



ONDINE

JÓN NORDAL

Choralis

Orchestral works

Iceland Symphony Orchestra
Johannes Gustavsson



JÓN NORDAL

JÓN NORDAL (1926)

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|---|--|-------|
| 1 | Choralis (1982) | 13:45 |
| 2 | Adagio for flute, harp, piano and string orchestra (1966) | 13:45 |
| 3 | Langnætti (1975) | 12:09 |
| 4 | Epitafion (1974) | 14:38 |
| 5 | Leiðsla (1973) | 15:10 |

ICELAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
JOHANNES GUSTAVSSON, conductor

APOLLONIAN LAVA

procrastination

This selection of five orchestral works by Jón Nordal presents a certain symmetry as to their time of composition: a set of three pieces written in 1973–75 with a seven-year lapse separating them from the preceding and the following pieces, from 1966 and 1982. This span of sixteen years may be viewed as the core of his creative career: a long career, yet marked by self-restraint and doubt, with a number of creative pauses.

Holding a post as head of the Reykjavík College of Music certainly did not encourage productivity but these pauses may primarily be ascribed to doubt. After such a brilliant début as the Piano Concerto from 1957, one probably gets to know that certain feeling a successfully crafted form generates, and after that it is hard to settle for artistic compromise.

But we need not even take that into account. For Nordal, composing has always been a very intimate act. Nothing comes automatically. Despite his solid musical education and outstanding beginnings, craftsmanship never became a substitute for spiritual necessity. Few composers have been as uncompromising in this respect, and the price he paid for this was high indeed. In some cases he simply had to cancel delivery of a commissioned piece, there being no question of finding an easy way out. At other times he would typically deliver at the very last possible moment – way past all deadlines – causing considerable physical and psychological strain for everyone involved, most of all himself.

pillow lava

This tendency for procrastination might be considered a private detail, unrelated to the outcome, but in the case of Jón Nordal it is relevant: for him, creation is the result of pressure.

Pillow lava is a familiar geological formation in Iceland. It is a formation of lava rock where the flowing magma has encountered resistance, typically that of cold water. Due to the pressure, a crust forms on the edge, temporarily halting the flux. The crust resists until – due to inner pressure – it cracks and the lava advances. This dynamic repeats itself and the lava flows on in small gushes, forming what looks like a stack of pillows. These pillows are like the steps Nordal takes towards completing a piece. Every new decision has to break through a hard crust of resistance formed by taste, a demand for relevance, and that unspoken feeling of the right path. To put it in his own words: “There is a path I get started on and I immediately feel if I stray away from it.” And if he does not find the path there will be no completed work.

fascination and perplexity

Speaking of pressure, there is no denying the pressure the Structuralist revolution of the Darmstadt school put on all composers in the 1960s and 1970s. Suddenly composing became burdened with political and aesthetic implications.

Jón Nordal attended the Darmstadt summer courses in 1957 and followed the latest progress of new music with a mixture of fascination and perplexity. A creative silence of almost a decade ensued, only briefly interrupted in 1962 by an experiment bearing the typically Structuralist title *Brotaspil* (Play of fragments).

Finally in 1966, the shell broke and he completed *Adagio* [track 2] at the request of his good friend Bohdan Wodiczko, then chief conductor of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. We learn from Marcel Proust that the breaking of creative barriers is by nature unpredictable. In retrospect, we may nevertheless assume that this piece would not have been possible without a couple of important findings.

Firstly, the decision to reduce the orchestral forces to strings alone, with flute, harp and piano as ‘obligato’ parts. This enabled the composer to avoid the orchestral tone he was brought up in and somehow opened the door to the more intimate idiom he was seeking. The solo instruments move on the borderline between individuality and generality, creating a remarkable textural fusion and balance.

Secondly, this work displays a way of being at ease with totally chromatic material. In fact, it makes constant use of all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale without accepting the restrictions of twelve-tone technique. This does not imply that the approach is whimsical or uncontrolled: it is as rigorous a work as ever written by Nordal. Its atmosphere is inconceivable without a predecessor like Anton Webern – highly respected by Nordal – but poetically speaking, it bears a very different message. We get all the fascination of a very chromatic soundworld transferred to a totally personal realm.

Although we should generally avoid interpreting musical forms too literally, there is definitely the feeling of a certain musical narrative in *Adagio*, especially in the light of the composer’s creative path. It comes quite naturally to hear the opening piano figure as a question. “Have we come to a chromatic realm, should we voice our message in the sombre hues of chromatic clusters?” The harp replies “perhaps”. When the strings come in their answer is “yes, but the message is something different, the structure need not guide the narrative”. In fact, although we may trace the opening cell in their entry, the pitches are distributed in such a way that the resulting harmonies are more open.

What follows is a truly fascinating ‘discussion’ informed by the dichotomy between a dense and chromatic texture on the one hand and broad, harmonic musical ideas. This may be said to culminate when the two ideas come together, violins and harp playing an interrupted chromatic line against a broad chord on the piano and lower strings. The texture speaks very clearly, with its rhythmical movement of

the piano and strings. Such a repeated rhythmically exposed chord is a recurrent figure in Nordal's music, often as a counterpoint to a more lyrical idea. The overall impression is that of a perfectly balanced form, finding a harmony of its own, modern yet personal.

active meditation

The form seeks balance. Our geological metaphor was not meant to say this music is of a telluric nature, quite the contrary: the outbursts of creativity are of an Apollonian nature, gently discursive and rationally lyrical, having an even rhythmic flow, with just enough blurring of the sound image for it to maintain its depth and attraction. There are certainly some dramatic outbreaks, but they mostly appear as accents in an otherwise even flow.

Dance and exuberance are all but foreign to Nordal's music, which is more about intimate expression, even meditation. Such is certainly the case in *Leiðsla* [track 5] for full orchestra from 1973. The meaning of the Icelandic word *leiðsla* may offer an insight into this work. It refers to a state of mind, slightly more conscious than a trance, yet very meditative, a sort of active and even productive meditation. The composer has revealed that the atmosphere of this piece was influenced by the Mediaeval poem *Sólarljóð*, which contains a beautiful ode to the sun.

The form proceeds between clearly depicted mental states with small bursts of individual comments. The large orchestra is used with assurance, proceeding through different states without portraying any themes too distinctly. It is not until after more than eight minutes that we experience something resembling conventional music, with a sort of memory of independent voice-leading in the strings. This proves to be just another mental state in the general trance and gives way to the blocks of chords that characterise much of the piece, sometimes resembling Messiaen's timeless and colourful soundblocks.

the pressure of grief

The appearance of motive-like behaviour in *Leiðsla* is significant. Only a year later, Nordal completed *Epitafion* [track 4], clearly characterised by the use of ostinato motives.

This piece has a special place in his oeuvre. It was written without being commissioned, simply from the need to honour the memory of a close friend – cellist Einar Vigfússon – who tragically passed away some weeks earlier.

Scored for small orchestra without brass, it achieves a similar textural balance as *Adagio*, but it is very different music. From the very first chord, so much of the music here seems to contain the memory of another epoch – just consider the strangely Mahlerian string section in the beginning – but it never

becomes a quote. Just as *Adagio* maintains a perfectly personal character while using serial elements, *Epitafion* achieves the same intimacy and unity of character while making use of thematic and almost tonal techniques such as the ostinato. This piece achieves a highly expressive atmosphere with refined and carefully nuanced means. It is certainly a remarkable epitaph and was met with favour and gratitude by the musicians of the orchestra on the occasion of its premiere in Reykjavík shortly after it was completed.

The last work in this three-piece set from 1973–75 comes *Langnætti* (Winter Darkness)[track 3], with some surprising new traits. Although it does not rely on a theme in the traditional sense, we definitely encounter a recurrent behaviour – the fast note-sequences exposed by the piano in the beginning. It is as if the composer had decided to bring the idea of ostinato to the surface and give it a central structural role.

The confidence revealed by this very focused and rhythmically lively music perhaps allows the assembly of a form with sharper caesuras than hitherto seen in Nordal's music. In fact, despite the sombre title we hear a playful formal construction, with the fast sequences disappearing and returning on different instruments until at the formal climax they appear in multiple layers and give rise to a sort of epiphany: a sound block comprising all possible pitches, somehow resembling some of Ligeti's sound masses. The sequence of pitches succumbs to the temptation of becoming pure sound, all of a sudden forgetting all discourse, but only for a while.

This climax arrives only after extended moments of doubt and then fades away in a whimsical solo of the oboe. This is certainly the most original and unexpected of Nordal's formal constructions. The affirmative character of the initial idea certainly does not lead to a straightforward and unproblematic overall form, but we do get a taste of some of the most Dionysian music Nordal ever wrote.

a strange tune

Choralis [track 1] was written to a commission from Mstislav Rostropovich for the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington in 1982. Here we witness one of the rare cases where Nordal incorporates folklore in his music. The tune in question is no arbitrary choice. It is the very unusual *Liljúlág* that has riddled scholars for decades. Here, it is brought in by the lower strings after about one minute of introduction.

The reason scholars are fascinated with this tune is that it is in a tonality or mode that is hard to define, and with a clearly pronounced diminished fifth between the first and third note, making it harsh to some ears. Some have wondered whether this peculiarity might simply be the result of a copying error, but it might also be the very reason for its popularity; also, this melody has a strange beauty to it. Although odd at first hearing, it has its own musical appeal.

This peculiarity also makes it a choice material for the modern composer. Although stated only once, this tune seems to lurk behind all events in *Choralis*, often giving rise to distinct choral gestures in the



orchestra. As to the form, this piece goes back to the fluid and linear formal construction most common in Nordal's music. Fragments of the melody constantly appear on the surface, acting as a musical cement, with every new utterance adding something to our image of it.

Jón Nordal has stated that although he was generally not attracted to using pre-existing materials, at times traditional sources such as here can add some extra life to the music. We clearly sense the ease with which this piece unfolds and perhaps here the Icelandic folk tune had a similar effect on his work as serialism had on *Adagio*, allowing him a central idea to hold on to and confront his imagination with, without following any dogma as to the precise method.

The final interval of the piece, an augmented fourth clearly stated in the first violins, is at the same time the most abstract of intervals and the most traditional, the distillation of the essential trait of *Liljulag* and atonal music alike, but we hear it just as the conclusion of a remarkably coherent work, that in turn concludes the remarkably rich quintet of orchestral pieces that this disc so fortunately brings together.

Atli Ingólfsson

Founded in 1950, the **Iceland Symphony Orchestra** is Iceland's national orchestra. The orchestra has been widely praised for its performances and recordings, and each year it presents a full season of subscription concerts, school and family concerts, and concerts devoted to modern music. Vladimir Ashkenazy has conducted the orchestra regularly since the early 1970s and currently holds the position of Conductor Laureate. In September 2016, Yan Pascal Tortelier assumed the post of Principal Conductor, previously held by conductors such as Jean-Pierre Jacquillat, Petri Sakari, Rumon Gamba, Ilan Volkov, and Osmo Vänskä, who holds the title of Principal Guest Conductor. Since 2011, the orchestra's home has been Harpa Concert Hall in downtown Reykjavík.

The Iceland Symphony Orchestra has recorded widely for various international labels. The orchestra's complete cycle of Sibelius symphonies under the direction of Petri Sakari was much praised by critics. Most recently, the orchestra has recorded the complete orchestral works of Vincent d'Indy with Rumon Gamba for the Chandos label. The first volume of the series was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2008 for Best Orchestral Performance, and the second volume was an Editor's Choice selection in Gramophone magazine. The Iceland Symphony Orchestra has toured widely in Europe and the United States. Its concerts abroad include appearances at the BBC Proms and at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., as well as two concerts in Carnegie Hall, in 1996 and again in 2000. The New York Times' critic Alex Ross described the orchestra's performance under Osmo Vänskä as "sensational... one of the finest Sibelius performances I have encountered."

www.sinfonia.is/en

Johannes Gustavsson is one of Sweden's leading young conductors. He is a versatile artist and conducts both symphonic and operatic repertoire on a high level with numerous leading Scandinavian orchestras and opera companies on a regular basis, including the Swedish Radio Orchestra, Stockholm Philharmonic, the Royal Swedish Opera, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Gothenburg Opera, Oslo Philharmonic and Kristiansand Symphony Orchestra. In the present and coming seasons Johannes Gustavsson will conduct the Turku Philharmonic Orchestra, Odense Symphony Orchestra, Sønderjylland Symphony Orchestra, Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra among others.

Since 2009 Gustavsson has been one of the regular conductors of the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra and from August 2010 to June 2014 he was First Guest Conductor with the Västerås Sinfonietta. The Nordic Chamber Orchestra in Sundsvall, Sweden, appointed him Artistic Advisor from autumn 2010 and the Oulu Symphony Orchestra appointed him Artistic Partner from 2011. In 2012, the Oulu Symphony Orchestra appointed him chief conductor for a period of three years. In July 2015, Johannes Gustavsson was appointed Chief Conductor at Wermlandsoperan in Sweden.

Gustavsson has an extensive repertoire and he has premiered more than 30 orchestral works written by Nordic composers. Gustavsson has been awarded several times. He is the first recipient of the Swedish Conductors' Award and the first conductor to receive the Herbert Blomstedt Conductor's Award. He has won prizes in the Solti competition in Frankfurt and the Toscanini competition in Italy.

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[66:30] • English notes enclosed

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