

# Choral Life in Iceland

*By Sigurður Sævarsson, singer and composer*

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The first choir in Iceland was founded around 1850. A group of progressive thinkers thought it was important for the renaissance of the country that Icelanders should abandon 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. The first choir of this kind was founded by students and teachers at the “Lærði Skólinn”, the only school for further education in the country at that time. Within a short space of 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 (royal visits by the Danish king, and also in churches, for example).

Today, Iceland’s population is approximately 328,000 and choral music has never been so widespread or so ambitious. Most of the nearly two hundred choirs which are in operation today each holds its annual Christmas and spring concerts, and some hold even more: for example, at Easter and other special occasions. Many of these choirs regularly travel abroad, most often to Europe and North America, and also around Iceland.

## Training of Singers

In the early days, the general teaching of singing was rare. A few promising voices had lessons with the handful of singing teachers in Iceland. For advanced tuition, the general destination was Europe, but only if the promising student had financial backing from wealthy individuals. Some of these

students went on to glittering careers and sang in the world's largest opera houses. Others came back to Iceland to teach, and gradually Iceland gained a large group of well-educated singers.

Every year there are some three hundred individuals learning singing. Naturally, not every one of these ends up on the opera stage, as a soloist or teacher, but in the last few years a body of professional choral singers has been established, which mainly sings at funerals. Many of these singers also perform with the Icelandic Opera, which usually mounts two productions annually. A large number of this well-educated group also sings in one or more of Iceland's ambitious chamber choirs. An example of the success of such choirs is Melodia, under the direction of Magnús Ragnarsson, which recently took part in the "Bela Bartók Choral Competition" in Debrecen, Hungary, to great acclaim. The choir shared second place in the chamber choir category with a choir from the Czech Republic. Melodia was also chosen to sing in the *Grand Prix* category. Another dominant choir is Schola Cantorum, formed in 1996 by Hörður Áskelsson, the Cantor of Iceland's largest church, Hallgrímskirkja – the Church of Hallgrímur – in Reykjavík. The choir has been the recipient of many prizes and much recognition, attracting critical acclaim in both in Iceland and abroad. The choir has released almost ten compact discs, containing many works specially composed for it.

Another example of choirs which have been active in performing music composed for them is the Hljómeyki chamber choir directed by Marta Guðrún Halldórsdóttir, and also the Hamrahlíð choirs, founded and directed by Þorgerður Ingólfssdóttir. Many of the country's best musicians performed with the Hamrahlíð School Choir as teens. This choir has toured widely and always receives unstinted praise.

From a very long list, mention must also be made of three further choral directors. First, Ingólfur Guðbrandsson, one of

the passionate pioneers of choral singing in the twentieth century. Ingólfur – who is the father of Þorgerður, mentioned above – founded Pólýfónkórinn in 1958, and this choir performed many of the repertoire's largest choral works, both in Iceland and on their numerous tours abroad.

Also deserving of mention is Jón Stefánsson, organist and choral director at the Church of Bishop Guðbrandur, Langholtskirkja, in Reykjavík. Stefánsson has founded and directed many choirs connected with this church, including children's choirs and girls' choirs as well as the mixed choir, and has directed performances of many large-scale works in the choral repertoire.

Last but not least, mention must be made of opera singer Garðar Cortes, founder of the Icelandic Opera and the Reykjavík Academy of Singing and Vocal Arts. After retiring as head of the Opera, he founded the Icelandic Opera Choir, which amongst many other projects gives an annual performance of Mozart's Requiem. This is a midnight candlelit concert, with orchestra, on the anniversary of the composer's death, where the performance of the uncompleted work halts at the exact moment where Mozart is said to have died. For all of those who have attended these performances, this is a long-remembered and deeply-felt experience.

Performances by most of the choirs mentioned above can be found on YouTube.



**Motett Choir, cond. Hörður Áskelsson**

## **Hallgrímskirkja – The Church of Hallgrímur**

When discussing choral activities in Iceland one has to make special mention of the immense part played by Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavík. The building itself towers over all other buildings in the city, and I maintain that its choral activities also tower above all others in Iceland.

The church's main choir, Mótettukórinn – the Hallgrímskirkja Motet Choir – was founded in 1982 by the aforementioned Hörður Áskelsson. The choir has been the recipient of many awards, the most recent being at the choral competition *Cançó Mediterrània* in Spain in September 2014, where the choir was awarded three prizes and was also voted the best choir at the competition. This choir has performed many of the larger works in the choral repertoire as well as introducing new music and singing both foreign and national favourites. As well as their duties at religious services, the choir gives an average of ten concerts per year.

As has been mentioned before, the chamber choir, Schola Cantorum, is also based at Hallgrím's Church. This choir gives about twenty concerts a year, and performs at lunchtime concerts every Wednesday during the summer: these performances

are attended by large groups of tourists who visit the church. Mention must also be made of the "International Organ Summer" series which is a summer-long festival with over forty concerts given by Icelandic and international guest organists. Finally, but by no means least, is the Church Arts Festival, which is a biannual event held in the church. The next festival will be from 14<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2015. Concerts will include the first performance in Iceland of Handel's oratorio "Solomon", as well as other concerts of all kinds of music, and the finale of the Festival will be the so-called "Hymn-Falls" (Sálmafoss), which is held as part of the Reykjavík "Culture Night". Many choirs from around the country are invited to participate in this marathon from noon until night. This event is attended by several thousand people, who are able to come and go during the day's events. It also includes the first performances of new hymns specially commissioned from poets and composers.

## **Icelandic Choral Works**

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. This gave the impetus to the founding of the first choirs in Iceland. The first major Icelandic choral work, performed in 1930, was a cantata celebrating one thousand years since the founding of the Althing, the oldest parliamentary institution in the world. A competition was established, which was won by Dr Páll Ísólfsson, organist and composer. The Cantata is in ten movements, for mixed choir, soloist and orchestra. For this occasion, a one hundred-strong Festival Choir was established and the work was conducted by the composer. The undersigned was fortunate enough to take part in a performance of this

work with the Icelandic Opera Choir, under the direction of Garðar Cortes, some twenty years ago. I have to say that I cannot recall another work filled with so many climaxes. I felt as if I were standing on a beach watching great wave after wave crashing on the shore; the work was literally bursting with a passionate love of country. Many other large-scale works have since been composed, mainly oratorios and sacred works. One must not, however, forget the multitude of smaller works which have embedded themselves into the hearts of Icelanders. It is not at all unusual that at any ordinary spring choral concert, the majority of music performed is Icelandic.

Because Iceland has so many accomplished and enthusiastic choral directors, who are for the most part ready and eager to try new music, Icelandic composers have the urge to write choral music for them. Composers know that their music will be given a fine performance, and this wills them on to continue in the same vein. Perhaps the number of Icelandic composers who write only choral music is not so great, but they are prolific, so that every year a few tens of works are added to the repertoire. Needless to say, other composers who write perhaps mainly instrumental music are also writing a choral work or two!

The Iceland Music Information Centre (ICEMIC) is the place to look if you want to study or buy Icelandic choral music. ICEMIC was founded by the Society of Icelandic Composers in 1968 in order to publish and promote Icelandic music. The Centre archives manuscripts, and now just about all music by Icelandic composers has been scanned and is available either in digital form or printed to order. ICEMIC will soon be opening their online shop, and information on the music can be found on their website: [www.mic.is](http://www.mic.is) . Enquiries can be sent to [itm@mic.is](mailto:itm@mic.is). I encourage you to make use of the excellent service ICEMIC provides.



kammerkór Hallgrímskirkju,  
Schola cantorum

## Postlude

Of course, the Icelandic choral tradition is no longer unique. People follow what is going on elsewhere in the world, they travel a lot and many have studied abroad and come to know choral practices outside Iceland. But does Icelandic music somehow differ from music elsewhere? I am afraid I cannot answer this question: it is for you, dear reader, to judge. There is much Icelandic music on the internet, on YouTube and other sources. Some Icelandic choral music is available in online shops, such as Amazon and iTunes, as well as on Icelandic websites. I urge you to look around and see if you can find the answer to my question!