

Sigurður Sævarsson: An Icelandic Voice

An interview by Cara Tasher, choral conductor and teacher

Since hearing the ethereal Hamrahlíð Choir at the World Symposium of Choral Music in Copenhagen in 2008 under the direction of founder Þorgerður Ingólfssdóttir, I have been drawn to the choral music of Iceland. To my North American ear, the homogeneous cultural population of Iceland combined with their cohesive choral tradition seems to promote a strong culture of vocal ensemble competency due to the naturally aligned and acoustically resonant vowels of the language. I would like to offer a special thanks to Valgerður G. Halldórsdóttir and the Icelandic Music Centre for her help in exposing our readers to the gorgeous music of this country.

Cara Tasher: *Much of your writing seems a kind of landscape music, incorporating lilting ostinati, drones, and some chant, and you have elegant and somewhat surprising tonal shifts permeating many of your songs. There is a great spaciousness in your writing, and critic John Quinn described one of your pieces as having a “fragile beauty”. How does being Icelandic influence your compositional style?*

Sigurður Sævarsson: Maybe one explanation for this ‘spaciousness’ in my music is the all-encompassing Icelandic nature. Iceland has few and small wooded areas or forests. As one journeys through Iceland, there are views as far as the eye can see. I find it delightful to stand and look out to sea, or to the distant, majestic mountains, or else study the mosses and tiny flowers. Most of my choral works are written with the acoustics of a large church in mind, where each note can weave around the next, creating a gentle, fine web around

the soul. Of course, my music has to be coloured by the beautiful and impressive music which I have listened to throughout my life and sometimes been lucky enough to perform, from Palestrina to James MacMillan. Iceland's musical history is not long. In fact, you might say it did not really begin until the first part of the twentieth century. So it is for this reason that Icelandic composers have looked to composers from other countries as their models. That is why Icelandic choral music is so varied, I think. The influences come from many sources: most composers went abroad for their further studies, both to Europe and the United States.

The first choir in Iceland was founded around 1850. A group of progressive thinkers who thought it was important for the renaissance of the country that Icelanders stopped the tradition of singing old chanted rhymes and quintsong (an oral folk practice of singing in parallel fifths) and change to more modern forms of song. This first choir was founded by students and teachers at the Lærði Skólinn, the only school for higher education in the country at that time. Within a short time, male choirs were dominant in the country's music-making. They were thought to embody the notion of national pride and the nation's struggle for independence. The first women's choir was not founded until 1918. Until then, women had only sung in the handful of mixed choirs, which were often formed for special occasions, such as royal visits by the Danish king, and also in churches.

A vast amount of choral music has been composed in Iceland since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the early days, composers wrote nationalistic works, not surprisingly, as at this time Icelanders were deeply occupied with national freedom and love of their country, which gave the impetus to the founding of the first choirs in Iceland. The first major Icelandic choral work was performed in 1930, a cantata celebrating the thousand-year anniversary of the founding of the Althing, the oldest parliamentary institution in the

world.



Nathan Hall wrote in the Reykjavik Grapevine: “Sigurður invents moments for voices that shine like bells, chiming in and then fading out to a near-inaudible whisper.” Please share your compositional process specifically for a cappella choir.

I always begin with the text. The words lead me onwards. If the text somehow does not move me, then I cannot compose to it. I have often said that, with the notes, I am painting scenery around the text. It does not matter whether the work is short or large, I always use the same technique. When I am composing an *a cappella* work, I need to take more care than usual not to tire the voices: they need to shine from the first note to the last. Simplicity is something else I always strive to respect. I want the listener to hear every note and where it is going – that way, there is also more chance of the text coming across clearly. I have had much valuable experience from singing in excellent choirs with great

conductors. With them, I have taken part in a rich and varied repertoire of works: many great works which have influenced me, and others that were not so great. However, one can still learn a great deal from the not-so-great works!

I want the listener to hear every note and where it is going – that way, there is also more chance of the text coming across clearly.

After choosing a text, what is the first thing you do in crafting a larger work?

I start by reading the text over and over. I want to know it as well as if I had written it myself. If I am working with a text that I have to edit, like my *Passion of Hallgrímur* (based on all 50 of Hallgrímur Pétursson's Psalms), then I work with the text as if it were a libretto. The aim is to make the 'storyline' as clear as possible, and also to ensure that the work does not become too long. I do not write a note until the text is completely ready. Then, if I feel that something more is needed as the work proceeds, I go back to the text to find more. I compose fairly slowly, sometimes taking weeks over a particular phrase that I think could be improved. After that, I need time to distance myself from the work, a few weeks or a month or two, in order to come back to it fresh before I finally let it go. This also applies to my shorter works. It is often the case that while one work is 'proving' on the shelf, another work has already been started.

How did your instruction at Boston University differ from your instruction in Reykjavík?

The biggest difference I noticed straight away was that in the

U.S., I did nothing but study. At home in Iceland, I was working alongside studying, as well as singing in the choir of the Icelandic Opera. Naturally, in Boston everything was much larger than in Iceland. The atmosphere at Boston University was great and I met some wonderful people there. Originally, I enrolled in the Masters Degree programme for singers, but added an extra year to also complete my Masters in composition. I was very happy with my teachers in both departments. I also took part in the opera department's activities and sang in the world premiere of *Freshwater* by Andy Vores. One of my most rewarding experiences was singing in the Marsh Chapel Choir under the direction of Julian Wachner. We rehearsed on Thursdays and sang at Sunday services, which were broadcast live. We covered a lot of repertoire, in the Sunday services and concerts, and it was a great experience working with Julian.

The thirteenth-century Icelandic sagas are handy text sources in terms of their directness and being in the public domain. What will you set next from this body of poetry?

Icelanders are more well-known for their historic Sagas than for their music. Ever since Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) penned the Edda – which J.R.R. Tolkien said influenced him greatly when he wrote his *Lord of the Rings* – many great storytellers and poets have written some of Iceland's most precious pearls. I have studied various texts from this time, some of which are not easy to approach. I had the idea of writing music to the Edda, which, of course, is a mammoth task which I have yet to start. The same applies to my next opera: the libretto for the opera is ready; now the composer just has to sit down at the piano and start.

Describe your dream commission.

There is so much that I want to write for choir. I have assembled quite a few texts which I want to use. Of course, when I get a commission, I ask if there is a favourite text they want me to set to music. My dream commission would be to write a piece with a great text for an excellent and keen choral director and choir. One could not ask for more.

Which are your favourite choral ensembles to listen to (besides Schola Cantorum, of course)?

I must admit I have not followed any particular choir very much. I do, however, buy choral CDs, but usually, I am buying the work, not necessarily the performers. This is not ideal, I know, as sometimes I have to buy another version of the music because of flaws in performance. This does not happen very often though. Going over my collection, I see that I have the most recordings by the Monteverdi Choir, followed by Trinity College Choir and The Sixteen. Nowadays, there are so many great choirs and choral directors.

Name a few other composers that you might recommend to conductors who have never heard Icelandic music before to give them a broader sense of the choral music of your country.

Most Icelandic composers have, at some point in their careers, composed choral music. There are a few ambitious choirs and choral directors in Iceland who commission new works. An example of this is the Hamrahlíð Choir under their director Ms. Þorgerður Ingólfssdóttir. I think I am right in saying that there are only two of us Icelandic composers who have almost entirely devoted themselves to writing choral music in recent years: myself and my colleague from Schola Cantorum, Hreiðar Ingi. If people are interested in getting to know Icelandic choral music better, the Icelandic Music Information Centre itm@mic.is has knowledgeable staff who are always ready to

guide and recommend. And, of course, everybody is welcome to visit my website www.sigurdursaevarsson.com where I am also willing to help.

Nunc dimittis by Sigurdur Saevarsson

Sigurður Sævarsson began the study of singing at the Keflavík School of Music in Iceland with Árni Sighvatsson at age 23, having already been introduced to the violin at age seven. He then attended the New Music School in Reykjavík, where he studied with Sigurður Demetz and Alina Dubik. In 1994, Sigurður began graduate studies at Boston University, where his teachers included William Sharp, Charles Fussel, Sam Headrick and Martin Amlin. In 1997, he earned M.M. degrees in both voice and composition. Sævarsson's main focus since then has been composing opera and choral music. His published oeuvre includes many short choral works, four larger choral works (Requiem, "Missa Pacis, Christmas Oratorio, and Hallgrímsspassía), two operas, two chamber music works, and one song cycle for bass. Currently, Sigurður is a member of Schola Cantorum, one of Iceland's most respected choirs, and serves as the Principal of The New Music School in Reykjavík. Email: s@sigurdursaevarsson.com

***Cara Tasher**, director of choral studies at The University of North Florida since 2006, has garnered experience as singer, chorus master and conductor with choruses and orchestras of the highest calibre. She conducts the Chamber Singers and Chorale at UNF, mentors the undergraduate choral leadership, and teaches the Master's sequence in choral conducting. Proficient in several languages, Tasher's concerts, workshops, and guest performing engagements as both a singer and a conductor have brought her to over twenty countries. She*

*studied at University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, University of Texas at Austin, La Sorbonne, and Northwestern University where she received several honours and awards. Dr. Tasher is active within the community through ACDA, IFCM and NATS. She was awarded the 2010 Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award at the University of North Florida, co-presented 'The Conductor as Voice Teacher' at the World Symposium of Choral Music in 2014, and won her university's Outstanding International Leadership Award in 2016. Email: **cara.tasher@unf.edu***

Edited by Katie Sykes, UK