press, 1974).

⁹ Hereafter referred to as the IMIC.

¹⁰ Páll Ísólffsson: *Svipmyndir and Glettur*, Örn Magnússon, piano, ITM 7-10, © STEF and © Iceland Music Information Center, 1997.

¹¹ Páll Ísólffsson: *Complete Original Piano Music*, Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, piano, BIS-CD-1139, BIS Records AB, © 2000 and © 2001.

¹² By composers Jón Thórarinsson and Jón Nordal, respectively.

var (II), *Nocturne*, *Lilju-lag*, and *Heims um ból*. Additionally, parts of the manuscripts of the *Ballata* and the *Tilbrigði* are published here for the first time.

Ísólffsson's style and compositional approach

Ísólffsson's style in the piano works is rooted in the nineteenth-century German Romantic tradition. This is consistent with stylistic trends in the piano music of many composers from Scandinavia and the Northern European countries born during the last quarter of the nineteenth century who did not feel pressured by demands for originality. In their view the creation of music needed to be signified by craftsmanship of the highest order and the continuation of the traditions of older masters. When Ísólffsson set out to compose works for piano, he sought inspiration in similar works by Reger, Grieg and, to a lesser extent, Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann. He underscored his philosophy thus: "No one can become a fine composer unless he has a thorough knowledge of the works of previous masters."¹³

Reger had much influence on Ísólffsson during the Leipzig years, both as a teacher and composer: "The analysis classes that I attended with Max Reger in Leipzig were unforgettable, his lectures shone with intellect and knowledge, his brain must have been unusually developed and remarkable."¹⁴ Ísólffsson's study of the works of Reger followed the example of his own organ teacher and mentor at the Leipzig Conservatory, Karl Straube, who also was a lifelong friend of Reger and a devoted interpreter of his organ works.¹⁵

Ísólffsson was not distracted by the discord that surrounded Reger during his life-time and in his legacy:

Max Reger, one of the major composers in recent times experienced much resistance, because he did not follow in the footsteps of others. His main opponents consisted of a whole army of music critics, who spilled derogatory comments on him only because he dared to explore new paths.

Reger was a magnificent man and definitely the most important organ composer after Bach, he did of course have some devoted supporters and admirers, but they were fewer than the others, who misunderstood and underestimated him.¹⁶

¹³ Matthías Johannessen, *Hundathúfan og hafid* (The Dog-tussock and the Ocean: Conversations with Páll Ísólffsson) (Reykjavík: Bókfells Press, 1961), 154.

¹⁴ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 114–15.

¹⁵ Helmut Wirth, "Max Reger," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), vol. 15, 676.

¹⁶ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 138.

When the musical influences of Reger on Ísólfsson's piano works are examined, it becomes apparent that certain technical aspects of Reger's music have been incorporated. These are: textural density, perpetual figurative writing, enharmonic and chromatic relations, and abrupt modulating sequences. Jón Ásgeirsson comments that "Ísólfsson's piano works owe much to Reger but are more transparent."¹⁷

Grieg's music influence is more present in Ísólfsson's creation of melodies and rhythms. The use of intervals such as fourths and fifths, melodic ornaments, and accented folk-dance rhythms are among the elements in Ísólfsson's piano music also found in Grieg's works. The fact that Grieg's songs were known in Iceland during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth may have contributed to Ísólfsson's familiarity with his style.

Ísólfsson remarks on his composing process that "other composers' music does also kindle my spirit. It is not unusual to be inspired by the works of other artists."¹⁸ An example is his use of the motif that is heard in thirds in dotted-rhythm (dotted eighth-sixteenth), from Grieg's *Svundne Dage* (Vanished Days), op. 57 no. 1, as the main motif for the F minor *Impromptu*,¹⁹ or the harmonized melody from Grieg's *Aften på Høifeldet* (Evening in the Mountains), op. 68, no. 4, which became a foundation for the *siciliano* opening of the *Intermezzo*, op. 5, no. 2.²⁰

Alternatively, elements from the burlesque style frequently found in the piano music of Reger, such as strong contrast of articulation and skillful changes of register, formed the basis for the pianistic writing in the swift sections of the *Einu sinni var* (I),²¹ whereas the appoggiatura opening of Schumann's *Walzer* sparked a musical idea from which the *Lítill vals* was created.²²

The view expressed by most participants in the study is that while Ísólfsson's compositional style in the piano works is grounded within late-Romanticism his expression is easily recognizable and includes personal and nationalistic influences. Sveinbjörnsson remarks that in Ísólfsson's music one finds traits such as grandeur and religious thought, humor and

¹⁷ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

¹⁸ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 51.

¹⁹ See discussion in Chapter 2, 83–85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

²² *Ibid.*, 55–56.

melancholia — all recognized aspects of the composer's personality which help defining his unique style.²³

Another observation is that there is an "Icelandic tone" in some of the piano works, represented by heavy chords in the bass register; a similar notion is affirmed in the reviews of my CD:²⁴ "the tragic funeral march in variation 8, is more "Icelandic" than much of the other music on the CD;"²⁵ "the stones and ice of Iceland might be glimpsed instantly in variation 6 and variation 8 (the latter an *Eroica*-like processional)."²⁶ In this relation Podhajski's speculation are relevant:

The prime characteristic of Icelandic music which is derived both from cultural tradition and Icelandic landscape, is a specific emotion reflecting a general tragic condition; some elements of the Icelandic environment can inspire composers who are impressionable to tragic phenomena, to write pieces about this kind of emotional mood, referring to both nature in itself and the cultural heritage of people being in contact with nature.²⁷

Ragnarsson agrees in that "like most other Icelanders, Icelandic composers identify strongly with their country, and so their music is intrinsically influenced by similar values and a common heritage."²⁸

I maintain that the special qualities of Ísólfsson's style in the piano works is the balance between his creative faculties in harmonic modulation and lyric gift combined with sincere emotional expression. His cultural heritage contributes to the style but does not define it.

²³ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

²⁴ See Appendix III for selected review excerpts of *Páll Ísólfsson: Complete Original Piano Music*. BIS-CD-1139, BIS Records AB (© 2000 and © 2001). Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, piano.

²⁵ Valdemar Pálsson, "Tímabaert" (A Timely Issue), *Reykjavík Daily Morgunblaðið*, May 23, 2001, 28.

²⁶ R. Barnett, "Páll Ísólfsson," available at <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/classrev/2001/Sept01/ISOLFSSON.htm> (accessed July 30, 2006).

²⁷ M. Podhajski, "A Contribution to the Consideration of the Native Features in Icelandic Music." In *Icelandic Piano Music*, Edited by Marek Podhajski. 110–112. Akureyri: Akureyri Music School, 1992.

²⁸ H. Ragnarsson, *A Short History of Icelandic Music to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Reykjavík: Icelandic Music Information Centre, 1980, 38.

The character pieces in perspective

The nineteen character pieces for piano divide into four groups according to style influence and maturity. Most of the earlier pieces fall into a “humorous burlesque” or “sentimental lyric” group, and some even belong to both of these categories. The second two groups embrace pieces belonging to traditional dance genres, as well as works that express “Weltschmerz” through the tonal and harmonic language of late-nineteenth-century Romanticism.

The influence of Reger is prominent in the pieces from the “humorous burlesque” group whereas the influence of Grieg and Schumann is strong in the “sentimental lyric” group. The traditional dance genres are represented by a Classical menuet and a Chopinesque mazurka. Two more pieces belong in part to this group, the *Gletta* II (see example 2.15), which adds influence from Nordic folk dance, and the *Lítill vals* (Little Waltz) (see example 2.18), which echoes Schumann’s *Albumblätter*, op. 124, no. 4 (see example 2.17), but is at its core a “burlesque” piece.

Ísólfsón’s style gradually evolves away from “humorous burlesque” pieces and towards the mature and late works that express “Weltschmerz” following in the chromatic footsteps of Liszt and Wagner. As a contrast, the “sentimental lyric” works date from Ísólfsón’s early days of composing to his late period of activity. Thus, it seems that despite the “deep seriousness that existed in Páll’s personality,” as remarked by Jón Thórarinsson,²⁹ Ísólfsón was a true lyricist at heart.

Ísólfsón throws his net widely with regard to keys, as his piano works represent a fair cross-section of the major-minor system. The key of B minor, though, seems to hold special importance for Ísólfsón, as it is prominent in four works, the *Romanze* (see example 2.28), the *Saknadarstef* (Elegy) (see example 2.35), the B minor *Impromptu* (see example 2.44), and the *Minnisblad* (Memento) (see example 3.28).³⁰ Even in the *Einu sinni var* (I) (Once Upon a Time) (see example 2.23), written in the relative major (D), the color of B minor seems to hover over the opening melody.

²⁹ Jón Thórarinsson, interview 1999.

³⁰ See discussion of the *Minnisblad* in Chapter 3, 154–155.

In order to understand what connotations the key of B minor had for Ísólffsson, it is illuminating to look at the poems he chose for his songs composed in this key. These songs are: “Heimthrá” (“Longing for the Home”), “Sáud thid hana systur mína?” (“Did You See My Sister?”), and “Úr harmanna helgilundum” (“From the Holy Valley of Tears”).³¹ The emotional essence of each of the three poems is the same, an expression of loss and regret. Thus, it is clear that B minor was employed by Ísólffsson for some of his most heartfelt compositions.

In terms of melodic construction there is some cross-relation between opening motifs; the tonic triad is used most frequently in the early works, especially ascending from the tonic but also inverted. This applies to the *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5 (see example 2.1, example 2.6, and example 2.10), the *Glettur I and II* (see example 2.12 and example 2.15), the *Lítill vals*, the *Ösku-menúett* (Ash-Minuet) (see example 2.18 and example 2.19), and the *Ég beid thín* (I Waited For You) (see example 2.20).

A descending third builds an opening motif for three works, the *Romanze*, the *Einu sinni var* (I) and the B minor *Impromptu*. Moreover there is an interesting correlation between the opening melodies of the *Einu sinni var* (II) (see example 2.27.), and the *Nocturne* (see example 2.32). Thus the *Einu sinni var* (II), composed in D major, opens with F-sharp, E, D, C-sharp, B, A, which is echoed subtly in the *Nocturne* in D-flat major, with F, E-flat, D-flat, C, B-flat, A-flat.

When it comes to rhythm, meter, dynamics, and phrasing, regularity and symmetry are prominent in most of the character pieces. It is in the later works that Ísólffsson begins to expand these elements, especially in the *Ballata* (see example 2.45), and the *Stef* (Thema) fragment (see example 2.42), where he works with changing meters and irregular phrasing. The upbeat opening of the *Nocturne* melody is also an example of how Ísólffsson seeks ways to broaden the rhythmic flow of his works.

The character pieces adhere, in terms of length and formal structure, to traditional miniature norms, and thus most are brief, lasting between two and five minutes in performance. In

³¹ For further information about the songs, refer to the Iceland Music Information Center's Web site: <http://www.mic.is>.

three of the later works Ísólfsón expands the formal structures: in the *Einu sinni var* (I), the *Impromptu* in F minor (see example 2.36), and the *Ballata*.

The *Impromptu* in F minor and the *Ballata* in E minor are, aside from the *Tilbrigði*,³² Ísólfsón's most ambitious piano works. They are also somewhat problematic, because, as previously mentioned, Ísólfsón expands his creative work methods in these works in terms of length, formal structure, rhythm, meter, tonality, dynamics, and phrasing, but is at the same time on experimental ground as composer. All the same, these are unique works within the piano collection, which were finished toward the end of his mature period.

There are some indications that it was quite a challenge for Ísólfsón to compose these works. There are three different manuscript versions of the *Ballata* (entitled *Ballata*, *Ballade*, and *Preludium*); and enclosed with the manuscript of the F minor *Impromptu*, there are two different codas, both marked "Allegro molto." The F minor *Impromptu* was not finished by the time of Jórunn Vidar's 1966 recording of the *Svipmyndir*. It was, furthermore, not listed on the original title page of *Svipmyndir*, and the only manuscript of the work made available to this author is in the handwriting of Ísólfsón's assistant.

The version of the *Ballata* that was included in Vidar's recording and was listed as the tenth work on the original title page of *Svipmyndir* is handwritten by the composer. It is probable therefore that Ísólfsón thought of the *Ballata* version as representative, and a suitable final piece for the *Svipmyndir* collection, although later he added a shorter, more modest version, entitled *Preludium*.

In this context, it is worth speculating as to why Ísólfsón marked three of his late works with Roman numerals. The fragment in F-sharp minor, "Andante moderato e poco maestoso," is entitled *Stef* (Thema), but previously *Impromptu* II had been written above the title. Similarly, the F minor *Impromptu* has the Roman numeral IV clearly written above the title, and at the top of the first page of the manuscript of *Preludium*, there is written the numeral I.

Moreover, the unclear copy of the manuscript of the B minor *Impromptu* suggests that something was written to the left of the title of the work. Unfortunately, it is illegible. Nevertheless,

³² See discussion of the *Tilbrigði* in Chapter 3, 97.

it is possible to hypothesize that Ísólffsson planned to publish the *Preludium* and the three *Impromptus* together as a set at some point. This could explain why the *Ballata*, with its thundering , fortissimo–octaves conclusion, was changed to a *Preludium*. The *Preludium* ends with a pianissimo final chord, which is more suitable for the first piece of a set. The different endings of the *Ballata* and *Preludium* can be seen in examples 2.46, example 2.47 and example 2.48 respectively.

In terms of the F minor *Impromptu*, the “Roman numerals theory” would also favor coda 1, which the editor of *Svipmyndir* chose to publish with the *Impromptu*, since it has more elan than coda 2. As the fourth and final piece of a set, the F minor *Impromptu* would benefit from a brisk coda. The difference between coda 1 and coda 2 can be seen in examples 2.40 and 2.41, respectively.

The remainder of this chapter will present the character pieces from the early works to the late *Ballata* and point to similar works by the composers Ísólffsson viewed as his models and inspiration.

Thrjú Píanóstykki, op. 5

The *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5, *Burlesca*, *Intermezzo*, and *Capriccio*, issued by the Sigfús Einarsson Bookstore in Reykjavík in 1925, were Ísólffsson’s first published piano pieces, according to the sources consulted for this research.³³ They reveal Ísólffsson’s lyrical gift and compositional craftsmanship and were premiered on May 31, 1948, by Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson:

They were very well received and I think they represent Páll in a fine light as a composer for the piano, although this music is heavily influenced by nineteenth-century composers. He liked my playing of the op. 5, though I probably played the *Burlesca* faster than other pianists. I can hear the influence of Grieg in the *Intermezzo* and *Capriccio*.³⁴

³³ The year 1925 is written in Ísólffsson’s handwriting next to the *Thrjú Píanóstykki* on the list of works in his own copy of his biography, 69.

³⁴ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

Thórarinsson feels that Ísólfsón's personal humor is apparent in the early piano pieces, both in the *Glettur*, of course, and in the *Burlesca* and *Capriccio*. The *Intermezzo* reminds him of Grieg, although the *siciliana*³⁵ rhythm dates back many ages: "I think one can detect influence from Icelandic folk songs in the *Capriccio*."³⁶

These works were composed much earlier than 1948, probably closer in time to *Glettur*. This is consistent with the comments of Gísli Magnússon, who recorded the *Glettur* and the *Thrjú Píanóstykki* in 1955:

I had the impression that the *Glettur* and the op. 5 might have been composed during the Leipzig years, under the influence of Brahms and Grieg. I liked those works immediately and found them entertaining and special. It might be difficult to find an Icelandic tone in them, but the *Burlesca* could be thought of as a country dance, even with trolls. The *Intermezzo* can be heard as a boat song and one can hear children playing and dogs barking in the humorous *Capriccio*.³⁷

Burlesca

As the first published piano piece, the *Burlesca* (see example 2.1), relies upon similar works by Reger. It is fair to state that Ísólfsón used the composition of the *Burlesca* as an exercise in order to achieve fluency in the Regerian burlesque style. Although I pointed out in my earlier paper³⁸ the resemblance of this work to Reger's *Burletta*, op. 44, no. 2 (see example 2.2), I would now add that this piece is not the sole model for the op. 5, no. 1.

Thus, the descending bass line in mm. 1–3 is identical to mm. 1–3 of Reger's *Humoreske*, op. 82, no. 3 (see example 2.3), in E minor and m. 8 of Reger's *Caprice*, op. 18, no. 3 (see example 2.4), in G minor clearly influenced the music in mm. 29–30 of the *Burlesca*. All the same, the *Burlesca* holds its own, not only as a fine student composition but also as an example of how Ísólfsón studied a compositional style in order to be able to create new works based upon elements from that style.

³⁵"*Siciliana*" is defined as "a 17th- and 18th-century dance and aria form, probably of Sicilian origin. It was generally in ternary form (ABA), with fairly slow tempo, and in 6/8 or 12/8 metre. Many examples are in a minor key; other characteristic features include a flowing accompaniment, a gentle lyrical melody, often with a dotted rhythm, and the use of a Neapolitan 6th at cadence points," in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Alison Latham, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e6169> (accessed March 29, 2009).

³⁶Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

³⁷Gísli Magnússon, interview, 1999.

³⁸Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, "Icelandic Piano Music: History and Development" (Master's thesis, City University, London, 1989), 18.

EXAMPLE 2.1

Ísólfsón: *Burlesca*, op. 5, no. 1, mm. 1–24

Burlesca

Allegretto vivace Páll Ísólfsón, Op.5 Nr.1

Piano

5

10

15

20

p *mf* *p* *p* *mf*

EXAMPLE 2.2

Reger: *Burletta*, op. 44, no. 2, mm. 1–4

2. Burletta

Sehr lebhaft, mit Humor

fe leggiero *più f*

EXAMPLE 2.3

Reger: *Humoresque*, op. 82, no. 3, mm. 1–4

Vivace

p *f*

senza Ped.

EXAMPLE 2.4

Reger: *Caprice*, op. 18, no. 3, mm. 7–10

poco ritardando - - *a tempo*

p *mf* *ff* *p*

Intermezzo / Melódía

The *Intermezzo*, op. 5, no. 2, in A minor (see example 2.6), finds inspiration for the opening melody and harmony from Grieg's *Aften på Høifeldet* (Evening in the Mountains), op. 68, no. 4, in E minor (see example 2.5). Ísólfsson builds his melody and harmony in mm. 2–3 upon the harmonized melody of the *Aften*, as it appears in mm. 47–48 and weaves into a solemn “*siciliano*” rhythm. Thus, as can be seen in the examples below, mm. 47–48 of *Aften* become the basic structure for the music in mm. 2–3 of the *Intermezzo*.

EXAMPLE 2.5 Grieg: *Aften på Høifeldet*, op. 68, no. 4, mm. 43–52

The musical score for Grieg's *Aften på Høifeldet*, mm. 43–52, is presented in a piano arrangement. The piece is in E minor and 3/4 time. The tempo is marked "Tempo I.". The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the right hand and a bass clef staff for the left hand. The right hand features a melodic line with various ornaments and fingerings, while the left hand provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines. Circled numbers 1-9 are placed above and below the notes to indicate specific fingerings or ornaments.

EXAMPLE 2.6

Ísólfsón: *Intermezzo*, op. 5, no. 2, mm. 1–17

Intermezzo

Páll Ísólfsón, Op.5 Nr.2

Semplice
p
Con ped.

① ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑧ ⑨

② ⑦

4

8

11

14

mf

p *mf*

mf

The *Intermezzo* is in compound ternary form A:||BA||C||A coda (A mm. 1–9a, B mm. 10–31, A mm. 32–40, C mm. 41–73, A mm. 74–78, coda mm. 79–82). Ísólfsson creates the melody of the B-part, which begins with an upbeat in m. 10, by inverting the opening motif from mm. 1–3 of the A-section. An example of the musical integration of the *Intermezzo* is the way in which the cantabile melody in A major of the C-section, beginning in m. 43 with an upbeat (see example 2.7), emerges from a motif found in mm. 28–29 of the B-part (m. 31). Measure 28 is, in fact, the beginning of a modulating bridge, which leads back to A in m. 31. Thus, the C, D, C, D, E motif in the treble of mm. 28–29 is recalled at the beginning of C: C-sharp, E, A, B, C-sharp (mm. 43–44).

EXAMPLE 2.7

Ísólfsón: *Intermezzo*, op. 5 no. 2, mm. 18–46

14 *poco vivace*

22 *dim.*

28 ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ *rit.* *a tempo*

33 *mf*

37 *mp*

41 *Poco allegretto* *mf* ① ② ③ ④ ⑤

As the *Intermezzo* is arguably one of the most successful character pieces from Ísólfsón's collection, the finding of the *Melódía* manuscript (see example 2.8), in 2007 is important, since the original manuscript of this piece has not surfaced. The last page of the *Melódía* manuscript has the inscription: "Endurbaett útgáfa!" "Til frú Thórdísar Claessen, 22. febr. 1931" (Improved Edition! To Mrs. Thórdís Claessen, February 22, 1931).

EXAMPLE 2.8 Ísólfsón: *Melódía*, mm. 1–25

Melódía.

Pál Ísólfsón

Semplice

Piano.

non poco animato.

un poco più mosso.

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The *Thrjú Píanóstykki* were published in 1925 so this 1931 version of the *Intermezzo* under another title seems redundant as aside from the “un poco animato” marking in m. 10, the changes that have been made including deleting of inner voices (mm. 12, 16), change of an accidental (m. 16, E instead of E-flat), are not improvements to the *Intermezzo*. A case in point is the sentimental extension (mm. 82–84) (see example 2.9), which contradicts the solemn atmosphere of the piece. The *Melódía* manuscript was probably written as a gift to Mrs. Claessen, but since it was discovered among Ísólfsón’s belongings, it may not have left the composer’s desk.

EXAMPLE 2.9 Ísólfsón: *Melódía*, mm. 74–84



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Capriccio

The *Capriccio* in A major (see example 2.10), is technically the most demanding piece of the op. 5 to play. This spirited piece is in an energetic mood, filled with accents and staccatos, but with less emphasis on melodic material. Abrupt changes of register with dense figurative patterns and sequential movement characterize the outer parts of the *Capriccio*.

EXAMPLE 2.10

Ísólfsón: *Capriccio*, op. 5, no. 3, mm. 1–11

Capriccio

Páll Ísólfsón Op. 5 Nr. 3

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-8) is marked *Allegretto vivace* and *mf*. The second system (measures 9-20) is marked *a tempo* and *f*. The third system (measures 21-36) is marked *mf* and *marc.*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

The *Capriccio* is in compound ternary form A:||B A':||C||AB A', (A mm. 1–8, B mm. 9–20, A' mm. 21–28, C mm. 29–56, A mm. 57–64, B mm. 65–76, A' mm. 77–93). The A and B-sections consist of the “Allegretto vivace” material in A major, contrasted with a lyrical C-section in A minor, marked “Quasi andante” (see example 2.11). The solemn melody of the C-section is based upon the tonic minor triad, E, C, A, which relates to the C-sharp, A, E opening motif of the “Allegretto vivace,” thereby consolidating the form.

Thórarinnsson’s comment, that influences from Icelandic folk song can be detected in the *Capriccio*, invites a closer look at the C-section since the modal color of the solemn melody, as well as its rhythmic and formal regularity (AABBAB¹), and reinforces the folk-song connection. Musicologist Árni Heimir Ingólfsón, who has researched the national music heritage, does not think the melody is of Icelandic origin: “It reminds me of some of Grieg’s arrangements of

Norwegian folk songs,³⁹ but it is more likely that Ísólfsón composed it in the style of a folk song since he was such an inspired lyrical composer.”⁴⁰

EXAMPLE 2.11 Ísólfsón: *Capriccio*, op. 5, no. 3, mm. 29–56

Quasi Andante

The musical score consists of four systems of piano music. The first system is marked 'p' and 'mf'. The second system is marked 'mf'. The third system is marked 'un poco rit.' and 'f'. The fourth system is marked 'mp' and 'p'. The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

³⁹ According to Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, Grieg imitated folk song once, in *Solveig's Song*. Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 400.

⁴⁰ Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, letter to Grímsdóttir, October 5, 2005.

Glettur I and II

The *Gletta* I (Humoresque) (see example 2.12), and *Gletta* II (see example 2.15), were published in 1926, according to the sources available,⁴¹ although the published edition is neither dated nor marked with an opus number. It is dedicated to Hans Grisch, one of Ísólfsson's Leipzig professors, "in Dankbarkeit gewidmet."

An Icelandic source mentions a concert performance of *Glettur* by Haraldur Sigurdsson in Nýja Bíó (New Cinema Hall) on July 17, 1925.⁴² Furthermore, Sigurdsson recorded the pieces for the Icelandic company Fálkinn on the British Columbia Records label in 1930.⁴³ Based on this information, the *Glettur* were presumably composed around 1920, first performed in public in 1925, and published in 1926.

The publication in Iceland of Páll's two Humoresques, the *Glettur*, [in Iceland] was an important event which can be described as a fresh gust of wind arriving from the traditional centers of high culture. Every aspect of this music was new to Icelandic listeners, the vivacious rhythm, the rich harmony and supple melodies.⁴⁴

The *Glettur* are genial works in which the young Ísólfsson presents himself as an energetic composer in command of his craft. His expression is joyfully humorous and the music is bursting with tongue-in-cheek melodic and rhythmic motifs. The *Glettur* have remained popular in Iceland and are a staple among Icelandic pianists.

Judging from their comments, one can understand why some might say, "I think the *Glettur* might be among the best music Páll composed."⁴⁵ "Ísólfsson's first piano works are excellent, totally invigorating and much played."⁴⁶ "The *Glettur* are fine pieces but difficult."⁴⁷ The *Glettur* are prime examples of how Ísólfsson builds upon the Regerian burlesque style.

⁴¹ The year 1926 is written in pencil in Ísólfsson's handwriting next to the *Glettur* on the list of works in his own copy of the biography, 69.

⁴² Ingólfur Kristjánsson, *Harpa Minninganna: Árni Thorsteinsson tónskáld* (Musical Memoirs: Composer Árni Thorsteinsson) (Reykjavík: Ísafold Press, 1955), 406.

⁴³ This happened because of the efforts of music enthusiast Haraldur Ólafsson, owner of the Fálkinn company in Iceland, who set up a collaboration between Fálkinn and Columbia Records in London in order to document Icelandic musicians on vinyl. This progressive venture, which began during the first decade of the twentieth century, resulted in the preservation of many historic performances that otherwise would not exist today. These recordings were distributed in Iceland and internationally through the network of Columbia Records. Source: Jónatan Gardarsson, conversation with Grímsdóttir, August 2007.

⁴⁴ Hallgrímur Helgason, *Tónskáld og tónmenntir: Íslensk tónmenntaritun III* (Composers and Music History: Musicology in Iceland III) (Reykjavík: Skákprent, 1993), 62.

⁴⁵ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

⁴⁶ Jórunn Vidar, interview, 1999.

⁴⁷ Örn Magnússon, interview, 1999.

Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson comments: “*Gletta* I seems somewhat inspired by the style of Reger, but *Gletta* II exhibits some ‘Icelandic influence.’”⁴⁸ In fact, as will be detailed below, the musical inspiration for *Glettur* is to be found in works of both Reger and Grieg.

In the *Gletta* I Ísólfsson casts his net wider than in the *Burlesca*, searching for ideas in the works of Grieg as well. The relaxed atmosphere of *Gletta* I is reminiscent of the opening of Grieg’s *Hjemad* (Homeward), op. 62, no. 6, in E major (see example 2.13) and the grain for the opening idea of *Gletta* I can be found in mm. 1–2 of Reger’s *Moment Musical*, op. 44, no. 5, in C-sharp minor (see example 2.14).

⁴⁸ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

EXAMPLE 2.12

Ísólfsson: *Gletta* I, mm. 1–15

I.

Páll Ísólfsson.

Allegretto grazioso.

Piano.

p

5

mf

7

p

mf

12

p

mf legg.

EXAMPLE 2.13

Grieg: *Hjemad*, op. 62, no. 6, mm. 1–10

Allegro giocoso alla marcia.

p

EXAMPLE 2.14

Reger: *Moment Musical*, op. 44, no. 5, mm. 1–8

5. Moment musical

Anmutig, etwas lebhaft, doch nicht zu sehr

mp *p* *ff*

f *più f*

Sigurjónsson's earlier comment, "that *Gletta II* exhibits some 'Icelandic influence,'" is debatable. The rhythmic ornamented opening however, outlining the D major triad and accompanied by fifths in the bass, suggests Nordic folk-dance⁴⁹ as does the short-long rhythm in m. 8. Similar elements are found in Grieg's *Bedstemors Menuet* (Grandmother's Minuet), op. 68, no. 2, in G major (see example 2.16), and may have provided an inspiration for *Gletta II*.

EXAMPLE 2.15 Ísólfsson: *Gletta II*, mm. 1–10

II.

Páll Ísólfsson.

Allegro vivace.

⁴⁹ Traditional Nordic dance music is a type of traditional music or folk music that once was common in the mainland part of the Nordic countries. Nordic folk dance music consists of various dance rhythms that do not originate in the Nordic countries but once were the fashion dances among the European nobility. With time these dances spread to common people, and in some cases they remained there long after the nobility had exchanged them for new fashionable dances. Many of these rhythms can also be found in other parts of Europe, and some of them have also been used in classical music. Wikipedia contributors, "Traditional Nordic dance music," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Traditional_Nordic_dance_music&oldid=271889285 (accessed June 8, 2010).

EXAMPLE 2.16 Grieg: *Bedstemors Menuet*, op. 68, no. 2, mm. 1–4

The Svipmyndir compilation

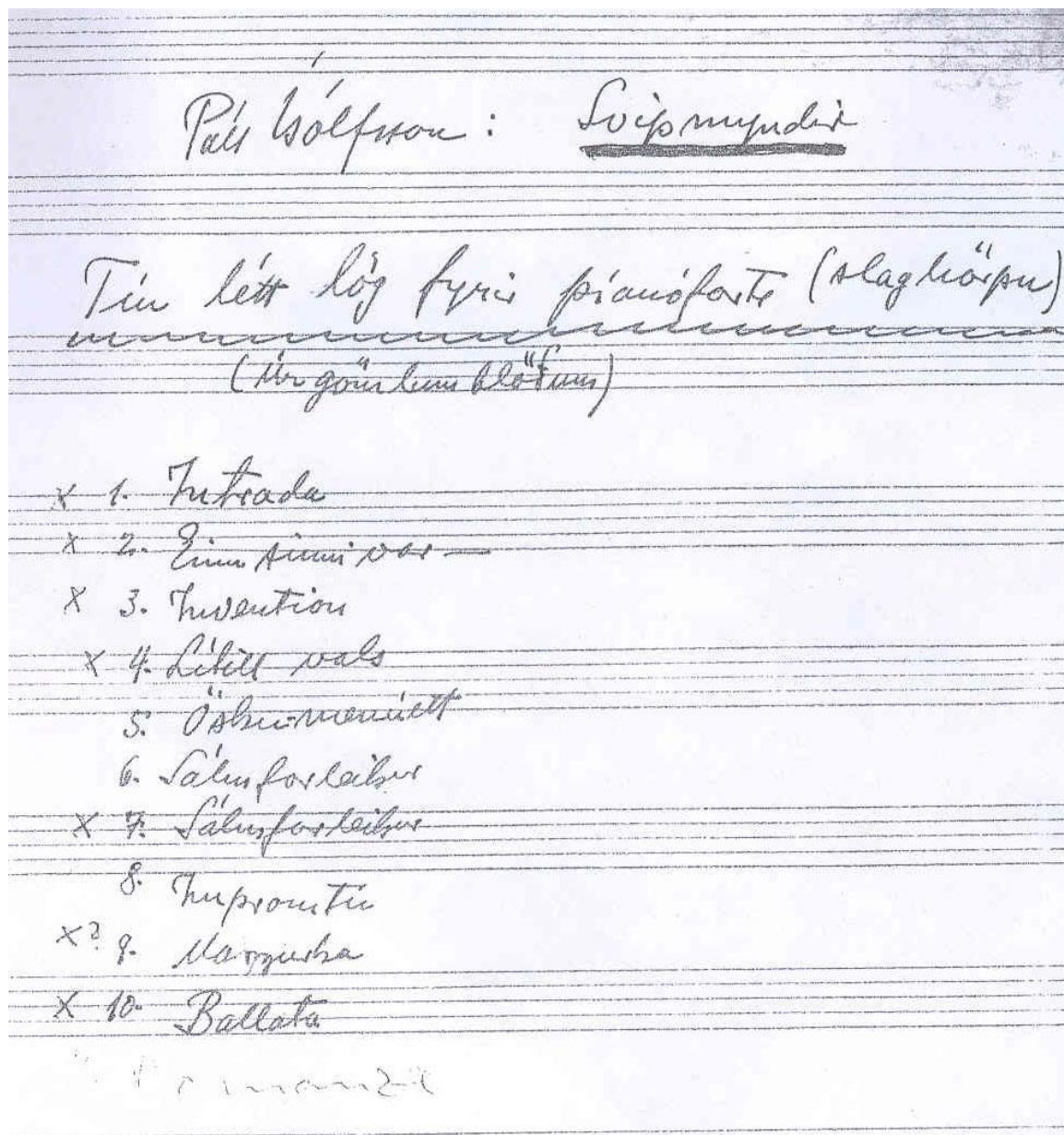
The *Svipmyndir* (Album Leaves) were prepared in manuscript as a compilation by Ísólfsson, probably sometime during 1953 and 1966. Figure 2.2, below, presents a copy of the original title page, at the top of which the composer wrote: “Tíu létt lög fyrir pianoforte (slaghörpu) (Ten Easy Pieces for the Pianoforte [The Grand-Piano]),” and underneath in brackets: “Úr gömlum blöðum (From Old Papers).”

This subtitle is reminiscent of what Páll wrote in a short preface to the 1953 edition of the *Söngljód I*: “This collection could have been called ‘From the Desk Drawer’ since the songs originate from many places and dates.”⁵⁰ Regrettably, the *Svipmyndir* were not published during the composer’s lifetime.

The *Svipmyndir* compilation contains a diverse mixture of Romantic character pieces, short dances, and works composed in the style of Bach. This type of compilation is similar to Schumann’s *Albumblätter*, op. 124, the many compilations for solo piano by Reger, such as the *Zehn Kleine Vortragsstücke*, op. 44, and the *Lyric Pieces* by Grieg.

⁵⁰ *Söngljód I*, preface, 1.

Figure 2.2

Ísólfsson: *Svipmyndir* — Original Title Page

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The ten pieces were listed in the original *Svipmyndir* compilation in this order: *Intrada*, *Einu sinni var*, *Invention*, *Lítill valse*, *Ösku-menúett*, *Sálmsforleikur*, *Sálmsforleikur*, *Impromptu*, *Mazurka*, *Ballata*. The works not included in the original compilation are: *Romanze* (although *Romanze* was added below the list of works on the title page, this is not in Ísólfsson's

handwriting)⁵¹ and the *Impromptu* in F minor (an assertion based on the fact that only the *Impromptu* in B minor was included in Vidar's 1966 recording of *Svipmyndir*), and the *Preludium*.

Ísólffsson's humorous description of the *Svipmyndir* album as "easy pieces" does not apply to all the works. The *Einu sinni var*, the *Ballata*, and both *Impromptus* are technically demanding piano works. According to Pálsdóttir, this is also the case with his songs: "The compositional structure of the music carries the most weight; therefore, it is difficult to perform some of Ísólffsson's songs."⁵²

As mentioned earlier, pianist and composer Vidar worked with Ísólffsson on the original *Svipmyndir* compilation. She said about the *Svipmyndir*: "Performing those works is pure joy for the pianist; this music is of lasting value. It was a great honor for me to record the *Svipmyndir* and the recording produced a strong reaction. I also performed five of them in the Austurbæjarbíó concert hall in 1963 on the occasion of Ísólffsson's seventieth birthday."⁵³

The 1994 publication of the *Svipmyndir* compilation was supervised by pianist Magnússon, who feels that the works reflect Ísólffsson's life, which indeed makes them very personal:

Ísólffsson's piano music is difficult; I experienced inner soul battles while learning these works before their premiere in 1997. It was my idea to prepare the works for publication and I decided it was necessary to complete this project with a premiere. The music was very individual, the tonal language foreign to me and not pianistically written. I would say though that it was a gratifying project.

I was nervous during the performance because I had no idea of how the *Svipmyndir* compilation would be received. There was practically no performance tradition for these works, unlike the *Glettur* and op. 5, which have been much performed through the years. In the end my worries proved unnecessary for the *Svipmyndir* were well received.⁵⁴

There is some discrepancy between the original set and the published edition of *Svipmyndir* regarding two issues in particular. As the *Ballata* is listed as the last piece on Ísólffsson's title page of *Svipmyndir*, the question arises as to why the *Preludium*, which is an abridged version of the *Ballata*, would be chosen for the 1994 published edition?

⁵¹ The *Romanze* was undoubtedly included in Vidar's 1966 recording of *Svipmyndir* with Ísólffsson's consent. It is identified in the INBS Library as TD-1222, 1966.

⁵² Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁵³ Jórunn Vidar, interview, 1999.

⁵⁴ Örn Magnússon, interview, 1999.

Another issue is why the *Veislan á Sólhaugum* (The Feast at Solhaugar) was included? The *Veislan* was originally composed for string quintet as part of the incidental music for a 1943 staging of a play under the same title by Henrik Ibsen. The version of *Veislan* in the *Svipmyndir* edition is an arrangement for piano that was not included by Ísólsson in the original *Svipmyndir* compilation.

The *Svipmyndir* provides a missing link between the earlier pieces, the *Glettur*, and the op. 5, on the one hand, and the *Tilbrigði*, on the other. The earlier pieces show Ísólsson's lyrical and humorous side as well as his thorough craftsmanship. Through the various works of the *Svipmyndir* collection it is possible to trace how he developed and matured as a composer. These works exhibit a large spectrum of emotions as the composer's many-sided personality unfolds in them.

The larger works within the *Svipmyndir* compilation are excellent examples of Ísólsson working at the height of his compositional powers. He uses late-nineteenth-century chromatic harmony to support beautifully structured melodies and expands the familiar forms borrowed from his predecessors. This is echoed in the words of Thórarinnsson: "Later Ísólsson experimented on a wider ground. Sometimes Páll used compositional technique that would have been considered avant-garde when he was in the early stages of his career."⁵⁵

Lítill vals

It is not unlikely that the *Walzer*, op. 124, no. 4, in A minor (see example 2.17), by Schumann, inspired the *Lítill vals* (Little Waltz), in A minor (see example 2.18), dedicated to Jórunn Vidar on her twelfth birthday in 1930.⁵⁶ When mm. 1–2 of the *Lítill vals* are compared to mm. 2–3 of the *Walzer*, one finds that the origin of the opening motif of the *Lítill vals* (E, C, E triplet, C, B, A) is the E appoggiatura to the C and leading (via B on the third beat) to the A in mm. 2–3 of the *Walzer*. The similar harmony in these measures, save for the added F-sharp on the second beat of m. 1 in the *Lítill vals*, supports this suggestion. The slight sarcasm represented by the augmented-fourth triplets in mm. 10–11, at the beginning of the "Poco più mosso" section,

⁵⁵ Jón Thórarinnsson, interview 1999.

⁵⁶ Vidar's mother was a sister of Kristín Nordmann, Ísólsson's first wife.

signifies the moment at which Ísólfsón parts with Schumann in style and the atmosphere changes unexpectedly from pleasant to intense.

EXAMPLE 2.17 Schumann: *Walzer*, op. 124, no. 4, mm. 1–8

Lebhaft (Komponiert 1835)

Mit Pedal

EXAMPLE 2.18 Ísólfsón: *Lítill vals*, mm. 1–12

5. Lítill vals
Til Jórunnar Viðar

Allegretto (mp)

Poco piu mosso (f)

Ösku-menúett

The *Ösku-menúett* (Ash-Minuet) in G major (see example 2.19), was initially composed and dedicated to Thurídur Pálsdóttir, nicknamed Níní. The simplicity in this music is enchanting and rare in the music of Ísólfsson. The *Ösku-menúett* first appeared before the public in 1945 as part of the incidental music to a theatrical program entitled *Myndabók Jónasar Hallgrímssonar* (The Jónas Hallgrímsson Picture Book) in an arrangement for string quintet by the composer. Níní, however, remembered having played it on the piano as a child,⁵⁷ which indicates that the *Ösku-menúett* was composed somewhat prior to 1945.

⁵⁷ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

EXAMPLE 2.19

Ísólfsson: *Ösku-menúett*, mm. 1–17

6. Ösku-menúett

Til Níní

Moderato

mf

5

mp

1. 2.

10

f

14

mp

f

Fine

Ég beid thín

The *Ég beid thín* (see example 2.20), is Ísólfsón's only known piano transcription of one of his songs. The song is entitled "Blítt er undir björkunum" ("It Is Pleasant Under the Trees"), but the first verse begins with the words "Ég beid thín lengi, lengi" ("I Waited a Long Time For You"). The song was composed as a part of the incidental music to the play *Gullna Hlidid* (The Golden Port), written by Ísólfsón's friend Davíð Stefánsson (1895–1964),⁵⁸ and premiered in 1941.⁵⁹

The piano transcription of *Ég beid thín* is not dated. Judging from the firm writing in the manuscript, one can probably date it from around the same period as the play or even earlier. There are three repeats indicated in the score pointing to the three verses of the song, so it is not an original piano piece. The transcription adheres to the song in terms of melody, key, rhythm, and harmony, but the brief introduction, mm. 1–3, and elaboration on the third verse of the song in the tonic major, mm. 16–27, suggest that Ísólfsón may have composed the piece as an impromptu entertainment number for the many private gatherings he attended.⁶⁰ The fact that the manuscript is not signed would support this suggestion as the transcription would not necessarily have been intended for publication.

⁵⁸ "Davíð Stefánsson was born in Northern Iceland and is considered one of the most prominent writers and poets of his generation; among his works are novels, plays, and poems. His somewhat somber style is Romantic in nature and frequently his subjects are the least fortunate of mankind." Cited in http://www.skolavefurinn.is/_opid/islenska/bokmenntir/hofundar/david_stefansson/aeviagri_p.pdf (accessed May 18, 2008).

⁵⁹ The *Gullna Hlidid* became an extremely popular play and ran for sixty-six performances during 1941–42, a record at the time. *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "I remember many occasions when Ísólfsón played the piano in private homes." Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

EXAMPLE 2.20

Ísólfsón: *Ég beid þín*, mm. 1–20

Ég beid þín -

The musical score consists of ten systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The notation is handwritten and includes various rhythmic values such as sixteenth and thirty-second notes, as well as rests. There are several instances of 'rit' (ritardando) and 'b. dolce' (bristoso dolce) markings. The score shows a progression of chords and melodic lines, with some ink bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.

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EXAMPLE 2.21

Ísólfsson: *Ég beid thín*, mm. 21–27

The image displays three systems of handwritten musical notation. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system shows a melodic line in the treble staff with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a bass line with chords and some melodic fragments. The second system continues the melodic line with more complex rhythmic patterns and includes some slurs and accents. The third system shows the melodic line ending with a double bar line, and the bass line continuing with a few notes and a fermata.

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Intrada / Tileinkun

The *Intrada* in E major (see example 2.22) is the first piece listed on the title page of the manuscript of the *Svipmyndir* collection. *Intrada* was first published in the periodical *Helgafell* on the occasion of Ísólfsón's sixtieth birthday in October 1953 under the title *Tileinkun* (Dedication) and dedicated to pianist Árni Kristjánsson. Ísólfsón subsequently changed the title, for the piece is entitled *Intrada* on the 1966 recording made for the INBS by Jórunn Vidar.

When the two manuscripts are compared, it is clear that the only thing the composer changed in addition to the title was the tempo indication. The *Tileinkun* is marked "Lento, cantabile ed espressivo," but the *Intrada* is marked "Moderato — mit inniger Empfindung," with the added metronome indication of a quarter-note equals sixty-nine. The 1994 published edition lists the piece as *Tileinkun*, with the dedication to Kristjánsson. The tempo indication, however, is *Moderato*, omitting the "mit inniger Empfindung" and the metronome marking. Another discrepancy between the manuscript and the published edition occurs in m. 10 where an accidental (B-sharp) is missing in the treble on the first beat.

It is appropriate for the *Intrada* to be the first piece of a set, as the piece opens with certain grandeur. This Schumannesque miniature depends upon the varied texture of the arpeggiated chords in the left hand, which together with sophisticated harmony, sustain the whole piece. Magnússon comments:

In most of Ísólfsón's piano works one can sense that they were written by an organist. Sometimes it would be easier to have access to foot pedals when the chords and the sound world of the piece are thick and massive. An example of this is *Intrada / Tileinkun*, where each chord is arpeggiated, which in turn dissects the melody. The massive sound world of the organist is required.⁶¹

⁶¹ Örn Magnússon, interview, 1999.

EXAMPLE 2.22

Ísólfsón: *Intrada / Tileinkun*, mm. 1–24**2. Tileinkun***Til Árna Kristjánssonar*

Moderato

f *p*

5 *mf*

9 *p* *mf* *p*

13 *cresc* *f* *sf* *p*

17 *sf*

21 *mf* *cresc.* *molto espr.*

Einu Sinni Var (I) and (II)⁶²

An indication of Ísólfsson's mature compositional style is seen in the *Einu sinni var* (I) (Once Upon a Time) in D major (see example 2.23). The poetic implication of the title calls for a certain "tone," which identifies the group of "Once Upon a Time" character pieces, for, according to Dahlhaus, "the 'tone' that identifies a genre is closely connected to its 'mode of presentation,' its relation to the audience or listeners."⁶³

Ísólfsson's opening melody, which is introduced in the A-section, sets the "tone" by being narrative and reflective in accordance with the title. The sparse texture, simple rhythm, and ambiguous tonality in mm. 1–4 underline the melody in an ideal way, thereby creating a convincing mode of presentation.

Ísólfsson also expands the form of the piece; instead of remaining within the formal limits of the works by which it is probably inspired, i.e., the two character pieces by Grieg and Reger bearing the same title: *Es war einmal*, op. 44, no. 3, in E minor by Reger, and *Der var engang*, op. 71, no. 1, in E minor by Grieg. The form of Ísólfsson's *Einu sinni var* (I) is ABC B¹C¹A¹ (A, mm. 1–34; B, mm. 35–44; C, mm. 45–56; B¹, mm. 57–66; C¹, mm. 67–72; A¹, mm. 73–91), as opposed to the ABA¹ form of its two probable models.

⁶² The Roman numerals are added by myself to provide easy reference to these two pieces that share a common title and key.

⁶³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 105.

EXAMPLE 2.23

Ísólfsson: *Einu sinni var* (I), mm. 1–29

7. Einu sinni var

Andante tranquillo

The musical score is presented in five systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/8. The tempo is marked *Andante tranquillo*. The dynamics are indicated as *mp*, *mf*, and *p*. The score includes handwritten measure numbers 6, 12, 18, and 24. The music features a mix of chords and melodic lines, with some measures containing rests or specific articulation marks like accents.

Ísólffsson uses elements from the Regerian burlesque style in both B-sections of *Einu sinni var* (mm. 35–44 and mm. 57–66). These parts are in D minor and marked “*Allegretto capriccioso*.” These elements include strong contrasts of articulation and skilful changes of register, set in motion by the staccato chords in m. 35 (see example 2.24). This is the last instance in which Ísólffsson uses the Regerian burlesque style in the piano works. This time, however, the composer’s intention is not to create a humorous atmosphere, as in the earlier piano works, but to reflect happier times in the past.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ A similar use of the Regerian burlesque style is found in the piano part of the song “*Sáud thid hana systur mína?*” (“Did You See My Sister?”). There, too, it is used by the composer to create an atmosphere of regret, to underline the content of the poem.

EXAMPLE 2.24

Ísólffsson: *Einu Sinni Var* (I), mm. 35–46

The musical score for Example 2.24 is presented in four systems. The first system (measures 35-37) is marked *Allegretto capriccioso* and *f*. The second system (measures 38-40) features triplets and is marked *8va.*. The third system (measures 41-43) includes a *p* dynamic and a *cresc.* marking. The fourth system (measures 44-46) is marked *Moderato* and *mp*, with a key signature change to C-sharp minor and a time signature change to 2/4. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

The C-section, mm. 45–56 (see example 2.25), presents new melodic material in the key of C-sharp minor, marked “Moderato,” and is characterized by chromatic chordal movement. The atmosphere is one of pathos, created by Ísólffsson’s command of chromaticism and enharmonic relations. Although the style of this part is based upon the chromatic style frequently observed in the piano works of Reger, Ísólffsson keeps this music within a tonally accessible realm.

When C (C¹) returns in m. 67, it is in the tonic minor and is only six measures long, instead of the previous twelve measures. Despite how dissimilar the three parts of *Einu sinni var*

seem on the surface, the composer welds them together by recalling parts of the opening melody in sections B and C; thus, in the opening measure of B (m. 35), the staccato chords in the treble are melodically based upon the descending steps of m. 1, and in the opening two measures of C (m. 45), the melody in the top voice bears resemblance to the melodic shape of mm. 5–9 in A.

EXAMPLE 2.25 Ísólfsón: *Einu sinni var* (I), mm. 44–56

The image displays a musical score for Example 2.25, consisting of three systems of music. The first system, starting at measure 44, features a treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. It includes a piano part with triplets and a dynamic marking of *cresc.*, and a vocal line with a dynamic marking of *mp*. The tempo is marked *Moderato*. The second system, starting at measure 47, continues the piano and vocal parts, with dynamic markings of *f*, *mp*, and *f*. The third system, starting at measure 52, shows the piano part with a dynamic marking of *mp* and the vocal part with a dynamic marking of *p*. The tempo is marked *riten.* and the time signature changes to 3/4.

Einu sinni var (II)

The “tone” in the Einu sinni var (II) (see example 2.26. and example 2.27), is set by the “syrjandi” (questioning) marking at the top. This piece presents conclusive answers to the harmonically open phrases only in the last measure, in the form of the V–I harmony. This delightful miniature is a late piece, as can be inferred from the insecure handwriting in the manuscript. Although it is one of few pieces not signed by Ísólfsson, there is no reason to doubt its authenticity, as the graphic style of this manuscript matches other of his music manuscripts.

EXAMPLE 2.26

Ísólfsón: *Einu sinni var* (II), mm. 1–16a

Spurjandi *Einu sinni var*

Handwritten musical score for *Einu sinni var* (II), mm. 1–16a. The score is written on five systems of two staves each. The notation is handwritten and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The first system is marked "Spurjandi" and the second system is marked "Einu sinni var". The score is written in a style that suggests it is a working draft or a composer's sketch. The bottom of the page shows several empty staves.

EXAMPLE 2.27

Ísólfsón: *Einu sinni var* (II), mm. 1–16a, (typeset version)**Einu sinni var (II)**

Sprjandi Páll Ísólfsón

©Páll Ísólfsón

Romanze

It is possible to consider the *Romanze* in B minor (see example 2.28), a tribute to Grieg because of the way that it recalls the harmonic and melodic sound world of the Norwegian composer.⁶⁵ The dreamy atmosphere, created by the wistful melody woven into the arpeggiated chords in mm. 1–8, recalls the opening of Grieg's *Erotik* (Erotic Piece), op. 43, no. 5 in F major.

A common thread through the *Romanze* is the opening melodic motif in m. 1. It inspires a slightly different version beginning on F-sharp in m. 9, but one that adheres to the same rhythm, and it is heard yet again in m. 15, beginning on D (see example 2.29). When the motif is presented in D major and supported with a lilting bass (mm. 15–19), Ísólfsón's tribute to Grieg is complete.

⁶⁵ Defined by Horton as “Norse” ingredients this includes pedal point, sequences, the sharpened fourth of the scale, the fall from tonic to dominant via the leading-note, and the feminine cadence. John Horton, *Scandinavian Music: A Short History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963), 105.

EXAMPLE 2.28

Ísólfsson: *Romanze*, mm. 1–12

8. Romanze

Tranquillo

p e dolce

3

mp

6

mp

9

mf

11

p

Detailed description: The score consists of five systems of piano music. The first system (measures 1-2) is marked 'Tranquillo' and 'p e dolce'. The second system (measures 3-4) has a '3' above the first measure and 'mp' in the middle. The third system (measures 5-6) has a '6' above the first measure and 'mp' at the end. The fourth system (measures 7-8) has a '9' above the first measure and 'mf' at the end. The fifth system (measures 9-12) has an '11' above the first measure and 'p' at the end. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, and rests. The piano part includes various chordal textures and melodic lines.

EXAMPLE 2.29 Ísólfsón: *Romanze*, mm. 13–18

Mazurka

The *Mazurka* in C-sharp minor (see example 2.30), is an homage to Chopin. There are two extant manuscripts; one is entitled *Endurminning (Chopin)* (Remembrance); the other is entitled *Mazurka*, as represented in the 1994 *Svipmyndir* edition. This piece demonstrates the complete ease with which Ísólfsón was able to study the musical style of a composer with regard to melodic invention, choice of harmony, and rhythmic details.

EXAMPLE 2.30

Ísólfsón: *Mazurka*, mm. 1–14**10. Mazurka**

Moderato

mp

4

8 *1.* *2.*

mf poco animato

11

Nocturne

The *Nocturne* in D-flat major (see example 2.32, example 2.33, example 2.34), stands out among Ísólfsón's works. The music is lyrical and intimate; the beautiful melody flows freely, set into motion by the uncharacteristic beginning on the fourth beat and accompanied by the unintrusive triplets in the bass.

In the B-flat minor middle section, mm. 9–20, the music becomes more intense, with increased rhythmic drive in the melody and more frequent changes of harmony. Following the return of the unabridged opening melody, mm. 20–28, and now modulating to the tonic instead of the dominant (as previously happened in m. 8), an eight-bar-long coda concludes the *Nocturne* with a final reminder of the melody in the inner voice of the treble.

This piece is one of the few dated by Ísólfsón. He wrote on the front page of the manuscript "*Nocturne*" "Til sendiherra frú Bodil Begtrup med hjartanlegum kvedjum 11. Nov. 1953" (To Her Excellency, Ambassador Bodil Begtrup⁶⁶ with dear wishes, November 11, 1953). The importance of the *Nocturne* lies in the warmth and directness of musical communication, which has, in my opinion, no precedent among the other works in Ísólfsón's collection, except perhaps for the *Invention*.⁶⁷ The *Nocturne* provides a rare glimpse into the depth of the composer's soul, usually hidden behind a humorous facade or an expression of "Weltschmerz".

⁶⁶ Bodil Begtrup (1903–87) was the first Danish female ambassador.

⁶⁷ See discussion in Chapter 3, 151–152.

EXAMPLE 2.31

Ísólfsón: *Nocturne*, mm. 1–16

Andante cantabile Nocturne *Pav. Wolfson*

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Nocturne" by Ísólfsón, measures 1 through 16. The score is written on six systems of grand staves, each consisting of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The tempo and mood are indicated as "Andante cantabile". The composer's name, "Ísólfsón", is written in the top right corner, and the name "Pav. Wolfson" is written in the top right corner of the first system. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and slurs. Performance markings include "pedaled" in the first system, "mf" in the second and fifth systems, and "Cresc." in the sixth system. The score is divided into two sections by a double bar line with a "2." marking below it. The first section ends with a repeat sign and a first ending bracket. The second section begins with a second ending bracket. The score is reproduced by permission.

EXAMPLE 2.32

Ísólfsson: *Nocturne*, mm. 1–13 (typeset version)**Nocturne**

*Til sendiherra, frú Bodil Begtrup
með hjartanlegum kveðjum
11. nóv. 1953*

Páll Ísólfsson

Andante cantabile

p e dolce

mf

p

mf

sim.

3

6

8^a

11

1.

2.

EXAMPLE 2.33

Ísólfsón: *Nocturne*, mm. 14–27 (typeset version)

2

Nocturne

Musical score for measures 14–15. The piece is in G-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. Measure 14 features a melodic line in the right hand with a fermata over the first half and a *cresc.* marking. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes.

Musical score for measures 16–18. Measure 16 contains a five-note fingering (5) and a three-note fingering (3) in the right hand. The tempo marking *poco animato* is present. The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata, while the left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment.

Musical score for measures 19–21. Measure 19 is marked *poco rit.* and measure 20 is marked *a tempo*. A dynamic marking of *p* (piano) is shown in measure 20. The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata, and the left hand has eighth-note accompaniment.

Musical score for measures 22–24. Measure 22 is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte). The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata, and the left hand has eighth-note accompaniment.

Musical score for measures 25–27. The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata, and the left hand has eighth-note accompaniment.

EXAMPLE 2.34

Ísólfsson: *Nocturne*, mm. 28–36 (typeset version)

Nocturne

3

The image displays a typeset musical score for the Nocturne by Ísólfsson, covering measures 28 through 36. The score is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).

System 1 (Measures 28-30): Measure 28 begins with a treble clef and a key signature of three flats. A melodic line in the treble clef is marked with a *p* (piano) dynamic. The bass clef part provides a steady accompaniment. A slur spans across measures 28, 29, and 30.

System 2 (Measures 31-33): Measures 31 and 32 feature a more active treble line with accents (*>*) and slurs. The bass line continues with a consistent rhythmic pattern.

System 3 (Measures 34-36): Measure 34 starts with a bass clef. The treble clef part has a melodic line. A *ppp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking is present in the bass clef part. A *rit.* (ritardando) marking is indicated above the treble clef staff. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Saknadarstef⁶⁸

The *Saknadarstef* (Elegy) in B minor (see example 2.35), is dated March 1, 1964, and was composed in memory of one of Ísólfsson's close friends, poet Davíð Stefánsson. They collaborated on many projects through the years, including plays and songs. Ísólfsson reminisces about his friend in the second of his two conversation books, where he says:

I miss Davíð much, we were good friends. We met first in Copenhagen in 1927 or 1928 when I was giving concerts there. I liked him right away. The last time I met Davíð was in 1963 when we traveled together around Skagafjörður in northern Iceland. When the time came to say goodbye, I said: "Now let us toast my dear Davíð because it is not certain when we will meet again." As it turned out this was to be our last meeting in this life.⁶⁹

The *Saknadarstef* is a poignant miniature, tightly constructed despite its apparent simplicity. The music is laden with sadness and is an example of Ísólfsson's mature compositional style, wherein he expresses himself from the depth of his heart. A possible inspiration for the *Saknadarstef* is Grieg's *Forbi* [In Memoriam] (Gone), op. 71, no. 6, which he composed in 1901, probably following the death of his brother in October of that year.

The two pieces share the idea of eight tones building a motif by moving stepwise. In the *Saknadarstef*, m.1, the tones ascend a fourth in the soprano (F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp, B) and then in m. 17–18, descend in the alto (E, D, C-sharp, B); in the *Forbi*, they travel chromatically down a perfect fifth (B–E). Although the two motifs have different shapes, they both express grave emotions. Grieg's piece sounds more austere because of the chromaticism set forth in the opening, whereas Ísólfsson's *Saknadarstef* is firmly set in B minor, despite chromaticism in the harmonic motion in mm. 8–12.

⁶⁸ The published title in example 2.35 has the letter "ð" particular to the Icelandic alphabet which is pronounced "th."

⁶⁹ Matthías Johannessen, *Í dag skein sól* (The Sun Was Shining Today: Conversations with Páll Ísólfsson) (Reykjavík: Bókfells Press, 1964), 85–7.

EXAMPLE 2.35

Ísólfsson: *Saknaðarstef*, mm. 1–18

14. Saknaðarstef

Hægt og þýtt

p *mf*

5 *mp* *p*

10 *mf* *cresc.* *poco rit.* *ten.* *a tempo* *f* *ten.*

15 *molto rit.* *p* *pp*

1. marz, 1964. In memoriam Davíð Stefánsson

Impromptu in F minor

The Impromptu in F minor is one of Ísólffsson's late works for the piano and is, as was discussed above, ambitious and problematic with regard to form and content.⁷⁰ Inspiration for the F minor Impromptu (see example 2.36), is found in Grieg's *Svundne Dage* (Vanished Days), op. 57, no. 1, in D minor. Both works are structured in the same way, i.e., by linking several short parts together by means of motivic transformation and the use of enharmonic relations.

In order to add an improvisatory element to the musical flow, the composers use fermatas and change tempo markings throughout. The opening motifs of the two works are of a melancholy nature, but the move into the tonic major with a new tempo changes the mood. In the F minor *Impromptu*, the change to the tonic major is marked "Trio — Tempo di Walze," mm. 62–66 (see example 2.37).

EXAMPLE 2.36 Ísólffsson: *Impromptu* in F minor, mm. 1–10

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⁷⁰ See Chapter 1, 34–35.

EXAMPLE 2.37

Ísólfsón: *Impromptu* in F minor, mm. 62–66

62 **Trio** Tempo di Wälzer
p doler

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Also, it seems that Ísólfsón took the *Svundne Dage*'s "Più lento" part in D-flat major, with its motif that is heard in thirds in dotted-rhythm (dotted eighth-sixteen), in mm. 71–73 and again in mm. 89–91, (see example 2.38), as his point of departure for the eight-measure-long section in D-flat major in the *Impromptu*, mm. 46–53 (see example 2.39), and again in mm. 123–30.

EXAMPLE 2.38

Grieg: *Svundne Dage*, op. 57, no. 1, mm. 86–94

86 **Più lento.**
molto cresc. e stretto f

91 **Molto vivo.**
(longa) ff

EXAMPLE 2.39

Ísólfsón: *Impromptu* in F minor, mm. 46–53

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Ísólfsón composed two codas for the F minor *Impromptu*. The two codas are based upon the opening motif and harmony. Their difference lies in the pianistic and rhythmic details that Ísólfsón used more effectively in coda 1 (see example 2.40). Thus the stretto momentum begins right away in the first measure of coda 1, created by the left-hand accompanimental staccato eighth-notes, and it increases in m. 7, as a result of both the meter change and the syncopated rhythm in the left hand in mm. 12–14.

The build-up of a stretto in coda 1, as well as the choice of octaves instead of chords in the right hand in mm. 7–14, makes it more effective than coda 2 (see example 2.41); therefore, the editor's choice of coda 1 for the *Svipmyndir* edition is indeed convincing. What is problematic, however, is the piece as a whole, for in it Ísólfsón is experimenting, expanding the form by linking several short parts together by means of motivic transformation and the use of enharmonic relations.

Although the individual parts work well and all modulations and enharmonic shifts sound faultless, the overall plan of the piece is not convincing. The reason is that too many different styles are joined together. The mixture of sentimental lyricism and late-nineteenth-century

Romanticism with *Liebeslieder* waltzes and a classical coda in the vein of Beethoven is not viable in such a relatively brief work.

EXAMPLE 2.40 Ísólfsón: *Impromptu* in F minor, coda 1, mm. 1–14

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EXAMPLE 2.41 Ísólfsón: *Impromptu* in F minor, coda 2, mm. 1–13

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Stef (Thema) in F-sharp minor

This fragment (see example 2.42 and example 2.43), is in F-sharp minor and is marked “Andante moderato e poco maestoso.” The title *Impromptu II* is partly crossed out, and *Stef* (Thema) is written instead, but it is not dated. As the origins of this piece are unknown, it is challenging to place it within the piano collection. One possibility is that this might be the composition that Ísólfsón mentioned twice in his letters from Leipzig dated 1913: “I have plans in my head for variations in F minor” and “I have composed variations on a theme by Beethoven.”⁷¹

The maestoso character of the *Stef*, signified by the dotted rhythm in the opening measure, and the bold harmonic procedures with meter changes, indicate, however, a connection to the more mature works of Ísólfsón such as the *Impromptu* in B minor and the *Ballata*. Perhaps posterity will unearth the variations on this fine theme, but in the meantime the fragment remains preserved for the inspiration of future generations of composers.

⁷¹ Extended versions of the two quotes are cited in Chapter 1, 6.

EXAMPLE 2.42

Ísólfsón: *Stef* (Thema), mm. 1–19

Andante moderato epoco massoso. ~~Andante moderato~~ *Stef* (Thema) *ff*

p

molto più mosso
mf

cresc.

ff Tempo I

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EXAMPLE 2.43

Ísólfsson: *Stef* (Thema), mm. 20–23

The image displays a handwritten musical score for Example 2.43, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system includes a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff features a melodic line with notes, rests, and a large slur over a phrase. The bass staff contains a complex accompaniment with many notes and rests. The second system shows a treble clef staff with a few notes and a double bar line, and a bass clef staff with a large, sweeping gesture and a double bar line. The notation is handwritten and appears to be a sketch or a working draft.

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Impromptu in B minor

If Ísólffsson pays tribute to Grieg in the *Romanze*, the B minor *Impromptu* can certainly be considered a tribute to Reger. It is not an intentional tribute, though, as one would think of the *Romanze*, but rather illuminates how Ísólffsson gradually developed his own compositional style by continuing Reger's tradition.⁷² The B minor *Impromptu* (see example 2.44) is in that sense an outstanding example of Ísólffsson's mature style.

There are a number of factors to support this assertion. The short (42 measures) *Impromptu* represents Ísólffsson at the height of his command of the integration of formal structure, rhythmic flow, and chromatic harmony. The descending opening motif, with its signature dotted rhythm in m. 1 (F-sharp, E, D), is developed harmonically throughout and becomes a unifying structural device, in lieu of a melodic theme.

The high level of emotional expression in the *Impromptu* is achieved through an unusually broad use of the dynamic scale from pianissimo to fortissimo, as well as by the wide range of registers that the piece encompasses. Furthermore, the gradual increase in intensity during the build-up to the climax, in mm. 23–27, is reinforced with a change from the opening tempo, marked “andante” in m. 1, to the “poco agitato” in m. 25. Finally, Ísólffsson's use of unstable harmonic relationships throughout propels the piece relentlessly onward. This motion, energized by the dotted rhythm derived from the opening motif, creates a turbulent atmosphere in mm. 23–35.

Ísólffsson's uncharacteristic unleashing of strong emotions, such as passion, anger, and sadness, underlines the importance of the *Impromptu* within his collection of piano works. The mature composer has in this concise miniature ridded himself of all cautionary boundaries, in order to express sides of his personality that had hitherto not come to the fore in the piano works.⁷³

⁷² See, for example Book IV from Reger's piano collection *Aus meinem Tagebuch*, op. 82.

⁷³ “Even though I appear to be an ever-so-happy person and even frolicsome, underneath this surface there is a depressed individual. There is sadness in my soul.” (An extended version of this quote is cited in Chapter 1, 14), Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 71.

EXAMPLE 2.44

Ísólfsson: *Impromptu* in B minor, mm. 1–15

12. Impromptu

Andante

mf mp pp p

4

8

12

p mf

Ballata / Preludium

The *Ballata* in E minor (see example 2.45), seems to be a direct descendant stylistically of the B minor *Impromptu*. It rides the wave of emotions unleashed in the *Impromptu* by going even farther with the same structural elements found in that piece. This includes much use of chromaticism, enharmonic relationships, and changing meters and dynamics. A conventional melody is not found in these works; instead, a developmental transformation of smaller motifs is given prominence throughout.

Thus, the *Ballata* opens in an authoritative fashion, with a dotted-rhythm motif, reminiscent of the B minor *Impromptu*, mm. 1–8. The choice of intervals (a minor second and a diminished fifth), outlining the *Ballata*-motif in m. 1, is more daring, however, and immediately sets the tone for what is to come in terms of chromatic harmony.

The construction of the *Ballata* conforms to the principles that, according to Charles Rosen, are common in the Chopin *Ballades*:

Two thematic groups in contrasting tonalities or modes are presented separately, like successive stages of a narrative and with little of the close-knit opposition of sonata style. In what follows, the two groups do not remain independent but contaminate each other (either by development or combination). The level of tension and excitement is raised, by variation, development, and generally by something like an operatic *stretto* (acceleration, repetition of short motifs, and a rising sequence). The original material, above all that of the second group, reappears with greatly heightened brilliance, glorified and often drastically abridged. The climactic return is placed as close to the end as possible, like the denouement of a tale, but may be rounded off by a virtuoso coda based on new material.⁷⁴

The *Ballata* conforms to Rosen's description thus: Two thematic groups in contrasting tonalities are presented separately ("Poco allegro," mm. 1–6, and "tranquillo," mm. 7–12); bridge (mm. 13–17); development, in which the two groups are combined (mm. 18–30); level of tension and excitement is raised by acceleration, repetition of short motifs, and a rising sequence ("Poco animato," mm. 31–41); original material from the two thematic groups reappears with greatly heightened brilliance ("Tempo I," mm. 42–55); bridge (mm. 56–59); a virtuoso coda based on material from both thematic groups, beginning with material from the first group and concluding

⁷⁴ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 335.

with thundering fortissimo octaves, which use rhythmic and tonal material from the first group ("Più mosso," mm. 60–77).

EXAMPLE 2.45 Ísólfsson: *Ballata*, mm. 1–10

Piano *A*

Ballata

Poco allegro *Più mosso*

WH Nr. 1. F. S.

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As mentioned above (p. 25), Ísólfsón left two versions of this piece, the one under discussion entitled *Ballata*, with a demanding coda in mm. 60–77, (see example 2.46 and example 2.47), and the other entitled *Preludium*, without the coda but with a quiet ending, mm. 56–59 (see example 2.48).

EXAMPLE 2.46 Ísólfsón: *Ballata*, mm. 56–67

The image displays a handwritten musical score for the piece *Ballata* by Ísólfsón, covering measures 56 to 67. The score is presented on four systems of grand staves, each consisting of a treble and a bass clef. The music is characterized by intricate rhythmic patterns, including frequent triplets and sixteenth-note passages. Performance instructions such as *riten.* (ritardando), *Piu mosso*, and *gusto* are included. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The notation includes various articulations, slurs, and dynamic markings like *f* and *p*.

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EXAMPLE 2.47

Ísólfsón: *Ballata*, mm. 68–77

Handwritten musical notation for the first system, measures 68-77. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. It contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a bass line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. There are 'x' marks above several notes in both staves.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system, measures 68-77. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. It contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a bass line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. There are 'x' marks above several notes in both staves.

Handwritten musical notation for the third system, measures 68-77. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. It contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a bass line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. There are 'x' marks above several notes in both staves.

Handwritten musical notation for the fourth system, measures 68-77. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. It contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a bass line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with slurs and accents. There are 'x' marks above several notes in both staves.

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I would recommend that the *Ballata* be regarded as the definitive version by virtue of its adherence to well-known formal principles of ballades, for as such, it is more convincing than as a prelude.

EXAMPLE 2.48 Ísólffsson: *Preludium*, mm. 56–59



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It was an achievement for Ísólffsson to compose the *Ballata* in his late maturity. Örn Magnússon feels that Ísólffsson's personal expression comes to the fore in the tonal language of the *Ballata / Preludium*: "one can hear the surf of the ocean in this work."⁷⁵ The ocean surf was indeed a source of inspiration for Ísólffsson: "When I was a young boy, I used to love walking down to the shore and sitting on a cliff listening to the sound of the ocean surf."⁷⁶ Thus the *Ballata* does not only represent an artist who had traveled far on his personal journey but is also an indication of the future path of Ísólffsson's musical development.

⁷⁵ Örn Magnússon, interview, 1999.

⁷⁶ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 70.

CHAPTER 3

The Piano Works: Variations and Liturgical Pieces

The Tilbrigdi in perspective

The piano work *Tilbrigdi um sönglag eftir Ísólf Pálsson* (Variations on a Song by Ísólfur Pálsson) consists of a theme and seventeen variations and is a virtuosic tour de force. In Ísólfsson's own copy of his biography,¹ which includes a list of compositions, the year 1965 is handwritten in the right margin next to the *Tilbrigdi*. This suggests that, although the work was premiered and recorded in Reykjavík by Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson in 1964, it was composed prior to that year and finalized in the composer's hand in 1965. The *Tilbrigdi* was published by Helgafell in 1974;² it is Ísólfsson's only large-scale work for piano and the crowning achievement in his diverse collection.

The *Tilbrigdi* are sectional character variations that explore piano technique within the given musical framework. They are also a comprehensive essay on variation techniques, for throughout the work general aspects of the theme such as tempo, mode, meter, and form are subjected to variation. Moreover, rhythmic and intervallic features inherent in the theme (see example 3.3), such as the anacrusis at the beginning, weight on the first downbeat, dotted rhythm, the interval of the second, and the grouping of three eighths, are used to inspire imaginative transformation of the original melody.

In addition, harmony, dynamics, articulation, and texture are varied to create an individual mood for each variation, ranging from the somber to the victorious. In summary, the theme motive is retained both as a source of free development and as a point of departure for the variations. In

¹ Ísólfsson's copy of the biography (Thórarinnsson, 1963) was discovered by me in 2007, together with the six additional manuscripts mentioned in Chapter 2, p. 28. This copy is valuable, as it has dates ranging from 1925 to 1965, written next to most entries on the work list (pp. 69–78) in the composer's hand. Of Ísólfsson's collection of piano works, only the *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5, the *Gleitur*, and the *Tilbrigdi* have a separate entry on the list.

² The 1974 published edition is entitled *Tilbrigdi um sönglag eftir Ísólf Pálsson* (Variations on a Song by Ísólfur Pálsson), but the manuscript is entitled *Tilbrigdi um stef eftir Ísólf Pálsson* (Variations on a Theme by Ísólfur Pálsson).

order to strengthen unity within the variation series, the reinvigorated theme is restated at the conclusion, in variation XVII (Un poco animato) (see example 3.24).

In composing the *Tilbrigdi* Ísólfsson's knowledge of the piano repertoire was an invaluable source, in particular with regard to technical solutions specific to the instrument. Moreover, it is possible to identify models for some of the individual variations, which are drawn from similar works by Brahms and Reger. These works are: the *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, op. 9, the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, op. 24, by Brahms, and the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Telemann*, op. 134, by Reger. Furthermore, it seems that the fiery spirit of Beethoven inspired the mood of the more virtuosic variations. The discussion of the theme and each variation below addresses these issues.

All musical examples from the *Tilbrigdi* are presented directly from a copy of the manuscript.³ A comparison of the manuscript copy, probably dated 1965, to the 1974 published first edition revealed discrepancies (see table 3.1, below). Although it is quite possible that some of them resulted from the composer's review of the *Tilbrigdi*, especially those pertaining to a melody or inner voices, the fact remains that Ísólfsson's illness⁴ during the last years prior to his passing in 1974 greatly reduced his work capacity. Therefore the manuscript is presented as de facto according to the sources available.

³ Unfortunately, the copy of the manuscript is not as sharp as one would wish, as this results in an uneven graphic quality of the musical examples.

⁴ Ísólfsson suffered from Parkinson's disease.

Table 3.1 A list of discrepancies between the copies of the *Tilbrigdi* manuscript and the 1974 edition.

	measure no.	beat no.	Tilbrigdi manuscript	Tilbrigdi edition
Theme		Upbeat	None	mf
variation I	9	4	B \flat in L.H.	D
"	15	4	A \flat in L.H.	F
"	16b	3	B–B \flat in R.H.	B \flat –B $\flat\flat$
" II	1	1	Allegretto grazioso	Allegro grazioso
"	8	5	G in L.H.	E \flat
"	9	2, 3	E \flat –E \flat –D–C in R.H.	E \flat –D–C–B
"	12	6	G in L.H.	A \flat
" IV	8	4	none	piano
"	10	4	mf	none
"	12	2	C in R.H.	D–E \flat
" V	2	1	C in R.H.	E \flat
" VII	7	2	G in L.H.	B \flat
"	11	1, 2	F, A \flat in L.H.	A \flat , B
"	12	1, 2	A \flat , G, F in L.H.	C, B \flat , A \flat
"	15	1	A in R.H.	A \flat
" VIII	14	4	B \flat unison in R.H.	B \flat octave
" IX	8	2	G in R.H.	B \flat
" XI	6, 14	2	A \flat –F in R.H.	A \flat –G
" XII	10	2	B \flat in R.H.	B
" XIV	10	3	B \flat –major chord in R.H.	G–minor chord
"	12	3	C–B–B in R.H.	C–C \sharp –B \flat
"	17	1	A in L.H.	A \flat
" XV	8	3	B \flat –E \flat in R.H.	D–E \flat
"	11	4	E \flat in R.H.	C
"	10	4	mf	none

A tribute to Ísólffsson's father

The *Tilbrigði* theme is based on a song entitled *Kvedja*⁵ (Farewell) (see example 3.1 and example 3.2), from the song collection *Fjólan* (The Violet), by Ísólffsson's father, Ísólfur Pálsson. These songs were published in Reykjavík in 1934 by the composer's brother, Jón Pálsson. The placement of *Kvedja* as the last of the *Fjólan*'s thirty-one songs is significant because it was frequently sung at the end of family gatherings at the Ísólffsson's Stokkseyri estate.⁶

The *Kvedja* poem is by Freysteinn Gunnarsson:⁷

Vid komum hér gladdir á góðvinafund, til gamans vid kvaedi og söng,
og huga vid lyftum á hverfandi stund frá hversdagsins ys og thröng.
En stundin er lidin, hún leid svo hratt vid ljóðhreim og strengjaslátt,
Thví kvedjumst vid öll medan allt er glatt, og aftur vid hittumst brátt.

We came here to celebrate with our good friends, enjoying poetry and songs,
thus we elevate our minds briefly above the busyness of daily life.
Now this moment is bygone, it passed swiftly while we listened to lyrics and music;
therefore we bid a joyous farewell knowing that we'll soon meet again.

⁵ The published title in example 3.1 has the letter “ð,” particular to the Icelandic alphabet, which is pronounced “th.”

⁶ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁷ Freysteinn Gunnarsson (1892–1976), distinguished scholar, theologian, and poet was director of the Iceland Teacher's College during 1929–62, and wrote, in addition to the *Kvedja*, the poems to a few songs by Ísólffsson. He was a prolific author of various educational textbooks as well as a comprehensive Danish-Icelandic dictionary. Gunnarsson's translation of the *Nonni* book series was an important step toward introducing these renowned stories, which have been translated into approximately forty languages, to children. Sources included are: 1) Ármann Halldórsson, “Freysteinn Gunnarsson sextugur,” *Menntamálarit um uppeldis- og skólamálarit* (Educational Matters: A Journal on Children's Development) 25 (1952): 98–99) “Nonni Books,” available at <http://www.nonni.is/?m=page&f=viewPage&id=8> (accessed Aug. 14, 2008).

EXAMPLE 3.1

Pálsson: *Kveðja*, mm. 1–9

Kveðja.
(Freysteinn Gunnarsson).

Animato.

mf Við kom-um hér glað - ir á góð- vin - a - fund, til gamans við kvæð - i og

söng, og hug - a við lyft - um á hverf - and - i stund frá

hversdagsins ys og þröng. — En stund - in er lið - in, hún

EXAMPLE 3.2

Pálsson: *Kvedja*, mm. 10–16

leið svo hratt við ljóðhrein og strengj - a - slátt, því
kveðjumst við öll meðan allt er glatt, og aft - ur við hitt - umst brátt.

In light of how significant the *Kvedja* song was to the Ísólfsson family Pálsdóttir feels that by choosing the *Kvedja* as his theme for the variations, her father wanted to pay tribute to not only his family but, more specifically, his own father. She maintains that the *Tilbrigði* may represent a description of Pálsson's personality. Therefore, the *Tilbrigði* can be considered Ísólfsson's most personal composition:

I think it is possible to view the *Tilbrigði* as a tribute to my grandfather Ísólfur. Páll loved his father dearly but left him at a young age in order to live with his uncle Jón Pálsson. Páll had unlimited respect for his father and longed to express that in some way; perhaps there were some unresolved issues between the two of them as is often the case.

There are, for instance, no letters available from Ísólfur to Páll while he studied in Germany, only from Jón. It was of the utmost importance for Páll to seek approval from his father, who lived long enough indeed to witness his son's success. This may have been the reason why Páll chose his father's song as the theme for *Tilbrigði* and even attempted to describe his personality through the music.⁸

⁸ Thuríður Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

It would not seem out of character for Ísólffsson, who found outlet for his creativity within the Romantic style, to paint a musical portrait of a loved one as an homage. He describes his father's personality in the *Hundathúfan* conversation book thus: "My father's personality was melancholic; he laughed seldom but hid a sensitive nature underneath a hard shell. His smile was enchanting, though."⁹

Thórarinsson, one of Ísólffsson's closest colleagues, offers valuable insight on the *Tilbrigdi* toward the end of his *Andvari* article entitled "Páll Ísólffsson."

Páll was past seventy when the *Tilbrigdi* were premiered by pianist Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson. At that point the work had recently been finalized. It is a powerful composition, sparkling with energy and various colors. The theme is a simple song, probably improvised during a quiet evening in the home of Ísólfur Pálsson in Stokkseyri. This might have been one of those restful moments at the end of a busy day when the head of the household sought spiritual nourishment at his instrument.

Through the *Tilbrigdi* the song is transformed and elevated. The difference between the original theme and the finalized composition equals many centuries of development in the music history of other nations. Perhaps it can be suggested that the elegance and variety of the *Tilbrigdi* mirror the growth in musical life in Iceland at the point when Páll Ísólffsson was finishing his life's work. Along the same lines it could be said that the artistry and music appreciation of the Stokkseyri people are echoed in the original song.¹⁰

In this context it is certain that it was not coincidental for Ísólffsson to choose *Kvedja* as the theme for his pianistic magnum opus. The *Tilbrigdi* are a symbolic farewell in many ways: to Ísólffsson's father and first music teacher, to the early home environment, to a successful career in music, and to the world at the end of the road.

This premise explains that it was crucial for Ísólffsson to finish the *Tilbrigdi* and have them performed and recorded, as is confirmed by Thórarinsson: "Of the piano works, the *Tilbrigdi* are the most substantial and moreover probably the last grand work that he finalized before his health failed irreversibly."¹¹ Furthermore, this supports the notion that the *Tilbrigdi* show the composer at an emotionally mature stage, at liberty to express the full range of his deepest emotions.

⁹ Matthías Johannessen, *Hundathúfan og hafid* (The Dog-tussock and the Ocean: Conversations with Páll Ísólffsson) (Reykjavík: Bókfell Press, 1961), 44.

¹⁰ Jón Thórarinsson, "Páll Ísólffsson," *Andvari*: Nýr flokkur (New series) 21, n.s. 104 (1979): 32.

¹¹ Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

It is possible that the catalyst for Páll to begin composing the *Tilbrigdi* was his father's death in 1941. He might also have begun working on the piece during the last years of Ísólfr's life, but the inclusion of a funeral march as part of the *Tilbrigdi* (Variation VIII — Marcia funebre) (see example 3.13), suggests that the father's death was indeed the catalyst. Sigurjónsson's impression that the work dated from Ísólfr's Leipzig years is therefore less plausible.¹²

By choosing a personally significant theme Ísólfr created a great piece for the piano. Previously of course Ísólfr had created a large-scale variation work for the organ, the *Chaconna*, but even though it reflects his ambition and creative abilities, it is an impersonal work. The *Tilbrigdi* are, on the other hand, an emotionally expressive and personal composition. In this context Schumann's thoughts about a composer's choice of a theme for his variations ring true: "In the very choice of his theme one recognizes the man. To the extent that memories are associated with it, thoughts about it will be meaningful and profound."¹³

"...an unplayable piece of music"

Ísólfr chose his friend pianist Sigurjónsson to present the *Tilbrigdi* to the outer world. It was invaluable to learn directly from him how this happened:

Páll called me and said he was composing variations and would like me to play them. On the one hand, I cared about Páll and was pleased to do this for him. At the same time, while being curious about the project, I wasn't sure what to expect. When I first saw the manuscript in his home, I thought it exceeded my expectations. The work was of course composed in the Romantic style, and when I had learned it, I enjoyed playing it. Then I played the *Tilbrigdi* for Páll; he was very impressed and didn't make any comments on my interpretation. He only wondered whether the dedication to me should be "à mon ami" or "zu meinem Freund."

Subsequently I found the *Tilbrigdi* somewhat empty, even unwieldy, although there are many interesting aspects to the work. I also felt that it was too long for a concert performance, and Páll even continued adding more variations before the premiere. Pianist Rudolf Serkin looked at the score of the *Tilbrigdi* at some point and then asked Páll if it wouldn't be appropriate to add a fugue. Páll thought about it but I'm glad he didn't add a fugue, as the work is long enough in my opinion.¹⁴

¹² Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

¹³ Cited in Kurt von Fischer, "Variations," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 19, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 550.

¹⁴ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

According to Sigurjónsson, he gave the official premiere of the *Tilbrigdi* in a 1964 recital presented by the Tónlistarfélagid (Philharmonic Society) in the Austurbæjarbíó Concert Hall.¹⁵ However, he also recalled having performed the *Tilbrigdi* on two other occasions: in Austurbæjarbíó in 1963, at the celebration of Ísólfsson's seventieth birthday, and on December 1st of some year (he could not remember which) at the Iceland University Concert Hall¹⁶. In 1967 Sigurjónsson performed the *Tilbrigdi* together with works by Liszt, Chopin, and Grieg on tour in Russia.¹⁷

Regarding the reception of my premiere of the *Tilbrigdi* in Iceland, there were many who found the work very impressive, but I think those may have been mainly members of the audience who were not very knowledgeable about music. The *Tilbrigdi* are not well written for the piano because Páll was an organist. I did not find the *Tilbrigdi* as rewarding to play as I found the shorter piano works. I would, however, like to hear other pianists perform the *Tilbrigdi*, since so far I'm the only one who has.¹⁸

A few years later I performed the *Tilbrigdi* on tour in Russia, but regrettably there were no critics in attendance. Páll was disappointed with this and also with the fact that Icelandic musicians didn't like the piece and were not willing to play it. Unfortunately this was my impression as well.¹⁹

Pálsdóttir's comments were along similar lines: "Páll was very pleased with the *Tilbrigdi* and deeply saddened by the fact that no one played the piece; he said that it was an un-playable piece of music."²⁰

Indeed, a few sections of the *Tilbrigdi* are unwieldy and even un-playable. A good case in point is the appoggiatura on every beat in the outer sections of variation IX (see example 3.14). This is unpianistic writing as it lies uncomfortably under the hand. The practical solution for the performer is to play only the musically important appoggiaturas, usually placed on rhythmically strong beats within bars. Another example is the melodically meager but thickly written variation XIV (see example 3.20). However, these examples are the exception, as the *Tilbrigdi* are brimming with rewarding pianistic challenges and enchanting musical content.

¹⁵ Guðrún Egilsson, *Med lífid í lúkunum* (Holding my Life in my Hands: Conversations with Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson) (Reykjavík: Almenna Bókafélagid Press, 1979), 145.

¹⁶ Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

¹⁷ Egilsson, 168–69.

¹⁸ In 2000 Sigurjónsson attended my *Tilbrigdi* performance in the Salurinn Concert Hall.

¹⁹ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

²⁰ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

Sigurjónsson recorded the *Tilbrigði* twice, once for the INBS in December 1964²¹ and in 1973 on an LP²² issued by Menningarsjóður (Culture Fund) for commercial distribution. He remarked:

Regarding my recordings of the *Tilbrigði*, both Páll and I were unhappy about the Menningarsjóður LP because for a number of reasons it didn't give a fair impression of my playing. The main reasons for my less than ideal performance on this LP were a short preparation time, an inferior studio in Copenhagen, and a poor instrument. On the other hand, the recording that I made in 1964 for the INBS sounded much better in every way; Páll and I were very pleased with it.²³

A comparison of the two recordings revealed exactly these qualitative differences that Sigurjónsson pointed out. On the INBS recording his playing sounds relaxed and secure, whereas in the Copenhagen recording it sounds hurried and in a number of places technically less secure. As for the piano used on the LP recording, it is an old instrument in less than prime condition. Furthermore, the pianist omits variation XV, all in all, the 1973 LP is somewhat unsatisfactory.

A hallmark of Sigurjónsson's interpretation of the *Tilbrigði* in the two recordings is a tasteful rubato, which is convincing, for instance, in the theme and in variations I and XII. Furthermore, the addition of left-hand octaves in variation III is common to both recordings, as is an unhurried tempo in variation XIII. Repeats are sometimes not observed, especially in the second half of many variations. In summary, it is possible to ascertain that Sigurjónsson's performance of the *Tilbrigði* in the 1964 INBS recording represents the composer's wishes and is therefore a valuable source.

²¹ This recording is identified in the INBS Library: TD-927, 1964.

²² This recording is identified in the Hafnarfjörður Library: LP 786.2, 1973, Icelandic Piano Music — Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, Menningarsjóður (Cultural Fund), 1973.

²³ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

The Tilbrigdi in analysis

The theme (Andante moderato) (see example 3.3), based on the *Kvedja* song, is well suited for compositional exploitation through variation. Its simple ternary form, four-part texture and uncomplicated harmony, straightforward rhythm, and direct emotional expression constitute a solid foundation for the *Tilbrigdi*. The key of E-flat major underscores the victorious sentiment expressed at the end of the poem: “We bid a joyous farewell knowing that we’ll soon meet again.”

Indeed, the fact that Ísólfsón places the funeral march in the middle of the *Tilbrigdi*, variation VIII (Marcia funebre) (see example 3.13), and thereafter permits the melancholic theme to return empowered in the final variation XVII (Un poco animato) (see example 3.24), can be understood as the composer’s way of expressing that life will ultimately conquer death. When the *Tilbrigdi* theme is compared to the *Kvedja* song,²⁴ they sound similar. However, as table 3.2 shows, there are minor discrepancies.

TABLE 3.2 A list of discrepancies between the *Tilbrigdi* theme and the *Kvedja* song.

measure no.	beat no.	Tilbrigdi theme	Kvedja song
1–16		Andante moderato	Animato
2	2	E ♭ in tenor	C
3	2	E ♭ in tenor	A ♭
3	3	A ♭ in tenor, C in alto	C in tenor, E ♭ in alto
6	2	E ♭ in tenor	C
6	6	D ♭ in alto	E ♭
7	3	C ♭ in alto	C and E ♭ in alto
10	5	F in tenor	B ♭
10	6	E ♭ in tenor	B ♭
11	2	F in tenor	E ♭
12	4	B ♭ in soprano and bass	quarter rest in soprano and bass
13	1, 4	octave grace-note addition to bass	none
14	1, 4	octave grace-note addition to bass	none
16	2	G in bass	E ♭
16		repeated second half with 1 st and 2 nd endings	no repeats

²⁴ Refer to the complete score of *Kvedja* on pp. 101–102.

EXAMPLE 3.3

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Theme, mm. 1–16

**TILBRIGÐI UM STEF EFTIR
ÍSÓLF PÁLSSON**

Andante moderato **PÁLL ÍSÓLFSSON**

80

120

150

1. 2.

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Ísólsson's revisions to the *Kvedja* are justified; for instance, the tempo indication "Andante moderato" complements the mood of the melody better than "Animato,"²⁵ and the inclusion of a repeat for the second half provides a necessary balance to the form. The octave grace-notes to the bass in mm. 13 and 14 add appropriate weight to the return of A¹, and similarly the addition of a G on the second beat of the first and second endings in mm. 16 and 16a confirms the theme's final ending, as opposed to the conclusion of A in m. 8, which omits the G. Furthermore, the minor harmonic adjustments resulting from the note exchanges in the inner voices, such as in m. 11, where the supertonic triad is affirmed throughout the first half of the measure by changing the E-flat to F on the second beat, solidify the theme as the basis for the subsequent variations.

The structure of *Tilbrigdi* divides into two halves, each of which presents a theme and eight variations, and the second half mirrors the first. Thus, the first half begins with the theme and continues with variations I through VIII, and the second half begins with variation IX and concludes with the restatement of the theme in variation XVII. The symmetry is enhanced by the inclusion of two variations in the minor mode in each half (variations III, VIII, X, and XIII) as well as four fermatas (following variations IV, IX, XI, and XVI).

The form is a variable in the *Tilbrigdi* since the theme is altered through the course of the work in its relative proportions. The theme is in simple ternary form (AAB A¹BA¹), where the sectional balance between A and B is 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half. By way of varying the proportions of A and B as well as the harmonic structure, elements of binary and unisectional forms are present in some variations.

Increased significance of B is apparent in variations VI and XIV, where the sectional balance is 4:3 and 3:2 respectively, and, where the B is presented in the key area of the relative minor C, preceded by its dominant (variations II, and VI), or not (XIV). In variations V and IX, the B begins on the sharp side of the tonic minor (E), and on the sharpened side of the supertonic minor (F-sharp) respectively; in order to counteract these chromatic deviations in the harmonic structure the sectional balance is 3:1, where A is presented three times in the tonic E-flat major

²⁵ The final variation (XVII) is, however, marked "Un poco animato," which at that point is a convincing tempo for the reinvigorated theme.

(V); in variation IX the third presentation of A proceeds via the relative major (G-flat) of the tonic minor (E-flat), in preparation for variation X in that key.

Unisectional form is noted in variation XIII with respect to its tonal and harmonic homogeneity as it stays in the tonic minor (E-flat), ternary elements are nevertheless preserved with the thematic contrast between A and B. In variation XIV thematic features of B are intertwined with A: (mm. 7–8; mm. 15–16, mm. 31–32). Table 3.3 presents a sectional analysis of the *Tilbrigdi*.

Table 3.3 *Tilbrigði sectional analysis*

A:B ratio	se.	mm.	se.	mm.	se.	mm.	se.	mm.	se.	mm.	se.	mm.
Theme 2:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
Var. I 2:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
Var. II 2:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
Var. III 2:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
Var. IV 3:1	A	1-4	A ¹	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16				
Var. V 3:1	A	1-4	A ¹	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16				
Var. VI 4:3	A	1-4	A	1-4	B	5-10	A ¹	11-14	B	5-10	A ¹	11-14
Var. VII 3:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	5-10	A	13-16				
Var. VIII 2:1	A	1-4	A ¹	5-8	B	9-12	A	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
Var. IX 3:1	A	1-4	A ¹	5-8	B	9-12	A	13-16				
Var. X 3:1	A	1-4	A ¹	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16				
Var. XI 3:1	A	1-4	A ¹	5-8	A	1-4	A ¹	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
									B	17-20	A ¹	21-24
Var. XII 2:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
Var. XIII 2:1	A	(1)2-6	A ¹	7-11	B	12-16	A ¹	(17)18-22	B	12-16	A ¹	18-22(23-4)
Var. XIV 3:2	A	1-6	B	7-8	A ¹	9-14	B	15-16	A ¹	17-18		
					B	19-24	A	25-30	B	31-32	A ¹	33-34
					B	19-24	A	25-30	B	31-32	A ¹	33-34
Var. XV 2:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16
Var. XVI 2:1	A	1-4	A	1-4	B	5-8	A ¹	9-12	B	13-16	A ¹	17-20
Var. XVII 2:1	A	1-4	A	5-8	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16	B	9-12	A ¹	13-16

Variation I (*Andante moderato*) (see example 3.4), is a natural continuation of the theme. It pushes the theme gently into the unknown by tossing it around the ornamental filigree of notes. Thus the theme is presented complete within the three-part texture alternating between the upper voices. The use of all registers of the piano in variation I is indicative of the composer's free use of the instrument in the following variations. Also to be mentioned is the expression of *fortissimo* (m. 13) resulting in a forceful climax which is noteworthy that early in the course of a variation work. The sectional balance is 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half.

EXAMPLE 3.4.

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation I, mm. 1–15

VAR. 2
Andante moderato

mf

3

6

9

12

15

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Variation II (*Allegretto grazioso*) (see example 3.5), shifts the rhythmic emphasis away from the first beat in the theme but, instead, sets hemiolas in motion with an accented downbeat in the bass. The two-part texture presents the theme in octaves but disguises it with a combined articulation of legato and staccato, as well as dissonant appoggiaturas, to draw attention away from melodic signposts. The B section is presented in the tonal area of the relative minor (mm. 9–12). The sectional balance is 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half.

EXAMPLE 3.5

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation II, mm. 1–10

VARI II
Allegretto grazioso

mf

3

5

7

9

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Variation III (*Allegro moderato*) (see example 3.6), changes the mode to the tonic minor E-flat, and assumes the character of a "*siciliana*"²⁶ with the dotted rhythm prevalent throughout. The texture has returned to four parts with frequent octave doubling in the right hand. The theme is passed between the upper voices and the lower, where the antecedent phrase is heard in the right hand in mm. 1–2 and the consequent in the left hand in mm. 3–4. To reinforce the mood of bygone eras, small canonic interplay is encountered in mm. 9–10 at the beginning of the second half where the theme opening in the alto voice in m. 9 becomes a countermelody to the theme continuation in the left-hand octaves in m. 10. The sectional balance is 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half.

²⁶ This is appropriate in the context of the *Tilbrigdi* for, according to Little, "the *Siciliana* was associated with pastoral scenes and melancholy emotions from the 18th century to the 20th." Meredith Ellis Little. "*Siciliana*," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, ed. Laura Macy, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25698> (accessed March 27, 2009).

EXAMPLE 3.6

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation III, mm. 1–16

VAR. III
Allegro moderato

The musical score is written for piano and consists of six systems of two staves each. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 3/8. The tempo is marked *Allegro moderato*. The score begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The first system (measures 1-4) features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the bass and chords in the treble. The second system (measures 5-8) introduces a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The third system (measures 9-12) returns to a piano (*p*) dynamic. The fourth system (measures 13-16) features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The fifth system (measures 17-20) continues with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The sixth system (measures 21-24) concludes with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as chords, eighth notes, and slurs.

Variation IV (*Allegretto cantabile*) (see example 3.7), bounces back to E-flat major but with a meter change to common time (C). It is a through-composed lyric episode which omits the repeats, this changes the sectional balance which was 2:1 in the theme and the previous variations to 3:1 since the A is heard three times but the B only once; the theme is written in the top voice but now without the dotted rhythm and mirrored by matching bass notes. Similar technique is used, for instance, in variation four of the *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, op. 9, by Brahms but without the bass notes mirroring the top voice (see example 3.8).

In this variation the sixteenth-note accompaniment in thirds helps propel the melody forward and together with a few changes in the harmonic support give yet another slant to the character of the theme. The first of four fermatas in the *Tilbrigdi* is placed in the last measure of this variation and denotes a structural pause.

EXAMPLE 3.7

Ísólfsson: *Tilbrigði*, Variation IV, mm. 1–6

VAR. IV
Deciso e cantabile

mf

30

50

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EXAMPLE 3.8

Brahms: *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, op. 9, Var. 4, mm. 1–24

Var. 4
Poco più moto

p *espress.* *legato* *pp* *legg.* *3*

3

dolce *poco cresc.*

legato *dim.* *sosten.* *p*

3 *dim. e sosten.* *3*

Variation V (Andante) (see example 3.9), is also through-composed, omitting the repeats and keeping the 3:1 sectional balance but returning to the original meter of 6/8 and a chorale-like texture. The familiar theme opening in m. 1 is presented in a new rhythmic context that moves the E-flat major tonic chord away from the first beat. This deemphasizing of E-flat right at the beginning results in increased harmonic freedom for the theme and enables it to move toward the sharp side of the tonic.

Thus, the chromatic chord progression in the second half of m. 6, which leads to IV⁶ – I – V/V – V in C minor in mm. 7–8, effectively prepares the beginning of the B section in E minor in m. 9, using the G-major chord in m. 8 as a pivot. The return to A¹ happens via enharmonic relationships in m. 12, and the plagal decoration of the tonic E-flat major using the diminished supertonic triad concludes variation V.

EXAMPLE 3.9

Ísólfsson: *Tilbrigði*, Variation V, mm. 1–16

VAR. V
Andante

40

70 *p dolce*

100 *mf*

120 *poco riten.* *mf*

150 *dim.* *pp*

The musical score consists of six systems of two staves each. The first system is marked 'VAR. V' and 'Andante'. The second system is marked '40'. The third system is marked '70' and 'p dolce'. The fourth system is marked '100' and 'mf'. The fifth system is marked '120' and 'poco riten.' followed by 'mf'. The sixth system is marked '150' and 'dim.' followed by 'pp'. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

Variation VI (*Poco allegro*) (see example 3.10), is the first of five variations within the *Tilbrigdi* in which pianistic virtuosity is emphasized. The meter changes to 2/4 and the opening theme fragment B-flat, C, B-flat, E-flat, D, E-flat is compressed into a rhythmic pattern of staccato chords and octaves. This contributes to a shorter variation than usual, with a total of fourteen measures instead of sixteen despite repeat of both halves. The sectional balance has changed to 4:3 by way of extending the B to 6 measures instead of 4. The tonality is unstable and marked by chromaticism, modulating from a tonic opening to the unexpected E minor beginning of A¹ (m. 10) through to an ending in the relative minor of C. The fiery spirit of Beethoven is recalled by extreme use of dynamics ranging from pianissimo to forte and accentuated by sforzandos.

EXAMPLE 3.10

Ísólfsson: *Tilbrigði*, Variation VI, mm. 1–14

VAR. VI
Poco allegro

Handwritten musical score for Variation VI of *Tilbrigði* by Ísólfsson, measures 1–14. The score is written in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. It features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and various dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, *mf*, *sf*, and *pp*. The notation includes slurs, ties, and some handwritten annotations.

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Variation VII (*Allegro e brillante*) (see example 3.11), raises the virtuosic bar even higher than its predecessor, variation VI. The theme is concealed by octave displacements and a staccato presentation in a two-part texture, which uses all registers of the instrument. Similar technique is employed, for instance, in variation 21 of the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Telemann*, op. 134, by Reger (see example 3.12), but without the staccato articulation.

Back in the home key of E-flat major, this variation is presented in 3/4 meter and with the disappearance of the anacrusis the theme begins with an accent on the B-flat downbeat. It is through-composed, omits the repeats and changes sectional balance to 3:1. The composer's directions "*Allegro brillante*," "*senza ped.*," and "*forte*" in m. 1 suggest that nothing less than a "fireworks" performance will suffice for variation VII.

EXAMPLE 3.11 Ísólffsson: *Tilbrigði*, Variation VII, mm. 1–4

VAR. VII
Allegro e brillante
senza ped.
f sempre staccato

30

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EXAMPLE 3.12

Reger: *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Telemann*, op. 134, Var. 21, mm. 1–8

21. Variation
Vivace (♩ = 102)

The musical score for Variation 21, Vivace, consists of three systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 1-2) is marked *f sempre*. The second system (measures 3-4) includes a *crescendo* marking. The third system (measures 6-8) features dynamics of *ff* and *mf*. The piece is in 3/4 time with a tempo of 102 beats per minute. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major). The notation includes a variety of rhythmic patterns, including triplets and ornamental turns.

In variation VIII (*Marcia funebre*) (see example 3.13), a funeral atmosphere is created with the change of mode and meter, to the tonic minor and common time (C). Appropriately, the anacrusis sets the procession in motion with a double-dotted rhythm. Fragments of the original *Tilbrigdi* theme are incorporated into a new “funeral” theme, accompanied by arpeggiated chords in the lowest register of the piano. Triplets in the “funeral” theme add an important rhythmic element and, as a feature within the ornamental turns right after the double bar, propel a forward motion toward the third beat of m. 10. The sectional balance changes to 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half.

EXAMPLE 3.13

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation VIII, mm. 1–14

VAR. VIII
Marcia funebre

The musical score is written in a handwritten style. It begins with the title 'VAR. VIII' and the subtitle 'Marcia funebre'. The first measure is marked with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The score is divided into systems, with measure numbers 3, 5, 8, 10, and 13 indicated at the start of their respective systems. The notation includes treble and bass staves with various rhythmic values, including triplets and sixteenth notes. There are also some handwritten annotations like 'grva' and '5'.

Variation IX (*Moderato e energico*) (see example 3.14), returns to E-flat major and the original meter of 6/8 and connects with the previous variation by using triplets as a structural element. The thick chordal texture is reminiscent of Schubert, as is the melodic fantasy on the *Tilbrigdi* theme heard in the top voice. The fantasy element extends to the wandering tonality of this variation, which modulates via enharmonic relations to the B section which emphasizes the dominant key area of F-sharp minor. This variation is through-composed, omits the repeats and changes the sectional balance to 3:1. The second of four fermatas in the *Tilbrigdi* is placed in the last measure of this variation and denotes a structural pause.

EXAMPLE 3.14

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation IX, mm. 1–5

VAR. IX
Moderato a energico

The musical score is written for piano and consists of five systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4. The piece is marked 'VAR. IX' and 'Moderato a energico'. The first system begins with a forte (f) dynamic. The second system begins with fortissimo (ff). The music is characterized by a complex rhythmic pattern, primarily consisting of eighth and sixteenth notes, with numerous triplets and accents. The notation includes various articulations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The score ends with a fermata over the final measure of the fifth system.

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EXAMPLE 3.15

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation IX, mm. 6–12

Handwritten musical score for Variation IX of *Tilbrigði* by Ísólfsón, measures 6–12. The score is in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and articulation. The notation includes various ornaments, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Measures 6–7: Treble and bass staves with complex rhythmic patterns and ornaments.

Measures 8–9: Treble and bass staves with complex rhythmic patterns and ornaments. Measure 8 includes the instruction *Per animals*.

Measures 10–11: Treble and bass staves with complex rhythmic patterns and ornaments. Measure 10 includes the dynamic marking *p*. Measure 11 includes the number 15.

Measures 12–13: Treble and bass staves with complex rhythmic patterns and ornaments. Measure 12 includes the number 3.

In variation X (Moderato) (see example 3.16), the meter has changed to 9/8 and the music begins in E-flat minor that has been prepared by variation IX. Variation X shares dotted rhythm as a main structural element with the previous two variations written in the tonic minor (III and VIII). Chords, octaves, and hand-crossings alternate, creating four “question-and-answer” four-measure phrases molded alike; the “question” phrase pleads quietly and the “answer” phrase responds in a fierce manner. The resulting atmosphere is dramatic and unstable. This variation is through-composed, omits the repeats and changes the sectional balance to 3:1.

EXAMPLE 3.16

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation X, mm. 1–8

VAR. X
Moderato

The musical score is handwritten and consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 1-4) includes a treble clef, a key signature of three flats, and a 9/8 time signature. It features a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. The second system (measures 5-8) begins with a measure rest labeled '5' and includes a treble clef. The third system (measures 9-12) begins with a measure rest labeled '7' and includes a treble clef. The score is characterized by complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and frequent use of accidentals (sharps and naturals).

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Variation XI (Risoluto) (see example 3.17), returns to virtuosity in E-flat major. The theme is presented verbatim in staccato octaves alternately in the two hands, but because of the 2/4 meter it is well disguised within the square phrasing of what on the surface sounds like a new melody. The staccato accompaniment also helps to divert attention from the *Tilbrigdi* theme.²⁷ Again, as in variation VI, dynamic markings ranging from “mezzo piano” to “fortissimo” recall the Beethovenian spirit. Variation XI is 24 measures long instead of 16; the sectional balance has changed to 3:1 inclusive of the repeat of the first half. The third of four fermatas in the *Tilbrigdi* is placed in the last measure of this variation and denotes a structural pause.

²⁷ This presentation is similar to that of variation III of the second movement of the Sonata op. 109 by Beethoven.

EXAMPLE 3.17

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation XI, mm. 1–24

VAR. XI
Risoluto

f

5

9

mp

13

f

17

mp

21

ff

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Variation XII (*Grazioso*) (see example 3.18), is a lyrical episode in the home key of E-flat major and original meter of 6/8. The harmony is traditional and the technical emphasis is on hand-crossing, where the left hand echoes thematic fragments initiated by the right. The gentle atmosphere, reminiscent of variation I, comes as a welcome relief from the dramatic character of its immediate predecessors. The sectional balance is 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half.

EXAMPLE 3.18

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation XII, mm. 1–16VAK. XII
Grazioso

The musical score is written for piano in 8/8 time, featuring a treble and bass clef. It begins with a *mf* dynamic and a *Grazioso* marking. The first system (measures 1-4) shows a melodic line in the treble and a rhythmic accompaniment in the bass. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the melodic development. The third system (measures 9-12) includes a *cresc.* marking and a fermata over the final measure. The fourth system (measures 13-16) returns to the *mf* dynamic and concludes the variation with a final cadence.

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Variation XIII (Tranquillo) (see example 3.19), is the fourth and last written in E-flat minor and 3/4 meter. It is unusual within the *Tilbrigdi* in the sense that it steps out of nineteenth-century Romanticism and presents fragments of the theme as a blues melody over an ostinato bass. This bold move into the twentieth century is explained by composer Jón Ásgeirsson as follows: “To compose a variation in blues-style was Ísólfsón’s way of connecting the *Tilbrigdi* to the day and age in which he lived.”²⁸

Variation XIII remains in E-flat minor throughout, presenting what seems on the surface to be two twelve-bar strains, but is in fact sectionally balanced 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half. Here A is 20 measures and B is 10, leaving out the 4 measures serving as introduction, connection and coda (mm. 1, 17 and 23–24). The rhythmically demanding right-hand part is the main focus of variation XIII as it provides emotional release.²⁹

²⁸ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

²⁹ “Nor did the increase of invention in right-hand parts alter the fact that emotional release was the aim, rather than empty display.” Priestley, *The Cambridge Companion*, 215.

EXAMPLE 3.19

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation XIII, mm. 1–24

VAR. XIII
Tranquillo

70 *mf*

50 *mf*

90

120 *pp* *mf* *grv*

160

200 *pp* *Ped* *

Variation XIV (Quasi presto) (see example 3.20), returns to the nineteenth century with an opening in unison octaves that, in the opinion of pianist Sigurjónsson, is reminiscent of the Scherzo movement of Brahms's *Trio*, op. 40, in E-flat major.³⁰ With a length of 34 measures and through-composed, this is the most extensive of the *Tilbrigði* variations. The sectional balance is 3:2 with the A and B sections intertwined, and the added significance to B in terms of its relative temporal value within the whole variation. Written in E-flat major and in a 9/8 meter, it is, arguably, the most difficult variation to play. In consideration of the muscular writing for the instrument it seems that the main focus for the pianist is to achieve technical mastery.

³⁰ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, interview, 1999.

EXAMPLE 3.20

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation XIV, mm. 1–13

VAR. XIV.
Quasi presto

mf

40

60

80

ff

100

120

p

Variation XV (*Vivace*) (see example 3.21), is the last of five variations in which virtuosity is prevalent. In it, however, the technical difficulties are subservient to the music. Once again the theme is presented verbatim in the tonic and 6/8 meter, but it is now disguised by an accented lower-neighbor appoggiatura on each beat. This is an energetic variation driven by arpeggiated chords in the left-hand part and springy articulation in the right. A possible model is variation 3 from Reger's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Telemann*, op. 134 (see example 3.22), although Ísólfsson's "vivace" variation is more challenging. The sectional balance changes to 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the second half.

EXAMPLE 3.21

Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigði*, Variation XV, mm. 1–5

VAR. XV
Vivace

p

2

3

4 *cresc.* *gva*

5 *p*

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EXAMPLE 3.22 Reger: *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Telemann*, op. 134, Var. 3, mm. 1–8

3. Variation
L'istesso Tempo
(scherzando)

p

crescendo

f

Variation XVI (Risoluto) (see example 3.23), presents a triumphant “new theme” in E-flat major and 2/4 meter; it is 20 measures long, the sectional balance is 2:1 inclusive of the repeat of the first half. The new theme is a transformation of the original and is majestic in character, signified by a slow dotted rhythm and sonorous chords and octaves covering most registers of the instrument. The composer indicates that variation XVI should be played “forte e marcato” throughout, and in the final measure there is the last of the four fermatas in the *Tilbrigdi* denoting a structural pause. It is possible to interpret the character and placement of this variation as the overture to the rebirth of the *Tilbrigdi* theme in the seventeenth and final variation.³¹

EXAMPLE 3.23 Ísólfsón: *Tilbrigdi*, Variation XVI, mm. 1–6

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³¹ A similar situation is found in variation twenty-five of the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, op. 24, by Brahms. The atmosphere is triumphant, and Brahms's writing for the instrument in this last variation before the fugue was probably an inspiration for Ísólfsón.

Variation XVII (Un poco animato) (see example 3.24), brings back the *Tilbrigði* theme in a four-part texture and the original key, meter, and rhythm, as well as the original 2:1 sectional balance inclusive of the repeat of the second half. It is clear, however, that the melancholic theme returns empowered; the tempo indication of “Un poco animato,” the “forte” dynamic marking, and the moving sixteenth notes in the inner parts support this notion. The atmosphere in this final variation is joyous, which, as was suggested earlier in the chapter,³² can be understood in light of the composing history of the *Tilbrigði* as the composer’s way of expressing that life will ultimately conquer death.

EXAMPLE 3.24 Ísólffson: *Tilbrigði*, Variation XVII, mm. 1–4

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Variation XVII of the piece *Tilbrigði*. The score is written in 2/8 time and features a four-part texture. The tempo is marked "Un poco animato" and the dynamic is "f" (forte). The notation includes treble and bass staves with various rhythmic values and accidentals. The score is divided into two systems, each with two staves. The first system starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second system starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The score is handwritten and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals.

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³² See p. 107.

A fine addition to piano variations literature

The *Tilbrigdi* are the crowning achievement in Ísólfsson's collection of piano works. This was the opinion of most of the participants in the questionnaire pertaining to this study: "Of the later piano works the *Tilbrigdi* are a total feat!";³³ "by far the best Icelandic piano work";³⁴ "especially noteworthy";³⁵ "there is no question in my mind that the *Tilbrigdi* are outstanding";³⁶ "the *Tilbrigdi* are not easy at all and somewhat excessive but Páll's compositional command is admirable."³⁷

Swedish musicologist Bergendal has written: "Ísólfsson's greatest work for piano is the *Variations on a theme by Ísólfr Pálsson*."³⁸ Similarly, as I wrote in a 1992 article: "It is however in the colossal piano work *Variations on a theme by Ísólfr Pálsson* where the composer's pianistic strengths come to fore as this work is composed on a pianistic scale comparable to the larger works of Schumann, Brahms and Reger."³⁹

Two issues arise here: first, why did Ísólfsson choose the variation form for this important work, and second, why did he decide to use the piano as his medium? It seems plausible that Ísólfsson's professional ambition dictated that it would raise his profile more to add a set of virtuoso variations for the piano to his catalogue of works rather than to compose more character pieces or yet another organ piece in variation form. By solving such a challenge, he would be following in the footsteps of the composers who influenced him the most, Bach, Beethoven, Grieg, Schumann, Brahms, and Reger. It goes to Ísólfsson's credit that in the *Tilbrigdi* he does not retrace those footsteps rigidly but uses them rather as a springboard to create a unique and uninhibited work.

During an era of sparse and unconventional compositional procedures, the many notes, great sound volume, and sheer length of the *Tilbrigdi* may have seemed exorbitant and

³³ Jórunn Vidar, interview, 1999.

³⁴ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

³⁵ Gísli Magnússon, interview, 1999.

³⁶ Jón Thórarinsson, interview, 1999.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Göran Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, translated by Peter Lyne (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre, 1991), 38.

³⁹ Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, "Icelandic Piano Music — History and Development," *Icelandic Piano Music*, ed. Dr. Marek Podhajski (Akureyri: AMS, 1992): 32.

overwhelming, especially to the group of young Icelandic musicians and composers who had in 1959 formed a club called Musica Nova.⁴⁰ In retrospect, one can be grateful that Ísólffsson summoned up the energy to finish the *Tilbrigdi* despite the hostile atmosphere towards nineteenth-century musical styles prevalent among the younger generation of composers in the 1960s.

In present times the *Tilbrigdi* can be appreciated on their own terms for what they are, namely a unique work in the history of Icelandic music and a fine addition to the piano variations literature. The *Tilbrigdi* join the list of representative variation works for piano solo such as the 1876 *Ballade i Form av Variasjoner over en Norsk Folkevis*, op. 24 (Ballade in the Form of Variations on a Norwegian Folk Song) by Edward Grieg, the 1917 *Theme and Variations*, op. 40, by Carl Nielsen, the 1924 *Variations Fantasques*, op. 19, by Ilmari Hannikainen, and the 1941 *Tema con Variazioni* by Hilding Rosenberg.

A list of fourteen variation sets for piano solo by Nordic composers born during the second half of the nineteenth century is presented in table 3.4 below followed by a brief discussion of the variation sets by Grieg, Nielsen, Hannikainen, and Rosenberg in relation to the *Tilbrigdi*.

⁴⁰ The aim of Musica Nova was to promote new music, both by Icelanders and by foreign composers. Bergendal comments: "Musica Nova expanded into a rather intensive organization during the following years. Electro-acoustic music, music with open form or aleatory devices, music happenings — all were introduced and caused scandals every now and then. The general public, however, came in surprisingly large numbers to the concerts. Cited in Bergendal, *New Music*, 78.

TABLE 3.4 Fourteen Nordic variation sets for piano solo, composed 1876–1965

year	title	composer	dates	country
1876	Ballade i Form av Variasjoner over en Norsk Folkevis, op. 24 (Ballade in the Form of Variations on a Norwegian Folk Song)	E. Grieg	1843–1907	Norway
1895	Variations sur un Thème Original, op. 5 (Variations on an Original theme)	E. Alnaes	1872–1932	“
1898	Thème Original avec Variations, op. 7	V. F. Henriques	1867–1940	Denmark
1909	Fatum Variations, op. 94 (Fate Variations)	C. Sinding	1856–1941	Norway
1909	Theme and Variations, op. 48	E. Sjögren	1853–1918	Sweden
1915	Sju Variationer over den Svenska Kungssangen, op. 64 (Seven Variations on the Royal Swedish Song)	“	“	“
1915	Lampaanpolska (Sheep’s Polska – a set of four variations on the ancient Folia motif)	T. Kuula	1883–1918	Finland
1917	Theme and Variations, op. 40	C. Nielsen	1865–1931	Denmark
1923	Andante med Variationer, op. 57	H. Mankell	1868–1930	Sweden
1924	Variations Fantasques, op. 19	I. Hannikainen	1892–1955	Finland
1936	Variations, op. 23	F. Valen	1887–1952	Norway
1941	Tema con Variazioni	H. Rosenberg	1892–1985	Sweden
1943	Variationer og Fuga over et Tema af Weyse, op. 15 (Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Weyse)	P. Gram	1881–1956	Denmark
1965	Tilbrigdi um sönglag eftir Ísólf Pálsson (Variations on a Song by Ísólfur Pálsson)	P. Ísólfsson	1893–1974	Iceland

The four variation sets are major compositions in their creators’ catalogues and have features in common with the *Tilbrigdi*, such as length (theme plus between fifteen and nineteen variations), exploitation of pianistic virtuosity, and creative musical freedom. Aside from such common features these variation sets are as dissimilar as the themes from which they originate.

Thus there are influences from folk song and Romanticism in the *Ballade*, op. 24; a chromatic Neo-Romanticism is prevalent in the *Theme and Variations*, op. 40; and the influence of Impressionism and Neo-Classicism is clearly audible in the *Variations Fantasques*, op. 19, and the *Tema con Variazioni*, respectively. Two of the composers, Grieg and Hannikainen,⁴¹ were concert pianists, Rosenberg was a trained organist,⁴² and Nielsen played the violin.⁴³

It is intriguing in light of the above discussion about the catalyst for the creation of the *Tilbrigdi*⁴⁴ that, according to the available sources, the death of close relatives was also a major

⁴¹ Hannikainen studied with Cortot and performed internationally in a duo with Alexander Siloti.

⁴² Rosenberg worked as organist for several years after taking the organ examination.

⁴³ Nielsen performed with the Kongelige Kapel orchestra for several years.

⁴⁴ See p. 104.

influence on the variations by Grieg and Hannikainen.⁴⁵ This is represented in both works by variations reminiscent of funeral marches; in the *Ballade* it is variation 7, “Lento,” and in the *Variations Fantasques* it is variation 17, “Andante e dolente”.

Grieg was hurt by the initial indifference with which his *Ballade* was received. He remarked that the work was written “with my life’s blood in days of sorrow and despair”:⁴⁶

Internationally, the composition did not receive an immediate response, and this disappointed Grieg. He placed some hope in Liszt, however, who had earlier shown himself sympathetic toward Grieg’s music. In a letter to Matthison–Hansen on February 10, 1878, he wrote that he had sent Liszt “several things that should not be killed by neglect — for example, the *Ballade* which you know and about which I have literally not seen a single public statement.”⁴⁷

Today, however, the *Ballade* is “regarded as one of the most interesting and profound sets of variations for piano from the nineteenth century.”⁴⁸ This echoes how sad and disappointed Ísólffsson was when he realized that his colleagues did not much care for the *Tilbrigði*. The present has, however, recognized the merit of this unique work in the history of Icelandic music.

Liturgical works

In order to understand the many facets of Ísólffsson’s compositional output, it is necessary to include the liturgical works, such as hymns and chorale preludes, as they represent his views as organist and devoted admirer of Bach’s music. In the two conversation books he said that “the organist’s job is the profession most dear to my heart,⁴⁹ [and] “when I prepare to play at a church service, there is only one thing for me to think about: that I’m going to work at a holy place as a part of a divine service.”⁵⁰

Ísólffsson felt there was an irrefutable connection between one’s religious disposition and creating or performing church music: “It is necessary for a composer who creates church music to be of a religious mind. It would be dishonest if an atheist would either become an organist or

⁴⁵ Grieg lost both parents in 1875, and Hannikainen lost a brother in 1921 and his father in 1924.

⁴⁶ Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 200.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 200.

⁴⁹ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 185.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

compose church music.”⁵¹ Ísólfsson writes that “I believe in the power of prayer. I think there is nothing as healing for the spirit as praying for oneself and others. God hears the prayer, he is everywhere.”⁵² Similarly, Ísólfsson’s comments on Bach and his music are illuminating:

Bach has sometimes been called the beginning and the end of music; the end because his works were more advanced than anything composed before them; the beginning because he is the lighthouse by which we sail.⁵³

Bach’s fugues have healed my wounds every time I was feeling frail; the strict logic in Bach’s music is beneficial for the spirit, it sharpens the will, polyphonic music has had much better influence on my nature and inner disposition than Romantic music, which is less defined; the counterpoint in a fugue was the backbone of my weak spirit.⁵⁴

To close this chapter, I will look at the six liturgical works that complete the Ísólfsson collection. These keyboard pieces comprise a four-part *Invention* and three instrumental chorales, a harmonized version of an ancient Icelandic melody known as the *Lilja-lag* (Lilja-Melody), and an extemporization of the Christmas hymn *Silent Night* by Austrian composer Franz Xaver Gruber (1787–1863), entitled *Heims um ból* in Icelandic. Of these compositions, only the *Heims um ból* is conceived for the piano; the others are keyboard works to be performed on the piano or the organ.

⁵¹ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 152.

⁵² Johannessen, *Í dag skein sól*, 82.

⁵³ Johannessen, *Hundathúfan*, 154.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

Invention in F-sharp minor

Charles Rosen remarks that “in the nineteenth century, the fugue had become a demonstration of conventional mastery, a proof of craftsmanship.”⁵⁵ In Ísólfsón’s *Invention* in F-sharp minor (see example 3.25), the three-part counterpoint, woven from the four-measure-long subject, is subservient to the melodic flow throughout.

When the *Invention* is compared to Bach’s three-part *Sinfonias* certain similarities appear; these include: the length and slow metric and harmonic rhythm of the non-tonal subject (no. 13); an opening with an accompanied subject of a lyric rather than rhythmic or motivic nature (no. 14), as well as answers at the fifth (all the *Sinfonias*). Ísólfsón, like Bach in his no. 6 and 7, draws attention to the restatement of the subject on the tonic around two thirds into the piece by interrupting the musical flow momentarily. This is subtly realized in m. 37 with a harmonic and metric overlap as the subject enters in the bass, both supporting the dominant harmony and restating the subject in the tonic.

⁵⁵ Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 665.

EXAMPLE 3.25

Ísólfsón: *Invention*, mm. 1–12

4. Invention

Andante (Lento)

Sálmforleikur⁵⁶ in D major, Sálmforleikur in E-flat major

The two chorale preludes, which Ísólfsón included in the original *Svipmyndir*⁵⁷ compilation, are: *Sálmforleikur* in D major (see example 3.26), which is based upon the Lutheran hymn *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, in Icelandic, *Vor Gud er borg á bjargi traust*. It can be viewed as Ísólfsón's response to Reger's *Chorale Fantasia*, op. 27, for organ, based on the same hymn.

⁵⁶ "Sálmforleikur" (chorale) is an older version of this word used by Ísólfsón in his manuscript sources; the more current "sálmaforleikur" is used in the *Svipmyndir* edition.

⁵⁷ See *Svipmyndir* discussion in Chapter 2, 52–55.

The *Sálmaforleikur* in E-flat major (see example 3.27), is based upon a hymn probably not composed by Ísólfsson. The chorale preludes are traditional in form and structure, the melodic flow is ensured on account of the rhythmic interplay between all voices.

EXAMPLE 3.26 Ísólfsson: *Sálmaforleikur* in D major, mm. 1–4

13. Sálmaforleikur

Poco maestoso

The image displays a musical score for a chorale prelude. The title is "13. Sálmaforleikur" and the tempo is "Poco maestoso". The score is written for piano, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is common time (C). The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a "mf" dynamic marking. The second system shows a triplet of eighth notes in the treble clef. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

EXAMPLE 3.27

Ísólfsón: *Sálmaforleikur* in E-flat major, mm. 1–4

9. Sálmaforleikur

Andante religioso

Minnisblad

The original manuscript of the *Minnisblad* (Memento) in B minor (see example 3.28), is dated 1921 and dedicated to one of Ísólfsón's friends, the philosopher Sigurdur Nordal. It was Sigurdur's son, composer Jón Nordal,⁵⁸ who forwarded a copy of the manuscript to me, to be included in the dissertation. The *Minnisblad* was published in the 1953 edition of *Söngljód I*, as a song entitled *Sálmur* (Hymn) in A minor, with piano accompaniment. The religious poem, by Freysteinn Gunnarsson, was probably written specifically for the 1953 publication of the *Sálmur*.

This solemn keyboard piece was thus transformed into a hymn for voice and piano and transposed down a step, thirty-two years past its creation. A possible explanation for this is that

⁵⁸ "Jón Nordal (1926), Icelandic composer, pianist, and teacher. After graduating in 1949 from the Reykjavík School of Music, he continued his studies at the Zürich Conservatory with Walter Frey (piano) and Willy Burkhard (composition). He also studied in Paris and Rome, and participated in the summer courses at Darmstadt (1956–57). In 1957 he became a teacher of piano and theory at the Reykjavík School of Music. He was appointed principal of the school in 1959, and held the post until 1992. In 1959 he also cofounded the group Musica Nova, and served as its first chairman. He was elected a member of the Royal Swedish Academy in 1968. He was made a Knight of the Order of the Falcon in 1978 and a Grand Knight in 1993. Despite his relatively small output, Nordal is widely considered to be one of the most important Icelandic composers of his generation." See Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, "Jón Nordal," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, ed. Laura Macy, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27170> (accessed February 25, 2009).

Ísólfsson might have thought that as a song it would receive more performances. The manuscript version for piano is for this reason not included in the original *Svipmyndir* compilation.⁵⁹ The compositional style of the *Minnisblad* is more that of an instrumental prelude with its extended phrases and exquisite voice-leading than a vocal piece. Most important, however, is that the *Minnisblad* is a musical gem responsive to the composer's religious spirit.

EXAMPLE 3.28 Ísólfsson: *Minnisblad*, mm. 1–15

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Minnisblad" by Pál Pálfsson. The score is written on two systems of staves. The first system includes the title "Minnisblad" and the tempo marking "Lento". The second system includes the composer's name "Pál Pálfsson 21." and various dynamic markings such as "mp", "p", "f", "mf", and "dim". The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).

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Lilju-lag

According to Bergendal:

The enigmatic *Lilja* melody (see example 3.29), also belongs to the Christian environment. It was one of five notated Icelandic melodies and published in 1780 in an essay entitled *Essai sur la Musique Ancienne et Moderne*, by Laborde, a pupil of

⁵⁹ It is, however, included on my BIS CD (BIS-CD-1139).

Rameau. The text is a tribute to the Virgin Mary, written by the fourteenth century poet Eysteinn Ásgrímsson.⁶⁰

EXAMPLE 3.29 Anonymous composer: *Lilja*, mm. 1–32⁶¹

Fyrri menn, er fræðin kunnu.

The image shows a musical score for a song titled "Fyrri menn, er fræðin kunnu." The score is written on five staves of music in a single system. The music is in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The lyrics are written below the notes. The lyrics are: "Fyrri menn er fræðin kunnu forn og klók á heiðnum bókum, sungu niðr af sinum kongum, slungu illof á danska tungu. Ók á slíku móðurmál-i meir skyldumst ek en nokkur þeirra hræðan dikt af ást-ar-orðum alls valdand-a kongi að gjalda." The lyrics are hyphenated to fit the notes.

Fyrri menn er fræðin kunnu forn og klók á
 heiðnum bókum, sungu niðr af sinum kongum, slungu il
 lof á danska tungu. Ók á slíku móður-
 mál-i meir skyldumst ek en nokkur þeir- a hræðan dikt af
 ást - - ar - - orð - um alls - valdand - a kongi að gjalda.

Ísólffsson's *Lilju-lag*⁶² (see example 3.30), shows his examination of the national music heritage and is faithful to the original melody and rhythm aside from being transposed up a major third, from E-flat minor to G minor. The four-part harmonization of the melody is appropriately chromatic although there are four chords that are unclear as to their individual notes. This may be because this recently discovered manuscript is only a sketch, the final copy being lost.

Another possibility is that this is indeed the only copy, and therefore the corrective crossing-out of notes and chords indicates how late in Ísólffsson's life the *Lilju-lag* was written out. Therefore the following clarifying suggestions are provided: (1) in m. 19 on the fourth beat, the

⁶⁰ Göran Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, trans. Peter Lyne (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre, 1991), 14.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶² The *Lilja* melody has indeed inspired twentieth-century Icelandic composers besides Ísólffsson to write works based upon it. This includes Leifur Thórarinnsson (*Mariúvers*, 1980), Jón Ásgeirsson (*Lilja*, 1970) and Jón Nordal (*Choralis*, 1982).

alto is C natural; (2) in m.30 on the fourth beat, the tenor is A natural and the alto moves to D; (3) in m. 32, the tenor moves: C, A, G.

EXAMPLE 3.30 Ísólfsón: *Lilju-lag*, mm. 1–32

a. moll *Lilju-lag*

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece 'Lilju-lag' by Ísólfsón, measures 1 through 32. The score is written on six systems of two staves each. At the top left, it is marked 'a. moll' and the title 'Lilju-lag' is written in a cursive hand. The notation is highly complex, featuring many accidentals (sharps and naturals) and some scribbled-out passages, particularly in the later measures. The score includes treble and bass clefs, key signatures, and various note values and rests. The overall appearance is that of a working draft or a composer's sketch.

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Heims um ból

Ísólffsson's piano extemporization, in C major, of the Christmas hymn *Silent Night*, known in Iceland as *Heims um ból* (see example 3.31, example 3.32 and example 3.33), demonstrates the composer's improvisation skills: here, an individual version is created for each of the three verses of the hymn. The piece was probably written around the same time as the *Tilbrigði* (1965) as there is correlation between the pianistic writing, the handwriting in the manuscript, and the joy of improvising apparent in both works.

The first part of *Heims um ból* is marked *moderato* and begins with a brief introduction based on the thematic motive and leads to the hymn by concluding on the dominant seventh (mm. 1–6). The hymn is then presented true to the original rhythm and harmony (mm. 7–17), and is connected to the second part by means of repetition of the material from the introduction, now an interlude (mm. 18–23). In the second part, the melody is in the tenor while the soprano adds motion with an accompanimental sixteenth-note figure (mm. 24–35); a similar realization is also found in variation I of the *Tilbrigði*.⁶³

The harmonically experimental and dynamic third part of *Heims um ból*, is anticipated by a chromatic version of the interlude, which leads to the dominant seventh with a *ritardando* and a *crescendo molto* (mm. 36–41). Marked “*maestoso*” and “*fortissimo*,” the third part presents the melody in the soprano above dense and sometimes chromatic chords, accompanied by a mostly chromatic bass line in octaves (mm. 42–52).

The flamboyant pianistic writing in the third part of *Heims um ból*, (mm. 42–52), accentuated by *appoggiaturas* in the bass, recalls variation III of the *Tilbrigði*.⁶⁴ The coda of nine measures leads toward a triple *fortissimo* conclusion complete with a plagal cadence (mm. 53–61). All in all, the piece provides a refreshing, albeit Romantic, view of this well-known hymn. It is possible that the idea of extemporizing a piano version of *Silent Night* was inspired by the *Weihnachtstraum*, from Reger's piano collection *Aus der Jugendzeit*, op. 17.

⁶³ See example 3.4, 113.

⁶⁴ See example 3.6, 117.

EXAMPLE 3.31 Ísólfsón: *Heims um ból*, mm. 1–23

Moderato *Heims um ból* *p.z.*

mp dolce

p.

p.

EXAMPLE 3.32

Ísólfsón: *Heims um ból*, mm. 24–41

2

Handwritten musical score for piano, measures 24–41 of *Heims um ból* by Ísólfsón. The score consists of seven systems of two staves each. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The final system includes the handwritten instruction "ritard" above the staff and "cresc. molto" below it. The score is written in black ink on white paper.

EXAMPLE 3.33

Ísólfsón: *Heims um ból*, mm. 42–61

Mancoso 3

ff

cresc.

allargando

ff

Shower 24 - 12 mly

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CHAPTER 4

Evaluation

Is there more to know before the final evaluation?

The current study has shown that Ísólffsson's piano works are sophisticated compositions and that as a collection they form an ambitious and diverse repertoire. This evaluation is based upon my assessment of the piano works presented in the previous chapters. At this point it is apt to ponder whether there is more to know before the final evaluation of the piano works.

For this purpose this concluding chapter will add the views expressed by the participants in the questionnaire regarding the positioning of the piano works within the history of Western art music and among the piano works of Icelandic composers.

Additionally, representative works by a selection of Icelandic composers will be presented in table 4.1 below¹ under the heading "Selected Icelandic Piano Works Composed under the Influence of German Romanticism," for the purpose of placing Ísólffsson's collection within the genre in his native country.

Lastly, the collective reception history of Ísólffsson's piano works will be discussed in light of the anti-Romantic sentiment in Iceland's music circles around the middle of the twentieth century, a sentiment which was also to be found in other Nordic countries such as Sweden and Denmark. An important part of the reception history will be presented in the form of reviews published in Icelandic national newspapers and international media, which will subsequently lead to a final evaluation.

¹ See p. 166.

Views of questionnaire participants regarding the positioning of the Ísólfsson collection

As mentioned in the Preface,² a part of my research was the compilation of a questionnaire that included questions relevant to the topic. Two of the questions aimed to help place the Ísólfsson collection in a larger perspective:

- In your opinion, where should the piano works of Ísólfsson be positioned within the history of Western art music for the piano?
- What place do Ísólfsson's piano works occupy among the piano works of Icelandic composers?

The views expressed by the participants in the questionnaire regarding the positioning of the piano works within the history of Western art music were coherent in that the collection deserved recognition as representative of the Romantic style in Iceland:

Ísólfsson is a late-Romantic composer; his moderately sized piano collection with mostly short works belongs to, but will not occupy much space in, the history of Western art music.³

I thought of my edition of the *Svipmyndir* compilation first and foremost in an Icelandic context. The Ísólfsson piano collection is a great addition to the history of music in Iceland although it might not arouse much interest in the Western world if someone composed a mazurka in the style of Chopin. I agree with Ásgeirsson who wrote in his critique that he liked these works very much and found them related to similar works by Grieg and Schumann.⁴

I find that the piano works have not been fully appreciated in the past as representative of the Romantic style in Iceland.⁵

I think his music is of high quality and creates great pride for Iceland.⁶

As for responses to the latter question, regarding what place Ísólfsson's piano works occupy among the piano works of Icelandic composers, these too were conclusive in maintaining that his works were at the forefront:

Among the leading composers in Iceland during 1900–50, Páll is at the forefront, especially as regards his piano and organ works.⁷

The *Glettur* and *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5, are superior to other Icelandic piano works composed up to the third decade of the twentieth century. Ísólfsson should be regarded

² See p. vi.

³ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

⁴ Örn Magnússon, interview, 1999.

⁵ Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁶ Jórunn Vidar, interview, 1999.

⁷ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

as one of the most important Icelandic composers of the twentieth century and his works count among the high points of Icelandic music composed during 1900–50.⁸

Páll is absolutely the representative for Romanticism in Icelandic [piano] music.⁹

During Páll's lifetime nothing comparable was written for the piano by an Icelandic composer, and even in present times [1999] this remains true.¹⁰

When the piano works of Páll Ísólfsson are compared with piano works of other Icelandic composers active around 1930–50, he is first among equals.¹¹

Thus the views of the questionnaire participants in response to the two questions are helpful as they recommend placing Ísólfsson's collection at the forefront as representative of the Romantic style in Iceland.

Representative romantic works by Ísólfsson's compatriots

An important aspect relevant to placing the Ísólfsson piano collection in a larger perspective is that of defining his position within the genre in his native country. Judging from the views expressed by the questionnaire, one finds that those questioned feel that Ísólfsson's piano works should be regarded "at the forefront" and his position as the "first among equals."

I wrote in 2001:

Páll Ísólfsson is the first composer and performer who attained musicianship and experience on an international level and who resided in Iceland during his career. His piano compositions are the only works for the instrument composed on such a high standard by an Icelandic composer representing late-nineteenth-century German Romanticism. As such they are one of the summits of Icelandic music and an important part of the nation's cultural legacy.¹²

This assessment still holds true, but because an important aspect of it can be misunderstood, the necessary revision will be made at this point. The statement that Ísólfsson's "piano compositions are the only (underlining mine) works for the instrument composed on such a high standard by an Icelandic composer representing late-nineteenth-century German Romanticism" refers to the collection as a whole. As such, it is unrivalled in the history of

⁸ Jón Thórarinnsson, interview, 1999.

⁹ Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson, Gísli Magnússon, and Örn Magnússon, interviews, 1999.

¹⁰ Jón Ásgeirsson, interview, 1999.

¹¹ Jórunn Vidar, interview, 1999.

¹² Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, "The Piano Works," liner notes to the CD *Páll Ísólfsson: Complete Original Piano Music*, Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, piano, BIS-CD-1139, BIS Records AB, © 2000 and © 2001, 9.

Icelandic music. There are, however, selected piano works by Ísólffsson's contemporary colleagues and compatriots that reflect fine workmanship combined with profound inspiration.

Table 4.1 (below) shows a list of representative Icelandic piano works composed under the influence of German Romanticism. I compiled it following a review of published piano works and unpublished manuscripts by Ísólffsson's contemporaries during 1870–1970 and in consultation with answers from the questionnaire. The list is presented in the order of each composer's year of birth and with the proviso that future research may add works to it:

In order to assess any individual achievement one should be reminded that there is still much research needed on original documents that pertain to the development of musical life in Iceland during the first half of the twentieth century. Many compositions are available only as unpublished manuscripts without having been performed or recorded; therefore it is difficult to realize the complete picture.¹³

The works listed in table 4.1¹⁴ are, together with Ísólffsson's collection, representative Icelandic piano works composed under the influence of German Romanticism. This was to be expected from the composers who, aside from Björgvin Guðmundsson¹⁵ and Victor Urbantschitsch,¹⁶ chose to follow Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson's lead and seek further music education in Denmark (Copenhagen) and Germany (Leipzig, Berlin, Dresden, and Hamburg).¹⁷

As mentioned in Chapter 1, a selection of Sveinbjörnsson's works had the distinction of being issued by European publishers; so were the *Fünf Leichte Klavierstücke*, op. 2, by Sigurdur Thórdarson, the *Torrek-Intermezzo*, op. 1 no. 2, and the *Valse lento*, op. 2 no. 1, by Jón Leifs, and the *Caprices Mignons über ein Kinderlied* and *Sonatine* by Victor Urbantschitsch.¹⁸

¹³ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

¹⁴ All works marked with an asterisk in the table are included in this dissertation with a musical example.

¹⁵ Guðmundsson studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

¹⁶ Urbantschitsch studied at the University of Vienna.

¹⁷ According to Vagn Kappel "Leipzig [was] together with Paris the main seat of musical education at the beginning of the century." "Through the friendship of Niels W. Gade and Mendelssohn, strong bonds had been formed between Leipzig and Copenhagen." Vagn Kappel, *Danish Composers* (Denmark: Det Danske Selskab, 1967), 50; 51.

¹⁸ Sveinbjörnsson's works were published in England and Denmark by several companies, among them the London Music Publishing Company and Wilhelm Hansen Publishing Company; Thórdarson's op. 2 was published by the Tonkünstler-Verlag in Vienna, Leifs's works were published by Kistner & Siegel in Leipzig, and Urbantschitsch's works were published by the Ludwig Doblinger Verlag in Vienna.

TABLE 4.1 Selected Icelandic piano works composed under the influence of German Romanticism

year	title	composer	dates
unknown	Pastorale*	Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson	1847–1927
	Idyll		
	Víkivaki		
	Barcarolle		
1934	Sorg (Grief) publ. in Hjómblík*	Björgvin Gudmundsson	1891–1961
1921 unpubl. ms.	Minnisblad (Memento)*	Páll Ísólffsson	1893–1974
1925	Thrjú Píanóstykki, op. 5*		
1926	Glettur I, II*		
1930	Lítill Vals (Little Waltz)*		
1941 unpubl. ms.	Ég beid þín (I awaited)*		
1945	Ósku-menúett (Ash-Minuet)*		
1953	Intrada / Tileinkun*		
1953 unpubl. ms.	Nocturne*		
1964	Saknadarstef (Elegy)*		
1965 unpubl. ms.	Tilbrigði*		
“ unpubl. ms.	Heims um ból (Silent Night)*		
1966	Einu sinni var (I)*		
	Romanze*		
	Impromptu, B ♭ minor*		
unpubl. ms.	Ballata*		
	Mazurka*		
	Sálmforleikur, D major*		
	Sálmforleikur, E ♭ major*		
	Invention*		
	Impromptu, F minor*		
1970 unpubl. ms.	Einu sinni var (II)*		
1932	Fünf Leichte Klavierstücke, op. 2*	Sigurður Thórdarson	1895–1968
unknown	Hugleiding (Contemplation)*	Thórarinn Gudmundsson	1896–1979
1934	Intermezzo*	Emil Thoroddssen	1898–1944
1913	Vökudraumur (Rêverie)*	Jón Leifs	1899–1968
1919	Torrek—Intermezzo, op. 1 no. 2 ¹⁹		
1921	Valse lento, op. 2 no. 1		
1960	Strákalag (Boy's Song), op. 49*		
1925 unpubl. ms.	Andante*	Markús Kristjánsson	1902–31
1926 unpubl. ms.	Variations on a theme by Beeth.		
1922	Caprices Mignons ü. ein Kinderl.*	Victor Urbantschitsch	1903–58
1923	Three Pieces for Piano		
1959	Sonatine, G major		
1936	Sónata, op. 1*	Hallgrímur Helgason	1914–94

The piano works of Iceland's first composer, Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson, are listed at the top of table 4.1. They illustrate the delicate musicianship prevalent in his compositions, which emphasize melodic flow and slow harmonic rhythm, bespeaking a kinship with the music of Niels Gade; moreover, in the *Pastorale* (see example 4.1), one can hear subtle harmonic and rhythmic

¹⁹ The composition appeared first in 1919 as *Torrek* op. 1 no. 2 — *Intermezzo*. In 1924, the *Intermezzo* appeared as the second part of *Trilogia Piccola* for orchestra, op. 1. Carl-Gunnar Åhlén, *Jón Leifs, Tónskáld í mótbyr* (Jón Leifs, A Composer in Adversity) (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1999), 286; 289.

influence of Scottish folk music reflective of the composer's adopted home environment for seventeen years.

EXAMPLE 4.1 Sveinbjörnsson: *Pastorale*, mm. 1–24

PASTORALE.

SV. SVEINBJÖRNSSON.

PIANO. *Allegro.* *pp*

cresc. *mf* *pp*

cresc. *mf* *f ben pronunciato*

L. M. 1465 P. C. ©

The *Fünf Leichte Klavierstücke*, op. 2, by Sigurdur Thórdarson witness the composer's Leipzig education,²⁰ as the influence of Reger is apparent in the well-crafted *Scherzo*, op. 2, no. 3 (see example 4.2). Hallgrímur Helgason remarks that of the op. 2 piano works, "the *Scherzo* is the finest with its vivacious theme signified by diminished fourths and a nice balance between chordal passages and linear texture."²¹

EXAMPLE 4.2 Thórdarson: *Scherzo*, op. 2, no. 3, mm. 1–25

3

Aufführungsrecht vorbehalten

Scherzo

Allegro

Tempo I

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T. V. 71

²⁰ As was mentioned in Chapter 1, Thórdarson joined Ísólffsson and Leifs in Leipzig during 1916–18.

²¹ Hallgrímur Helgason, *Tónskáld og Tónmenntir: Íslensk Tónmenntaritun III* (Composers and Music Education: Musicology in Iceland III) (Reykjavík: Skákprent, 1993), 76.

When the piano works of Austrian-born composer Victor Urbantschitsch are compared with similar works from the Ísólfsón collection, it is clear that in terms of harmonic proficiency, facile approach towards the instrument, structural authority, and familiarity with late-nineteenth-century Romanticism theirs was a meeting of kindred spirits. This is not surprising when one considers the professional background of Victor Urbantschitsch, who in the early stages of a promising career became an Icelandic citizen following his immigration in 1938.

A former student of Guido Adler, Joseph Marx, Clemens Krauss, and Felix Weingartner, Urbantschitsch graduated in 1925 from the University of Vienna, completing his doctoral dissertation on sonata form in the music of Brahms.²² Previously upon arrival in Iceland he had conducted opera orchestras in Mainz, Belgrade, and Graz, where he also served as assistant director and professor at the conservatory during 1934–38.

Suffice it to say that the addition of this talented and highly qualified musician added much to the Icelandic music scene. In his capacity as teacher at the Reykjavík School of Music, organist at the Landakot Catholic Cathedral, and conductor at the National Theatre, Urbantschitsch, like Ísólfsón, was not able to devote much time to composing.²³ His piano works such as the *Caprices Mignons über ein Kinderlied* (see example 4.3), are sometimes stylistically centered in the Regerian vein but display a refreshingly unrestrained approach to the piano in terms of technique and expression.

²² Victor Urbantschitsch, “Die Sonatenform bei Brahms. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Instrumentalmusik” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Vienna, 1925).

²³ Ingibjörg Eythórsdóttir, “Erlendir Tónlistarmenn á Íslandi á 20. Öld, Grein II: Stríðsgróðinn – Evrópsk Hámenning” (Foreign Musicians in Iceland in the Twentieth Century, Article II: The Warprofit – European High Culture), available at <http://www.musik.is/Pistlar/ingibjorg1.html> (accessed July 30, 2006).

EXAMPLE 4.3

Urbantschitsch: *Caprices Mignons*, no. 3, Caprice, mm. 1–17

3. Caprice. 5

D. 6467.

Jón Leifs has earned a measure of international recognition mainly for his string quartets, songs, and orchestral works. Most of Leifs's output for the piano are transcriptions of Icelandic folk songs, but the works included in table 4.1 are exceptions, representing a bird's-eye view of his stylistic development.

The wishful lyricism of the *Vökudraumur / Hugleiding* (see example 4.4), which dates from Leifs's fourteenth year, is echoed in the theme of *Strákalag*, op. 49 (Boy's Song) (see example 4.5), composed in 1960, which, although structured as a folk song with its subsequent free variations, reconciles admirably the composer's fifty-year-long quest to become independent of his roots within German Romanticism found in earlier works such as the *Torrek-Intermezzo* (1919)²⁴ and the *Valse Lento* (1921).

EXAMPLE 4.4 Leifs: *Vökudraumur / Hugleiding*, mm. 1–24

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Vökudraumur (Hugleiding)" by Leifs. The score is written for piano and is in 2/2 time, marked "Lento. Legato molto". The title is written in a decorative, cursive font at the top. The score consists of three systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef. Circled numbers 1 through 13 are placed above or below specific notes in the score. Performance instructions include "pp. una corda", "p", and "mp". A handwritten note "In første-fasen. 1915." is visible in the upper right of the first system.

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²⁴ "The work [*Torrek-Intermezzo*], a tone poem sustained by a chromatic procession, has obvious ties to German Romanticism." Cited in Magnússon, "The Music," 5.

EXAMPLE 4.5

Leifs: *Strákalag*, op. 49, mm. 1–9

STRÁKALAG
Op.49

Boys' Song - free variations on an original theme

Jón Leifs

Allegro commodo

mp

con Rda

The two Gudmundssons, listed in table 4.1, Björgvin and Thórarinn, made significant contributions to the Icelandic music scene during the first half of the twentieth century. Björgvin was a composer, choral director, and organist active primarily in Canada during 1911–31 and thereafter in Akureyri, the largest town in northern Iceland. He was a prolific composer, trying his hand at various genres, such as cantatas and songs; his collection of 105 short pieces for piano or organ was published in 1948 under the title *Hljómblik* (A Glint of Sounds),²⁵ from which the *Sorg* (Grief) (see example 4.6), represents stylistic influences of Romanticism.

²⁵ Björgvin Gudmundsson, *Hljómblik* (A Glint of Sounds) (Akureyri: Nordri Edition, 1948).

EXAMPLE 4.6

Björgvin Gudmundsson: *Sorg*, mm. 1–19

XXXVIII (Sorg) 1934

Lento con dolore

mp

più cresc.

p

dim. *pp*

The two Gudmundssons shared more than a common last name, for both emigrated from Iceland with their mothers around the same time, Thórarinn in 1910 and Björgvin in 1911, but for dissimilar reasons. While Björgvin “rather unwillingly”²⁶ joined the approximately 17,000 Icelanders who immigrated to Canada and the United States and was not able to fulfill his life-long dream of conservatory music studies until at the age of thirty-five because of a lack of financial resources, Thórarinn, on the other hand, was among the first Icelanders to enter the Royal Conservatory of Music in Copenhagen (on a violin scholarship at the age of fourteen) and went on to graduate three years later.

Thórarinn’s weightiest contribution to the Icelandic music scene was the 1921 founding and leadership of a small ensemble named the Reykjavík Orchestra, a precursor to the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. As a composer he wrote mainly songs, the *Hugleiding* (Contemplation) (see example 4.7), is one of his few instrumental pieces.

²⁶ Björgvin Gudmundsson, *Minningar* (Memoirs) (Akureyri: BS Edition, 1950), 198.

EXAMPLE 4.7

Thórarinn Gudmundsson: *Hugleiding*, mm. 1–20

Hugleiding Þór. Guðm.

Dolce. *mp.* *p.* *mf.* *p.* *resc.*

p. *resc.*

p. *cresc.* *p.*

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The *Intermezzo* and *Andante* witness an unfulfilled potential of their composers, Emil Thoroddssen and Markús Kristjánsson, respectively. Both were excellent pianists according to the sources available and possessed a lyrical gift, demonstrated by their published songs. On account of their untimely deaths, however, their intimate knowledge of the piano was not transmitted through many compositions.

The *Intermezzo* (see example 4.8), by Thoroddssen is an amiable interlude composed as part of the music to the play *Piltur og Stúlka* (A Boy and a Girl), premiered in 1934. Kristjánsson is represented in table 4.1 with two unpublished works: *Variations on a Theme from Sonata, op. 26, by Beethoven*, a welcome addition to the short list of virtuoso variations composed for the piano by Icelandic composers, and the *Andante*, in E major (see example 4.9), an intriguing fusion of late Romanticism and jazz harmony.

EXAMPLE 4.8

Thoroddssen: *Intermezzo*, mm. 1–21

Piano. II. Intermezzo. 1. part. *Pillur og stúlka*

Allegro

p

sempre stacc. *mf*

diu

p *#esere*

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EXAMPLE 4.9

Kristjánsson: *Andante*, mm 1–33

Andante Markús Kristjánsson (públ. cop.)
1925

poco rit. *a tempo*

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The prolific composer and musicologist Dr. Hallgrímur Helgason is an important figure in the history of music in Iceland as he, together with composer Jón Thórarinnsson (b. 1917), represents the first generation of professional musicians to develop from the fertile ground Ísólfsson had prepared. Both Helgason and Thórarinnsson were among the first students at the newly founded Tónlistarskólinn í Reykjavík during the 1930s and as was pointed out by pianist Sigurjónsson in Chapter 1: “Ísólfsson’s presence at the new music school assured high standards” and, in the words of pianist Magnússon, “initiated academic education in music.”²⁷

It is therefore not surprising that Helgason’s career²⁸ was built upon a strong academic background that included studies during 1948–54 with leading European musicians such as Paul Hindemith²⁹ and Willy Burkhard. The first Icelander to graduate with a doctoral degree in music, a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Zurich in 1954,³⁰ Helgason’s voluminous research into the history of music in Iceland is one of his most valuable contributions to the nation’s culture.

As a composer, Helgason has not received the attention his substantial oeuvre deserves, which includes orchestral, choral, chamber, solo instrumental, and vocal compositions. Bergendal writes: “Even if Hallgrímur Helgason is cosmopolitan as far as his attitude on form and structure is concerned, he is nonetheless a nationalist and a national Romantic as far as musical material is concerned. In this respect he is like Jón Leifs and a few other composers.”³¹

Furthermore, Bergendal points out Helgason’s “ambition to include Icelandic folk melodies in a contrapuntal texture and his love of variations” as important characteristics of his

²⁷ Gísli Magnússon, interview, 1999.

²⁸ Hallgrímur Helgason (1914–94), composer and a pioneering scholar of the twentieth century in the field of Icelandic music studies. Music studies at the Reykjavík College of Music, the Copenhagen Conservatory, the Leipzig Conservatory, and Leipzig University. He received graduate degrees in violin, theory, and composition from the Musikhochschule in Zurich and a doctorate from the University of Zurich in 1954. Through his writings on Icelandic music, ancient and modern, and lectures, as well as his tuition at the University of Iceland (docent in liturgical music 1974–84), the University of Saskatchewan (associate professor of analysis, theory, and composition 1966–74), his influence remains significant. Sources: Amanda M. Burt, “Hallgrímur Helgason,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 8, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 453; Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, 59.

²⁹ Thórarinnsson, too, studied with Hindemith, but at Yale University during 1944–47.

³⁰ Hallgrímur Helgason, *Íslenzkar tónmenntir: kvæðalög, forsaga theirra, bygging og flutningsháttur* (Icelandic Traditional Folk Music: Its Origins, Structure, and Performance Practice) (Reykjavík: Örn og Örlygur, 1980) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Zurich, 1954).

³¹ Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, 60.

music.³² Sveinsson's (b. 1938) assessment of Hallgrímur Helgason's compositional style echoes that of Bergendal:

Hallgrímur was a conservative artist and seemed to resist change through the years. His compositions appeared somewhat ancient, his methods academic based on the aesthetic of the learned. Helgason's style was signified by densely ornamented counterpoint in the spirit of the Baroque era. He sought to express Icelandic folk music traditions within the forms of classical music and under distinct influence of the "Leipzig school."³³

Thus it can be stated that Helgason combines the intensive approach of Leifs toward the Icelandic musical heritage and Ísólffsson's affinity for the chromatic harmony of late-nineteenth-century Romanticism as well as the strict counterpoint of the seventeenth century.³⁴ Therein lies the uniqueness of his compositional style, a style which has not had much impact on younger generations of composers in Iceland, as Bergendal writes: "Helgason, with his stylistic awareness and his unwavering belief in the contrapuntal model of music, stands relatively alone in Icelandic music."³⁵

Helgason's *Sonata*, for piano, op. 1, no. 1 (see example 4.10), dedicated to pianist Haraldur Sigurdsson, dates from 1936 and was first published in 1939, then republished in 1962.³⁶ The *Sonata* was premiered by the composer himself at a concert held at the Gamla Bíó hall on January 18, 1940. Emil Thoroddsen wrote in a review about the concert:

It is apparent that here is a composer who has dedicated himself to music and who has a weightier academic background than is usual among Icelandic composers. He does not shy away from assuming ambitious polyphonic tasks and one can state that the larger compositional forms are skillfully presented.³⁷ As the first piano sonata by an Icelandic composer, it is a landmark in the country's music history.

Thoroddsen's insight about Helgason's facility is enlightening, for each of the *Sonata's* five movements is carefully crafted with abundant musical inspiration. The first movement is in the

³² Ibid., 59.

³³ Atli Heimir Sveinsson, "Hallgrímur Helgason — In Memoriam," *Reykjavík Daily Morgunbladid*, September 30, 1994, 27.

³⁴ "[Helgason] was one of the first to realize how important Jón Leifs was for Iceland in an international context and frequently promoted him and his works." Ibid., 27.

³⁵ Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, 59.

³⁶ Hallgrímur Helgason, *Sonata*, no. 1 for Piano (Reykjavík: Musica Islandica — Menningarsjóður (Cultural Fund), 1939; 1962).

³⁷ http://www.musik.is/Baldur/TsagaRvk/1930-1950/til1950_19.html (accessed Nov. 22, 2008).

form of a theme and eleven variations and modeled after Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*, op. 54. The three brief inner movements alternate between the moods of late Romanticism and Nordic folk-dance whereas an Icelandic traditional song, *Svíalín and hrafninn*, is interwoven into the virtuosic technique of the final movement.

EXAMPLE 4.10

Helgason: *Sónata*, op. 1, no. 1, IV *Intermezzo*, mm 1–11

IV
Intermezzo

Andante molto sostenuto (♩ = 72–80)

The score consists of five systems of piano music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The tempo is marked "Andante molto sostenuto" with a metronome marking of a quarter note equal to 72-80 beats per minute. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The dynamics include *mp quieto* and *dolce*. The piece concludes with the marking *allarg.* and a double bar line. Fingerings and articulations are indicated throughout the score.

There are two conclusions that can be drawn from the information presented above. First, that Ísólffsson's contemporaries and compatriots, whose works are listed in table 4.1, share his affinity for and high proficiency in composing in the Romantic style. While no single composer of this group can be counted as Ísólffsson's soulmate, it would be fair to state that artistic sensibilities meet not infrequently in these piano works.

The collective reception history

The views expressed by the participants of the questionnaire about Ísólffsson's piano compositions are indicative of their reception history to some extent, at least with regard to the *Glettur* and *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5. These works were received enthusiastically from the composer's hand and have remained popular among the nation's artists and audiences alike. It is certain that the main reason for the success of these works was their immediate publication, which encouraged performances and subsequent radio and commercial recordings.³⁸

Perhaps most importantly, the *Glettur* and op. 5 encouraged younger composers to write works for the piano, as Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson (b. 1938) responded when asked which Icelandic piano pieces he considered the most important: "Sveinbjörnsson's and Páll Ísólffsson's, early, easy piano pieces which were widely accepted and acted as a stimulus to younger Icelanders who were interested in 'what could be done' — ('If they can do it, then I can') — to help make the piano more at home in Iceland."³⁹

As has been described in previous chapters, the reception history of the remainder of Ísólffsson's piano output, during the composer's lifetime and for two decades thereafter, was less successful than that of his early pieces. There is more than one reason for this, including the lack of accessibility through publication and recordings and the fact that Ísólffsson was not himself an exponent of the piano works (as he was of the organ

³⁸ Composer Sigurbjörnsson echoes this view in his brief response, "publish it," to the question what should be done to increase knowledge about Icelandic music in society. Cited in Marek Podhajski, ed., *Icelandic Piano Music* (Akureyri: Akureyri Music School, 1992), 154.

³⁹Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson, cited in Marek Podhajski, ed., *Icelandic Piano Music* (Akureyri: Akureyri Music School, 1992), 150.

music).⁴⁰ The chief reason, though, was the Icelandic music community's rejection of the late-nineteenth-century Romantic style through which Ísólfsson found his creative outlet.

Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson maintains that "Páll's compositional style says much about him; his inclination was towards the lyric and romantic, in many ways conservative, not revolutionary. I don't think Páll could have truly expressed himself through a different musical style but he was definitely aware of international trends."⁴¹ Thurídur Pálsdóttir agrees: "[My father's] sincere desire was to compose in the late-nineteenth-century Romantic style; it was his musical language of choice."⁴² The comments of composer Karólína Eiríksdóttir (b. 1951) are illuminating in this respect: "Of course we are all influenced by current trends. Nonetheless I believe that one has to be true to oneself. I am sure that if I slavishly followed some fashionable trend, the result would sound pretentious."⁴³

Composer Hjálmar Ragnarsson (b. 1952) writes: "Around 1950, Icelandic musical creativity changed greatly; for the first time since the Reformation we relate to the music of the time."⁴⁴ As has been referred to in previous chapters, this effectively means that composers such as Ísólfsson, Leifs, and others of their generation who did not "relate" to the music of the 1950s by allowing "fashionable trends" to influence their compositions were gradually ignored.⁴⁵

The anti-Romantic sentiment in musical circles around the middle of the twentieth century was of course not an Icelandic phenomenon but perhaps became a stronger force there than in larger communities. Thus, there were established composers in other Nordic countries such as Sweden and Denmark who preferred working in non-revolutionary musical styles:

⁴⁰ As a contrast Sveinbjörnsson performed his piano and chamber works in Iceland and abroad into old age, as this review by Sigfús Einarsson about a 1922 concert shows: "One should mention the *Rhapsodi* no. 2, played by the composer himself with no effort, his fingers still nimble." Cited in Sigrún Gísladóttir, *Sigfús Einarsson* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Guðjónsó, 1972), 100.

⁴¹ Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, interview, 1999.

⁴² Thurídur Pálsdóttir, interview, 1999.

⁴³ Karólína Eiríksdóttir, cited in Podhajski, ed., *Icelandic Piano Music* (Akureyri: Akureyri Music School, 1992), 127.

⁴⁴ Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, cited in Podhajski, ed., *Icelandic Piano Music* (Akureyri: Akureyri Music School, 1992), 141.

⁴⁵ The songs composed by Ísólfsson and other Icelanders under the influence of German Romanticism were, however, not affected by the 1950s anti-Romantic sentiment but have remained popular with the nation to this day. There is no doubt that INBS's programming priorities have helped to preserve this part of Icelandic music.

Sverige levde förvisso ännu vid sidan av den nya musikens utveckling. Inte bara Peterson-Berger (1867–1942) utan även Alfvén (1872–1960), Atterberg (1887–1974), Rangström (1884–1947) med flera tog helt afstånd från de nya tendenserna.

Sweden certainly still stood outside new international musical developments [until the conclusion of World War I]. Not only Peterson-Berger but also Alfvén, Atterberg, Rangström, and other composers distanced themselves completely from the new currents.⁴⁶

In 1945 the younger generation of Swedish composers formed a club called “The Monday Group,” whose members: “wanted a thorough purge of the benighted musical life of the times and to forge new music over a fire of high and pure ideals.”⁴⁷ One of the group’s members, Karl-Birger Blomdahl, wrote in a letter to a Danish colleague: “we all react against the old national Romanticism which, as you know, has dominated Swedish musical creativity for an eternity.”⁴⁸

In Danish music history there is a dividing line marked by the composer Carl Nielsen (1865–1931).⁴⁹ According to Kappel, there were:

A few Danish composers who survived or were even junior to Carl Nielsen, who belonged more or less to the late Romanticism he reacted against. Many of the next generation, who were influenced for life by his great personality, still compose [in 1967] from premises he himself evolved away from. But we are in the highest degree justified in regarding his work as the musical watershed in Denmark.⁵⁰

As is clear from the paragraph above, Nielsen represented the “musical establishment” in Denmark during his time and even for some time thereafter. Therefore, for those composers who were openly not in stylistic agreement with him and his supporters, their artistic future was at stake, as the case of Rued Langgaard (1893–1952) shows:

Langgaard has been called “the tragic case” of our country’s music history, because in spite of his fantastic musical gifts, he never found a natural place in the musical life of his day. [One of the] reasons for his exclusion from the musical society was that his uncompromising artistic position brought him into conflict with the Carl Nielsen–influenced, anti–Romantic aesthetics, which became absolute in Denmark around the time of Nielsen’s death in 1931.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Leif Jonsson, Huvudredaktör, *Musiken i Sverige* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget T. Fischer and Co. och Kung. Musikaliska Akademien, 1992), 496.

⁴⁷ Lena Roth, editor, *Musical Life in Sweden* (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute, 1987), 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁹ Vagn Kappel, *Danish Composers* (Denmark: Det Danske Selskab, 1967), 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵¹ Bendt Viinholt Nielsen, “An Ecstatic Outsider”: *Rued Langgaard, 1893–1952*, available at <http://www.langgaard.dk/litt/om/fontese.htm> (accessed July 30, 2006); originally published in *Fontes Artis Musicae* 42, no. 1 (Jan.–March 1995): 1.

In retrospect, it seems that Ísólffsson's position as an important figure of the musical establishment in Iceland, in his capacity as Reykjavík Cathedral organist and chief administrator at the main cultural centers during much of the twentieth century, spared him the fate of fellow organist and composer Langgaard.⁵² At the same time, such a high-profile position within the community might gradually have increased Ísólffsson's reluctance to celebrate publicly his compositional activities in the anti-Romantic fifties and sixties.

In light of this history it is understandable, as mentioned in Chapter 2, that Örn Magnússon experienced "inner soul battles"⁵³ before his 1997 premiere of the *Svipmyndir* collection. Today, however, one can ascertain that "soul battles" related to Ísólffsson performances belong to history; his music has at last received its due recognition on a national level. This is inferred from the favorable music reviews following Magnússon's 1997 *Svipmyndir* performance and subsequent CD publication:⁵⁴

Ísólffsson's compositions belong to our contemporary times and show this remarkable musician in a new light;⁵⁵ "[The *Svipmyndir*] are varied but always nice to listen to (at times profound) and enjoyable."⁵⁶

Similarly, the national music reviews following my performance of the complete Ísólffsson collection known at the time (2000) positively recognized its strength as a whole, as well as that of individual works, the *Tilbrigði* in particular. Musicologist and critic Bergthóra Jónsdóttir wrote her review under the title "A Feat" in the *Reykjavík Daily Morgunblaðið*:

There was a unique opportunity to hear all of Páll Ísólffsson's piano works at a single recital on Wednesday evening. They prove to be highly varied and to cover a broad range in time and emotional scale. [The *Glettur* and *Thrjú Píanóstykki*, op. 5] have often been heard. *Svipmyndir*, a collection of small works from various periods in the composer's life, were long neglected and seldom heard. The group contains many gems that are not less worthy of recognition than the small pieces named above. They display influence by

⁵² "The fact that one of the most gifted organists Denmark has ever known was unable to get a church job, even though he applied, year after year, to almost every available position, shows both the pronounced absence of magnanimity in Denmark's music culture of the 1930s and the period's lack of respect for the Romantic tradition represented by Langgaard. In 1940 [he], then 47 years old, finally received his first and only permanent position as organist and cantor at the cathedral in Ribe." *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³ See Chapter 2, 54.

⁵⁴ *Páll Ísólffsson: Svipmyndir and Glettur*, Örn Magnússon, piano, ITM 7-10, © STEF and © Iceland Music Information Center, 1997.

⁵⁵ Jón Ásgeirsson, "Af Gömlum Blöðum" (From Old Sheets), review of a concert performance by Örn Magnússon (piano), Gerdarsafn, Kópavogur, *Reykjavík Daily Morgunblaðið*, February 19, 1997, 21.

⁵⁶ Oddur Björnsson, "Einu Sinni Var" (Once Upon a Time), review of the CD entitled *Páll Ísólffsson: Svipmyndir and Glettur*, Örn Magnússon, piano, ITM 7-10, © STEF and © Iceland Music Information Center, 1997, published in *Reykjavík Daily Morgunblaðið*, December 23, 1997, 23.

many of the masters of music history: Bach, Grieg, and Schumann. But these influences appear first and foremost in the form of Ísólfsón's homage and respect towards the old masters.

What came as a surprise in this recital was the final work, *Tilbrigði*. Yet another side of Páll Ísólfsón is revealed in it. This magnificent work is a huge composition on the tune *Kvedja* (Farewell), by the composer's father, Ísólfur Pálsson. If the *Svipmyndir* are to some extent a tribute to the old masters, then this work is certainly a tribute to the composer who was closest to Páll, his father. The work is a poem of great praise in variation form in which Pálsson's little tune takes on many different forms.

The variations are extremely pianistic, but very difficult for the performer. It is an impressive composition and many of the variations are extremely striking for the ear, for example, the seventh, *Allegro e brillante*, which is full of luminosity and lightness, and the thirteenth, *Tranquillo*, which was mysterious and very atmospheric. The variations must be among the greatest piano works in Icelandic music. When all is said and done, Páll Ísólfsón's personal musical style is both strongly defined and cohesive. Humour and joy, and above all great energy and strength, characterize many of his works.⁵⁷

Arndís Björk Ásgeirsdóttir concurred in her review, which appeared in the *Reykjavík Evening Paper DV* under the title "An Integral Performance":

Páll Ísólfsón's works are well written and all are interesting to hear. They are substantial challenges for the pianist, and while the influence of nineteenth-century masters is clear in them, the composer's style is nevertheless dominant.

The biggest work on the program was the *Tilbrigði*, showy variations of a high degree of technical difficulty; there was no fumbling and the technical challenges took second place to the music, which came well to the fore. The performer highlighted the most beautiful aspects of the work and made one ask why on earth it is never heard? It certainly deserves to be played more often, as in fact do all the works in this successful recital.⁵⁸

In a review, which appeared in the *Reykjavík Daily Morgunbladid* in 2009 under the title "A Controlled Power," Jónas Sen expressed appreciation of Ísólfsón's works: "Páll's music has a timeless quality and continues to unravel its beauty upon each listening."⁵⁹

When my CD featuring the piano works of Ísólfsón was issued in 2001 by the Swedish label BIS Records AB, it received predominantly positive reviews in the national press and in

⁵⁷ Bergthóra Jónsdóttir, "Threkvirki" (A Feat), review of a concert performance by Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir (piano), Salurinn, Kópavogur, *Reykjavík Daily Morgunbladid*, November 5, 2000, 18; trans. Jeffrey Cosser.

⁵⁸ Arndís Björk Ásgeirsdóttir, "Heilsteyptur Flutningur" (An Integral Performance), review of a concert performance by Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir (piano), Salurinn, Kópavogur, *Reykjavík Evening Paper DV*, November 3, 2000, 12; translation by Jeffrey Cosser.

⁵⁹ Jónas Sen, "Tempradur Kraftur" (A Controlled Power), review of a concert performance by Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir (piano), Salurinn, Kópavogur, *Reykjavík Daily Morgunbladid*, February 28, 2009, 12.

international music publications.⁶⁰ They were much in accord with the concert reviews cited above to the effect that Ísólffsson's solid craftsmanship, "personal, deep-seated creative methods,"⁶¹ and "sanguine power,"⁶² as well as his "unapologetic nineteenth-century aesthetic,"⁶³ were acknowledged.

Burwasser sums this up in his article for *Fanfare*: "This is a charming and pleasant recording of obscure Scandinavian piano music. The influence of Grieg, via, perhaps, Ísólffsson's teacher Max Reger, who revered the Norwegian master, is powerful. As with much of Grieg, the appeal of this music derives from the intersection of bold, piquant folk sources and cultivated technique."⁶⁴

The piano works of Wilhelm Peterson-Berger (1867–1942)⁶⁵ were mentioned in comparison to the Ísólffsson collection in two of the CD reviews.⁶⁶ This is not surprising since Peterson-Berger belongs to a group of Nordic composers with whom Ísólffsson, in my view, shares a cultural heritage and aesthetic standpoint as a common ground from which their creative work springs.⁶⁷

[Peterson-Berger's] piano pieces (including three collections entitled *Frösöblomster*), rooted in the folk music idiom but tailored for the drawing room, are part of the standard Swedish repertoire.⁶⁸

A comparison of Peterson-Berger's piece *Erinnerungen* (Reminiscences) (see example 4.11), with the *Impromptu* in B minor⁶⁹ sheds light upon their common creative ground. The

⁶⁰ See Appendix III for selected review excerpts of *Páll Ísólffsson: Complete Original Piano Music*. BIS-CD-1139, BIS Records AB (© 2000 and © 2001). Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, piano.

⁶¹ J. Romero, "Cuando las apariencias engañan" (Never Judge a Book by Its Cover), *Boletín de Información Discográfica* (July–August 2001): 21; translation by Í. Lillendahl.

⁶² R. Barnett, "Páll Ísólffsson," available at <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/classrev/2001/Sept01/ISOLFSSON.htm> (accessed July 30, 2006).

⁶³ J. Sullivan, "Ísólffsson: Piano Works, All," *American Record Guide* 1–2 (2002).

⁶⁴ P. Burwasser, "Ísólffsson," *Fanfare*, Nov-Dec. 2001.

⁶⁵ "Peterson-Berger studied the organ and composition at the Stockholm Conservatory (1886–89); he then went to Dresden (1889–90), where his teachers included Kretzschmar (orchestration). He returned to Umeå to teach music and languages (1890–92), and went again to Dresden as a music educationist (1892–4). In 1895 he settled in Stockholm, where he was music critic of the *Dagens nyheter* from 1896 to 1930, except for a period when he was stage manager at the Stockholm Opera (1908–10) and for an Italian visit in 1920–21." Rolf Haglund, "Wilhelm Peterson-Berger," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, ed. Laura Macy, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/21444> (accessed November 30, 2008).

⁶⁶ See review excerpts in Appendix III, pp. 270–71, from M. W. Andreasen, "Islandsk Klavermusik," *High Fidelity* 7 (2001): 42; and R. Barnett, "Páll Ísólffsson," available at <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/classrev/2001/Sept01/ISOLFSSON.htm> (accessed July 30, 2006).

⁶⁷ Composers such as Tor Aulin (1866–1914), August Körling (1842–1919) and Vilhelm Svedbom (1843–1904) also share this common ground with Ísólffsson.

⁶⁸ <http://www.mic.se/avd/mic/prod/micv5eng.nsf/docsbycodename/soekresultat?opendocument&fraga=Peterson-Berger> (accessed November 30, 2008).

emotionally laden musical expression in the *Erinnerungen* emphasized by a broad use of the dynamic range, is echoed in the *Impromptu* in B minor, itself an outstanding example of Ísólfsso n's mature style. Both pieces open with a declamatory motif signified by a dotted rhythm and continue through tonally unstable outer parts, providing relief in the more harmonious middle parts.

⁶⁹ See Chapter 2, 90–91.

EXAMPLE 4.11

Peterson-Berger: Erinnerungen, mm. 1–30

Erinnerungen.
Souvenir. ————— Reminiscences.
Minnen.

W. Peterson - Berger.

Andante, molto tranquillo.

The musical score is written for piano and consists of six systems of music. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked 'Andante, molto tranquillo'. The score includes various dynamic markings: *mf*, *f*, *p*, *pp*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, and *pp*. There are also performance instructions such as *cresc.* and *dolce legato*. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, stems, beams, and various note values (quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes) and rests.

The most important message gained from the reviewers has been the sincere recognition of the *Tilbrigði* as a major composition. Pálsson at Morgunbladid wrote: "These variations are huge, technically difficult and tremendously effective, a brilliant work";⁷⁰ Andreasen wrote along similar lines in *High Fidelity*: "Det tyve minutter lange værk har både substans og klaverteknik til at gøre det til noget, der ligner et hovedværk. Det er særdeles fængslende og yderst velskrevet" (This twenty-minute-long work has both the substance and technique to qualify as a major composition. It is particularly captivating and well written).⁷¹ For Ísólffsson himself, unfortunately, the praising of the *Tilbrigði* in these reviews is a belated compliment, but in light of the work's indifferent reception history, it is a boon to his reputation.

On the negative side, I would mention the point made by some reviewers about the fact that Ísólffsson's style is reactionary rather than forward-looking. This was expressed thus by Burwasser: "Ísólffsson introduces no special twists or new matrixes in his music;"⁷² and by Barnett: "There is little experimentation, Ísólffsson was no revolutionary."⁷³ Indeed, when Ísólffsson's piano works are measured against parameters such as creative innovation of musical thought and contemporary compositional methods, their value as original contributions to piano literature may appear somewhat diminished. Therefore, the value of his piano works and their relevance are rather determined by timeless qualities such as emotionally communicative content and solid musical structure.

In summary, it is clear that the consonance found among all the reviews cited above, regardless of the author's country of origin, reaching from the United States to Spain, Scandinavia, and the United Kingdom, lends support to my assessment of Ísólffsson's piano collection presented throughout the dissertation, and it indeed echoes the views expressed by the participants in the questionnaire conducted as part of the research.

⁷⁰ Valdemar Pálsson, "Tímabaert" (A Timely Issue), *Reykjavík Daily Morgunbladid*, May 23, 2001, 28.

⁷¹ M. W. Andreasen, "Íslandsk Klavermusik," *High Fidelity* 7 (2001): 42.

⁷² Burwasser, "Ísólffsson," *Fanfare*.

⁷³ Barnett, "Páll Ísólffsson," available at <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/classrev/2001/Sept01/ISOLFSSON.htm> (accessed July 30, 2006).

In the final evaluation

It is appropriate here to cite the following quotation about American composer Edward MacDowell (1860–1908) by John Tasker Howard, as its message applies to Ísólffsson as well:

MacDowell need never be put forward with the chauvinism he hated so heartily himself. He is probably the first of our creative musicians for whom we need make no allowances for lack of early training. None of his limitations were caused by his being an American. Whether he shall eventually be judged great or small, he may be considered simply as a composer, without our being kind to him because he was our countryman. And after we have put him under the magnifying glass, stripped him of the idealization that has been wrapped about him by admirers more zealous than wise, he will emerge with several of his banners still flying.⁷⁴

In my assessment Ísólffsson, too, emerges as a fine composer who has made a valuable contribution to the Romantic piano literature of the northern European and Scandinavian countries. Through the course of this research, his piano works have been examined from many perspectives; this has revealed that Ísólffsson's rich emotions, lyrical gift, and compositional proficiency were transformed into beautiful music, which today is appreciated regardless of when or where it was created. On a final note, it is apt to remember Ísólffsson's own words: "Music teaches us to live, teaches us tolerance and modesty, and shares its unique beauty with us."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music*, rev. ed. (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1939), 380; cited in Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1997, 1941), 938.

⁷⁵ Cited in Matthías Johannessen, *Hundathúfan og Hafid* (The Dog-tussok and the Ocean: Conversations with Páll Ísólffsson) Reykjavík: Bókfells Press, 1961), 185.

APPENDIX I

Manuscripts⁷⁶ and published piano⁷⁷ works cited: Páll Ísólfsson

00000	Minnisblad (dated 1921)
00000	Melódía (dated February 22, 1931)
00000	Ég beid thín
00000	Einu sinni var (II)
00000	Nocturne (dated November 11, 1953)
00000	Lilju-lag
00000	Heims um ból
00000	Ballata
00000	Stef (fragment, not dated)
00000	Tilbrigði um stef eftir Ísólf Pálsson
19011	Glettur <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allegretto grazioso 2. Allegro vivace
19014	Thrjú Píanóstykki (Three Piano Pieces), op. 5: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Burlesca 2. Intermezzo 3. Capriccio
19029	Tilbrigði um sönglag eftir Ísólf Pálsson (published 1974)
19900	Svipmyndir (published 1993) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Preludium 2. Tileinkun

⁷⁶ The 00000 number refers to a manuscript preserved but not catalogued at the time of writing (2010) in the manuscript collection of the National and University Library of Iceland. All manuscripts, marked 00000, are published for the first time in the dissertation.

⁷⁷ The five digit number in the column on the left hand side is the catalogue number of the publisher, Iceland Music Information Centre.

3. Impromptu (F minor)

4. Invention

19900 (cont.). Svipmyndir

5. Lítill vals

6. Ösku-menúett

7. Einu sinni var (I)

8. Romanze

9. Sálmaforleikur (E-flat major)

10. Veislan á Sólhaugum

12. Impromptu (B minor)

13. Sálmaforleikur (D major)

14. Saknadarstef

Manuscripts and published piano works cited: other Icelandic composers⁷⁸

786.2 Sve ⁷⁹	Pastorale	S. Sveinbjörnsson 1847–1927
38003	Idylle	
38034	Víkivaki	
38113	Barcarolle	
32030	Sorg (published in <i>Hljómblik</i> , 1934)	B. Gudmundsson 1891–1961
26008	Fünf Leichte Klavierstücke, op. 2 (1932)	S. Thórdarson 1895–1968
709014	Hugleiding	Th. Gudmundsson 1896–1979
00000 (24016) ⁸⁰	Intermezzo (1934)	E. Thoroddssen 1898–1944
33123	Vökudraumur (1913)	J. Leifs 1899–1968
33004	Torrek-Intermezzo, op. 1 no. 2 (1919)	

⁷⁸ A list of selected piano works by Icelandic composers is presented in table 4.1, Chapter 4, 166.

⁷⁹ This catalogue number refers to the *Pastorale* published by the London Music Publishing Company, shelved at the National and University Library of Iceland.

⁸⁰ The original manuscript published in the dissertation; the five-digit number in the brackets refers to the published edition by the IMIC.

33124	Valse lento, op. 2 no. 1 (1921)	
33008	Strákalag, op. 49 (1960)	
00000	Andante (1925)	M. Kristjánsson 1902–1931
00000	Variations on a theme by Beethoven (1926)	
739010	Caprices Mignon über ein Kinderlied (1922)	V. Urbantschitsch 1903–1958
739900	Three Pieces for Piano (1923)	
739011	Sonatine (G major) (1959)	
7006	Sónata, op. 1 (1936)	Hallgrímur Helgason 1914–1994

APPENDIX II

Interviews: a list of eight interview participants and their professional credentials

1. Ásgeirsson, Jón, composer and music critic. Interview dated June 18 and 23, 1999.
Jón Ásgeirsson was born in 1928 in Ísafjörður. He studied at the Reykjavík College of Music with Urbantschitsch, Thórarinsson, and Kristjánsson. Following further studies in Glasgow, he became principal of the Neskaupsstadur School of Music. He was appointed on the faculty of the Iceland Teacher's College in 1962 and became professor at that institution in 1994. An avid choir director and chief music critic of the Reykjavík Daily Morgunbladid during 1970–2003, Jón's main capacity as composer has resulted in a large number of compositions for many vocal and instrumental combinations.

His works include three operas entitled *Thrymskvida*, *Galdra-Loftur*, and *Möttuls saga*; music to the ballet *Blindingsleikur*; five solo concertos for cello, horn, clarinet, trumpet, and flute; the orchestral works *Thjóðvísa*, *Lilja*, *Fornir dansar*, and *Sjöstrengjaljóð*; three string quartets and several other ensemble works. Song collections and film music are a part of Jón's repertoire and his many honors and awards include the Knight's Cross of the Order of the Falcon in 2001.

2. Magnússon, Gísli, pianist and school principal. Interview dated June 25, 1999.
Gísli Magnússon was born in 1929 and studied at the Reykjavík College of Music, where his teachers were Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson and Árni Kristjánsson. Further studies included those at Zurich Conservatory of Music with Walter Frey. He graduated with a Solo Diploma in 1953 and studied thereafter in Rome with Carlo Zecchi. He made his debut in 1951 in Reykjavík and has since given many recitals frequently appeared as soloist with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and in the Reykjavík Art Festival. In the spring of 1977 he was the soloist at the opening concert of the Bergen Festival.

Gísli was very active, too, performing chamber music; his appearances in a concert series with cellist Gunnar Kvaran during the years 1974–95 aroused great enthusiasm at the time. Many of his performances have been recorded. Gísli taught at Gardabaer's Music School from 1969 and became principal in 1984. Regrettably, Gísli died in 2001.

3. Magnússon, Örn, pianist and music teacher. Interview dated June 16, 1999.
Örn Magnússon was born in Ólafsfjörður in north Iceland in 1959, and his musical education began there. He graduated from the Akureyri College of Music in 1979, and during 1980–86 he studied in Manchester, Berlin, and London. His repertoire includes many styles, from Baroque music to contemporary compositions.

Örn has in recent years devoted much of his energy to Icelandic music and its performance. He has recorded CDs, both as a soloist and in collaboration with others. This includes *Sprotar* (ITM 8-02) with Icelandic piano music, *Svipmyndir and Glettur* (ITM 7-10) with the piano music of Páll Ísólfsón, and the complete piano works of Jón Leifs (BIS-692). Örn has given concerts in many places in Europe and Japan, and has appeared at various arts festivals, both as a soloist and in chamber music.

4. Pálsdóttir, Thurídur, soprano and music teacher. Interview dated June 15, 1999.
Thurídur Pálsdóttir was born in 1927. She studied music at home from early childhood, but in the fifties she spent long periods in Italy, where she underwent training for the opera under Maestro Luigi Albergoni, and, more extensively, under renowned opera star Lina Pagliughi in Milan. Later, she graduated as a teacher of music from the Reykjavík College of Music.

Thurídur has given a number of solo concerts, and church and oratorio music has been among her specialties. She has, for instance, performed as a soloist in concert productions of Bach's *St. John Passion*, *Missa Brevis* by Haydn, the *Requiem* and *Exultate Jubilate* by Mozart, Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, and *Le Roi David* by Honegger. Of the numerous operatic roles she has sung, the following might be mentioned: Leonora (*Il Trovatore*), Pamina (*The Magic Flute*), Rosina (*The Barber of Seville*), Norina (*Don Pasquale*), Adina (*L'Elisir d'Amore*), Julia (*Les Contes d'Hoffmann*), Musetta (*La Bohème*), Nedda (*I Pagliacci*), Micaela (*Carmen*), and Monica (*The Medium*); in addition she has performed a number of roles in operettas.

Thurídur served for many years as chairman of the Board of the National Theatre and she was a reserve deputy Member of Parliament during 1991–95. Her honors and awards include the Knight's Cross of the Icelandic Order of the Falcon in 1982, and the honorary Cavaliere dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana in 1987. Additionally, she has received the Silver and Gold award from the Icelandic Society of Actors and an honorary cup from the Icelandic Opera in 1983. Her performances have been recorded both for the Icelandic National Radio and issued on LPs and CDs.

5. Sigurjónsson, Rögnvaldur, pianist and music teacher. Interview dated June 14, 1999
Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson was born in 1918 in Eskifjörður on the East Coast of Iceland but later moved to Reykjavík. After studies at the Reykjavík College of Music with Kristjánsson, he continued in Paris with Marcel Ciampi (1937–39) and in New York with Sascha Gorodnitzki (1942–45). He made his debut at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to great critical acclaim, but then moved to Iceland with his family, where he has since made his home concertizing and teaching at the Reykjavík College of Music (1945–86). Rögnvaldur has appeared in all the Nordic countries, Russia, Romania, Germany, Austria, the United States, and Canada, playing numerous recitals and appearing as soloist with symphony orchestras.

In the fall of 1963 Rögnvaldur went on a concert tour to the U.S. and Canada. He played an imposing program during that trip including Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* and a sonata by Leifur Thórarinnsson. Reviews of this concert were on the whole very favorable, and in the *Winnipeg Tribune* Roy Maley wrote as follows under the heading: "Virtuoso approach by pianist Rögnvaldur Sigurjónsson." "[Sigurjónsson] proved to be an able and serious pianist. He played his program of Schubert, Chopin, Liszt and Scandinavian composers with technical finesse and honest musicianship. In the process he displayed a flair for a virtuoso approach to the keyboard which reached its highest level in Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz*." His discography includes solo and chamber music CDs and radio broadcasts. His last major concert was in the fall of 1978, a very successful event celebrating his sixtieth birthday. Regrettably, Rögnvaldur died in 2004.

6. Dr. Sveinbjörnsson, Bjarki, musicologist. Interview dated June 14, 1999.
Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson was born in 1953. He graduated with a Music teacher diploma in 1976 from the Reykjavík College of Music. Further studies included organ, history, and theory in the United States (1979–81), and musicology at Aalborg University in Denmark from 1989 until 1998 when he graduated with a Ph.D. degree. Bjarki has written and lectured extensively on various subjects in relation to the history of music in Iceland. This

includes published articles on the internet, in music magazines, and in newspapers as well as the production of more than 150 radio programs for the Icelandic National Broadcasting Station.

His lecture appearances include the Iceland Academy of Arts, the Reykjavík College of Music, the University of Iceland's extension division, the Folk Music Festival in Siglufjörður, the Ole Bull Academy in Norway, the Festival of Old Music in Utrecht, and the University of Manitoba. His research projects include presenting Icelandic manuscripts from 1100 to 1800 on the internet (www.musik.is) as well as Icelandic folklore in cooperation with the Árni Magnússon Institute. Other research topics include "Icelandic phonograph recordings from 1903–28," "Western-Icelandic composers in Canada from 1875 to 1950," and "Organs in Icelandic churches from 1875", in cooperation with Dr. Jón Hrólfur Sigurjónsson.

7. Thórarinnsson, Jón, composer and writer. Interview dated June 15 and 21, 1999.
 Jón Thórarinnsson was born in 1917. He studied at the Reykjavík College of Music, with Hindemith at Yale (MM 1947), at the Juilliard School (1945), and in Germany and Austria (1954–55). In 1947 he was appointed Head of theory and composition at the Reykjavík College of Music. He was on the music staff of Icelandic National Broadcasting Station (1947–56), chairman of the first board of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra (1950–53), the orchestra's manager (1956–61) and on the board again since 1982. Head of music and drama for the INBS (1968–79). He has published biographies of composers Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson and Páll Ísólfsson, and in preparation is a comprehensive history of music in Iceland. His music shows a flair for drama in a tonal style with ventures into chromaticism.

Among Thórarinnsson's compositions are: Vocal: Around twenty songs for voice and piano; *Of Love and Death* (C. G. Rossetti), B, orch, 1950; *Völuspá* (text from the *Edda*), B, chorus, orch, 1974; the motet *Vakna þú sál mín* (Awake my soul, from Ps. 57), 1991; folk-song arrangements for children's voices. Instrumental: sonatina for piano, 1946; sonata for clarinet and piano, 1947; children's piano pieces, 1950; music for organ, 1954; *Brek* for flute and harpsichord, 1981. Principal publishers: Helgafell, Musica Islandica, Iceland Music Information Center. A large selection of his works was issued in 1998 on three CDs entitled *Fuglinn í fjörunni* (MÍ 001, distrib. Skífan, Reykjavík).

8. Vidar, Jórunn, composer and pianist. Interview dated July 19, 1999.
 Jórunn Vidar was born in Reykjavík in 1918. She began music studies under the guidance of her mother, Katrín Vidar, and composer Páll Ísólfsson. In 1936 she graduated from the Reykjavík College of Music, where she had been a pupil of Árni Kristjánsson, and for the next two years she attended the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. During 1943–45 she was a pupil of Giannini at the Juilliard School in New York. Further studies included piano lessons in Vienna 1959–60.

Her works combine the influences of Icelandic melodies and rhythms with a cosmopolitan harmonic style. Among her compositions are the ballet *Fire* (1951), *Five Meditations on Icelandic Themes* (1965), the piano concerto *Slátta*, a set of Icelandic folksongs for voice and piano (1972), published by Iceland Music Information Centre, and a *Suite* for violin and piano (1974).

Questionnaire: part one

1. How would you define the position of composer Páll Ísólfsson in the history of Icelandic music?
2. How would you place Ísólfsson's music among the music of Icelandic composers?
3. What place do Ísólfsson's piano works occupy among the piano works of Icelandic composers?
4. How would you define the importance of Ísólfsson's piano works among his complete oeuvre? Do we get to know the composer through his piano works, or are, for instance, the organ works or songs more illuminating for his creative spirit?
5. What if any stylistic influences are to be found in Ísólfsson's piano works that are directly derived from Western classical music?
6. Is there a personal voice apparent in the piano works of Ísólfsson as is frequently heard in the works of, for instance, Stravinsky and Bartók? If so, how would you define it?
7. Are there any unique "Icelandic" influences to be found in the piano works or could any European composer have composed them?
8. Did you at any point in time hear Ísólfsson perform his piano compositions, either at a concert or from a recording? If so, or if you did hear him perform with other musicians at some point, can you describe his piano playing in few words?
9. How would you describe Ísólfsson's writing for the piano?
10. Are there any piano works of Ísólfsson that you would like to give particular mention?
11. In your opinion, where should the piano works of Ísólfsson be positioned within the history of Western art music for the piano?

Questionnaire: part two

Ásgeirsson, Jón.

1. Can you discuss your experience as a student at the Reykjavík College of Music during Ísólfsson's period as principal?
2. Would you like to add anything else to the discussion?

Magnússon, Gísli.

1. Could you discuss the role of Ísólfsson's piano works in your career?
2. As a music school principal and piano teacher for many years, could you add a few words as to the pedagogic value of these piano works?
3. Would you like to add anything else to the discussion?

Magnússon, Örn.

1. You prepared and edited the manuscript of the *Svipmyndir* for publication in 1994 and premiered the collection in April 1997. Can you discuss this experience?
2. The *Svipmyndir* are the most recent addition in print to Ísólfsson's published piano works. What in your opinion is their importance?
3. Could you discuss the role of Ísólfsson's piano works in your career?
4. As a piano teacher for many years, could you add a few words as to the pedagogic value of these piano works?

Pálsdóttir, Thurídur.

1. As the daughter of the composer, your position in relation to this research is unique. Could you discuss Ísólfsson's attitude towards the piano and piano compositions in general?
2. Did Ísólfsson compose at the piano?
3. Would you like to add anything else to the discussion?

Sigurjónsson, Rögnvaldur.

1. The *Tilbrigði* are dedicated to you. How did this come about?
2. You premiered the *Tilbrigði* and recorded the work twice. Can you discuss it? Furthermore, it would be interesting to learn how the work was received.
3. Did you consult with the composer regarding the interpretation?
4. The *Tilbrigði* is Ísólfsson's only virtuosic piano work. Do you think there is a reason for that?
5. Would you like to add anything else to the discussion?

Dr. Sveinbjörnsson, Bjarki.

1. Based upon your research into the history of music in Iceland, could you evaluate the position and influence of Ísólfsson from the past to present?
2. Would you like to add anything else to the discussion?

Thórarinsson, Jón.

1. As the biographer and colleague of Ísólfsson, could you discuss your acquaintance of the composer?
2. Would you like to add anything else to the discussion?

Vidar, Jórunn.

1. As the first pianist to perform and record the *Svipmyndir*, what did you think about these works?
2. Did you consult with the composer regarding the interpretation?
3. Did you receive any comments from music enthusiasts in due course?
4. Would you like to add anything else to the discussion?

APPENDIX III

Selected review excerpts of Páll Ísólfsson: Complete Original Piano Music. BIS-CD-1139, BIS Records AB (© 2000 and © 2001). Nína Margrét Grímsdóttir, piano.

This complete collection of Ísólfsson's piano music is in every way attractive. The CD is bursting with quality piano music which should become widely known. One of the two larger work collections on this CD is *Svipmyndir* — a collection of piano works from various periods in Ísólfsson's life. Many of these works seem to be homages to past composers.

The *Variations on a Song by Ísólfr Pálsson* is Ísólfsson's chief piano composition, created towards the end of his career. These variations are huge, technically difficult and tremendously effective. Many other points could be mentioned here in connection with this brilliant piano work of Ísólfsson, but it will suffice to mention the tragic funeral march in variation 8, which is more "Icelandic" than much of the other music on the CD.

Among other things that do surprise the listener is the unusual leap to the United States, where Gershwin's influence can be heard in variation 13. This is a typical "blues" mood similar to Gershwin's *Preludes* from 1926. I have not yet mentioned the lovely *Gleitur* and the *Thrjú Píánóstykki*, op. 5, which have been deservedly popular through the years in Iceland. If one can speak of "classical" Icelandic works, these beautiful piano works by Ísólfsson would qualify. I feel there is a special reason to celebrate this CD.⁸¹

Known mainly for his songs, Icelandic composer Páll Ísólfsson was also a skillful piano composer, as demonstrated by this welcome program of his complete works for the instrument. This music, mainly from 1920–40, has an unapologetic nineteenth-century aesthetic. These pieces are well constructed and deeply felt, tending toward minor keys and gently melancholy, though a few bustling humoresques and burlesques pop up as happy contrasts.⁸²

This is a charming and pleasant recording of obscure Scandinavian piano music. The influence of Grieg, via, perhaps, Ísólfsson's teacher Max Reger, who revered the Norwegian master, is powerful. As with much of Grieg, the appeal of this music derives from the intersection of bold, piquant folk sources and cultivated technique. Ísólfsson introduces no special twists or new matrixes in his music, but he presents a concentrated flavor of his nationalism with latent skill.⁸³

Det er en blandet landhandel, som stilistisk og pianistisk kommer langt omkring. *Tre Klaverstykker*, op. 5 er ægtefødt klavermusik i en stil, der kan lede tanken hen til Chopin. Rigtig klavermusik, som i meget høj grad er værd at lægge øre til. Så er der to bagateller, [*Gleitur*] *Humoresker*, som også musikalsk og kunstnerisk er bagateller, og derpå fjorten albumblade, *Svipmyndir*, som i tone bringer mindelser om det nordiske (Carl Nielsen, Grieg og, måske, Peterson-Berger), men også Chopin. Samlingen rækker fra det ret ligegyldige til det meget interessevækkende.

⁸¹ Valdemar Pálsson, "Tímabaert" (A Timely Issue), *Reykjavík Daily Morgunblaðid*, May 23, 2001, 28.

⁸² J. Sullivan, "Ísólfsson: Piano Works, All," *American Record Guide* 1–2 (2002).

⁸³ P. Burwasser, "Ísólfsson," *Fanfare* (Nov.–Dec. 2001).

CD'ens mest omfangsrige værk er *Variationer over en Sang af Ísólfur Pálsson*, en melodi der lyder som en børnesang. Det tyve minutter lange værk har både substans og klaverteknik til at gøre det til noget, der ligner et hovedværk. Det er særdeles fængslende og yderst velskrevet. Anbefales de nysgerrige og klaverelskerne!⁸⁴

This is a mixed bag, both stylistically and pianistically which casts its net widely. *Thrjú Píánóstykki*, op. 5, are typical works of the style, which leads one to think of Chopin. This is fine piano music and worthwhile listening to. Then there are two bagatelles, [*Glettur*] *Humoresques*, which are both musically and artistically similar to other such works. In addition, there are fourteen albumblatts *Svipmyndir*, which recall the music of other Nordic composers (Carl Nielsen, Grieg, and, perhaps, Peterson-Berger), but also Chopin. This collection goes from the trifle to extremely interesting works.

The most expansive composition on this CD is the *Variations on a Song by Ísólfur Pálsson*, a melody that sounds like a children's song. This twenty-minute-long work has both the substance and technique to qualify as a major composition. It is particularly captivating and well written. Recommended for the curious piano music enthusiast!

Romantiskt färgat musik, klart påverkad av Grieg och Reger och skön att lyssna till.⁸⁵

This music is colored by Romanticism, clearly composed under the influence of Grieg and Reger, and sounds beautiful.

Su música se mueve dentro de una grata estética romántica y nacionalista. Su no muy numerosa obra para piano, es fiel reflejo de esa personal y arraigada manera creativa, en la que la influencia popular tiene un particularísimo relieve.⁸⁶

[Ísólfsón's] music is permeated by a Romantic and nationalistic spirit. His not so many compositions for piano are a faithful reflection of his personal, deep-seated creative methods, and in which influence from folk music comes as a particular relief.

If you know Moeran's *The White Mountain*, Peter Maxwell Davies' *Farewell to Stromness*, the Grieg *Lyric Pieces* or the *Frösöblömster* of Peterson-Berger you will have some idea of what to expect of the *Humoresques* and the *Three Pieces*. Ísólfsón worked, in this case, at the margins of the tonal tradition not violating it but subtly exploring its hinterland; probing at the boundaries. The *Three Pieces* and the *Humoresques* jar the folk song and folk dance argot with spiced Brahmsian drama.

Then come the fourteen [*Svipmyndir*] *Album Leaves* where the "ernste" Brahms goads, struts, flickers, muses and smiles. There is little experimentation. The beaming smile peeps out from many corners and I recommend that you spend five minutes in the company of the *Impromptu* (track 9). The folk voice has now largely been subsumed and is glimpsed, if at all, in shadows and suggestions. The music has a sanguine power that places it apart from MacDowell's profusion of piano miniatures, superficial soul-mates.

Ísólfsón was no revolutionary. He worked with craftsmanship and some inspiration within the traditions he had learnt in Leipzig with Reger and Teichmüller. The stones and ice of Iceland might be glimpsed instantly in variation 6 and variation 8 (the latter an *Eroica*-like processional) but the idiom is unmistakably adopted and fits the composer like a glove.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ M. W. Andreassen, "Íslandsk Klavermusik," *High Fidelity* 7 (2001): 42.

⁸⁵ P-G. Bergfors, "Páll Ísólfsón," *Göteborgsposten*, December 6, 2001.

⁸⁶ J. Romero, "Cuando las apariencias engañan" (Never Judge a Book by Its Cover), *Boletín de Información Discográfica* (July–August 2001): 21; translation by Í. Lillendahl.

⁸⁷ R. Barnett, "Páll Ísólfsón," available at <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/classrev/2001/Sept01/ISOLFSSON.htm> (accessed July 30, 2006).

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B. Ísólffsson's writings and career documents (photocopies)⁸⁸

1. Personal letters (1912–60).
2. Concert programs and concert reviews (1916–45).
3. Diary documenting a period at the Icelandic National Broadcasting Station (1935–37).
4. An article about the Reykjavík College of Music entitled: "Several Thoughts and Proposals" (1955).
5. A speech draft addressed to the people of Stokkseyri (1959).
6. Lecture about the Icelandic musical heritage entitled "Für Rundfunk — Isländische Volksmusik" (1960).
7. An article about the importance of music in the life of people (not dated).
8. A speech draft addressed to the Reykjavík College of Music (1960).
9. A speech draft addressed to young students of the arts (not dated).
10. A commentary about Ísólffsson's tour of the United States and Canada, prepared for radio broadcasting (not dated).
11. An address prepared for radio broadcasting on Palm Sunday (not dated).
12. Ísólffsson's own copy of his biography.

⁸⁸ Original documents preserved but not catalogued at the time of writing (2010) in the manuscript collection of the National and University Library of Iceland.

C. Audiovisual sources

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