



DANÍEL BJARNASON | PROCESSIONS

## LINER NOTES

It is possible that in a few, very specific ways, the sound of *Bow to String*, three movements for multitracked cello (written for cellist Sæunn Þorsteinsdóttir), will remind listeners of a recognizable *Valgeir/Bedroom Community* “sound”: in the mercurial recording of the titular sonority, a cello bow slashing, now gliding, across the strings, or in *Bow to String*’s blurring of the line between electronic music and chamber music, by now a familiar strategy for the Icelandic collective. But the construction of the music’s emotional triggers is something very different.

*Bow to String* not only evokes feelings of tension or tenderness, it dares to signal them. Where some composers might eschew gushing melody in favor of a spare, oblique line—or rich, Romantic harmony in favor of a subtly deployed drone—this work has been composed in a sort of musical lingua franca, its effects immediately recognizable to any listener familiar with the sentimental signs of Western music.

There is no discontinuity, however, between the score’s grounding in conventions of the musical past and the elements that mark it as unmistakably contemporary. The unapologetically, relentlessly direct harmonic progression grounding “sorrow conquers happiness” (borrowed from a song written by Ragnar Kjartansson and Davíð Þór Jónsson) or the melody singing out in the concluding “Air” lay themselves bare, inviting the audience into the score by demonstrating an awareness of its emotional technologies, but without ever crossing over into irony. The violently percussive performance techniques, the moments of ghostly timbre or asynchronous attack, are not there as commentary on the piece’s emotional vocabulary but as an extension thereof.

*Processions*, Daniel’s second piano concerto, written for pianist Víkingur Ólafsson, performs the same balancing act of self-consciousness versus earnest appeal—in terms of genre as well as harmony.

Maybe the poet Frank O’Hara was joking, or maybe he was being willfully superficial, when he claimed that he had never heard a piano concerto he did not truly love. But I prefer to believe that he was recognizing a certain pleasure inherent in the form itself, inextricable from an essential piano concerto-ness. Technically speaking, the phrase “piano concerto” usually means a work for solo piano with orchestral accompaniment, in three movements (fast, slow, and fast again). In practice, it often implies something more, an especially indulgent relationship between composer, soloist, orchestra and audience. Even a concerto for violin or oboe, say, lacks quite the same mutually flattering interplay amongst the performers that exists in the archetypal piano concerto.

And this piece is true to archetype. The extravagant opening statement (taken to new heights in Daniel’s thunderous exposition “*In Medias Res*”) and its subsequent development recall an old-

fashioned Slavic concerto, not to mention the ivory-pounding virtuosity and soaring, deeply earnest melodies.

But again, the effusiveness of the score is continuous with, not opposed to, unmistakably contemporary elements. There are crashes of harsh dissonance, the orchestra is augmented by a battery of exotic percussion, and melodic lines run strangely astray; the propulsive rhythms of the last movement (“*Red-Handed*”), like the syncopations in *Bow to String*, project a certain quasi-primitive energy reminiscent of rock; and while *Bow to String* is obviously a creature of the studio, one might argue that even the entirely acoustic “*Red-Handed*”’s tape delay-like staggered pulsation is in its own way descended from recording technology. Still, the intrusions of modernity work with the form, those dissonances heightening the tensions composed into the harmonies, the wayward modalities creating a slightly more obscure, involved sort of business for the pianist,

the unorthodox orchestrations surrounding the work with a halo of color. There is not so much the sense of a historical or ideological statement being made as there is the sense of a composer simply marshalling all the technical forces at his disposal to accomplish a musical goal.

What binds these elements together, what keeps them from seeming unfocused or haphazard, and what ultimately unites all the pieces on this disc, is that hardest thing to define, the composer's "voice," his strong, distinctive style.

Skelja, a far darker, more introspective score for harp and percussion, in a sense

suggests what might remain behind if the comforts of form and more overt forms of expression were somehow extracted from *Bow to String* and *Processions*. The hot, dense texture of the electronic cello choir and the massed resources of the orchestra are replaced with the strict economy of a plucked (and e-bowed) harp. But even here, glimpsed in the harp's obscure business, and the percussion's subtle halos of color, the style of the composer—however dark, now, and introverted—persists.

Notes by Daniel Johnson



## CREDITS

Iceland Symphony Orchestra: 1st Violin: Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir - leader, Zbigniew Dubik, Martin Frewer, Bryndís Pálsdóttir, Júlíana Elín Kjartansdóttir, Gunnhildur Daðadóttir, Mark Reedman, Sigrður Hrafnkelsdóttir, Pálína Árnadóttir, Hildigunnur Halldórsdóttir, Rósa Guðmundsdóttir, Magdalena Dubik  
2nd Violin: Ari Þór Vilhjálmsson, Margrét Þorsteinsdóttir, Þórdís Stross, Christian Diethard, Roland Hartwell, Ólöf Þorvarðsdóttir, María Weiss, Ingrid Karlsdóttir, Kristján Matthíasson, Joanna Koziura  
Viola: Þórunn Ósk Marinósdóttir, Sarah Buckley, Guðrún Þórarinsdóttir, Kathryn Harrison, Eyjólfur Alfreðsson, Sesselja Halldórsdóttir, Herdís Anna Jónsdóttir, Þórarinn Már Baldursson  
Cello: Sigurgeir Agnarsson, Hrafnkell Orri Egilsson, Margrét Árnadóttir, Lovísa Fjeldsted, Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir, Ólöf Sesselja Óskarsdóttir, Auður Ingvadóttir  
Doublebass: Hávarður Tryggvason, Dean Ferrell, Jóhannes Georgsson, Þórir Jóhannsson, Gunnlaugur Torfi Stefánsson

Flute: Áshildur Haraldsdóttir, Melkorka Ólafsdóttir  
Oboe: Daði Kolbeinsson, Peter Tompkins  
Clarinet: Rúnar Óskarsson, Sigurður I. Snorrason  
Bassoon: Rúnar Vilbergsson, Brjánn Ingason  
Horn: Joseph Ognibene, Emil Friðfinnsson, Stefán Jón Bernharðsson, Lilja Valdimarsdóttir  
Trumpet: Ásgeir Steingrímsson, Einar Jónsson, Eiríkur Örn Pálsson  
Trombone: Sigurður Þorbergsson, Jón Halldór Finnsson, David Bobroff  
Tuba: Finnbogí Óskarsson  
Harp: Elisabet Waage  
Timpani: Eggert Pálsson  
Percussion: Steef van Oosterhout, Frank Aarnink, Kjartan Guðnason

All music Composed & Conducted by Daníel Bjarnason

Produced & Mixed by Valgeir Sigurðsson

Bow to String  
Sæunn Þorsteinsdóttir: Cello (or 'an infinite number of cellos')  
Valgeir Sigurðsson: Programming on 1st movement, "sorrow conquers happiness"

Processions  
Víkíngur Ólafsson: Piano  
Daníel Bjarnason: Conductor  
Iceland Symphony Orchestra

Skelja  
Katie Buckley: Harp  
Frank Aarnink: Percussion

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Additional engineers Paul Evans & Sturla Mio Þórisson  
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Processions recorded at Háskólabíó, Reykjavík

Tonmeister: Árni Heimir Ingólfsson  
Sound consultant: Sveinn Kjartanson at Sýrland Mobile

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## SOLOISTS

Passionate about music of all times, Icelandic pianist **Vikingur Ólafsson** (b.1984) has appeared throughout Europe, toured China and Canada extensively and given many premieres, including concertos by Daniel Bjarnason and Snorri Birgisson. His debut CD featuring works by Brahms and Beethoven was recorded in Gewandhaus and released by Hands on Music in 2009. A Juilliard graduate from the class of Robert McDonald, his awards and recognitions include two Icelandic Music awards, The American-Scandinavian Society Cultural Prize, Birgir Einarson Memorial Award, Rotary Foundation Cultural Grant and VISA Iceland Cultural Prize. Vikingur Ólafsson was nominated for the Nordic Council Music Prize 2009. [www.vikingurolafsson.com](http://www.vikingurolafsson.com)

Cellist **Sæunn orsteinsdóttir** enjoys a varied musical life as a soloist, chamber musician and teaching artist. She has performed solo throughout the United States and Europe and has received

numerous awards for interpretation and musical personality, including the Zara Nelsova Award at the 2008 Naumburg International Violoncello Competition. As a chamber musician, she has collaborated with Itzhak Perlman and Mitsuko Uchida and participated in music festivals such as Marlboro, Kronberg and Prussia Cove. Born in Reykjavik, Sæunn studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music (BM) and The Juilliard School(MM) and her principal teachers include Richard Aaron, Joel Krosnick and Tanya Lesinsky Carey. [www.saeunn.com](http://www.saeunn.com)

Duo Harpverk was formed in 2007 by harpist **Katie Buckley** and percussionist **Frank Aarnink**. The duo's intention is to perform new music for harp and percussion. Since beginning they have commissioned and performed pieces from composers in Iceland, Holland, England, Australia, United States and more. They continually receive submissions and

perform all over Iceland. Both Frank and Katie are members of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. Katie is from the United States and performs as a soloist and chamber musician and well as being the Principal harpist in the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. Frank, from the Netherlands, performs solo and chamber music and is a percussionist and timpanist in the Iceland Symphony Orchestra.



