

History on their Shoulders: Music and Nation-Building in Iceland

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**Abstract**

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Music making in Iceland has historically been considered a minor form of expressive culture. Compared with the academic and popular attention given to the nation's Viking-age settlement, epic medieval literature, and well-preserved language, music making in Iceland has been significantly understudied. One of the driving questions of this dissertation explores this striking imbalance and asks why local forms of music making in Iceland have been relatively neglected in both academic accounts and popular discourse. In answering this question I explore three related issues: post-colonialism, nationalism, and senses of history. In summary, this dissertation puts music making at the center of a series of case studies to show how Icelanders use music to assert who they are and how they aspire to be seen as a nation.

This dissertation blends ethnographic writing and historical narrative, with both approaches grounded in the fieldwork I conducted in the Nordic region between 2008 and 2012. Iceland is the focus of this dissertation, while the larger North Atlantic and Nordic regions are

also discussed. My aim with this multi-sited approach is to bring contemporary Iceland into a larger regional context. In the course of this research I conducted interviews and observations with musicians, music educators, government policy makers, record label owners and producers, local scholars, tourism industry workers, concert goers, as well as friends and acquaintances. Where appropriate, and when invited, I took on the position of participant-observer and joined in as a music maker throughout my fieldwork.

Chapter One introduces the reader to key points in Iceland's historical development, and positions this study alongside three main issues, including national identity, post-colonialism, and senses of history. Following this, I provide a series of case studies that examine diverse forms of music making as documented during my fieldwork in the Nordic region. Together this material provides a critical engagement with historical and contemporary forms of music making in Iceland while also demonstrating the importance of past and present cultural entanglements across the North Atlantic.

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**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. April Greenan, Dr. Bruce Quaglia, and Dr. Larry Loeb who each played a role in introducing me to the field of ethnomusicology and for encouraging me academically and personally at a pivotal time and place.

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## Preface

This dissertation examines contemporary music making in Iceland in relation to three main issues: post-colonialism, national identity, and senses of history. In some ways this material is remarkably far away from what I originally planned to study as a graduate student, but in other ways it addresses the same questions that first drew me to graduate studies and the field of ethnomusicology. I was introduced to ethnomusicology as a vocal performance major at an institution where the majority of the undergraduate coursework in music history, theory, repertoire, and performance was drawn almost exclusively from Western European (i.e. Austro-Germanic, Italian, and French) practices prior to the 20th century. Much of this material was new and fascinating to me and I was particularly excited to study and perform 19th century *Lieder*, but I also grew increasingly curious about music beyond this narrow scope. I began to meet and discuss my budding interests with a few of my professors, and was fortunate to be taken under the wings of a few dedicated professors who encouraged me to look into ethnomusicology.

At the time, my undergraduate institution was without an ethnomusicologist on the faculty and there was no musicological coursework available beyond historical Western European material. But for my last two years of undergraduate study, I spent an hour each week discussing core texts and exploring new (to me) approaches to the study of music with an anthropologist on campus who also had an interest in ethnomusicology. Near the end of this course of study I embarked on my first attempt at sustained ethnographic research with local Tibetans living in Salt Lake City. I explored generational shifts in perspectives of heritage and Tibetan music as each new generation became more and more removed from physically having

lived in Tibet. Unsurprisingly, this initial research was a bit rough as I worked to hone my interviewing and writing skills, but it solidified my interest in ethnomusicology.

When I first enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Washington, I intended to continue working with material related to music and refugee experiences of Tibetans. In order to better inform my studies I took a class with Dr. Guntis Šmidchens in my first year titled *Immigrant and Ethnic Folklore*, which happened to be offered through the Scandinavian Studies Department. I quickly became fascinated by the Nordic region and was drawn to the prospect of studying contemporary issues in European music making. Through careful advising and a bit of happenstance, I enrolled in Danish language courses during my second year of graduate school and have been strongly involved in Scandinavian topics since then. This included a culminating essay for my master's degree in which I focused on the late Sudanese-Danish popular musician, Natasja Saad and related issues of transnationalism and ethnicity. Over the next three years I proceeded to spend three to six months of each year studying and researching in Copenhagen.

The material and approaches included in this dissertation grew out of my research and experiences in Denmark, although the geographic scope further expanded into the far North Atlantic. As I continued to focus on material related to immigrant and ethnic minorities in Denmark, I came to work with the often overlooked internal post-colonial migrants from Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland. I undertook this research at a time when public debates about cultural belonging in Denmark tended to be predicated on an understanding of Denmark as a small homogenous nation-state. Positioning the North Atlantic as part of the Danish cultural realm, both historically and in contemporary contexts, seemed posed to

complicate the idea of Denmark as an ethnically homogeneous space. This approach drew on Homi Bhabha's argument that "the Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity" (Bhabha 1994, 9). As explored later in this dissertation, Denmark, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland have been entwined for centuries largely thanks to Danish colonial practices and policies throughout the North Atlantic region.

My most recent research period in Denmark, between February and June 2011, focused on music making among Icelanders, Faroese, and Greenlanders in Copenhagen. During this period I spent time at the different cultural centers for each of these groups around the city, and noted the prominence of musical activities hosted by each of these centers. I then combined ethnographic research in Copenhagen with historical research on how music making across the North Atlantic has been shaped by shared networks and routes under Danish rule. Following this research in Denmark, I then relocated to Iceland for nine months between September 2011 and June 2012 and to the Faroe Islands from July 2012 to September 2012. My intention with this multi-sited research was to avoid over-privileging Denmark as a powerful center and to incorporate experiences and perspectives from the islands themselves.

The fieldwork period of my research directed my work in sometimes surprising and unexpected ways. As I continued to gather material and travel to new locations, I amassed far more material than I had originally foreseen. After returning from my fieldwork to begin the writing process, I was faced with the difficult task of choosing what material to leave in the dissertation and what to leave out. I ultimately chose to focus specifically on the material I

worked with related to Iceland. I hope that in future projects I will be able to more fully focus on the regional aspect of the North Atlantic, but in this dissertation I explore the larger themes and issues that framed my fieldwork specifically in relation to music making in Iceland. Where appropriate I have retained some sections of material dealing with Faroese, Greenlandic, and Danish music making, but the focus remains on music making in Iceland and by Icelanders abroad.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation blends ethnographic writing and historical narrative. Both of these approaches are grounded in the fieldwork I conducted in the Nordic region between 2008 and 2012. As previously mentioned, Iceland is at the center of this dissertation, while the larger North Atlantic and Nordic regions are also discussed. In taking this approach, my aim is to bring contemporary Iceland into a larger regional context. I consider it vital to view Iceland as part of a larger region and as connected to the outside world in order to counter a tendency in academic and popular discourses to over-isolate Iceland geographically and culturally.

In the course of this research I observed and conducted interviews with musicians, music educators, government policy makers, record label owners and producers, local scholars, tourism industry workers, concert goers, as well as friends and acquaintances. Where appropriate, and when invited, I took on the position of participant-observer and joined in as a music maker throughout my fieldwork. My research mainly focused on adult (18+) music making across divides of popular, classical, and traditional forms. In situations where children were involved, I

was an observer only and did not interview or work directly with them. I remained aware that my presence, whether as participant or strictly as observer, inherently influenced the activities and people involved. I do not claim that this is an authoritative or timeless account of music making, but instead an analysis of music making in Iceland and the Nordic region as I was fortunate enough to experience it.

In addition to these interactions with music making, I also conducted extensive interviews with musicians, educators, politicians, and diverse music industry workers. I include the names of these individuals in this writing where the specific role or status held by the person would reveal their identity whether I divulged their name or not. Where the person's identity would not be immediately obvious based on their role in the research, I have chosen to withhold their full name to maintain their privacy.

This research engaged complicated language politics in the North Atlantic, and I was conscious of the language I used to interact with individuals during my fieldwork. I am considerably more proficient in Danish, having studied the language since 2007, than in other Nordic languages. I have, however, studied Icelandic since 2010, and I studied Faroese over the summer of 2012. Due in part to the historical relationships between Denmark and Iceland, Danish remains compulsory for Icelandic students. Icelanders, however, do not typically use Danish as a true second language in the same manner as Faroese and Greenlanders do. Older Icelanders, particularly those born prior to 1944 and in the decade or so following, are more likely to speak Danish comfortably than younger generations. But as a native American-English speaker significantly more proficient in Danish than in Icelandic, I encouraged those I worked

with, whether native Icelandic or Danish speakers, to choose which language they preferred to use when interacting with me. During the fieldwork I discuss in Chapter Five that also involved native Faroese and Greenlandic speakers, Danish tended to be the language of choice between us. While the politics of language remain complicated, many of these individuals did not speak English, leaving Danish as our common language. Even when individuals did speak English, proceeding in Danish tended to create a more level field with everyone functioning in a non-native language. Throughout this dissertation, all translations from Danish, Icelandic, and Faroese into English are my own. Quotations included in this dissertation are taken from interviews conducted in either Danish, English, or Icelandic, and have been edited only as necessary due to issues of translation or clarity.

I came to consult the musicians and individuals I worked with in many different ways. When making contact with individuals I initially corresponded with them or their managers directly and received permission to proceed with the research. I also worked with larger groups of musicians including choirs and *Kvæðamannafélög*, which are societies dedicated to the performance and practice of a traditional form of Icelandic singing known as *rímur*. When making contact with these groups, I corresponded with the director or the foreperson of the group in advance. I provided the groups with information sheets that explained the nature and scope of my research prior to interacting with them. I received consent from each individual I interviewed in order to record the interview and potentially use the material for research and educational purposes. Everyone I worked with was assured that they did not have to participate in this research and that they could stop the interview or stop working with me at any point.

In an effort to fully place myself in this research, it is worth reiterating my position as a precarious outsider. I came to the area of Iceland late in my graduate studies, after having been led further and further north through Europe. During my fieldwork others often assumed that I must have Nordic heritage in order to be interested in this material; but, while I am a white European American, I have no familial or cultural ties to the Nordic area. Yet, to call myself a complete outsider in this region would be to ignore the inroads an Anglophone can make into the Nordic realm through learning a local language, as well as the relations formed through the process of ethnographic research. The strength of education in English in both Denmark and Iceland would have allowed me to complete a significant amount of this research without learning either Danish or Icelandic. Thus, while my language skills fall far below the level of native proficiency, the fluency I did obtain was vital to the establishment of relationships in the field with my consultants and to more fully understanding the situations around me.

This research demanded a high level of study and preparation on my part, but it is ultimately a project of collaboration between myself and the people I consulted. As others have similarly tried to articulate, I take full responsibility for the shortcomings of this work while giving credit to those I worked with for the material included. For many of the musicians I worked with, there was often a sense of amusement and skepticism that an American researcher such as myself would be able to find anything worthwhile about them to write. At the very least, I hope this document faithfully demonstrates that yes, there are indeed many worthwhile things about them and the music they make.

## Chapter 1: Positioning Iceland

Music making in Iceland has historically been considered a minor form of expressive culture.<sup>1</sup> Compared with the academic and popular attention given to the nation's Viking-age settlement, epic medieval literature and well-preserved language, music making in Iceland has been significantly understudied. Accounts of music making on the island prior to the early 20th century typically depict music as virtually non-existent or of an embarrassingly low quality (Ingólfsson 2004, 4).<sup>2</sup> One of the driving questions of this dissertation explores this striking imbalance and asks why local forms of music making in Iceland have been relatively neglected in both academic accounts and popular discourse. In answering this question I explore three related issues: post-colonialism, nationalism, and senses of history. In summary, this dissertation puts music making at the center of a series of case studies to show how Icelanders use music to assert who they are and how they aspire to be seen as a nation.

The purpose of this first chapter is to familiarize the reader with pertinent historical and cultural developments in Iceland and to introduce each of the three main issues (post-colonialism, nationalism, and senses of history) in relation to music making. In the chapters to

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<sup>1</sup> Icelandic historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon has argued, for example, that “The [Icelandic] medieval literature has been an almost overwhelming presence in Icelandic culture and society. In some ways the prestige of the literature can be seen as having stunted the development of other art forms. Even in the twentieth century, when music, pictorial art and other art forms started to emerge as independent entities, one is still often aware of the weight of the literature on the work produced” (Magnússon 2010, 252).”

<sup>2</sup> Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, an Icelandic musicologist, makes note of the influential German historian and philologist Konrad von Maurer's argument that Icelanders were completely unmusical, as published in von Maurer's 1874 volume *Island von seiner ersten Entdeckung bis zum Untergange des Freistaats (Iceland from its First Discovery to the Fall of the Free State)*.

follow, I build on this foundation with specific case studies drawn from my fieldwork in Iceland between September 2011 and June 2012. I also draw on fieldwork conducted in Denmark between February and June 2011 and in the Faroe Islands between July and September of 2012. This multi-sited approach expands Iceland beyond its physical boundaries to explore how an Icelandic cultural, political, and historical realm extends and overlaps into neighboring places. I draw on arguments from Kristín Loftsdóttir (2012) and Paul Gilroy (1993) that national entities and identities are shaped by “transverse dynamics” instead of entirely within their own nationalized space (Loftsdóttir 2012, 600). The multi-sited nature of my research within the the North Atlantic demonstrates that national identities in the region have been formed, and continue to form, in relation to each other.

## **History and Issues**

In order to understand the role of boundary formation, particularly as it relates to post-colonialism, nationalism, and senses of history, a few key aspects of Icelandic history are worth reviewing. Iceland was initially settled around 870 CE when Viking migrants from the west coast of Norway travelled across the North Atlantic (Hastrup 1984, 235). Around the same time, Vikings also travelled and settled in the Faroe Islands and eventually in Greenland. At that point in time, the biggest distinction between these Viking settlements was the physical location of their new homes. None of these islands were home to a pre-existing permanent population at the time (Hambrecht 2012, 474) and this enabled the Viking settlers to develop new societies.

Despite the harsh climate, life threatening seismic activity,<sup>3</sup> and economic hardship that settlers in Iceland routinely faced, the island has remained inhabited by descendants of the original Viking settlers as well as other migrants since the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. In the time between when the Viking settlers traveled to Iceland as essentially Norwegian migrants and today, the people living in Iceland have come to see themselves as uniquely Icelandic. The development of an Icelandic identity as distinct from other Nordic areas has been the focus of significant scholarly research (see for example Hastrup 1990; Ísleifsson 2011; Loftsdóttir 2011). This effort to establish differentiation in this area with shared roots and overlapping histories is essential to understanding both the North Atlantic and the larger Nordic realm (Wylie 1981, 9).

### *National Identity*

The development of an Icelandic national identity gradually emerged over centuries of Dano-Norwegian governance of the island. The initial period of settlement began around 870 CE and lasted until 930 CE, at which time a common law was established on the island and the *Alþing* was declared the legal center. This period is now known as the Icelandic “free state” period and it lasted until about 1262 CE. At that time, Icelanders swore allegiance to the Norwegian crown (Hastrup 1984, 235). The settlement period and the free state period are together considered to have been periods of great growth and increased independence from the rulers back in Norway. This period of relative freedom from Norway, however, ended in 1262

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<sup>3</sup> Numerous volcanic explosions throughout the history of the island have threatened the inhabitants, including the Laki eruption in 1783-1784 that killed over a quarter of the island’s population, the 1973 eruption in the Westman Islands, and, more recently, the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull.

when the Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarson regained control of Iceland, along with the Faroe Islands, and Greenland (Karlsson 2000, 89).

Iceland remained in Norwegian control up until the formation of the Kalmar Union united the Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian kingdoms under one ruler in 1397. At this time Margrethe, daughter of the Danish King Valdemar was married to Norwegian King Hákon VI, who was the son of Magnus Eriksson of Norway and Sweden (Gustafsson 2006, 207). The Kalmar Union collapsed in 1536, at which time Norway and its North Atlantic possessions were subsumed under the Danish crown, while Sweden and Finland (at that time a Swedish dependency) separated politically from the Dano-Norwegians (Gustafsson 2006, 214). Danish rule over Iceland then solidified with the introduction of absolutism under the Danish King Frederik III in 1660 which lasted until 1848 (Gustafsson 1998, 201). Danish control remained in place until Iceland became a sovereign state in union with Denmark in 1918 and finally a fully independent state in 1944 (Hálfðanarson 2006, 88).

Between 1600 and 1918, Icelanders were subject to poor economic and political standing within the Danish realm. The nature of some of the imposed policies, including a strict trade monopoly between Iceland and Copenhagen from 1602 to 1787 (Gunnarsson 1983), severely limited the ability of Icelanders to develop economic markets separate from Copenhagen. This restrictive economic policy, combined with Danish control of educational and religious institutions, as well as governance of the island effectively turned Iceland into a Danish colony during this period. Writing about this situation, historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson posited that,

Comparing the dismal reality of contemporary Icelandic social and cultural life with the glorious period of the sagas in the 10th and the 11th centuries, the intellectuals

could not avoid pondering the question why their country had declined so spectacularly in the centuries from its first settlement. In the saga period, Icelanders were heroes, equally equipped to fight with the sword and the word, while in the 18th century, according to one pre-romantic commentator, Icelandic society was on the brink of extinction ‘terminating in a wretched, sullen, acrimonious, and ever-wicked and infamous lethargy’ (Hálfðanarson 2010, 90).

Thus the free-state era came to be seen as a hopeful model of what colonial Iceland could become if freed from Danish control. Many even viewed potential independence from Denmark as an actual restoration of the Icelandic free-state (Oslund 2011, 210).

Icelandic sovereignty finally came after nearly a century of Icelandic national awakening that began in the early 19th century. Prior to this period it is difficult to say what, if anything, characterized a specifically Icelandic national identity. In a situation with strong parallels to other post-colonial situations, the Icelandic independence movement was centered in Denmark itself among a core group of Icelandic students studying at the University of Copenhagen.<sup>4</sup> When the absolutism of the Danish king ended in 1848, giving birth to the Danish nation-state, these Icelandic students in Copenhagen started to think about the potential for Iceland to become an independent nation-state, separate from Denmark. Alongside this independence movement was the growth of an Icelandic national identity as distinct from Icelandic ethnicity, which had been in development since the original settlement of the island. Thomas Eriksen has described this aspect of nationalism as “a nationalist holds that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries, whereas many ethnic groups do not demand command over a state” (Eriksen 2002, 7). At the heart of this emergent national identity was the issue of Icelandic independence

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<sup>4</sup> Until the 20th century, Copenhagen was the educational center for Icelandic students. The University of Iceland was established in 1911. To this day, many Icelandic students seek higher education at Danish universities. This situation is more fully discussed in Chapter Five.

in relation to a cruel and hegemonic foreign ruler. A leading advocate for complete independence from Denmark argued in 1943 that “The struggle for independence was ‘comparable to the fight of an enslaved person for full liberty and individual rights’” (Hálfðanarson 2006, 238).

This determination to become an independent, legitimate nation that underpinned a Icelandic national identity in the 19th century was carried through the 20th century and on into today. Nobel Laureate Halldor Laxness’s 1934 novel *Independent People* seriously grappled with the motivations and cost of independence in one man’s life. Guðbjartur Jónsson (Bjartur of Summerhouses), the main character of the novel and an individual obsessed with his own independence, is sometimes seen as symbolic of the Icelandic people. It is worth noting, however, that Guðbjartur nearly causes his and his family’s demise due to this obsession. Nevertheless, in an interview I conducted with the cultural advisor to the Minister of Education, Science, and Culture in Iceland in May 2012, he reiterated that independence remains fundamental to the Icelandic national psyche to this day, saying “There’s an ongoing theme in all of this, which says that the independence of Iceland is an ongoing effort. You have to decide every day that you’re independent” (Personal Interview May 22, 2012). Even though Iceland gained complete independence from Denmark in 1944, the nation has remained wary of entering political unions that might threaten its sovereignty, such as the European Union.

### *Post-colonialism*

Iceland’s independence in 1944 came at a time when other locations around the world were similarly undergoing processes of de-colonization. Yet the extent to which Iceland can

easily be seen as a post-colonial location, as the concept has been developed, is worth considering here. Iceland was only one part of the larger Danish colonial empire stretched from India to Africa, and from the Caribbean up to the North Atlantic. Denmark's first non-Nordic colony, Tranquebar, was established in India in 1620, followed by trading posts in Ghana in the mid-17th century, plantation colonies in the West Indies in 1671, and (re)colonization of Greenland in 1721 (Fihl 1984, 51). Each of these locations were exploited by the Danish crown in tandem, but in significantly different ways. Goods brought down from the North Atlantic to Denmark, for example, helped to fund coffers which in turn purchased slaves from Ghana who were in turn shipped to the West Indies in order to cultivate sugar. Throughout this time, Denmark also remained in control of Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Norway.

The period of Danish expansionism in the North Atlantic and in the south declined in the 19th century beginning with the loss of Norway to Sweden in 1814. In 1850 the forts and possessions of Denmark on Ghana's gold coast were sold to England. Denmark's European territory further declined in 1864 when control of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein was transferred to Prussia after extensive warfare. This loss of the duchies was one of the key instigators of the rise of romantic nationalism in Denmark in the 19th century. As the Danes saw their overseas and European territories shrink away and their multinational state break apart, they were encouraged to rebuild their nation with a renewed strength and homogenized ethnicity.

At the same time that Iceland gained independence, Denmark was still in possession of Greenland and the Faroe Islands, even though students in Copenhagen from these locations had also started their own independence movements in the 19th century. But, for a variety of reasons,

only the Icelandic movement eventually led to independence. One of the key strengths that Icelandic nationalists were able to draw on was the perception of their culture and language as being a preserved form of old Danish and Norse culture. Anthropologist Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir argued that during the 19th century,

It became a commonly accepted view that due to Iceland's distance and isolation, the original and pure Nordic culture had been preserved in Iceland, while it had been diluted or disappeared altogether in the other Nordic countries. Thus Icelanders were now believed to be, in some ways, superior to other Scandinavians as they alone possessed the authentic Nordic language and spirit (Björnsdóttir 1997, 4).

This supposed preservation of “the original and pure Nordic culture” was considered to be most visible in the Icelandic language and in the preserved medieval sagas. Björnsdóttir continues this argument by pointing out that

Iceland is probably one of the few former colonies in the world, which was believed not only by its inhabitants, but also its colonizers, to be culturally superior to its colonizers, and to have preserved the original and purer version of the colonizer's culture (Björnsdóttir 1997, 4).

Iceland was clearly in a privileged position over Denmark's other colonies due to both internal and external perceptions of Iceland as a sort of deep-freeze for a shared Old Norse heritage (Oslund 2011; Oxfeldt 2005).

This perception of Iceland as a repository of pan-Nordic culture aided the Icelanders in gaining independence and even served as a model for the Danish romantic nationalists, including N.F.S. Grundtvig who argued that “the true but lost core of Danishness” could be found in the old Icelandic manuscripts (Hálfðanarasson 2000, 98). But this same respect for Icelandic culture contributed to the unequal relationship between the locations throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The perception of Iceland as an Old Norse holdout is a form of temporal

differentiation, which Johannes Fabian identified as one of three main ways to distinguish between colonized and colonizer (Fabian 1983). Dipesh Chakrabarty has similarly described the “waiting room of modernity”, in which a coeval status is denied to those not conforming to a very specific Western European notion of modernity (Chakrabarty 2000, 8).

The temporal displacement of Iceland is significant for research on music in Iceland. As I further explore in Chapter Two, the admiration of Icelandic literature and language for being preserved remnants of a Nordic past was the flip side of the shame felt toward local musical practices that were also viewed as pre-modern holdouts. This led to the importation of large-scale instrumental musical practices from Western Europe, including Denmark, Germany, and Austria, in the early 20th century. Music thus became a targeted site for demonstrating the modern proclivities of the emerging nation at the same time that the language and literature were heralded as untouched artifacts of the past. A perception of Iceland as somehow being delayed in its musical development and the temporal displacement of Iceland remains pertinent to discussions of Icelandic popular music and related discourse, as I explore in Chapter Five.

### *Senses of History*

Historical events and movements in Iceland and the larger North Atlantic have clearly shaped the development of Icelandic national identity, but the ways in which this history is remembered and evoked in modern Iceland continues to influence Icelandic nationalism and senses of self. In his study *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal argues that the past is “dubious owing to its very absence, inaccessible yet intimately known” and that “the character

of the past depends on how – and how much – it is consciously apprehended” (Lowenthal 1999, 192). I refer to the apprehension of the murky past as actively informing the present as “senses of history.” The historical narratives described above of Iceland as an independent Viking outpost or an impoverished Danish colony demonstrate how such historical narratives can be used as a tool of empowerment or disempowerment. Yvon Csonka, an ethnologist at the University of Greenland has argued that “a few historians and other scholars are beginning to realize that, rather than desperately trying to extract history (facts, ‘real events’) from myths, it may be more fruitful to admit that history also functions as ‘cultural myth’” (Csonka 2005, 315). The employment of history as a powerful cultural myth is common for both the powerful and the disadvantaged.

The apprehension and awareness of the past is also relevant to the study of music. Ethnomusicologists, including Stephen Blum (1991), Daniel Neuman (1991), Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2006), Caroline Bithell (2006), and Philip Bohlman (2008), have theorized the roles that the past can play in contemporary fieldwork in a process referred to as “the past in music” or “the noise of pastness” (Bohlman 2008, 246). In his chapter “Returning to the Ethnomusicological Past” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (2008), Philip Bohlman explored the degree to which his fieldwork in Austria’s Burgenland was influenced by how the people he worked with understand their own history and the history of their region. Bohlman’s chapter affirms that even when conducting contemporary fieldwork, ethnomusicologists often have to apprehend versions of the past told to them by musicians and others.

In Iceland, the framework of “cultural heritage” has become a dominant mode of negotiating the past on both personal and public levels. Archeologist Laurajane Smith defines heritage “not so much as a ‘thing’, but as a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present” (Smith 2006, 2). Iceland has a dedicated Ministry of Education, Science and Culture that directly oversees policies and funding that guide the majority of cultural activities across the nation. Peter Dueland, in his study of Nordic cultural policies, argues that government sponsored cultural heritage initiatives tend to be deeply interwoven with “the construction of national identity and a national monoculture” (Dueland 2003, 18). A recent publication from the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture supports the idea that cultural heritage initiatives in Iceland are indeed intended to foster a national identity. In this document, *The Arts, The National Cultural Heritage, Broadcasting, Language Policy, Sports, Youth Activities* (2009), the authors write that “the objective of the state is to ensure that the Icelandic national cultural heritage is passed on to subsequent generations” (Iceland 2009, 17) and that “each and every Icelander plays a part in the preservation and development of the cultural heritage and its transmission to future generations. This is, for example, obvious in such a fundamental element as the national language, Icelandic” (Iceland 2009, 5). This document also reaffirms the privileged position of the Icelandic language as a cultural artifact, even among contemporary Icelanders.

Language policy is the most developed aspect of Icelandic cultural policy, as demonstrated by the description of the dedicated Icelandic Language Council. According to the 2009 Icelandic Ministry of Culture document, this council “advises authorities in matters

concerning the Icelandic language and makes recommendations to the Minister of Culture on language policy, as well as issuing an annual report on the status of the Icelandic language” (Iceland 2009, 20). The Icelandic Language Council is only one part of the efforts to “protect” the Icelandic language; this document also describes the Árni Magnússon Institute of Icelandic Studies, The Icelandic Language Fund, and the Icelandic Language Day - a day on which “the Ministry of Culture engages in a special effort dedicated to the cultivation of the Icelandic language” (Iceland 2009, 21). The ongoing emphasis on the Icelandic language within Icelandic cultural policy was reinforced to me during a conversation with an individual within the Icelandic Ministry of Culture, when the individual held up the 2009 manual specifically on language policy and explained that the forthcoming general cultural policy manual for Iceland would probably not even be as big as the language specific manual.

The cultivation of a national language is often at the forefront of independence movements. Depending on the location, music is also a common focus of government policy in nation-building movements. There is a strong history of music being supposedly linked to national identity in Europe, as demonstrated by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder’s argument that

...the music of a nation, even in its most imperfect passages and favorite tunes shows the inner character, that is, the actual voice of the people deeper and truer, than the longest description of external contingencies would be able to describe (Herder 1800, 289-290).

According to this view, which was highly influential in the period of 19th century European romantic nationalism, it is the musical practices of a group of people that are most apt to reveal the “inner character” of the people at hand.

Cultural policy initiatives that directly relate to music in Iceland, however, are mostly limited to a discussion of the Music Council and Music Fund, the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, the North Iceland Symphony Orchestra, the Icelandic Music Information Centre, and the Music for All project. In the major cultural policy document discussed above, *The Arts, The National Cultural Heritage, Broadcasting, Language Policy, Sports, Youth Activities* (2009), there is no mention of cultural heritage in regard to Icelandic music. Instead the Icelandic Music Information Centre has a purpose of preserving and cataloguing “Icelandic contemporary music, and to promote it both domestically and abroad” (Iceland 2009, 15). While the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra

should aim to enrich Icelandic musical culture, stimulate interest and knowledge of classical music and provide the residents of Iceland with the opportunity to enjoy such music by giving concerts in as many locations in Iceland as possible, and through radio broadcasts. Special emphasis should be on performing and promoting Icelandic music (Iceland 2009, 13).

“Icelandic music,” as described here, seems to refer only to compositions by Icelanders in the Western European art music style. This document reveals a clear paradox in which Icelanders are charged with preserving their tradition-bound language and literature while traditional forms of music making, such as *rímur* and other local forms of vocal music, go without mention; instead the policy aims to develop an interest in classical music among Icelanders. As I explore further in Chapter Two, the effort to associate national music culture in Iceland with Western European classical music has clear roots in the independence movement of the 19th century, when local Icelandic music making was seen as a source of embarrassment for the emergent nation.

Efforts to inculcate a particular national identity and sense of cultural heritage among Icelanders extends beyond government documents. The major National Museum of Iceland (*Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*), located on the University of Iceland's campus, includes a permanent exhibit titled *Þjóð verður til: Menning og samfélag í 1200 ár* (Making of a Nation: Heritage and History in Iceland) that occupies the entire second floor of the building. This exhibit includes artifacts from the era of settlement up until today in an effort to show a linear development of the modern Icelandic nation. While the focus of this exhibit is on material culture from the history of Iceland, associated texts and descriptions demonstrate the nationalization of Icelandic cultural heritage and history.

Despite the tendency to root Icelandic cultural heritage and a related national identity in the Viking heritage of the island and some of its inhabitants, it is necessary to recognize the increasing diversity of Iceland's population. As I discuss in Chapter Four, immigration to Iceland has dramatically increased over the past decade, particularly from Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. There is a growing number of individuals and families living in Iceland who identify with Iceland as home but do not necessarily trace their ancestry back to the Vikings. Taking this diversity into account, I do not wish to reinforce narrow definitions of Icelandicness based on familial heritage in this dissertation. Instead I see a tension between the strong sense of Icelandic heritage based on this Viking heritage and the reality of being a modern cosmopolitan state.

These tensions manifest in the many ways in which practice and policy in Iceland hinge on ancestral connections. Familial ties, for example, serve as vital identity markers, as demonstrated by the patronymic naming system. In this practice, Icelanders do not typically take

on a family name but instead take a last name that identifies them as the son or daughter of their father (or sometimes their mother). For example, an individual named Stefán Jónsson is Stefán, son of Jón; Sigga Jónsdóttir is Sigga, daughter of Jón. It is not customary to refer to an Icelander only by their last name, as this name is more of a genealogical marker than a unique name.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these naming conventions, the company DeCode Genetics Inc. has been working to gather genetic material from each living Icelander in order to map the Icelandic genome. Iceland was chosen as an ideal location for such genetic mapping due to the presumption of a small and homogeneous population (Pálsson, Rabinow 1999, 14). Questions of identity and senses of history in Iceland clearly extend beyond cultural or even political matters and into the area of genetic and familial heritage.

## **Roadmap**

This dissertation proceeds as a series of case studies that examine how the above issues of national identity, post-colonialism, and senses of history relate to contemporary music making in Iceland. Chapter Two expands on the historical material presented above to further demonstrate the pejorative attitudes towards local forms of music making during the Icelandic independence movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries. I also examine the prestigious position afforded to Western European art music at the same time. I explore how the efforts to import continental European musical practices continues to shape shared senses of Icelandic musical history. I relate

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this writing I maintain Anglophone customs and refer to Icelanders by their last name when discussing scholarly works, but when discussing Icelanders I worked with in person I refer to them by their first name. This should not be seen as a lack of formality or disrespect.

this material to present day issues in Iceland, such as the controversial building of Harpa, the expensive and grand concert hall in the center of Reykjavík built at the height of Iceland's recent economic collapse and completed in 2011. The goal of this chapter is to explore in more detail the threads of national identity and senses of history in relation to music and the independence movement in Iceland.

Chapter Three builds on ideas presented in earlier sections of the dissertation in a discussion of contemporary Icelandic popular music and the country's growing tourism sector. In this chapter I introduce the concept of "borealism" as a northern counterpart to the study of orientalism (Ísleifsson 2011, 8). The theoretical lens of borealism demonstrates the role that people outside of Iceland have played in shaping both external and internal perspectives on Icelandic heritage and culture. I argue that exotifying perspectives, particularly in terms of landscape, folk beliefs, and language, of Iceland are directly related to the successful efforts to wed Iceland's popular music industry to the tourism industry. This chapter also demonstrates a continuity between Iceland's efforts to portray itself musically in certain terms during the independence movement and the current efforts to use popular music to craft an international reputation.

Chapter Four shifts in focus to diverse sites of musical learning in Reykjavík. In this chapter I offer a small range of focused case studies to provide a more individualized context for how issues of national identity, post-colonialism, and senses of history relate to formal and informal music education in Iceland. I offer analyses of different organizations focused on vocal music practices, ranging from efforts to better incorporate singing into early childhood

education, *Kvæðamannafélög* (societies dedicated to the study and performance of *rímur*), to adult choirs, in order to explore the various roles of such practices in contemporary Iceland.

Chapter Five expands the geographic scope of the dissertation in a study of Copenhagen as the former capital city, both politically and culturally, of Iceland. I draw on the historical context of Copenhagen as the original site of Iceland's national awakening to ground a study of contemporary Icelandic choirs in Copenhagen. This chapter also discusses Greenlandic and Faroese choirs in Copenhagen and positions Icelanders in relation to the larger North Atlantic. This material draws on the idea that national identities are formed in relation to other people and places, and specifically focuses on how Icelanders operate musically within the post-colonial North Atlantic realm in Copenhagen.

Chapter Six continues the efforts of Chapter Five to position Iceland in relation to the larger North Atlantic by introducing material from the Faroe Islands in which national identity, post-colonialism, and senses of history are also apprehended. Through this material I offer the Faroe Islands as a counterweight to the Icelandic case in which language and literature were made paramount to the formation of an Icelandic national identity and ethnicity. Instead, the Faroese language was exclusively oral up until the 19th century while music and songs were praised as a primary force in the development of a Faroese national identity and ethnicity. Together the material presented in this dissertation demonstrates that, despite having historically been overlooked in Iceland's cultural history, music remains a vibrant source of expressive culture in Iceland and in the larger North Atlantic.

## Chapter 2: “We Had Great Books but No Music”<sup>1</sup>

This chapter proceeds as a study of Iceland’s so-called “shameful” musical history in relation to the internal and external pressures placed on Icelanders to become a “proper” and independent European nation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I draw on some of the historical points introduced in Chapter One and more fully contextualize these within the framework of music making. I also demonstrate how the national self-consciousness of musical legitimacy continues to shape state priorities and cultural life in Iceland, as demonstrated by Harpa, a large concert hall built on the Reykjavík harbor in the midst of Iceland’s recent economic collapse.

I begin with an examination of the very idea of shameful music in Iceland’s history and also look at the introduction of continental European musical practices, particularly the symphony orchestra. I underpin this material with theories of collective memory and cultural heritage in order to explore the degree to which “national consciousness” can be seen as a useful tool. Finally I position this material within the context of Iceland’s ongoing peripheralized relationship to European centers of power. Throughout this section I argue that Iceland’s drive to develop a symphonic orchestra, arguably a rather cosmopolitan institution, and to move away from the perceived “howling” of *rímur* chanting and other local musical forms demonstrates a desire to be homologous to other independent Western European nations.

As established in the previous chapter, historical narratives of Iceland are filled with a heroic settlement era, fantastic Vikings, enigmatic belief systems, and a legacy of epic literature.

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<sup>1</sup> This material is original, but related to a forthcoming co-authored article by myself and Kristín Loftsdóttir.

Music making, however, rarely factors into these historical narratives as anything other than barbaric or shameful. This research was motivated by the desire to understand why, in a place where discourses of history and heritage reign paramount, the history of Icelandic music remains swept away as a shameful remnant of an embarrassing past. As my research progressed, a potential answer to this question emerged: whereas Vikings and sagas are associated with the settlement of Iceland, an era viewed with admiration as free from foreign tyranny, Icelandic vocal and instrumental music remain largely associated with the period of strong Danish control between the 16<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. With the growth of Icelandic nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local musical practices retained their association with a “shameful” history and were reprimanded as unfit for an emergent Icelandic nation-state.

While the rejection of local musical practices by the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic nationalists in Iceland, understood as being associated with a period of foreign domination and significant depravation in Iceland, is not necessarily surprising (Ingólfsson 2003, 239), the situation is markedly different from other national romantic movements across Europe. Johann Gottfried Herder, a key figure in European romantic nationalism, predicated much of his work on a presumed relationship between the “folk” and music in national contexts. Herder considered it a shame that travelogues did not more often include information about the “childlike sounds of foreign nations” because

the music of a nation, even in its most imperfect passages and favourite tunes shows the inner character, that is, the actual voice of the people deeper and truer, than the longest description of external contingencies would be able to describe (Herder 1800, 289-290).

Following this line of thought, local musical practices in many 19<sup>th</sup> century European contexts were thrust to the center of national formations. Philip Bohlman, for example, posits that folk songs allowed people “to take charge of their own narratives and to weave these into the histories of their own nations” (Bohlman 2008, 29). Counter to such pan-European narratives of folk music in the Enlightenment era of the 18th century, indigenous Icelandic music was conscientiously shunned in an effort to bring Icelandic musical practices in line with dominant Western European art music practices. In effect, the romantic nationalist period in Iceland was characterized by a desire for the emergent Icelandic nation to become more properly “European,” particularly through music.

I draw on a growing body of literature in ethnomusicology that examines the “noise of pastness” (Bohlman 2008, 246) in contemporary ethnographic fieldwork to examine how the historical drive to become European through music continues to shape narratives of self, nation, and musicality in Iceland. Just as the Icelandic romantic nationalists sought to shape perceptions of Iceland’s historical positioning, contemporary individuals continue to construct (and reconstruct) the past. In the introduction to a volume of *Ethnomusicology Forum* dedicated specifically to “The Past in Music,” Caroline Bithell argued that

The past, then, is a source of cultural symbols that have a power beyond mere history. Hence the theorization of the past – by historians, archaeologists and anthropologists alike – as a construction of the present, with both past and future viewed as ideational or representation....It is these multi-faceted, contested and sometimes conflicting interpretations of the past that so often surface in fieldwork (Bithell 2006, 5).

I did not originally intend to interrogate the past in the present of Iceland, and yet that very concept came to the surface during my work. This chapter thus proceeds as a consideration of

known elements of historical music making alongside the narratives of the past that emerged in my fieldwork.

This approach highlights the tensions of history in Iceland and illuminates internal diversity within Europe and in European music making. This diversity has historically been overlooked, as Bohlman also notes, arguing that

Europe, as a historical and cultural domain of musical practices, has been a place where fieldwork has been difficult because of the assumption of sameness, the assumption that there has been *a* history of Western art music, if not of Western music in general. The extensive sameness that we encounter in this overwhelming historiographic concern with self has encumbered the use of fieldwork to study Europe (Bohlman 2008, 268).

This monolithic rendering of Western art music and Europe itself, as noted by Bohlman, has made fieldwork in the North Atlantic a fascinating experience. Here past and present mingle in the music, places, and memories of those with whom I worked.

One specific place in which the past and present mingled had just taken shape on the Reykjavik harbor when I moved to the city in 2011. Iceland's new concert hall Harpa opened in early 2011 to both praise and criticism, as the multi-million dollar building had been completed during the collapse of the Icelandic economy starting in 2008. As I will discuss later in this chapter, some viewed the building as a testament to the priority placed on the arts by Icelanders even in desperate times, while others saw it as an extravagant ode to an archaic and irrelevant type of music. Still others saw it as the long awaited fulfillment of 19th century desires for Iceland to have what the understood as a "properly European" musical culture.

### **“Shameful” Music?**

Kristín Loftsdóttir, the anthropologist at the University of Iceland supervising my fieldwork in Iceland between 2011 and 2012, invited me to spend New Year’s Eve of 2011 at her family’s home in Hafnafjörður, just 6.5 miles outside of Reykjavík. Even though Reykjavík proper, where I lived, is renowned for its lively New Year’s Eve celebrations, Kristín assured me that some of the most important aspects of the New Year celebrations happen within the home and among families. Eager to experience the evening in this context, I set out for Hafnafjörður as one of a handful of guests that included Kristín’s immediate and extended family, as well as some family friends.

As dinner progressed that evening, the conversation turned to the state of classical music in Iceland. One of the family friends, an opera singer, began to explain how she had left Iceland to gain proper training and to build a career, which she did with some success in Austria. She returned home to Iceland a few years ago and now sings occasionally with the Icelandic Opera. As she talked about her operatic career, the conversation soon opened up to my own research in Iceland. That an American had come to Iceland to research music seemed to strike her as novel at best, and ill-informed at worst. She explained that it was strange to come to Iceland to study music, because “we had great books, but no music.”

This comment stood out to me for its resonance with other remarks made to me throughout my fieldwork that revealed local narratives of Iceland’s musical history. On another evening, only a month later, while relaxing with university colleagues at a Reykjavík pub, a man

who had remembered me from an event recently hosted by the United States Embassy<sup>2</sup> asked me if he recalled correctly that I was in Iceland to research music. After confirming his memory, he shook his head and lamented: “We lost all of our music, you’ll have to go to the Faroe Islands if you want to study that.” Such senses of loss and lack in narratives of music and history in Iceland are directly related to the larger concerns of cultural and national legitimacy that permeated 20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland.

The perception of Iceland as lacking in musical history engages with an ongoing discussion about “legitimate”, proper, and respected forms of music making within European societies. This attitude is also found in various examples of published scholarly research. Göran Bergendal, a Swedish musicologist, offers an explanation of Iceland’s supposed lack of proper musical history that reflects these tensions, writing:

Isolated and situated at the world’s end, it [Iceland] still lacked the essential requirements for the creation of a musical society in the urban tradition of the Western World. For more than five hundred years the country had been ruled from afar, and there had been no court or aristocracy to give the necessary environment and money for the creation of symphonies, quartets, cantatas, ballet or opera (Bergendal 1991: 15).

Here Bergendal first specifies a singular urban musical tradition for the entire western world and then explains why Iceland was without this tradition. While Iceland had indeed long been ruled from afar and was without a domestic court culture, the idea of a singular pathway to musical modernity, paved with courts and aristocracy and inevitably leading to the creation of symphonies and operas, is problematic and resonates far beyond the North Atlantic. In this pattern, Western European art music is placed at the end of a sort of evolutionary pathway with

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<sup>2</sup> I was associated with the U.S. Embassy due to my fieldwork grant through the US State Department.

other forms of music making scattered at various points on that path. When Icelanders did start to compose and sponsor symphonies, quartets, cantatas, ballets, and operas, it was not due to local court culture or even aristocracy, but to a keen awareness on the part of certain Icelanders that they had not heretofore been on that specific pathway to European modernity, but wished to be so.

Instead of symphonies, quartets, cantatas, ballets, and operas, Iceland has been home to indigenous forms of music making presumably since its initial settlement around 874 CE. Details of music making from this era were not preserved. There are no known accounts of what music the original settlers brought with them, and any attempts to reconstruct music from the first few centuries of settlement in Iceland are speculative at best (Ingólfsson 2003, 16). Musicologist Árni Heimir Ingólfsson is currently at the forefront of research into early Icelandic music and is currently completing a book on the presence of music notation in Icelandic manuscripts between 1300 and 1800 CE. Thus a comprehensive work detailing the presence of music in Iceland prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century is currently unavailable. Yet records do display the prominence of vocal music in Iceland in the forms of hymns, ballads, and chanted poetry known as *rímur* dating back to at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Nielsen 2006, 247).

This general dearth of documentation of early Icelandic music making, combined with well-documented embarrassment over the extant vocal musical styles, has no doubt contributed to the narratives of loss. The most “embarrassing” aspects of historical music making in Iceland relate to a particular type of vocal music, *rímur* (plural form for “rhymes”, singular being *ríma*). This chanted or intoned poetic form has been described as “an amalgamation of heroic sagas and

sagas of chivalry” (Karlsson 2000, 71) that “may comprise more than a thousand two to four line stanzas, divided into chapters with varying meters and often with varying tunes, since in principal the tunes are bound to the meter” (Nielsen 2006, 253). These songs were frequently performed in the evenings as a form of entertainment in Icelandic homes and farmsteads, as attested to by various travel accounts and images from pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland.

The *kvöldvaka*, or evening activities on Icelandic farmsteads, were captured in numerous drawings and etchings made by tourists and travelers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the best known of these drawings was done by the Dane August Schiøtt around 1861. This drawing peers into the long narrow main room of a typical Icelandic turf house with a woman sitting on a bed knitting while talking to a man standing near her. Across the room, a young man sits with a book held to his face, possibly chanting *rímur* aloud to the others. Near the young boy, a single man sits by himself, while in the back room of the house, visible through a doorway, a young woman nurses a baby. The furnishings of the house are sparse and minimal, but the importance of the communal nature of the *kvöldvaka* is clearly displayed. I offer a discussion of a modern *kvöldvaka* in Chapter Four.

*Rímur* was a common form of entertainment in Icelandic homes until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with certain talented individuals traveling between homes and farms to perform. The performance and practice of *rímur* was, for many Icelanders, an everyday activity passed down between family members until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to 1930, when radio broadcasting began in Iceland, *rímur* was the main form of entertainment in Icelandic homes. Although new

technology and a great migration to the urban center of Reykjavík are both thought to have contributed to the demise of *rímur*; there are families who continue to practice this style of music.

As depicted in the drawing described above, *rímur* texts were typically read from a book with a melody chosen by the performer from memory. The texts themselves were typically written down and even reproduced, but each individual performer determined the combination of text with melody. Texts are typically constrained to very specific rhyme schemes and meter. The most respected *rímur* practitioners were able to draw on a large bank of known melodies that could be paired with particular rhyme schemes.

A common feature of this music was the practice known as *tvísöngur* (twin-singing), in which two voices sing against each other in parallel fifth movement. This practice of singing in parallel fifth movement is considered a key characteristic of traditional Icelandic music, as it continued to be practiced in Iceland long after such harmonic movement was abandoned in continental traditions. Popular music scholars have focused on this movement in the works of Björk and Sigur Rós as representative of an Icelandic sound, with the senior music critic Jón Ásgeirsson arguing that “it can be asserted that *tvísöngur* in Iceland is at least 700 years old, and thus is nothing less than the oldest remains of *popular song* that exist in the world” (in Ingólfsson 2003, 7). Perhaps more than any other aspect of Icelandic traditional music, the practice of singing in parallel fifth movement has been both glorified and villainized as a uniquely Icelandic musical holdout.

Despite the strong position of *rímur* in Icelandic musical history, it has also been a controversial musical practice for its perceived association with a barbaric Iceland devoid of

“proper” European musical culture. An individual identified as G.R.<sup>3</sup> published an article in the influential journal *Iðunn* in 1933, titled “*Um rímnakveðskap*” (On *rímur* poetry). The article begins: “There was a time when Icelanders were song-less people. At that humiliating period the people had nothing to do with it [music]...”<sup>4</sup> G.R. goes on to write,

Even though Iceland is far away from other lands, men were finally given alternatives for better music than *rímur*. The general reconstruction activities in Iceland unravel in promotion of foreign artwork, both in music and in book culture; ... more and more [Icelanders] traveled out, heard excellent music and learned to appreciate it. Icelanders began to approach the need not to become inferior to other folks in hearing and enjoying music. And here it began to bear witness that Icelandic music would come into being. We gained composers and song crafters first, then later experts and the talent to compose more diverse types of music (G.R. 1933, 165).<sup>5</sup>

The author further positions *rímur* in the same category of musical material completely lacking in validity, yet “valid as historical monument” much like the music of “negro singers and music of savages” (G.R. 169). Finally the author argues that “*Rímur* and *rímur* songs have only a home

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<sup>3</sup> I thank Árni Heimir Ingolfsson for alerting me to this resource, and for the credible suggestion that G.R. was in fact Guðlaugur Rósinkranz, who was later a director of the national theater in Iceland.

<sup>4</sup> “Sú var tíðin, að Íslendingar voru sönglaus þjóð. Á niðurlægingaröldum þjóðarinnar var ekki nog með það...”

<sup>5</sup> “En þott Ísland liggi langt frá öðrum löndum, þá kom þar þó um síðir, að mönnum gafst kostur á betri tónlist en rímnalögunum. Hin almenna viðreisnarstarfsemi á Íslandi greiðir fyrir kynnum við útlenda listmenningu bæði í tónlist og bókmentum; vaknandi sjálfsbjargarhvöt og metnaður Íslendinga skapar bætt húsakynni, tryggari efnahag og önnur skilyrði, sem til þess þarf að njóta menningarlegra verðmæta. Sem betur fór, var allir þorri manna ekki lengur knúinn til þess að rorra fram í gráðið í köldum og myrkum húsum og raula tónlistarlega vitleysu. Menn tóku að eignast hljóðfæri, nótnabækur, söngfræðibækur. Fleiri og fleiri fóru utan, heyrðu ágæta tónlist og lærðu að unna henni. Íslendingar voru að nalgast það að þurfa ekki að verða eftirbatar annara þjóða um að heyra og njóta tónlistar. Og hér fór að sjást vottur þess, að íslenzk tónlist væri að myndast. Við eignumst tónskáld, lagasmiði fyrst, en síðan menn, sem kunnattu hafa og hæfileika til þess að rita fjölbættari tónverk.”

in museums and offices of researchers” (G.R. 170). This text clearly reveals a sentiment of *rímur* as shameful music unfit for a modern European nation.

The sense of shame or embarrassment with *rímur* grew during the national awakening of the 19th century, but roots of such attitudes go back to the early post-Reformation period in the 16th century. At this time efforts to modify Icelandic musical practice to conform to continental styles took the form of mass importation of psalms and hymns from Denmark or Germany (Karlsson 2000, 137). One of the first published manifestations of this self-awareness of local musical practice came in 1612 with the Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson of Hólar’s *Vísnaþók* (Verse Book). An explicit purpose of this publication was to wipe out secular poetic and musical practices in Iceland, including both balladry and *rímur*. The ballads were considered overtly lustful and sexual, while *rímur* tended to be based on long epic poems focusing on bodily strength, aggressive adventures, and supernatural creatures. When the practice of *rímur* showed no signs of dwindling away, Þorláksson hired poets to write religious *rímur* in hopes that Icelanders might at least adjust the topics of the verses to Christian themes as in the hymns imported from Denmark (Karlsson 2000, 137). Almost two-hundred years later influential Icelanders were still trying to force Icelandic religious musical practices to conform to continental practices, as demonstrated by Magnús Stephenson’s 1801 publication of new hymns called *Evangelisk-kristilig Messusaungs- og salmabók* with the intention of bridging “the gap between the spiritual poetry of Europe and Iceland, which had fallen far behind other northern nations” (Senner 2000, 414).

Stephenson's writing in turn influenced other critics of Icelandic song and poetic forms throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the key figures in the early nationalist movement, Jónas Hallgrímsson, published a now famous review of a *rímur* composition by Sigurður Breiðfjörð, *Tristan og Indianu*, along with a general call for the end of *rímur* in an 1837 edition of the national journal *Fjölnir*. Looking back at this time period, Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason, wrote "Jónas consigned to perdition five hundred years of the history of Icelandic literature" (Gíslason 1980, 106). Jónas Hallgrímsson's charges against *rímur* were directed largely at the literary and poetic value of the genre, but his critique can also be read as a charge against *rímur* as musical practice.

#### *Bjarni Þorsteinsson*

It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that a few individuals began to direct scholarly attention to local musical practices *without* a goal of eradication, but instead to study and preserve them. Bjarni Þorsteinsson's seminal 1906-1909 publication *Íslensk Þjóðlög* (Icelandic Folk Songs), is based on twenty-five years of work with Icelandic folk songs from 1880-1905. The publication offered a collection of song transcriptions as well as an account of his own reflections and experiences with Icelandic music. The collection was based on three types of source material: songs taken from manuscripts, songs taken from printed books, and finally songs collected from the memory of living Icelanders. Þorsteinsson wrote that the last category offers "without a doubt, our youngest folk songs" (Þorsteinsson 1906, IV). He explains that the collection contains *rímur*, hymns, and *tvísöngur*, which, according to Þorsteinsson were "without

a doubt the strangest and most folklike factor in all of our folks songs from the start to finish” (Þorsteinsson 1906, V).<sup>6</sup>

Þorsteinsson’s work was one of the first documents to provide a sense of musical wealth and legitimacy to Icelandic folk singing. Yet at this time, in the heat of the Icelandic independence movement, there was an overwhelming sense that perhaps such music was not worth supporting. The value of Þorsteinsson’s collection was of such significant doubt that he was unable to find funding for his work in Iceland and ultimately turned to Danish resources for assistance. After being met with resistance from both Icelandic and Danish publishing sources, Þorsteinsson sought out the help of the influential Danish musicologist Angul Hammerich.

Hammerich in turn wrote a letter of support for the work stating:

At the request of Pastor B. Torsteinsson I have gone through his manuscript on Icelandic folksong and the old songs, particularly those belonging to the melody collection. It is a joy for me to say that I find this work of especially great value. With great collecting effort he has managed to gather equally rich and meaningful material with the weight of illuminating music’s position in Iceland in both the past and present. Because of Iceland’s whole cultural position this offering of material also becomes of not poor worth for music history research overall.

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<sup>6</sup> “...en tvísöngurinn er án efa hinn merkilegasti og þjóðlegasti þáttur í öllum vorum þjóðsöng frá upphafi til enda.”

Therefore I take no hesitation in recommending this for publication in print, especially in one of the large cultural languages, by which it could do the most good for research (Þorsteinsson 1906-1909, vi).<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these comments, Hammerich wrote a personal note to Þorsteinsson stating:

Thank you for your work on the Icelandic songs; it is a great and meaningful work, and it has interested me greatly to get to know it. I recommend that it must be released in print. I believe that your great effort of collecting and your cleverness, you at the same time have been in treatment, must not go to waste. And I believe that, it is a proud thing, that Iceland also in musical regards shows itself to be a treasure chest to an even greater degree than man would previously have thought possible (Þorsteinsson 1906-1909, VI).<sup>8</sup>

Thus Danish perceptions of Icelandic cultural value worked in this case to support Bjarni's publication, even as Icelanders themselves were not so interested.

Bjarni also included notes from the Icelandic Bishop Jón Helgason and Jón Jónsson who had written that this manuscript

Has great and various information to offer and it at the same time is so oddly nationalistic in many ways, it is considered very desirable to have these folk songs in print, no less than other ancient national literature (for example folk rhymes, riddles, and entertainment), that the society has produced. We consider likewise that the collection

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<sup>7</sup> Efter Anmodning af Pastor B. Torsteinsson har jeg gennemgaaet hans Manuskript over islandske Folkesange og gamle Sange, særlig den dertil hørende Melodisamling. Det er mig en Glæde at udtale, at jeg finder dette Arbejde særdeles værdifuldt. Med stor Samlerflid er det lykkedes ham at skaffe et ligesaa righoldigt som betydningsfuldt Materiale til Veje til Belysning af Tonekunstens Stilling paa Island i Fortid og Nutid. Paa Grund af Islands hele kulturelle Stilling vil dette Materiale tillige blive af ikke ringe Værdi for den musikhistoriske Forskning i det hele taget.

Jeg tager derfor ikke i Betænkning meget at anbefale det til Udgivelse i Trykken, især paa et af de store Kultursprog, hvorved det kunde komme Videnskaben til Gode.

<sup>8</sup> Tak for Deres Værk om de islandske Sange; det er et stort og betydeligt Arbejde, og det har interesseret mig meget at lære det at kjende. Jeg answer det for givet, at det maa udgives i Trykken. Jeg mener, at Deres store Samlerflid og den Dygtighed, De samtidig har vist i Behandlingen, ikke maa gaa til Spilde. Og jeg synes, det er en stolt Ting, at Island ogsaa i musikalsk Henseende viser sig at være et Skatkammer i langt højere Grad, end man paa Forhaand skulde trod er muligt.

will have the ability to greatly increase the familiarity of people both here in the nation and abroad, because our folksongs so far have been given such little attention (Þorsteinsson 1906-1909, vi).<sup>9</sup>

Yet even with the support of Hammerich, Jón Helgason, and Jón Jónsson, there was little interest from Icelandic sources to help see the work through to publication. In the end, the Danish Carlsberg Foundation funded the publication of Þorsteinsson's manuscript (Þorsteinsson 1906, VIII). Still the publication was extremely influential in Iceland and inspired other Icelanders, including the composer Jón Leifs, to take a more serious look at local musical practices.

### *Iðunn*

This growing interest in Icelandic musical practices coincided with mass migration from rural areas to the new urban center in Reykjavík in the early 20th century. As migration grew along with mounting pressure to conform to continental practices, a new society, *Iðunn*, formed in Reykjavík during the autumn of 1929 with the intention of preserving and collecting *rímur* and other traditional poetry (Iðunn 2004, 281). The timing of *Iðunn*'s origins coincided almost exactly with some of the most important nationalistic events in 20th century Iceland, including the establishment of large-scale symphonic music. One of the first efforts of this group was to name and document particular melodies and then link them to specific verses (Iðunn 2004, 281).

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<sup>9</sup> “haft mikinn og margbreyttan fróðleik að geyma og hann jafnframt svo einkennilega þjóðlegan að mörgu leyti, að við hljótum að telja það mjög æskilegt að þjóðlögum þessum yrði komið á prent, eigi síður en öðrum fornum, þjóðlegum fræðum, (t. d. þulum og þjóðkvæðum, gátum og skemmtunum), er fjelagið hefir áður gefið út. Teljum við líklegt að safn þetta mætti verða til þess, að auka mjög þekkingu manna, bæði hjer á landi og erlendis, á hinum forna þjóðsöng vorum, er hingað til hefur verið svo lítill gaumur gefinn, og yfir höfuð að tala verða þjóð vorri til sóma.”

As part of this process, the original members of the group were recorded on silver lacquers resulting in 200 recordings in 1935 and 1936. An explicit goal of the group was to record the oldest practitioners possible in an effort to capture regional and historical variations in *rímur*.

This set of 200 recordings and accompanying transcriptions is perhaps the most influential collection of traditional music in Iceland. *Iðunn* still exists and meets twice a month, which I will discuss in a following section. They continue to work from these recordings, which were published in 2004 by a local record label as a beautiful black velvet bound tome titled *Silfurplötur Iðunnar* (The Silver Plates of *Iðunn*). This effort to preserve *rímur* and the activities of *Iðunn* have not been without controversy, with some attacking *Iðunn* as trying to police and control the practice (Ólafsdóttir 2008).

### **Cultural Heritage & Collective Memory**

The perception of older forms of music making in Iceland as shameful or embarrassing has become a fundamental component of modern Icelandic collective memory. Scholars have worked with theories of collective memory throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs paving the way. In Halbwachs' understanding of collective memory, the past is never actually preserved but reconstructed based on the present (Halbwachs 1992). Specifically at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu. This makes it impossible then to truly apprehend the past, whether collectively or individually; instead we understand memories. More recently, Paul Connerton has continued to write on the topic, particularly in *How Societies Remember* (1989).

Some scholars, including Gedi and Elam, have challenged the notion of collective memory as a theoretical tool. They consider whether collective memory is merely a new term for what previously would have been termed myth and legend. They question the value of any terms suggesting “collective” motivations or activities, arguing that even if everyone in a group were to act in the same way, the action is still done on an individual level (Geddi and Elam 1996, 34). In a specifically Icelandic context Guðmundur Hálfðanarson analyzed Halbwachs’ original work as well as critiques launched at it by Gedi and Elam and others. He notes that while the concept of collective memory is thorny in some ways, it addresses a reality in which history is not “the private property of historians, but also functions within the public realm” (Hálfðanarson 2006, 88). Hálfðanarson expands on the Icelandic situation explaining that a public sense of collective memory in Iceland was clearly present throughout the independence movement. When, on June 17, 1944, Icelanders flocked to Þingvellir<sup>10</sup> to officially declare independence from Denmark, the festivities were dominated by a sense that the Icelandic nation had been restored after 600 years of oppressive Danish rule (Hálfðanarson 2006, 88). Even though there was little physically or culturally in Iceland in 1944 that resembled Iceland in 1262, when the island fell under Norwegian rule, there was a sort of collective understanding that the sovereign nation was to be restored following independence from Denmark. Thus this sense of history, whether called collective memory, myth, or legend, remains a powerful force for Icelanders.

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<sup>10</sup> Þingvellir is the original site of parliament in Iceland and is now a national park.

## Speaking with Musicians

Throughout my fieldwork I encountered musicians and scholars who had themselves grappled with understanding narratives of musical history in Iceland. One of these individuals, Sigtryggur Baldursson, is now the managing director of Iceland Music Export, a major organization that promotes Icelandic musicians abroad and works to draw tourists to Iceland to experience local music. Sigtryggur plays a highly influential role in shaping cultural policy and the popular music industry in Iceland. Sigtryggur is also an accomplished musician and is well known for his work as the drummer for the Sugarcubes, the band that launched Björk's career in the 1980s. In May 2012, I interviewed Sigtryggur for his perceptions as both a musician and influential person in the Icelandic music industry.

Without prompting from me, he offered the following understanding of historical music making in Iceland:

**Sigtryggur:** When I started touring the world with the Sugarcubes, people were very interested about Icelandic culture in general. We used to say, as I still say today, that our big cultural heritage is literature and that's what people sort of, there's, there's a few ways of looking at that. One of them is basically that music was banned in the Middle Ages by the church here in Iceland. So all merry making and music was basically banned by law. A lot of old Icelandic music was lost, but not all. And that's where the *rímur* comes in strong, because *rímur* was both story telling and musical and they used to have fun with all sorts of voicing and all sorts of cool stuff, I'm sure you've studied some of this.

**Kim:** I've been going to the *Iðunn* meetings since I've been here.

**Sigtryggur:** Wonderful. *Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn*. Wonderful place.

**Kim:** Já

**Sigtryggur:** That's wonderful. Yes, but sadly, a lot of this, there are also, in the last two years there's been a renaissance of *rímur* and the heritage of Icelandic music. But that also harks back to instruments like *langspil* (Personal Communication, May 14, 2012).

According to Sigtryggur, the church in the Middle Ages was responsible for a ban on all music making. This idea may be associated with an attempt made by the church in Iceland to ban dancing. But he notes that there has been a “renaissance” of music making in more indigenous musical styles. His observation resonated with the perspectives of two other musicians in Iceland I consulted who have been influential in bringing local forms of music making into the general consciousness, Bára Grimsdóttir and Chris Smith.

Bára is one of the most respected contemporary *rímur* chanters, coming from a family known for being skilled chanters across many generations. She is also a classically trained composer and has written a significant amount of new Icelandic choral works. Her partner, Chris Smith, is originally from England but now lives in Iceland and frequently performs, records, and teaches with Bára. In addition to becoming acquainted with Bára through attending *Iðunn* meetings, I met with them to discuss their experiences instituting a course on Icelandic music history at the Iceland Academy of the Arts. They explained that initially there was considerable resistance and skepticism towards such a course, but once they were permitted to offer one, the students responded positively. During this interview, Bára tried to explain past and present perceptions of Icelandic music making:

**Bára:** So we gradually got more influence from other countries, and then especially during the war, we had, first we had the British.

**Chris:** This is the second world war you’re talking about?

**Bára:** Yeah, the second world war. Sorry. We had the British soldiers, they brought the gramophones, all the new music, so it was a kind of explosion and then later the Americans took over and you know, much more of these things.

**Chris:** Then you've got radios with rock and roll and stuff.

**Bára:** So, kind of, all this folk [music], people were ashamed of it. People thought it wasn't music, it was howling, people were howling, you know. And people even didn't call this instrument *langspil*, that was ---

**Chris:** that wasn't a musical instrument

**Kim:** What was it?

**Bára:** It was just *langspil* (Personal Communication May 19, 2012).

The attitudes described here by Bára and Chris strongly reflect perceptions of Icelandic music, both vocal and instrumental, as barbaric and unmusical when compared to dominant continental European musical practices. A few well-known travelogues written about Iceland in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century referred to the singing practices of Icelanders in terms such as “howling”, which Bára references here. Such attitudes continue to surface in Chris and Bára's efforts to increase education in traditional Icelandic music.



Figure 1: Bárá Grímsdóttir at left with Chris Smith to the right holding up pieces of paper. June 15, 2012. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

The turn away from local musical practices in the 19th century clearly continues to influence Icelandic music making and music education. As demonstrated by the priorities of cultural heritage policies in Iceland, music remains secondary in focus to language and literature. And yet, due to the efforts of individual musicians and educators in Iceland, indigenous forms of music making are starting to be included in curriculum and are surfacing in the public awareness of Icelandic culture. Of course it is complicated to discuss this situation in terms of “local” and “foreign” music, as such language risks too narrowly defining “Icelandic music”. Instead, I distinguish between music seen to have its roots in Iceland and the music that was consciously

imported to Iceland during the independence movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. Another way to distinguish these styles of music is between the music in Iceland which was deemed shameful, and that which was promoted as the sounds of a new state.

### **Becoming European**

A sense of embarrassment over local musical practices directly contributed to the concerted effort to import musical practices from the European continent to Iceland. The first event typically identified as laying the groundwork for the development of institutionalized instrumental music in Iceland occurred in 1876 when a horn ensemble under the direction of Helgi Helgason performed in Reykjavík. This event is thought to be the first public instrumental concert in Iceland (Bergendal 1991, 15). This served as a precursor to the 1926 performance of the Hamburg Philharmonic under the direction of Jón Leifs in Reykjavík's Iðno performance hall – the first symphonic orchestra to perform in Iceland (Bergendal 1991, 31). The 1930 festival at Þingvellir, commemorating 1000 years since the establishment of Iceland's parliament, became another key event in the "Europeanization" of Icelandic music.

The 1930 festival at Þingvellir provided a platform for the Icelandic nation to display its cultural uniqueness within the Danish realm, but also to assert its modernity and legitimacy as a potential independent nation-state. This festival was in part born out of a growing trend during the 1920s in which art and culture explicitly intersected with politics and the government in Iceland. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Ólafur Rastrick wrote that, along with the establishment of the National Theatre Trust in 1923 and the Cultural Council and Cultural Fund in 1929, and

the National Radio in 1930, the Þingvellir festival “...made art a governmental undertaking in the sense that it became a part of mechanisms directed at influencing the values and behavior of the population” (Hálfðanarson 2006, 90).

In 1928 it was decided that two types of concerts would take place at the 1930 festival, one would be of “ancient, native songs” and the other type would be of new large-scale music by Icelandic composers. Even these “ancient, native songs” were for the most part composed songs by Icelanders studying in Denmark in the 19th century. Jón Leifs, one of Iceland’s most prominent composers, offered to organize a symphonic orchestra for the festival. These musicians were presumably to be from Germany where Leifs was based at the time, but the organizing committee rejected his offer. They were opposed to foreign musicians playing during the festival because any symphony would have to be comprised of only Icelandic musicians. Yet despite this insistence, the organizing committee soon realized that that goal was not attainable (Sveinbjörnsson 1998, 19). Jónas Jónsson, a member of the festival’s organizing committee, wrote:

The art of our countrymen must be among the things that first spring to mind. Of course we are not capable of astounding our guests with what we can show them, but at least we can convince them that here lives a nation who can be considered as demonstrating promise on the road to cultural maturity (Sveinbjörnsson 1998, 19).

Jónas Jónsson’s comments reaffirm the self-positioning of many Icelanders as infantile, but with a desire to “mature” eventually into what they see as a proper European society.

The head of the committee eventually travelled to Vienna in order to find both composers and a conductor for a festival orchestra. Franz Mixa, an Austrian, was selected as the orchestra conductor and relocated to Iceland in order to work with local musicians. He wrote about the

difficulties he faced trying to work with Icelandic musicians, as most lacked experience playing in a symphony. In a moment of historical irony, the organizing committee eventually had to bring in musicians from the Royal Symphony in Copenhagen to play in the Þingvellir symphony. But a new door had opened in Iceland with Mixa staying in Reykjavík after the festival to help start a local music school in order to train musicians on symphonic instruments. A handful of other Viennese musicians were eventually also brought over for the same purpose.

In 1950, twenty years after the Þingvellir festival occurred, the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra was officially established. It remains one of the key cultural projects of the Icelandic state, as reiterated in an interview I conducted with the cultural advisor to the Minister of Culture who is also on the board of directors for the Icelandic Symphony. I asked him why the state, so invested in the preservation of Icelandic cultural heritage, had fully embraced this relatively new type of music instead of local musical practices. He replied:

**Guðni:** We have to think about the time span is so limited, it's just in 1930 or something, the novelty of a symphony orchestra in Reykjavík was huge. The first symphonic orchestra was here in what 1915? 1925 or something like that... So it's, in a way, of course, to run a symphony orchestra for a city like Reykjavík is of course a statement of independence as well. Of course it is. I think so, you know. Traditionally it is. But it's also nowadays something that we want to show that we can do. We want to have in place, because that is what cities do, what nations do (Personal Communication, May 22, 2012).

It is not, however, a given that the state will continue to support this music, which became clear during the 2008 collapse of the Icelandic economy. As discussed at the start of the chapter, the opening of Harpa, the first building constructed in Reykjavík explicitly for live musical performances, fueled nationwide debates on whether an essentially bankrupt state should pour

money into such a facility. This in turn sparked a debate on the building itself, as well as the value of state support of a cultural institution seen to serve only some within Icelandic society.<sup>11</sup>

The opening of Harpa in May 2011 came in the midst of significant controversy over the cost of the building at 27 billion ISK (roughly \$224 million [U.S.] as of July 2013) (Magnússon 2011). Harpa became a divisive symbol of Iceland's economic crash not only for its sheer cost, but also because of the perceived symbolism of building Iceland's first symphony hall in the midst of a national crisis. In an interview with Ólafur Elíasson, the Icelandic-Danish artist who designed Harpa's façade, Ólafur explained:

As far as I remember, the concert house is the result of a discussion that has spanned decades, and at the time of the competition phase—when I entered the discourse—the feeling was still that this was supposed to be a concert house, a culmination of ambitions and plans that went back a long time and seemed important. When I first met with the architects in Copenhagen, they not only presented me with their ideas about the building, but they also explained its significant role in the history of music in Iceland and that there had been all these attempts to generate a concert hall. The design team was very much working with the idea that the local musical culture was at the core of the design... So the design of Harpa was very much about creating a public cultural institution—to meet the longstanding demand of Icelanders for a concert hall that the public could enjoy and appreciate as its own (Magnússon 2011).

Harpa was originally intended to be the dedicated house of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, but since this was not economically feasible this arrangement led to the house's final design as a conference center as well as a concert hall. But as Ólafur explains, even a shared concert hall was seen as the fulfillment of a long-term goal for the Icelandic nation. Up until the opening of Harpa in 2011 the Iceland Symphony Orchestra regularly performed in *Háskólabíó* (University

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<sup>11</sup> The building was originally to have exclusive VIP lounge areas and special access for the upper echelons of society. This ran counter to the egalitarian sensibilities many Icelanders uphold.

Cinema), a movie theater next door to the University of Iceland. The previous home of the Icelandic Opera, which also moved to Harpa, was *Gamla Bio* (Old Cinema), a renovated movie theater in the center of Reykjavík.

Despite being the most western country of Europe, Iceland challenges a tendency to create monolithic narratives of Western European musical histories (see Bohlman 2008). The Iceland Symphony Orchestra was established in 1950, while the Icelandic opera was founded in 1978. Prior to these dates there were no regular state-sponsored or large-scale performance organizations dedicated to Western European art music forms in Reykjavík. For many Icelanders prior to the economic collapse, the building of Harpa represented a sort of resolution to Iceland's long-fraught relationship to continental musical practice. Post-2008, however, the building emerged as a controversial symbol of Iceland's catastrophic drive to prove itself a modern European nation.

Harpa is, for many, symbolic of both the economic crash in Iceland and the long-held desire for Iceland to be home to large-scale instrumental music in the continental traditions. This controversial positioning of Harpa emerged on New Year's Eve in 2011 in a wildly popular national television program. In addition to eating a large meal with one's family, drinking copious amounts of alcohol, and lighting bombastic fireworks, a key aspect of celebrating the new year in Iceland is watching *Áramótaskaupið*, the annual sketch-comedy show broadcast around the island on public television. Kristín, whose home I was at that evening, explained that when the show, annually watched by nearly 95% of all Icelanders, begins at 10:30 p.m., the

entire country seems to fall silent with no one on the street and even a brief pause in the evening's otherwise endless string of fireworks.



Figure 2: View of Harpa from the Reykjavík Harbor. October 9, 2011. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

### **Áramotaskaupið**

Ever since Iceland's economic crisis began in 2008, the majority of the sketches featured on *Áramotaskaupið* have commented on the lavishness of Icelandic life prior to the collapse and the greed of the bankers, politicians, and general population that contributed to the economic

catastrophe. The prospective legal fate of the politicians and bankers directly responsible for the crash weighed heavily on the nation in 2011 and was a recurrent theme in that year's broadcast. The 2011 show also heavily criticized the newly opened, and outrageously expensive, Harpa.

Every year the broadcast closes with a music video remaking a contemporary popular song. Looking back through the archives of *Áramótaskaupið*, these music videos took a decisive turn away from parody towards biting criticism after the economic collapse. The 2011 broadcast ended with an anthem of outrage at the money spent on Harpa and the general greed that led directly to the demise of the country's economic and political stability. Set to the tune of Adele's (2011) song "Rolling in the Deep," the video shows a chorus of children marching through the streets of Reykjavík singing lyrics that lambast the leaders of the land for ruining their home and their future.

The video begins with a young girl standing in front of Harpa on the Reykjavík harbor. She is soon joined by a small group of children marching through the city streets, with cut away scenes showing the inside of Harpa and actors portraying Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, Iceland's prime minister at the time, and another politician standing inside drinking champagne while holding a Norwegian flag. A later scene shows the actors playing the politicians raising the Norwegian flag outside of Harpa. This act symbolizes the precariousness of Iceland's independence on numerous levels. After the crash, Norway saw a dramatic rise in the number of Icelandic immigrants coming to find work and financial security. The crash also reinvigorated a sense of shared history

with Norway, causing murmurs that perhaps Icelanders should ask the Norwegians to be reintegrated as part of Norway.<sup>12</sup>

The text of the song<sup>13</sup> reinforces the general theme of the evening's broadcast and the Zeitgeist of 2011 Iceland - Harpa as a symbol of the nation's demise. The opening lines of the song single out Harpa in relation to sickening old ways, while asserting that new times are quickly approaching:

Parna fer hún Harpan út á haf Höllinn sem kreppan oss Af gjafmildi sinni gaf.	There it is Harpa out in the harbor The castle that squeezed us dry Generously gave.
Gamla settið það siglið líka út. Svei mér það losaði í maga mínum hnút. Nýir tímar þeir nálgast okkur hratt.	Old it sails also out It seems to have loosened The knot in my stomach New times, they approach us quickly

The refrain of the song positions Iceland as a “magnificent” land or nation, but one in dire need of cleansing and renewal.

Við kyndum bálið og berjumst áfram Við byggjum saman þetta stórkostlega land. Já, kyndum bálið og brennum ruglið og röflið, bullið.	We fuel the fire and fight onward. We build together This magnificent land Yes, fuel the fire and Burn this nonsense and cut the crap.
Svo 2012!!!	So 2012!!!
Tökum nýjan sið. Við hreinsum til í hólfi og gólf.	Take up new ways We clean the walls and the floors

<sup>12</sup> See Gunnar Karlsson (2000, 62 – 65), for an extended discussion of Icelandic identity in relation to the shared past with Norway.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 1 for the complete text and my translation into English.

Og við byrjum upp á nýtt.

And we start all over again

Throughout the text, Harpa and the perceived values associated with constructing such an expensive building, especially in the midst of severe financial crisis, symbolize attitudes and practices that nearly brought down the financial viability of Iceland as an independent nation. As explored earlier, Icelanders continue to position independence as a fundamental concept in cultural policy and national identity. Harpa exposed serious tensions in contemporary Iceland about the value of independence, modernity, and cultural priorities.

## **Conclusion**

These narratives of Icelandic history and memory influenced not only local senses of place and being, but also dominated the pseudo-colonial relations between Denmark and Iceland for centuries. Angul Hammerich, the Danish musicologist who wrote in support of Bjarni Þorsteinsson's folk music collection, began his influential 1899 article "*Studier over islandsk musik*" (Studies on Icelandic Music) with:

Iceland is the land of history. With its location out in the middle of the stormy North Atlantic, removed from the hurried pace of contemporary life with its changing innovations, making up that age old Saga Island is a true treasure chest of all the past's traditions. The population has protected its inheritance with rare faithfulness and love. Old customs and old practices, which other places have long forgotten and abandoned, live on in Iceland as an independent life right down to our own time. The same with the language. The same language that the Vikings spoke with the first settlement of the land at the close of the 9th century CE is still spoken and written up there. Also the music. The same forms, the song functions, those that are right at the heart of the Middle Ages, were

brought to the land with the settlers and the church clerics continue up there. The strange land is therefore well worth studying musically in that way (Hammerich 1899, 273).<sup>14</sup>

Even though Hammerich was writing in 1899, the idea that Icelanders have managed to continue living in the past in the present time permeates much of the 20th century scholarship on Iceland. On this island so often inundated with its own history, any conversation of historical and collective memory must at the same time remain firmly aware of contemporary aspects of Icelandic life.

To close this chapter, I position my analysis of senses of place in Iceland in a specifically post-colonial context in an effort to relate this case, on the fringes of Europe, to other areas. As of the early 20th century, Denmark's once vast colonial empire still consisted of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the present day U.S. Virgin Islands, along with Iceland. In part because of the reverence given to certain elements of Icelandic heritage, namely the language and literature, late 19<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic intellectuals saw themselves as properly European, as opposed to those rightfully colonized by Denmark. An illuminative example of these tensions arose in 1904 when Icelanders were expected to perform alongside Greenlanders and Virgin Islanders in Copenhagen's Tivoli gardens as a colonial display. In researching this event, Kristín Loftsdóttir

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<sup>14</sup> Island er Historiens Land. Ved sin Beliggenhed midt ude i det stormfulde Nordhave, fjernet fra det hastigt pulserende Nutdisliv med dets skiftende Nydannelser, udgør den ældgamle Saga-Ø et sand Skatkammer for alle Fortidens Overleveringer. Med sjælden Troskab og Kærlighed til det nedarvede har Befolkningen værnet om dem. Gammel Sæd og gamle Skikke, andet Steds længst opgivne og forglemte, har paa Island levet et slevstændigt Liv lige ned til vor Tid. Saaledes ogsaa Sproget. Det same Tungemaal, de norsk Landnamsmænd talte ved den første Bebyggelse af Landet henimod Slutningen af det 9de Aarhundrede, tales og skrives endnu deroppe. Saaledes ogsaa Musiken. De same Former, Sangen benyttede, da den, midt i Middelalderens Hjerte, blev bragt til Landet med sine Landnamsmænd eller med Kirkens Klærke, raader endnu deroppe. Det mærkelige Land er da vel værd at studere ogsaa i musikalsk Henseende.

uncovered an article by Gísli Sveinsson in *Fjallkonan* on December 16, 1904 titled “Exhibition in Copenhagen from Denmark’s Dependencies: Iceland in Great Danger.” Kristín notes that

In his article Gísli Sveinsson vividly expresses his concern with the exhibition. He states that Iceland will be: ‘exhibited along with uncultured savage ethnicities (*siðlausum villipjóðum*)...to disgrace us in the eyes of the cultivated world’, furthermore as stressing that ‘people are being taught that we should be observed as belonging to the same stage of culture and progress as the Greenlanders (*skrælingjar*) and blacks (Loftsdóttir 2012, 62).

In her continued analysis of the situation, Kristín pulls apart Icelandic senses of self, Icelandic perceptions of European centers of power, as well as Icelandic perceptions of “justified” racism and colonialism practiced by Danes on *other* people. Sveinsson and sympathetic Icelanders did not find colonialism and subjugation distasteful in theory, they just thought that Icelanders were above such treatment.

Icelandic nation building occurred relatively late in comparison with centers of power in Western Europe, but was coterminous with many post-colonial locations scattered across the globe. While both geography and historical patterns of more severe subjugation might appear to make Iceland an interloper in a conversation of post-colonialism, the patterns and practices which Iceland adopted leading up to and during the independence movement bare striking similarities to global trends.

In writing about the emergence of national culture in 20th century Zimbabwe, ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino noted that:

Like any unit of identity, nations require other units of the same type for their very existence; nations can only understand themselves as such in relation to other nations that are relatively similar in character. Hence, new nation-states require cosmopolitan institutions, roles, and emblems (diplomats, finance and foreign ministers, airports, national sports teams and dance companies, flags, anthems) homologous with those of the

other members of the global family of nations as to be recognizably like them (Turino 2008, 15).

Without overstating similarities between Icelandic and Zimbabwean nationalism, Turino's writing on Zimbabwe strongly resonates with the situation in Iceland. By understanding Iceland in relation to other historically marginalized areas, as opposed to the dominant strands of European history, Europe as monolith itself begins to unravel. Borderlands are exposed between minority populations distanced from, yet clearly influenced by, the powerful centers in Western Europe. In the following chapter, I continue this discussion of national identity but turn to the topic of contemporary popular music in Iceland.

### Chapter 3 - Glögg er gests augað/Clear is the Guest's Eye

Ever since the Sugarcubes, the band that introduced Björk to the world, brought popular music from Iceland beyond Scandinavia,<sup>1</sup> listeners from outside the region have tended to approach popular Icelandic music as an anomaly as mysterious as Iceland itself. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, visitors to this island have long seen Iceland as a liminal holding in the middle of the foreboding North Atlantic. At the same time, Icelanders are aware of the power their homeland tends to have on the imaginations of those outside of the island. As the interest in Icelandic popular music spreads, and as tourists come to Iceland in ever-increasing numbers, people in Iceland are experimenting with how to satiate tourist desires while simultaneously increasing visibility and financial resources for local artists.

At various times throughout my fieldwork in Iceland, individuals within the Icelandic popular music industry remarked upon how often they are asked *why* Icelandic popular music is so successful and unique. While this supposed greatness and uniqueness of Icelandic popular music is largely subjective, the degrees of success are somewhat more measurable. In a recent master's thesis, *The Island Syndrome: A View on the International Success of the Icelandic Music Scene* (2012), Ilana van den Berg explores what factors might be used to analyze the international levels of success of pop music scenes. She then considers how well these models explain the success of Icelandic music. Van den Berg concedes that there are few resources available to quantify the presumed success of Icelandic music (2012, 17) but then offers a range

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<sup>1</sup> There had of course been other Icelandic musicians to be heard outside of Iceland prior to the Sugarcubes, but this group was one of the most influential and most famous. They have also remained in the spotlight longer than most other groups due (in part) to Björk's subsequent solo career.

of quotes discussing the success of Icelandic music from sources including the Icelandic Minister of Culture and the Icelandic Music Export Office. She also cites a handful of references from popular music journalism as well as writing by both Mitchell and Dibben. She concludes the section by writing, “considering all the above said, it cannot be denied that the Icelandic music scene is in fact enjoying notable international success” (2012, 18).

When I conducted an interview with one of the owners of Reykjavík’s *12 Tónar*<sup>2</sup> record shop, I started to explain the interviewing procedures when he gently interrupted me to assure me he knew how this would go. He shrugged the explanations off and said he does four to five interviews with foreigners every year about Icelandic popular music. As the interview progressed, he explained that he is always surprised by how much tourists know about Icelandic music. Iceland has even become a site of “pilgrimage” for the fans of Sigur Rós:

**Jóhann:** The music and the power of it and what it has done for the Icelandic tourist industry, we see it. People come here just because they have been touched by the music of Sigur Rós and they want to make a pilgrimage to this place. And now it’s more, now it’s not only Björk or Sigur Rós, there are other bands as well. People want to, they want to taste this atmosphere, they want to experience where this sound comes from. So, I’m always surprised when I talk with people that come from different countries, how much they know about Icelandic music.

**Kim:** Do you think there’s anything to that, in terms of Sigur Rós being actually uniquely Icelandic. What do you think when you talk to [the tourists]...

**Jóhann:** We have a saying here that, clear is in the eye of the guest, *glögggt er gests augað*. So we can learn many things from what they have to say. And they see, especially after they’ve travelled around the country, they *see* Iceland in the music. Or they hear the landscape in the music, I know it sounds maybe like a cliché, but this is the experience, year after year I get so many people that tell the same stories. (Personal Communication, Reykjavík, Iceland, April 24, 2012)

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<sup>2</sup> This record shop is frequently listed as a must visit site for visitors to Reykjavík in tourist guides. The business owners are very aware of this and cater to tourists and locals alike.

*Glögg er gests augað* (clear is the guest's eye) is my point of departure for this chapter. While business owners, such as the man interviewed above, welcome the increasing number of tourists to Iceland for the financial benefits, key actors in the popular music industry are creating innovative collaborations to combine music and tourism.



Figure 3: View of 12 Tónar record shop from Skólavörðustígur. May 7, 2010. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

In her 1993 article “Ethnography and Popular Music Studies,” Sara Cohen lamented the lack of ethnographic approaches to popular music studies. Cohen calls for studies of popular music as commodity and capital based on “theoretical models abstracted from empirical data” to be better balanced by the use of ethnographic approaches. She writes that these ethnographic

approaches

should also be comparative and holistic; historical and dialogical; reflexive and policy-oriented. It should emphasize, among other things, the dynamic complexities of situations within which abstract concepts and models are embedded, and which they often simplify or obscure. The social, cultural and historical specificity of events, activities, relationships and discourses should also be highlighted (Cohen 1993, 123).

Here I bring such an approach to the study of popular music on the fringes of Northern Europe by placing this music at the center of the conversation. Much of the English-language literature about popular music and culture in Iceland reinforces the peripheralization through depictions of exotic locales inextricably bound to nature. In this chapter I discuss this essentializing perspective and contextualize this discourse within the 20th-century nation building efforts in Iceland. Then to explore local production of popular music somewhat, though not entirely, removed from the overwhelming foreign discourse on music in Iceland, I offer an analysis of two recent albums which have swept the local award circuits without making much of a dent outside of the North Atlantic.

### **Seeing the Northern Exotic**

The infamous *Rolling Stone* rock critic David Fricke ushered in an influential way of writing about popular music in Iceland when he opened his 1988 *Rolling Stone* article on the Sugarcubes with “Welcome to Iceland - Pop Music’s Final Frontier” (Fricke 1988, 67). Fricke played a major role in directing the readers of *Rolling Stone* to the Sugarcubes, and he continues to write about music in Iceland over thirty years after his first publication on Iceland for *Rolling Stone*. In the years to follow, Icelandic popular music has been pressured to conform to

foreigners' expectations in various ways. These external conceptions of Icelandic music often involve a sound thought to be inextricably linked to landscape, folk beliefs, and heritage.

Fricke's writing was emblematic of this approach to Icelandic popular music. The article continues:

There is no such sign greeting you as you turn onto the coastal highway leading from the international airport at Keflavík, Iceland. But there should be. Because the vista that hits you as you drive northeast to the capital city of Reykjavík gives brand-new meaning to the words *rock* and *roll* (Fricke 1988, 66).

Fricke invokes pagan customs still thought to survive on this fringe of Europe, including belief in elves (*huldufólk*)<sup>3</sup> in his description of Björk Guðmundsdóttir, the lead singer of the Sugarcubes, as “an elfin young beauty” (Fricke 1988, 68). Here Icelandic music is portrayed as familiar enough for an American to appreciate -- at times echoing U2 and Blondie, according to Fricke -- but still fundamentally apart, just like Iceland itself. Fricke continues,

But while you have heard the bits and pieces before, you have never heard it all like *this*. Because the Sugarcubes make music that is very much like Iceland itself, a collision of extremes that can be at once forbidding and mysteriously compelling (Fricke 1988, 68).

Fricke's depiction of Iceland as a land of mystery, and the Sugarcube's music as being akin to its extreme homeland, evokes a fantastical version of Iceland as seen from the outside. Finally,

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<sup>3</sup> Supposed belief in the *huldufólk* is frequently used to “other” the Icelanders. These hidden people are thought to live in the rocks and natural elements in Iceland. There have been cases of roads that were planned to be built through supposed *huldufólk* terrain to be redirected in order not to disturb particular rocks.

One of the origin stories of the *huldufólk* traces them back to Adam and Eve. In this story God told Eve that she must keep all of her children clean before him. One day when God came to look in on Eve and her children, she had not had the opportunity to clean all of them yet. She therefore hid the dirty children so that God would not see them. God in turn made those children invisible so that they would never be seen again (Simpson 1972, 14).

Fricke solidifies his view of the Sugarcubes as related to Icelandic geography by noting a “unique symbiotic relationship between Icelandic geology and the Sugarcubes’ electric kick” (Fricke 1988, 68). This writing by Fricke demonstrates a specific way of associating Icelandic popular music with place. The aspects of place emphasized in Fricke’s article may seem tired and outdated, now, over 25 years later, but the discourse of exotic Iceland continues. What is more is that the connection between an exotic locale and quirky, strange popular music sometimes seems stronger now than ever.

The 2005 documentary film *Screaming Masterpiece: 1000 Years of Icelandic Popular Music* took the themes present in Fricke’s article to even greater lengths. Nearly every clip of musicians either playing or being interviewed is interspersed with footage of the Icelandic landscape: vast stretches of cratered volcanic land mirrored by foreboding mountains covered in snow; the ethereal aurora borealis; icy water flowing down jagged cliffs; and ravens flying overhead in the grey sky. The interviews are nearly just as evocative, with central themes emerging of the music’s connection to landscape, pagan spirituality, and the importance of Viking heritage in Iceland.

While the film offers an impressive soundtrack and compelling interviews with a number of musicians, the viewer never hears the questions or prompts given to the musician. This style of editing allowed the filmmakers to craft an overtly whimsical and nature-bound discourse throughout the film. When the composer Jóhan Jóhannsson states that if you live in a country like Iceland, you *will* be influenced by the landscape, the viewer does not know whether Jóhannsson was asked what his influences are, or if he was asked specifically whether landscape

has influenced his music. When the Faroese musician Eivør explains that she wants to stay true to her roots that exist in the old rhymes and psalms she learned from an elder relative, we do not know whether she was specifically asked about how her roots influence her. Nor are we told that Eivør -- and the elder relative who taught her music -- is Faroese, not Icelandic. When Björk offers an explanation of how Icelandic nationalism has influenced popular music, we do not know what her prompt was to give such an explanation. I point this out because the documentary paints a picture of Iceland in which nationalism, heritage, landscape, and paganism seem to be on the tip of every musician's tongue.

A few interviews included in the film, however, do offer a counter-narrative and also provide a glimpse into the sort of questions which these musicians might have been asked in order to elicit such responses. The singer Mugison explains,

Foreigners always ask about elves, trolls, Sigur Rós and Björk. And whether we are, you know, all dancing in and out of cliffs. That's OK. On a bad night, I fear the ghosts as much as anyone else. But I grew up with the country balls, that's my inspiration. Farmers and fishermen, rather than elves and trolls (*Screaming Masterpiece* 2005).

Mugison's experience was echoed by Björk when she explained in an interview for *The New Yorker* that "when record company executives come to Iceland they ask the bands if they believe in elves, and whoever says yes gets signed up" (Ross 2004, 49).

This discourse in which Iceland is portrayed as inherently set apart from modern Europe is not new. The colonial relationship between Denmark and Iceland has shaped the daily lives of individuals for centuries through one-sided economic policy and suppression of local languages and religions. The situation changed significantly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Iceland gained complete independence from Denmark in 1944. The rendering of Iceland as an exotic and

removed colony brings the area into larger conversations of lingering colonial inheritances in different parts of the world. As the popular music and tourism industries increasingly merge, the repurposed discourse of peripheralization in Iceland rears its head.



Figure 4: CD display found in a souvenir shop in Reykjavík. Text reads: “Great Icelandic music for people traveling in Iceland. Suitable for road trips, camping, parties, evening walks and as gifts. Better than a postcard and cheaper than a wool pullover!” May 18, 2012. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

## Borealism

While Iceland emerged from the 20th century fully independent and hyper-developed, it has retained a distant and other-worldly aura for both scholars and tourists alike. Karen Oslund

opened her 2011 volume *Iceland Imagined* by recounting a conversation she held during fieldwork in the country with a local who assured her that “except for the technology, we’re a third world country” (Oslund 2011, 6). Oslund also recalled her own surprise of arriving for the first time and finding a country with few buildings older than 100 years, hardly evoking the historic European cities many North Americans envision (Oslund 2011, 4). *Iceland Imagined* explores the travel narratives produced by mainland Europeans who journeyed north to Iceland and seemed uniformly to find a land that, in their minds, was fluctuating between modernity and primitivism. Oslund clarifies that Europeans who travelled the globe during the early modern period often came into contact with foreign lands and cultures that their perceptions of non-Europeans had great impact on global power structures and global positioning (Oslund 2011, 9). Edward Said’s seminal study *Orientalism* and his consideration of imaginative geographies in the Near East is perhaps the most famous of such writing (Said 1994, 49). But Oslund is hardly alone in her call to explore how the processes and implications of the Nordic North Atlantic complicate the standard binary division of the West vs. the Rest. The same year *Iceland Imagined* was published, a volume edited by Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Iceland and Images of the North* (2011), brought together 21 scholars focused on the marginality of far Northern Europe.

As discussed in Chapter One, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, along with their neighbor to the north, Greenland, constitute an “insular fringe” of this northern edge of Europe. Even the more dominant Nordic nations of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway have had to negotiate their relationship with the centers of European power for centuries. In her book *Nordic Orientalism*, Nordic Studies scholar Elisabeth Oxfeldt argues that her study

problematizes Said's original notion of Orientalism and posits a more complex model describing how European countries on the periphery - in the case of Denmark and Norway - imported Oriental imagery to position themselves not against their colonial Other but rather in relation to the powerful central European nations, particularly France and Germany (Oxfeldt 2005, 13).

Oxfeldt's study demonstrates how both Denmark and Norway, former rulers of Iceland, had to negotiate their own place within European power dynamics.

The tensions present in Iceland and also in the nearby and closely related Faroe Islands, however, have less to do with sitting on a physical fringe between two places. Instead, Iceland and the Faroe Islands seem to exist in a space between the Old World and the New World, between European modernity and primitivism (Einarsson 1996, 226). A Northern-specific form of orientalism, known as "borealism," has been theorized as a way to understand these experiences of peripherality in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Kristinn Schram defines Borealism as a way "to describe cultural practices involved in exoticizing the inhabitants of the north" (Schram 2011, 310). Schram also describes how Icelanders themselves tend to take pleasure in performing supposedly bizarre aspects of their culture, such as eating the uniquely Icelandic dishes including *svið* boiled sheep's head, pickled ram's testicle, and preserved shark. Schram notes a sort of self-parody often portrayed by Icelanders, particularly when abroad, and argues that this is an attempt to "defuse tension and distrust associated with a marginal national culture operating within a new host culture" (Schram 2011, 323). I noted a similar sort of self-parody in play with those in Iceland specifically working to sell Icelandic popular music to foreigners, particularly in the work of the Iceland Airwaves Festival.

This situation is a compelling amalgamation of Iceland's positioning as both a physical

island and what John R. Gillis (2004) describes as a “cultural island”. I draw on Gillis’s work, particularly *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (2004), to contextualize Icelandic popular music within the surprisingly recent global trend of peripheralizing island locations. I also draw on Kristinn Schramm’s work on “Borealism” as a Nordic counterpart to Said’s “Orientalism” to understand how the Nordic North itself has been imagined and constructed as an icy periphery.

### *Ultima Thule*

Anglophone writings about Icelandic popular music surged in the late 1980s once Björk and the Sugarcubes broke into both the British and the American markets, as demonstrated by Fricke’s article discussed in the previous section. Anglophone scholarly writing on popular music has also increased over the past decade. Nicola Dibben, for example, published a volume in 2009 on Björk, and in it she offers one of the most critical and cohesive studies of popular music in Iceland. Dibben later published an article in 2011 about landscape in Icelandic popular music videos. Toni Mitchell’s work on Icelandic music (2013) tends to take a psychogeographic approach.

In this section I examine the writings of Fricke, Dibben, and Mitchell alongside other non-Icelandic scholars. Here I draw on the writings of Foucault regarding politics and the study of discourse (Foucault 1991, 53-72) in order to place writings on Icelandic popular music within a larger discourse of Iceland as constructed by so-called outsiders.<sup>4</sup> Both Mitchell (2013) and

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<sup>4</sup> I must include myself here.

Dibben (2009) take a psychogeographic approach, in which popular music is at times deeply entwined with the Icelandic landscape. Mitchell argues in a recent article comparing Iceland and New Zealand that, “As small, peripheral countries, their music often relates more directly to their geographical features than larger countries, in an attempt to define a topographical identity” (Mitchell 2013, 2). Dibben’s 2009 article on nature and nationalism in Icelandic popular music videos explores just how much these videos tend to feature the Icelandic landscape. Dibben traces a perceived connection between Icelandic nature and the nation and relies heavily on second-hand interviews with Björk and the band members of Sigur Rós. She also focuses on the (2005) documentary *Screaming Masterpieces: 1000 Years of Icelandic Popular Music*.

Mitchell and Dibben’s psychogeographic approaches to the study of popular music reinforce a discourse in which Icelandic landscape is of particular importance in popular music. Yet Dibben presents a telling quotation from Kjartan Sveinsson of Sigur Rós as recorded in *Screaming Masterpiece* saying “I think Iceland is not really to do with the elves and nature and the glaciers. That’s a cliché. Nature is an influence but that’s true everywhere” (Dibben 2009: 138). Later in this same section, Sveinsson says that if anything it’s the vast openness of the land, the geographical space, which is the privilege of being an artist in Iceland. Dibben interprets this quotation as supporting the idea that landscape influences music making in Iceland in particular ways.

Dibben’s book on Björk discusses Icelandic nationalism as she highlights continuities between modern exotification of Iceland and Iceland’s post-colonial liminality (2009). Dibben

notes that while many Icelanders respect Björk for her ability to draw attention to Iceland, others see her representation of Iceland as regressive and reinforcing of stereotypes of an Iceland stuck in the Middle Ages. Furthermore,

The eccentricities, which some foreign media perceive in Björk and attribute to her Icelandic identity, are particular to her rather than to Icelanders as a nation, many of whom view her behaviours as equally bizarre. Overwhelming ignorance of Iceland, and global imagination of Iceland in terms of the mythical north, means that Björk, the most famous of Icelanders, comes to stand for all Icelanders (Dibben 2009, 51).

Dibben emphasizes here that the well-documented eccentricity of Björk has little to do with her Icelandicness and has far more to do with her individual personality. Along with Björk, Sigur Rós has also come to strongly symbolize Iceland in North America. Yet while Björk and Sigur Rós are hardly the only active popular musicians in Iceland, their influence abroad has been so great that they remain at the forefront of much writing about Icelandic popular music.

In my reading of Fricke, Dibben, and Mitchell I note a fascination and tendency to linger on the Icelandic geography in relation to popular music. Particularly in Fricke, there seems to be a sense of awe and wonderment that a place like Iceland would even produce popular music. In all of this writing, along with most cultural studies writing about Iceland, the island is rendered as a marginal location on the periphery of Europe.

This perceived marginalization of Iceland is hardly new. John Gillis, in his study of islands in the Atlantic titled *On the Ocean* (2004) notes that Pythias is thought to have voyaged north from Greece to Iceland in the 4th century BC and called the island “Ultima Thule”, meaning furthest island (Gillis 2004, 21). Here we see Iceland positioned very early as distant from the centers of power and named simply for being far away from Pythias’s home.

Gillis describes “mythical geographies” as opposed to “material geographies” and he argues that the mythical geographies are what provide meaning and direction in our lives (2004, 7). While islands are often thought to symbolize ideas of isolation and remoteness or as utopian paradises, Gillis argues that this attitude only began in the 18th century as power structures shifted away from monarchies possessing land and people towards the nation-state with its boundaries based on geography (2004, 127). As this transition spread across the globe, island locations were rendered peripheral and isolated from the main seats of power, which were almost always on the continent. Islands also came to be seen as living museums for old ways of life lost on the mainland. Gillis writes,

Now the sea was perceived a vast moat, and the islands were taking on an aura of insularity that has haunted them ever since. In the age of industrial capitalism and the nation-state, history turned its back on Atlantic civilization, forgetting that it had ever existed. The nineteenth-century progressive imagination turned inward to focus on roads and bridges, ignoring waterborne forms of transportation. No longer stepping-stones to the future, islands retreated into the mists of history, to remain in obscurity until much nearer our own times (2004, 100).

Gillis’s study examines multiple islands across the Atlantic, but distinguishes Iceland as not only a geographic island but what he terms a “cultural island”, as I mentioned earlier. He borrows this label from Thomas Eriksen to describe how Iceland was also seen as culturally set apart and unique. Gillis writes that the Icelanders did not learn of their own perceived cultural difference until Icelandic students studying in Copenhagen in the 19th century caught wind of the Danish romantic national movement. Gillis also notes that “[Iceland’s] constructed insularity and aboriginality has served it well” (Gillis 2004, 120). The constructed nature of insularity and aboriginality in Iceland is reflected in writings and perceptions of popular music in Iceland.

Iceland has therefore felt the effects of “islandness” as well as being perceived as culturally marginal within both global and regional transactions.

### **Iceland Airwaves**

The Iceland Airwaves music festival began in 1999 and has been held every year since. It continues to grow and is highly successful. In an interview I held with the public relations person behind Iceland Airwaves, she explained that the festival’s brand is so successful that they hardly have to market the festival. The tickets sell out quickly with little effort on their part (Personal Communication, May 14, 2012). The particular branding of Iceland Airwaves is clear in the publicity material available on the festival website:

It’s 4 a.m. You’ve been to five cool clubs, seen ten great bands, made fifteen new friends and fallen in love twenty times. You’re tired. You’re wired. You’re ready to find a bed. You’re ready to find the after-party. You can’t believe you’re here. You’re already making plans to come back next year. And guess what? It’s still Day One. Roll out of bed, hose the party remains out of your hair and hop on a bus. Before you can remember what you did the night before, you’re looking at geysers, waterfalls, lava fields – all the best that a volcanic island has to offer, including the world-famous Blue Lagoon, favorite soaking spot of the international hung-over glitterati. Mmm! You can really taste the hipster! (Iceland Airwaves)

The hipster aesthetic of Iceland Airwaves marketing can of course be found in the marketing of other music festivals around the world. Yet in the Icelandic context, it is difficult to fully disentangle it from the larger discourse of northern exoticism.

I conducted interviews with three employees of Iceland Music Export and Iceland Airwaves, during which I asked them to what degree they intentionally market Iceland as a sort of hipster isle. The publicity manager explained that it is very conscious because it is successful.

When I asked if they had a long-term plan for how to keep the festival fresh once the fad element has passed, she explained that they will keep going with this plan for as long as it is financially successful. The economic viability of the festival and related marketing is not surprisingly one of the main concerns of the organizers. Yet just how much money is at stake in the Icelandic popular music industry, and how much that financial element drives much of the support behind the industry, often goes unspoken.

In a recent glossy paged coffee table book titled *Reykjavik Rocks*, a group of Icelandic writers matched striking photographs of various elements of life in Iceland with little quotes or facts about the country. On one page, a picture of young people drinking and partying is matched with text reading, “The strength of the Reykjavik nightlife, though, stems from the fact that in Iceland the nights are longer than anywhere else” (Helgason 2012). Another image in this book shows a young boy skateboarding in front of the new concert hall in Reykjavik, Harpa. The text accompanying this picture reads:

The only thing the “business vikings” left behind, after their empire crumbled, was a brand new building by the old harbor of Reykjavik. It looks like money from the outside but inside it’s all mind and spirit. This is Harpa, a concert hall. The name is a reference to the famous story about Roman emperor Nero. While our economy was burning we were busy building a concert hall. Never mind the money, we got the music (Helgason 2012).

The “business vikings” were the bankers and large business owners of the early 21st century who are seen to have driven the Icelandic economy to its peak, and then deep into the ground. The crumbling empire is a direct reference to Iceland’s massive 2008 economic collapse. This book, marketed to tourists, and especially those who come to Iceland for the music, reinforces the idea that Icelanders and their music are somehow special, perhaps even innocent. The world can burn

around them, but those crazy Icelanders will keep rocking, as suggested in the last sentence of the quote above: “Never mind the money, we got the music.”

Yet, in late December of 2012, a month after Iceland Airwaves of that year wrapped up, I received an email from the Icelandic side of the Icelandic music export office, known as Útón. The subject of the email was “Foreign guests spent 1.1 billion kroner at Iceland Airwaves”. Iceland Airwaves is of course Iceland’s biggest music festival and over half of those in attendance are foreigners. This 1.1 billion kroner spent by foreigners at Airwaves is roughly equivalent to US\$8,733,000<sup>5</sup>. The email also noted that guests spent on average 29,268 kroner a day on housing and food.

When Iceland’s economy, which had been heavily inflated by banking practices, began to crumble in 2008, people throughout the country had to think of new ways to economically sustain themselves. Even before the economy crumbled, individuals had started to try to quantify the success of Icelandic popular music in terms of the tourists that were coming to Iceland largely to discover the homeland of Björk and Sigur Rós. After the economic collapse this realization that tourists were indeed inclined to come to Iceland for the music led to increased collaboration between the Icelandic music industry and the Icelandic tourism industry. Iceland Air, the national airline company, had a stake in Iceland Airwaves from the beginning of the festival, prior to the collapse. But now the airline company teams up with local hotels and tourism companies to offer appealing package tours for North Americans to come to Iceland Airwaves and explore Iceland at the same time (Young 2011). Yet Icelandic popular music does

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<sup>5</sup> Based on exchange rates in November 2012.

not exist solely for the consumption of foreigners, and the internal perspectives on the music tend to differ drastically from the outsider focused approaches described here.

### **Local Experiences**

When I lived in Reykjavík, the same woman cut my hair throughout my stay. Stína was in her late twenties, as was I. She was born and raised in Reykjavík and continues to live there now with her boyfriend and their young child. Every time I visited Stína, she would ask how my research was going and always offered new insight into her and her friends's experiences with Icelandic popular music. It was while I was in Iceland that the group Of Monsters and Men gained success in the United States, which Icelanders largely attributed to Seattle's KEXP radio station (pronounced "kex pah" in Icelandic, as "kex" is itself a word meaning biscuit, and the p is pronounced as the letter in Icelandic). Stína's younger sibling had gone to school with most of the musicians in Of Monsters and Men and she has known them since they were all young kids. Stína explained that almost overnight the band members became nearly impossible to reach, due to the large American management behind them, Universal. I asked Stína whether she was more inclined to like their music because she knows them, but she explained that no, that was not the case. But, she offered, she likes them because the music is fun, though she wonders whether they can keep up the momentum they had experienced in early 2012 (Personal Communication, February 2012).

On another occasion, Stína and I talked about her family's summer plans. She explained that most Icelanders get in their cars and drive to the countryside and camp at some point during

the summer. She was looking forward to driving around the country listening to Sigur Rós, which she says she does every year. I asked her whether Sigur Rós sounded Icelandic to her or whether there was anything to the idea that the music was linked to the Icelandic landscape. Stína paused and explained that even as an Icelander, Sigur Rós sounded unlike anything she had ever heard before. As to the idea that the music in any way evoked the landscape, she did not see much validity in the idea that music evokes landscape (Personal Communication, May 2012).

### *Icelandic Music Day*

While there is certainly a significant amount of effort placed on selling Icelandic music abroad, Icelanders also participate in making and enjoying popular forms of music without necessarily casting their eyes abroad. For example, *Degi íslenskar tónlistar* (Icelandic Music Day), December 1st, is intended as an opportunity for people across the country to join together and sing the same songs at the same time. And at 11:15 a.m. on December 1, 2011, every radio station in Iceland played the same three songs in succession. The songs chosen included the classical piece “*Kvæðið um fuglana*” (“The Song about Birds”) written by Davíð Stefánsson and Atli Heimir Sveinsson, “*Manstu ekki eftir mér?*” (“Don’t You Remember Me?”) by Ragnhildar Gísladóttir and Þórðar Árnasonar, and finally “*Stingum af*” (“Slip Away”) by Mugison. This effort to unify a nation in song represents a kind of sonification of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community”: it attempted to create a sense of camaraderie and shared experience among a diverse population of 320,000 people (Anderson 2006, 7). But it also created a space in which Icelandic music, particularly Icelandic popular music, was localized and temporarily

disengaged from global music markets -- a space in which Icelandic popular music had achieved unprecedented recognition among international audiences.

### *Mugison*

Within the context of popular music, Mugison's career and music demonstrates that musicians from Iceland are actually rather vulnerable in the international market, despite the significant attention given to Björk and Sigur Rós both in Iceland and international music markets. In early 2012 Mugison swept the Icelandic Music Awards by winning the categories of album of the year, songwriter of the year, and song of the year (for "*Stingum af*"). Mugison further endeared himself to his fellow Icelanders when, in December of 2011, he held a free concert in Harpa. Despite Mugison's success at home, his lack of success in the United States in particular has become a tale of warning for other musicians thinking about trying to break into North American markets and scenes.<sup>6</sup>

Mugison's 2011 album *Haglél* (Hail Storm) is packaged in a white paper jacket with embossed pencil scratches on the cover. The album's title appears handwritten in pencil on the jacket and sketches drawn by Mugison himself appear throughout the inside booklet. *Haglél*, in contrast to his previous releases in English, is entirely in Icelandic, Mugison's native language. The lyric booklet's cover is stamped with the word "*Landsbókasafn.*" *Landsbókasafn* is the national and university library of Iceland and it is renowned for its efforts to collect every book

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<sup>6</sup> During the summer of 2012 I consulted with the Faroese musician Eivør, who had lived and recorded for a number of years in Iceland before moving to Denmark, about arranging an upcoming American tour in 2013. Eivør's manager specified the dangers of embarking on such a tour, which Mugison is said to have learned the hard way.

published by Icelanders as well as foreign works about Iceland. Mugison's playful decision to place a reference to the library in his text booklet can be understood as a self-reference to the importance of the texts included in this CD booklet. All of the lyrics and accompanying texts in the booklet are in Icelandic with no other languages, including English.

*Háglel* proved to be a great success in Iceland, as demonstrated by Mugison taking home the awards for album of the year, song writer of the year, song of the year for “*Stingum af*”, and lyric writer of the year at the 2011 Icelandic Music Awards. As previously mentioned, the song “*Stingum af*” was also selected as one of the three songs to be sung in unison while broadcast on every radio station throughout the country for the 2011 Icelandic Music Day. While this was not Mugison's first album to receive national recognition, as his 2007 album *Mugiboogie* was awarded the Icelandic Music Award for best rock album of the year, *Háglel* had clearly struck a deep chord with the Icelandic public, as demonstrated by record sales, awards, and national celebration.

Mugison's song “*Stingum af*” managed to penetrate multiple levels of Icelandic society. In addition to being a featured song of the 2011 Icelandic Music Day, it was also used in language courses geared towards migrants studying at *Mímir*.<sup>7</sup> In March of 2012 I was enrolled in an upper intermediate level of Icelandic at *Mímir*, and my teacher used “*Stingum af*” as a classroom exercise. The teacher had printed out the text and cut out each individual line and then asked us, in groups of two, to reassemble the text in proper order while we listened to the song. This exercise, she explained, was to expose us to contemporary poetic Icelandic, and also to expose us

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<sup>7</sup> *Mímir* is one of the most popular institutions in Reykjavík to study Icelandic as a non-native language.

to Icelandic culture as described by Mugison. The students, myself included, listened along to the song while we worked to place the strips of paper in proper order. After we completed the exercise, we discussed Mugison's depiction of Iceland. Our teacher then asked us to sing along with the recording of Mugison, which we did. Singing along with the recording allowed us to practice our Icelandic at the same time that we entered into the national sphere of engagement with this particular song.

The text evokes nostalgia for a childhood spent in the countryside of Iceland. Mugison makes extensive reference to features of the countryside, including streams, waterfalls, fjords, and Icelandic moss. Mugison also emphasizes the family, describing a mother's kiss and a father's interaction with the children. The family plays games, sings songs, and eats lamb, a common dish in Iceland (see text and my translation below). "It is good to be here," he sings. The emphasis on the Icelandic landscape and reference to a magical whale might initially evoke the foreign longings for a nature-fueled, animistic Iceland I discussed earlier in this chapter. As I understand the song, however, Mugison is making very specific references to shared experiences among many, though certainly not all, children in Iceland. Nostalgia seems to pervade the text, while the waltz-like rhythm maintained by the piece's 3/4 time signature reinforces a sense of cyclical experiences and feelings.

**Instrumental Intro<sup>8</sup>**

0:00 - 0:18 Bars 1 -9

**Verse 1**

0:18 - 0:45 Bars 10 - 23

Það er andvökubjart  
himinn - kvöldsólarskart,  
finnum læk, litla laut,  
tínum grös, *sjóðum graut*  
finnum læk, litla laut,  
tínum grös, *sjóðum graut*

It is light with insomnia  
the sky, evening sun ornament  
(we) find a stream, a little hollow (noun)  
(we) pick grass, funds jumbled  
(we) find a stream, a little hollow (noun)  
(we) pick grass, funds jumbled

**Verse 2**

0:45 - 1:11 Bars 24 -37

Finum göldróttan hval  
og fyndinn sel í smá dal  
lækjarnið, lítinn foss,  
*skeinusár*, mömmukoss  
lækjarnið, lítinn foss,  
*skeinusár*, mömmukoss

(we) find a magical whale  
and a witty seal in a small valley  
the stream, little waterfall  
shining mother's kiss  
the stream, little waterfall  
shining mother's kiss

**Chorus**

1:12 - 2:13 Bars 38 - 70

stingum af -  
í spegilsléttan fjörð  
stingum af -  
smá fjölskylduhjörð  
senn fjúka barnaár  
upp í loft, út á sjó  
verðmæt gleðitár,  
elliró, elliró

(we) slip away  
in the mirror-smooth fjord  
(we) slip away  
small family herd  
soon blown away childhood  
up in the air, out at sea  
precious, happy tears  
peace of old age

**Verse 3**

2:14 - 2:40 Bars 71 - 84

hoppum út í bláinn,  
kveðjum stress og *skjáinn*,  
syngjum lag, spilum spil,  
þá er gott að vera til  
syngjum lag, spilum spil,

(we) hop out in the blue  
(we) say goodbye to stress and  
(we) sing a song, (we) play a game  
it is good to be here  
(we) sing a song, (we) play a game

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<sup>8</sup> Translation is my own.

pá er gott að vera til                      it is good to be here

#### Verse 4

2:41 - 3:08 Bars 85 - 98

tínnum skeljar, fjallagrös,	(we) pick shells, mountain moss
látum pabba <i>blása úr nös</i> ,	(we) let daddy blow out the nose
við grjótahól í feluleik,	with stone praise in hide and seek
á <i>hleðslu</i> lambasteik,	on loaded up steaks of lamb
við grjótahól í feluleik,	with stone praise in hide and seek
á hleðslu lambasteik,	on loaded up steaks of lamb

#### Chorus

3:09 - 4:00 Bars 99 - 122

stingum af -	(we) slip away
í spegilsléttan fjörð	in the mirror-smooth fjord
stingum af -	(we) slip away
smá fjölskylduhjörð	small family herd
senn fjúka barnaár	soon blown away childhood
upp í loft, út á sjó	up in the air, out at sea
verðmæt gleðitár,	precious, happy tears
elliró, elliró	peace of old age

*Haglél* is itself a diverse recording containing themes of love, longing, nostalgia, homesickness, and everyday life descriptions. The music on the album is also highly varied with blues influence coming across strongly on “*Kletturinn*,” a twisted sort of love ballad with “*Gúanóstelpan*,” and the sparsely accompanied closing track describing a fear of demons, “*Púkafæla*”. Perhaps more than anything else, it is this variety in Mugison’s artistic output that has so strongly endeared him to the Icelandic public.

In December 2011, Mugison arranged a free concert in Reykjavík’s new concert hall, Harpa, as a community event. A television advertisement for this concert showed Mugison seated at a desk wearing a suit jacket and tie, with a safari style hat on his head. The official state seal of Iceland was fixed on the wall behind his left shoulder, with his guitar resting by his right side. He

addressed the viewers as “Góða Íslendingar”<sup>9</sup> and explained that he would like to warmly invite everyone to a free concert in Reykjavík’s new concert hall, Harpa on the 22nd of December. He went on to explain, with *Stingum af* playing in the background, how tickets could be acquired for the event. This concert was a collaboration with *Fjállabræður* (Mountain Brothers), a Reykjavík based male chorus with roots in Iceland’s West Fjords known for recording and performing new rock-oriented choral compositions. The concert promotion was a success and tickets to the event, while free, quickly became unavailable.

On May 19, 2012 Mugison was a guest performer for the 100 year celebration of *Karlakórinn Þreystir*, another local male chorus along with the Icelandic musician KK and the Faroese musician Eivør. Mugison’s work with these local male choruses, as well as his performances with both Eivør and KK on May 19th, demonstrate the importance of camaraderie and collaboration within North Atlantic popular music. Just as his performance at Harpa sold out, so did the May 19th performance. Over 300 people filled *Langholtskirkja*, a church on the outskirts of Reykjavík. The audience was filled with people of all ages, from very young children toddling around the front of the church during the performance, to elderly individuals assisted by middle-aged friends and family. A woman who appeared to be in her late twenties sat beside me and offered commentary throughout the performance. When Mugison sang “Gúanóstelpan”, she whispered “that’s a dirty dirty song, but I love it. So does my mom.” More than any other Icelandic musician in recent years, Mugison has crossed generational and genre boundaries. His career, as opposed to that of Of Monsters and Men or Sigur Rós, demonstrates that local and

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<sup>9</sup> A formal greeting meaning “Dear Icelanders.”

foreign popularity do not necessarily go hand in hand. Through this work, Mugison in effect mediates internal senses of Icelandic identity and place.



Figure 5: Mugison at left with the male chorus *Karлакórinn Þreystir* . May 19, 2012. Reykjavík. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

## Conclusion

According to Simon Frith, music making is a key site for social groups to come to understand not only others, but themselves. He argues:

My point is not that a social group has beliefs which it then articulates in its music, but that music, an aesthetic practice, articulates *in itself* an understanding of both group relations and individuality, on the basis of which ethical codes and social ideologies are understood. What I want to suggest, in other words, is not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities (the assumption of the homology models) but that they only get to know themselves *as groups* (as particular organizations of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) *through* cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement. Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them (Frith 1996, 110-111).

Drawing from Frith's ideas presented here, Mugison, and other popular musicians in Iceland, actively create and shape Iceland as a social space through their music. Thus popular music is not

only a venue for shaping foreign perceptions of Iceland and Icelanders, but it also shapes internal understandings of what Icelandic society encompasses.

Music making in Iceland since at least the mid-19th century has played a key role in negotiations of domestic and foreign notions of Icelandic society. In the previous chapter I discussed how Western European classical music was a primary site of nation building and conscientious efforts to shift how Icelandic society was viewed both at home and abroad. I have argued in this chapter that music continues to play these roles in Iceland, but that popular music forms are now the primary site of identity formation in and through music. In the next chapter I combine a series of smaller case studies from the Reykjavík area to understand how these issues affect amateur and non-commercial sites of music making.

## Chapter 4: Song Learning in Reykjavík

This chapter explores contemporary song practices across Reykjavík, as documented during my ethnographic fieldwork between 2011 and 2012. I argue that singing remains a key practice through which Icelanders make sense of their identity and heritage. The issues at the heart of this chapter are music learning and knowledge. I focus on informal and formal methods of early childhood music education, adult learning of traditional Icelandic song forms, including *rímur*, and the intersection of these areas. I focus on participatory and community-based music making here, as opposed to the more specialized forms of music making discussed in Chapters Two and Three. I introduce a selection of case studies drawn from diverse sites of music making and music learning among both children and adults in the Reykjavík area. My goal in this writing is to position music making in everyday contexts as a vital part of contemporary Icelandic musical life, even though such practices remain outside the purview of music and cultural export schemes and most musicological research in Iceland.

I juxtapose my study of early childhood music education with a study of two *rímur* societies, in which both children and adults participate in social and educational functions. Despite have been critiqued as trying to “police” or “freeze” Icelandic song practices, my research shows that these organizations encourage change, growth, and participation from new and seasoned singers. Many of the people involved in the *rímur* societies are also active in other forms of music making and some regularly participate in community song evenings known as *söngvaka*, which I also discuss.

Choral singing is also a common and vibrant form of both childhood and adult music

making in the Reykjavík area. I thus include an overview of the different types of choirs found in the area, including school and university based choirs, church choirs, community choirs, and an all-male choir whose members originate in the West Fjord region of Iceland. This latter choir, *Fjallabröður*, represents a common practice of choirs formed in the urban region of Reykjavík by people with roots in specific rural areas. Despite nationalistic leanings and a supposedly rural background, *Fjallabröður* is a choir that is backed by a rock band and sings mainly new compositions.

The material covered in this chapter crosses between presentational and participatory forms of music making. In *Music as Social Life*, Thomas Turino embraces the categories of presentational and participatory music making, arguing that

these situations of participatory music making are not just informal or amateur, that is *lesser* versions of the ‘real music’ made by the pros but that, in fact, they are something else – a different form of art and activity entirely – and that they should be conceptualized and valued as such (Turino 2008, 25).

Turino’s categories of “presentational” and “participatory” are in some ways more useful than “amateur” and “professional,” even though the lines between such categories are historically blurry in Iceland. In all of the examples discussed in this chapter, even when presentational performances are involved, the social bonding between the musicians and the audience is of primary importance. The descriptions of music making in this chapter provide a counter-narrative to the hyper-exotic images of Icelandic music making as described in Chapter Three. I am also interested in forms of music making among people in Iceland that are not sold to tourists or used to market the nation.

## **Music & Young Children**

One of the driving questions behind this research is whether or not the prescriptive tendencies of Icelandic cultural policy impact the musical education of children. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture strictly oversees all formal education in Iceland, including general early childhood education and the curriculum of private music schools. As discussed previously in this dissertation, this same ministry oversees cultural heritage policies aimed at the preservation of dominant Icelandic cultural practices. Yet, with an increasingly diverse population, singing in early childhood education has been targeted as a key opportunity to encourage international and multicultural awareness among young people in Iceland.

In the introduction to *Songs in Their Heads*, Patricia Shehan Campbell compiles the writing of scholars from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century through the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to make a compelling case for the study of children's music. She notes a tendency for ethnomusicologists to overlook children's musical cultures in favor of adult music making (Shehan Campbell 2010). Inspired by Campbell's attention to children's music making, I too find value in observing both informal and formal sites of children's music making, and I set out to observe both. Due to the ethical constraints involved in conducting research with children, my work was entirely observational and I did not specifically interact with the children or talk to them. In some cases I conducted extended conversations with parents about their observations of their children's music making. This section demonstrates that early childhood music making has been targeted as a key site for introducing children in Iceland to international awareness and relations.

This component of my research focuses on informal and formal sites of children's songs from age one through age six. Iceland's strong social-welfare system and the social norm of both parents working outside of the home is complemented by a strong state subsidized system of early-childhood education and daycare. Almost every child in Iceland attends *leikskóli* (roughly equivalent to preschool in the United States) beginning at 18 months up until age six. Music, particularly singing, is a frequent activity for children in these settings. Many of the teachers at this level do not have specific training as music educators, but instead received training in early-childhood education in which music was one component.

Unlike preschool in the United States however, attendance at *leikskóli* is almost mandatory. According to a director of policy for *leikskóli* in Reykjavík with whom I spoke, 98% of children in Reykjavík attend these schools (Personal Interview, 15 March 2012). This institution is considered so vital that if authorities discover that children are *not* attending the schools, they are likely to conduct an informal investigation to uncover why the child has been excluded. *Leikskóli* are thus considered necessary for individual development and socialization.

Each individual school can develop its own curriculum based on nation-wide recommendations, and it is common for certain schools to develop a specific focus, such as health and wellness, arts, or music. In the official national curriculum guide for preschools in Iceland, music is included as one of many forms of communication and expression that children should be encouraged to use, although there are no actual guidelines for how music instruction should be implemented in the schools. In many ways, inclusion of music at this level is controlled by the individual schools and educators. This situation has enabled certain educators,

such as Birte Harksen, to think creatively about music education and develop inclusive music programs.

### *Birte Harksen*

In the Reykjavík area there are a few preschool teachers who have gained recognition for their efforts to develop inclusive music programs at their schools. Birte Harksen, a teacher originally from Denmark with whom I consulted, was recently awarded a two-year grant from the Icelandic Ministry of Education to research and implement effective musical teaching to young children. Harksen developed a website called *Börn og tónlist* (Children and Music) as part of her work and this website has become a major resource for early childhood educators around the country. Harksen's website has extensive audio and video recordings of children learning and singing music in Icelandic *leikskóli*. Well over two-hundred different songs are included on the website and for each song there is a detailed description and explanation as to why the song is used with the children. Harksen also posts the song lyrics and videos of the children singing the songs. This dynamic website, which includes repertoire from around the world, has become a resource for other educators in Iceland.

Harksen's formal training in Denmark had been in the arts and Danish language at the middle-school level. When she and her family relocated to Iceland, she was hired to teach Danish to Icelandic youth between the ages of 12 to 15. She did not find this line of work very satisfying, and she eventually took a teaching position at a preschool in the Reykjavík area as a general instructor. Despite not having been trained in either early childhood education or music,

she began to experiment with how best to use music with children as part of formal music instruction and general educational practice. In my work with Harksen, I observed song sessions at the preschool with two different age groups: students from eighteen months to three years old, and students from three to five years old. During my observations of these song sessions, as well as in my discussions with Harksen and my analysis of her website and a CD she made of her students, I was interested in not only the process of how children are taught to sing, but also what repertoire was selected for them to sing.

Describing her initial work with music in the preschools, Harksen recalled:

I started here [*leikskóli*] like that, just as an ordinary teacher, and then, after, when I saw we were not on our way back [to Denmark], I began to focus on the music.... it was something that I really enjoyed doing and liked but I couldn't find ways to use it with the children. It was so narrow how I used the music, it was like half past twelve we will all sit here and I would say "now I learned this song shall we sing that?" and they would say "yeah", or "what do you want to sing?" and they would always choose the same three songs and I was like, oh no, this is not interesting, I want to have, I want to think broader about music...and I thought well [I could turn this into research] (Personal Communication, 5 March 2012).

Later in the interview, she explained that these three songs were "*Afi minn og amma mín*" (My Grandpa and Grandma), "*Í leikskóli er gaman*" (Preschool Is Fun), and "*Óskasteinar*" (Wishing Stone). "*Afi minn og amma mín*" and "*Óskasteinar*" are two of the most popular Icelandic children's songs, and it is not surprising that the children would have requested them. But, as I will discuss later in this chapter, they also demonstrate foreign influence on presumably traditional Icelandic music.

After Harksen realized she was in a position to expose her students to new music, she sought funding from the Ministry of Education. She then developed a research project focused

on how best to incorporate dynamic music education into preschools in Iceland. She explained:

I used this opportunity to try to get a lot of ideas. How could I do music with this age group [to make it] more interesting for me and for them? Also probably because I'm from Denmark, I was always trying to understand the songs, so all of a sudden I experienced what lies in the text and in the subject of the song... At the same time, because this is a *heilsuleikskóli* (health-focused preschool), movement and sport is a big part of this, more than music was at any time in the beginning. When the sports teacher, *íþrottakennari*, stopped I thought, I would like this, because I am [already] working in this school. It was a coincidence, but now I'm here and how can I bring his movement part into what I do with music? I started to get ideas and develop ideas in that area and I also wanted to use instruments more. I wanted to use games and to try a lot of things but I see now four or five years later that the movement worked, I have been working more with that, and also to make stories and music go together and make music out of books. I can show you some ideas with that (Personal Interview, 5 March 2012).

Clearly, although Harksen is working at a health focused preschool, she has conscientiously worked to incorporate more music into the curriculum.

### *Repertoire*

The repertoire covered by Harksen with her students and included on her website includes newly composed songs by Harksen for the children at her preschool, such as “*Hver borðar laufblað?*” (Who Eats Leaves?). The description of this song on the website explains,

The idea for this song came when we began to work with a shark theme and the children were very curious about what sharks eat... The discussion took off and soon enough we turned to the idea of the food chain: Who eats what? The song is Italian and called “*Ci vuole un fiore*”, but I wrote new lyrics that fit with the theme. This was soon after þorrablót, so the ending was a natural fit: Who eats sharks? The kids at Sjárvarhóli! (*börn*

og tónlist)<sup>1</sup>

Harksen's newly composed lyrics in this song (see text below) help to educate the children about trends in the food chain, but it also positions the children in the song as the eaters of shark, or *Hákarl*, a common food considered uniquely Icelandic.

### **Hver borðar laufblað?**

Hver borðar laufblað?	Who eats leaves?
Það gerir lirfan.	The caterpillar does.
Hver borðar lirfuna?	Who eats the caterpillar?
Það gerir unginn.	The nestling does.
Hver borðar ungann?	Who eats the nestling?
Það gerir mávur.	The seagull does.
Hver borðar mávinn?	Who eats the seagull?
Það gerir selur.	The seal does.
Hver borðar selinn?	Who eats the seal?
Það gerir hákarl.	The shark does.
Hver borðar hákarl?	Who eats the shark?
Hver borðar hákarl?	Who eats the shark?
Það gera krakkarnir á Sjóvarhóli.	The kids of Sjóvarhóli do!

In addition to the selections of newly composed songs, including “*Hver borðar laufblað*,” Harksen also uses many popular Icelandic folk songs with the kids. When I visited the school, she had the students perform a famous Icelandic folk song, “*Á Sprengisandi*.” The text of this

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<sup>1</sup> Hugmyndin að þessu lagi kom þegar við byrðuðum að vinna með hákarlaþema og börnin voru mjög áhugasöm um það hvað hákarlar borða ... Umræðurnar fóru af stað og fyrr en varir var þetta búið að snúast yfir í pælingar um fæðukeðjuna: Hver borðar hvað? Lagið er ítalskt og heitir *ci vuole un fiore*, en ég gerði nýjan texta, sem passaði vel við þetta þema. Þetta var skömmu eftir þorrablótið, svo að endinn var auðvitað upplagður: ‘Hver borðar hákarl? Það gerir krakkarnir á Sjóvarhóli!’

song, included below, was written by Grímur Thomsen, one of Iceland's most renowned romantic poets who studied literature in Copenhagen during the rise of Icelandic nationalism there in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As the students sang this song, Birte had a diagram for them with pictures to remind them of the story of a lone traveler who is out horse riding but must travel quickly to avoid ghosts, outlaws, and even the elf queen herself. It is typical when performing this song for the tempo to gradually speed up in order to represent the increasing urgency of the rider. The text of this song engages with two of the most common themes of Icelandic folksongs: nature and supernatural occurrences.

### *Á Sprengisandi*

Ríðum, ríðum, rekum yfir sandinn, rennur sól á bak við Arnarfell. Hér á reiki' er margur óhreinn andinn úr því fer að skyggja á jökulsvell.	Ride, ride, drive over the sand the sun sets behind Arnarfell. Around here are many dangerous spirits because dusk is falling on the glacier.
Drottinn leiði drösulinn minn, drjúgur verður síðasti áfanginn. Þei þei, þei þei. Þaut í holti tófa, þurran vill hún blóði væta góm, eða líka einhver var að húa undarlega digrum karlaróm.	The lord leads my horse, the last leg of the journey will be difficult. Hey hey, hey hey. The fox is dashing in the hillock, she wants to chase bloody prey, there is also maybe someone shouting with a deep manly voice.
Útilegumenn í Ódáðahraun eru kannski' að smala fê á laun. Ríðum, ríðum, rekum yfir sandinn, rökkrið er að síga' á Herðubreið. Álfadrotting er að beisla gandinn, ekki' er gott að verða' á hennar leið.	Outlaws in the Ódáða lava are maybe herding sheep in secret. Ride, ride, drive over the sand, night is falling on the mountain. The elf queen is waving her wand, it is not good to be in her way.
Vænsta klárinn vildi' ég gefa til að vera kominn ofan í Kiðagil.	I would want the best horse to be able to survive in Kiða ravine.

As mentioned, Harksen also makes a concerted effort to include songs from outside of

Iceland in her repertoire with the children. When I visited the school, Harksen had the students sing a well-known Faroese children's song, "*Dukka mín er blá*" (My Doll Is Blue) (see text and translation below). She emphasized to me that she wanted the students to be familiar with Faroese music and culture, as they are Iceland's closest neighbors. She worked closely with the students on pronunciation so that the students understood that while the two languages are quite similar, they are indeed different. It was interesting to hear the children sing this particular song, as I had previously recorded a middle-aged Faroese man in Denmark sing this song, among others, when exploring songs he remembered from childhood.

### **Dukka mín er blá**

Dukka mín er blá,  
hestur mín er svartur,  
ketta mín er grá,  
máni mín er bjartur  
gyllir hvørja á.

My doll is blue  
My horse is black  
My cat is grey  
My moon is brightly  
glittering

Og ein summardag  
fara vit at ferðast,  
langa leið avstað,  
tá skal dukkan berast,  
tá er systir glað.

And one summer day  
We went out to travel  
heading on a long way  
then shall the doll be carried  
then my sister is happy.

Harksen also explained that at the beginning of the year, or whenever a new student comes into her classroom, she asks the child and the family to introduce the classmates to a song typically sung in their home. She does not single out the non-Icelandic students in this practice, but with the increasing number of students with international backgrounds, the students have been introduced to songs from many parts of the world through this practice. On the day that I visited the students, they sang a song from the Philippines, "*Bahay kubo, kahit munti*" (Nipa Hut,

Even Though It Is Small) that a mother of one of the students had taught them.

### **Bahay kubo, kahit munti**

Bahay kubo, kahit munti	Nipa hut, even though it is small
Ang halaman doon, ay sari sari	The plants it houses are varied
Sinkamas at talong, sigarilyas at mani	Turnip and eggplant, winged bean and peanut
Sitaw, bataw, patani.	String bean, hyacinth bean, lima bean.
Kundol, patola, upo't kalabasa	Wax gourd, luffa, white squash and pumpkin,
At saka mayroon pang labanos,	And there is also radish, mustard,
mustasa,	
Sibuyas, kamatis, bawang at luya	Onion, tomato, garlic, and ginger
Sa paligid-ligid ay puno ng linga.	And all around are sesame seeds.

Birte Harksen's work with the children at the preschool where she teaches and with other educators and children across Iceland is a significant component of how and what children in Iceland are taught to sing. In her song sessions that I observed, she did not approach the session as a formal lesson. Instead she incorporated music and song into her conversations with the children and encouraged them to sing and dance with her as she worked with them on both new and old songs. Due to the dominance of preschool education in the lives of most children in Iceland, the incorporation of music into such settings is a vital component of music in everyday life for youth and their families across the island. Furthermore, Harksen's efforts demonstrate that children in Iceland are exposed to music as a mediator of identity in Iceland and in relation to areas outside of Iceland. Throughout my work with Harksen, I wondered whether the strong cultural heritage policies in Iceland, as explored earlier, intersect with the reality of a diversifying student population.

### *Diversity in Iceland*

As previously mentioned, there has been a significant increase in the number of immigrants and people of foreign background currently living in Iceland since the 1990s. The overall number of immigrants living in Iceland increased from 5,357 in 1996 (1.8% of the total population) to 25,265 in 2008 (8% of the total population) (*Hagtiðindi Mannfjöld 2009*, 1). In addition to an overall increase in immigrants during this time period, the backgrounds of these immigrants have shifted from being predominantly Danish or Norwegian to being predominantly Eastern European (*Hagtiðindi Mannfjöld 2009*, 17). The proportion of children in Iceland who are either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants has also significantly increased. In 2008 there were 1,437 children fourteen years old and under living in Iceland who had been born abroad, whereas in 2006 there were 970, and in 1996 there were only 220. The government also tracks second-generation immigrants, defined as having both parents and all four grandparents born abroad. In 2008 there were 1,303 second-generation immigrants fourteen years old and under, whereas in 2006 there were 889, and in 1996 there were 156.

According to Jónsdóttir, director of the national organization *Fjölmennning í Leikskólum* (Diversity in Preschools), as of 2012, 18.5% of the children who attend Reykjavík's *leikskóli* have one or more parent with a foreign background, coming out to nearly 1100 of the 6000 children in the system (Personal Communication, March 15, 2012). Policy makers and educators are highly aware of the growing diversity within the school system and are actively concerned with working towards making the school system as inclusive as possible to serve the needs of all children and families in the region. Thus these policy makers have identified music education as

a key opportunity to foster inclusion among students. Jónsdóttir also explained to me that music is one of the main emphases in this initiative because it functions as a thread in multicultural thinking. The hope is that if children listen to and sing music from around the world, especially music from their classmates' homelands, their eyes will be opened to the diversity of music and cultures. Jónsdóttir explained that one practice commonly used in the schools is to have children and parents introduce the other students to music from their homelands (Personal Communication, Jónsdóttir March 15 2012).

Harksen echoed these efforts and explained that she tries to find songs from around the world to teach to her children. She hoped that through these efforts students would develop positive associations of foreign cultures through music. By learning these songs, the students are also exposed to a range of foreign languages from a very early age. Both traditional and contemporary Icelandic songs are also used in the classrooms, with the drive to do so coming from both the students and the teachers. These efforts provide a specific case study in how music in Iceland is used to mediate relations in Iceland and with the outside world as well.

### **Music Education & Song**

In addition to the time spent in the *leikskóli*, I also spent time with several families in the Reykjavík area. I offer the following description of one family as a case study of the role that song plays in Icelandic music education. I combine observations of Icelandic children with interviews with parents and music educators to explore why singing is a key component of early-childhood education but is rarely thought of as proper music education beyond the *leikskóli* age.

Instead, music education for older children and teenagers is more frequently the domain of instrumental Western European-style music. The privileging of instrumental music in educational settings is related to the material presented in Chapter Two, in which vibrant vocal music has been overshadowed by the prestige of Western European art music.

I came to know the families I worked with mostly through my activities at the University of Iceland and at the *Mimir* Icelandic language school for immigrants where I took daily Icelandic classes. One of the families I spent considerable time with had three children at the time, a nine-year-old boy and two six-year-old fraternal twin girls. Both parents lived at home with the children and were in their early forties with doctoral level education. This family was unique in educational attainment, international background, and family musical history. Prior to their marriage both parents spent significant time living in the United States and the mother had also lived in Niger for two years. This family happens to descend from one of the few Viennese men to settle in Iceland in the early 20th century in order to help build the German-Austro music education system and national symphony orchestra. This family was a good starting point for my research because they had just returned from a four month stay in the United States where the children had each attained basic, but functional, English skills.

When I initially began talking with the parents about the musicality of their children, both parents insisted that they themselves were not musicians, despite the musical family heritage. Partially because of their own feelings of not having received full music educations, the parents had invested significant time and money in the musical education of their children through a local music school. The girls were both learning to play the violin and the boy was learning to

play the piano. Performance on these instruments was highly valued in the family, as demonstrated by a practice and rehearsal schedule, as well as informal performances the children gave at family gatherings including Christmas parties, birthday parties, and dinner gatherings.

In addition to attending such social events at this family's home, I also accompanied them to lessons held at their children's music school. These schools are private, but the city government in Reykjavik heavily subsidizes them and oversees them with official curriculum policy developed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. In discussing the curriculum of the school with a few of the teachers there, I learned that there was no form of vocal training or singing offered. Furthermore, only Western European art music was taught at the school.

The parents mentioned that the children sang quite a bit at their regular elementary school, however. I was then invited to observe some of their local music activities at the elementary school, including a popular choral Christmas concert held in December that consisted of Icelandic and international holiday songs. There was a clear difference between the priority placed on Western European instrumental music by the local music schools and the more inclusive music making forms at the local everyday schools. In this model singing, either as a solo form of presentational music or as a group social activity, was excluded from official curriculum.

### *Pistol Packing Mama*

In addition to the family described above, I also interviewed a young mother in Reykjavik

about her daughter's musical habits while at home. During this interview I learned that the little girl "sings *all* the time." Her mother stated that the little girl started to sing at 18 months, which was the same age at which she started to talk. Her mother partly attributes the girl's singing to her own singing with the girl but also to the twice-weekly song sessions with the "daycare mother." Her mother also placed great significance on the role of media-based learning, including a six-part DVD series called *Söngvaborg*, in which two adult women sing and dance with a group of children and costumed characters. Her daughter also enjoys watching *LazyTown*, an Icelandic-based television program intended to encourage children to put down video games and get outside to play (that the medium of delivery for this message is a television show is beyond the scope of this discussion). This show incorporates frequent musical numbers, which the mother credits in part for her daughter's early song acquisition. The mother commented that her daughter often sings songs at home without the mother knowing where her daughter had learned them.

I asked the mother whether Icelandic traditional music, such as *rímur*, was taught to the little girl at school and also if she herself had been taught this style of singing. Her mother quickly responded that there is one song that every Icelandic child knows which she thinks is connected to the *rímur* tradition because of the melodic structure and the text. The mother was only willing to sing this song for me if I turned off my tape recorder, which I did. As she sang the song, "*Afi minn og amma mín*" (My Grandpa and my Grandma),<sup>2</sup> I was struck by its familiarity and initially attributed this to my attendance at numerous *rímur* rehearsals and performances.

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<sup>2</sup> Also one of the songs noted by Birte Harksen as frequently requested by her students.

After the interview was over I returned to my office and hummed the melody, thinking about this heavyweight of a children's song in Icelandic culture. Then I remembered a conversation with Helga Rut Guðmundsdóttir, professor of music education at the University of Iceland, in which she explained that one of Iceland's most well-known children's songs is in fact a 1940s American popular song titled "Pistol Packin' Mama," written by Al Dexter and later recorded by Bing Crosby and The Andrews Sisters. I had observed Helga talk with Icelanders about this song in the past, and without exception, people confirmed that yes, this was indeed one of the most famous Icelandic children's songs and every Icelander knows it. Birte Harksen named this song in it is "*Afi minn og amma mín*" form as one of the most frequently requested songs by her students. The same individuals were then often shocked and surprised to hear that it was a popular song likely brought to Iceland when the United States established a military presence in Keflavík during World War II. As I sat in my office humming the piece, I realized that I had just encountered the very phenomenon Helga had explained, as the melody I was humming was indeed the melody to "Pistol Packin' Mama."

The example of "*Afi minn og amma mín*" vs. "Pistol Packin' Mama" is significant in this discussion of song practices in Iceland because there is a preference in Iceland for cultural elements believed to be old and of uniquely Icelandic origin in cultural heritage policy and discourse.<sup>3</sup> For example, another beloved Icelandic song, "*Óskasteinar*" (Wishing Stone), is derived from a Hungarian children's song. Birte Harksen also named this as a frequently requested song by her students. In studying the roots of common songs in Iceland, clear

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<sup>3</sup> Further research could explore the fascinating origins of a number of the songs I encountered.

transnational flows emerge which challenge representations of Iceland as an isolated location.

### **Music in Adulthood**

As I discussed in Chapter Two, more than any other singing style in Iceland, *rímur* is closely connected to ideas of Icelandic heritage. In this section I return to the topic of *rímur* to discuss my research with adult practitioners who participate in Reykjavík's *rímur* societies. I describe the *rímur* society meetings I attended in both Reykjavík and in the nearby town of Selfoss to describe the methods used to learn this style. These observations are accompanied by interviews with *rímur* practitioners, including one of the most-well known *kvæðamaður* (a man well-versed in *rímur*), Steindór Andersen. I also introduce my research on both individual and group settings of other forms of adult singing, including solo vocalists, choral groups, and song groups.

#### *Rímur - A Living Tradition?*

In her 2008 article, “‘Pride and Prejudice’: The Preservation of the Icelandic *Rímur* Tradition”, Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir provides a rather negative perspective of Iceland's foremost *rímur* society, *Iðunn*. Ólafsdóttir traces the development of the group in the early 20th century and charges them with overly policing the *rímur* tradition (Ólafsdóttir 2008, 114). From my own experiences with *Iðunn*, I gained a significantly different picture. Whereas Ólafsdóttir focuses on the controlling nature of the group, to the extent that non-members were historically not allowed to attend meetings unless they came from rural Iceland, I found myself as a foreigner welcomed

into the meetings and rehearsals of the group. When I hesitated to perform with the group at one of their official meetings, I was quickly pulled by the arm up to the front of the room with great encouragement to sing along, and in general, I found the group warm and inviting.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, more than any other singing style in Iceland, *rímur* and the associated style of *tvísöngur*, or singing in parallel fifths, is connected to notions of an Icelandic musical heritage. The word *rímur* itself is the plural form of the word *ríma*, which in noun form refers to a particular style of Icelandic balladry, and in verb form, *að ríma*, means simply “to rhyme.” *Tvísöngur* translates to double-song, and can mean both to sing a duet as well as the particular practice of singing two parts in parallel fifth movement. These are two of the practices discussed in Chapter Two as having been largely shunned during the 19<sup>th</sup> century era of romantic nationalism as together they were viewed “as a weak tradition, an outdated relic of periods of oppression and hardship” (Ingólfsson 2003, 239). Despite contested notions over the value of *rímur* and *tvísöngur*, these song styles are still regarded as fundamental to Icelandic musical heritage. Building from the points I made in Chapter Two about *rímur*, here I examine how people learn to sing this style of music as well as who tends to be drawn towards learning this music.

Reykjavík based *Iðunn* has gained attention in recent years due to the highly publicized activities of its foreman, Steindór Andersen,<sup>4</sup> who after thirteen years, stepped down as foreman on March 9, 2012 to be replaced by Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson. Steindór has released a handful

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<sup>4</sup> Due to naming conventions in Iceland mentioned earlier in the dissertation, I refer to Steindór Andersen by his first name for the remainder of this chapter. Steindór’s father was Danish and he therefore does not have an Icelandic patronymic last name, however people would not typically refer to him merely as “Andersen.”

of his own recordings, but he is now internationally known for his collaborations with pop-music group Sigur Rós. Whereas Ólafsdóttir argues that *Iðunn* maintains a controlling sense of ownership over the *rímur* tradition (Ólafsdóttir 2008), my research shows that the members of the group were excited by the potential for Steindór's work with Sigur Rós to increase young Icelanders' interests in the traditions. Furthermore, Steindór's collaboration with Sigur Rós suggests a deep openness and willingness to play with the tradition even by those deeply involved in *Iðunn*.



Figure 6: Steindór Andersen at left. Reykjavík. March 24, 2012. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

On March 31, 2012 I was invited to Steindór's home in Hafnafjörður just outside of Reykjavík. What I had thought would be a one-hour long interview turned into an all-day visit. In addition to an interview that lasted over two hours, he walked me through his large library of *rímur* texts and demonstrated singing techniques. Then his wife invited me to stay for a dinner of *svið*, or seared and boiled sheep's head. After the meal, Steindór and his wife invited me to stay awhile longer so that I could watch a new program on television with them about Steindór's

career as a fisherman in addition to his *rímur* work.

During this visit, I was able to talk with Steindór about his varied experiences with *rímur*. I was particularly curious about how he became familiar with *rímur* and how other people in Iceland today learn to sing in this style. He posits that people today can learn in just the same way that people did 200 years ago.

**Steindór:** I've been teaching courses for this festival ever since 2000 in Siglufjörður until three years ago when I stopped and Bára Grims<sup>5</sup> has been doing this since, I think, and Jón Sigurðsson, too. I have been to Akureyri to teach a group of people there and here and there over the last years.

**Kim:** [Is it more typical to learn this style of music by listening to recordings, looking at books, or taking lessons? Is this something that is commonly self-taught?]

**Steindór:** Yes, it's much much better to learn it by yourself, just by listening to the old people. If you have the ability to learn things like that, you just do it. And it's simply comparable with popular songs on the radio, you will learn the text no matter how stupid the texts are, you learn it and you keep it in your head. And who asked them to do this to you? That was, but you still learn it and you know no precautions about this, because you can't. If you turn on the radio you hear these stupid texts and they just go into your head. So just the same way you can learn the *rímur* texts if you just play it again and again. That's what I did. You have to look into the nuances and learn how to do this, to rehearse on the tiny little waves and so on to, yes, it's like a time machine. You are repeating something a man did 200 years ago and you are doing the same text, you are doing the same melody and there's nothing to interrupt you, so you are doing absolutely the same as a man did 200 years ago. So how closer can you come to a time machine?

In this section, Steindór describes the process of learning *rímur* as a sort of time machine.

I then asked Steindór about the vocal aesthetics of *rímur*, as there is an overwhelming sense that *rímur* chanters historically warbled or howled. This is largely due to the nature of the

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<sup>5</sup> Here he is referring to Bára Grímsdóttir who I discussed in Chapter Two. It is typical for Icelanders to initially refer to one another by their first name and just the possessive form of the father's name in order to distinguish which person of that name they are discussing.

historical recordings made by early technology equipment of elderly people no longer in their vocal prime. I was curious about how people today are taught to use their voices, particularly when they use historical recordings as models. I then asked Steindór if there are specific rules about how one is to use the voice when performing *rímur* or if it is up to the individual to determine their own style.

**Steindór:** Yes, it is just up to you what you do and how you do it. One, sometimes, I think it goes to the extremes with certain chanters, like an old man called Hildí Gunnar Helgmundur Alexandersson. He was from Snaefellsnes peninsula and he chanted like this (Steindór's wife offers coffee/tea) he tends to wave on each weak syllable as often as he can, so it sounds like this (4:52 sings). Some of us think that this must be more closer to an authentic style, but it doesn't necessarily have to be so. The melody is simply like this (5:16), so (sings 5:26), this is the whole difference. I'm absolutely convinced that 500, 600, 700 years ago, people were able to sing with a shiny good voice. Of course they could! But they were not involved in this music as we know it today. But of course the voices were clean. We tend to imagine that the old people we recorded are doing the right thing with their rusty, hoarse voices. So it's not necessarily right.

Steindór sees an openness to how one might best learn to perform *rímur*:

In addition to my time with Steindór, I regularly attended the meetings of *Iðunn*, the most well known *rímur* society in Iceland. I first began attending their meetings on October 5, 2011 when I attended their Wednesday evening learning-session just outside of Reykjavík at the Gerðuberg cultural center. The group meets on the first Wednesday of each month (September - May) to rehearse and learn new repertoire. They then come together again the following Friday for a more formal meeting. On this October evening, Steindór was not present because he was at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Iceland was being honored as the "guest" of honor. During this rehearsal 26 people were gathered around a conference table to learn and study *rímur*: there were sixteen women and ten men ranging in age from their early 20s until well into their 70s. I

discovered halfway through the rehearsal that roughly half of those in attendance, and most of those under the age of 40, were observers much like myself. The observers were in training to be music teachers in Iceland, and one of the requirements of their program was to come and observe *Iðunn*.

The members of *Iðunn* used a mixed process of oral and written transmission to study and learn these pieces. Most members of *Iðunn* brought a personal copy of the book *Silfurplötur Iðunnar* (*Iðunn's Silver Plates*) to the meetings. This book was published in 2004 to commemorate *Iðunn's* 75 year anniversary and contains four CDs of 200 *rímur* recordings made between 1935 and 1936 as well as transcriptions and texts to each of the pieces found in the recordings. When learning a piece, the forewoman played the recorded version of the piece on a CD player once for the group. She then played the piece again so the group could sing along with it. The group then sang through pieces unaccompanied. When we arrived at the second piece of the evening, the forewoman elected not to play the recorded version because, as she noted, the voice was “too shaky” and “it sounded like a stereotype of what the form ‘should’ sound like” (Personal Communication, October 5, 2011). This is the perception that Steindór addressed in the above excerpt, when he argued that people of the past most likely had nice singing voices despite the low quality recordings made of them.

Learning *rímur* with *Iðunn* involved learning how to chant individual pieces, as well as understanding the unique rhyme schemes within each piece. The second piece of the evening, “*Áum njólu aldinn mar,*” was noted for the penultimate verse’s palindromic text. The members of the group frequently discuss the rhyme schemes of each piece they learn. As the group was also

concerned about the history of the performers on the recordings, the forewoman gave a short introduction to who sang on each recording and the history of each piece.

In my experience, *Iðunn* takes the tradition of *rímur* seriously without appearing overly stodgy or conservative. When working through the fourth piece of the evening, “*Hugann seiða svalli frá,*” the group listened to the CD in the three step process described above, but when they sang through the piece on their own without the accompaniment it was clear that they modeled their sound more on Steindór’s well-known version of the piece than on the historical recording. This demonstrated a willingness to let the tradition “live” and not keep it confined to the almost 80 year old recordings. It also continued the legacy of a particularly skilled *kvæðamaður* influencing those who heard him. The atmosphere of the room throughout the evening was friendly and jovial, with the members of *Iðunn* frequently laughing with each other as they attempted to understand both the texts and the rhymes in the pieces.

I returned for *Iðunn*’s rehearsal on the evening of November 2nd and found a very similar evening to the one described above. On November 4th I attended the official meeting of *Iðunn* from 8:00 - 10:00 p.m., which was held in a different room of the *Gerðuberg* community center. At this meeting there were 31 people, 13 women and 18 men and most of these individuals were in their late 30s up into their 80s. The event began with the reading of the minutes from the previous month’s meeting and then unfolded into an evening of individual and group *rímur* performances, poetry reading, non-intoned story telling, and a performance by Reykjavík’s foremost furrer singing Swedish folk songs and accompanying himself on his guitar. This evening contextualized the living tradition of *rímur* within a setting of general enjoyment of live

performance of music, oral history, and playfulness with the Icelandic language through word games and rhyme challenges.

Through attending *Iðunn*'s Wednesday evening learning-sessions and Friday evening meetings, I was invited by one of the members to attend a meeting of a *rímur* society in the rural outskirts of Selfoss. This group meets on the second Monday of each month in the large garage of one of its members, surrounded by hand-carved wooden masks and ships. This meeting was more informal than *Iðunn* and the society members were far more diverse in terms of age. On March 12, 2012 there were 36 individuals present. Their ages ranged from an eight year old boy to an elderly woman in her mid-80s. The group sat on two large wooden benches facing each other, with a few plastic chairs scattered at each end of the benches. This group also used *Silfurplötur Iðunnar*, the collection of archival records produced by *Iðunn* in the 1930s, and the method of learning was similar to that used by *Iðunn*, but with more repetition of pieces. The learning process for each piece entailed first listening to the recorded version once, followed by two rounds of singing along with the recording, and finally one round of singing the piece unaccompanied. This process was repeated three times for each song over the course of the evening.

During my observations of both *Iðunn* and the *rímur* society in Selfoss, I observed that *Silfurplötur Iðunnar* functioned as the main manual in *rímur* learning. As previously stated, this book was compiled in 2004 and published 100 short selections from *Iðunn*'s vast library of recordings in both transcription and audio format. When individuals attend the learning-sessions of *rímur* societies in Iceland they study the melody and the text together from the transcription

and the recording. Yet, through extensive conversation with Steindór Andersen and other practitioners, I was informed that historically melody and text were not necessarily glued to each other. A *kvæðamaður/kona* would have been familiar with an extensive corpus of texts which he or she could then match to an appropriate melody based on the rhyme scheme and number of syllables at will. Certain *kvæðamaður/kona* might have had certain melodies which they preferred and would match numerous texts to that one melody. With the publication of *Silfurplötur Iðunnar* it appeared that melodies and rhymes were becoming locked to each other.

During the day I spent at Steindór's house, I asked him whether the creation of a manual such as *Silfurplötur Iðunnar* functioned to stifle and canonize the tradition, by essentially locking the text to the melody. He nodded knowingly and admitted that this was a definite concern back when the book was created. It had been his hope that individuals would take *Silfurplötur Iðunnar* as a sort of beginning guidebook. In order to become familiar with the style, individuals could study these selections and gain familiarity with how texts and melodies might be paired, until eventually the individual gained enough confidence to begin crafting new *rímur*. The importance of self-study in learning *rímur* was reinforced when I asked Steindór whether he ever taught individuals how to perform *rímur*. While he does occasionally offer workshops during folk-music festivals, he insisted that it was something which one really has to learn on their own through dedicated study. *Rímur* study and performance by groups such as *Iðunn* offers the opportunity for group and individual performance.

## *Choirs*

While *rímur* remains a somewhat specialized activity, members of *Iðunn* and other *rímur* societies are working to make this style of music more commonly heard and practiced, choral singing is a common practice for many people in Iceland. Organized at multiple levels of society, ranging from community-based multi-cultural choirs for adults of immigrant backgrounds, choirs organized through workplaces, church-based choirs, university organized choirs, and choirs without a defined background. Choirs are therefore a compelling site of study to understand how groups of Icelanders join together under the guise of music making. This material, together with the other material presented in this chapter, offer insight into how music continues to actively shape larger senses of national identity in Iceland as well as more localized group identities.

When I first arrived in Iceland I initially sang with a newly formed choir based in Reykjavik that had not yet established a name. This choir served no particular group of individuals but was formed by word-of-mouth knowledge. After a few months of singing with this choir, I had to step down as my schedule became too hectic to adhere to the demanding holiday season rehearsal and performance schedule. In my short time with the choir though, I became familiar with a number of the singers and discussed with them their reasons for singing with a choir as well as their musical backgrounds.

Most of the individuals in this choir of about thirty members were in their early forties. There were more female singers than male singers. We met every Tuesday evening along with additional weekend rehearsals as needed. The repertoire selections in this choir were drawn from a standard canon of Western European choral works with a few new Icelandic compositions

included, particularly by the composer Bára Grímsdóttir.

The main reason individuals gave for singing in this choir was to forge a sense of community. Many of the singers in the group had lived outside of Iceland for a period of study or work and seemed particularly invested in fostering a sense of communal belonging now that they were again “home”. This desire for community through choral singing was also frequently expressed during my fieldwork with Icelandic, Faroese, and Greenlandic choirs in Copenhagen, which I discuss in Chapter Five.

In addition to this unnamed choir, I also spent time with the dynamic choir *Fjallabræður* (Mountain Brothers). This group had about 40 male singers, along with a small back up band. Members ranged in age from their mid-20s to their 50s. They are based in Reykjavík and rehearse weekly, but schedule additional rehearsals as needed. This group is unique for a number of reasons, but most strikingly for its rock-band like aesthetic. The director of the group conducts the rehearsals with his electric guitar strapped on and is backed by two drummers, an electric bass, electric keyboard, trombone, and a violin. The singers stand in a solid block formation, with different men taking turns singing solo lines over the ensemble singers. This group was compelling for its efforts to embrace an overtly nationalistic agenda, even focusing on landscape and cultural purity. Yet they juxtapose this tradition-oriented approach with a rock music influenced sound.

Most of the men in *Fjallabræður* have familial ties to Iceland’s West Fjord region, and they see themselves in line with elements of culture supposedly unique to that region. All of the songs the group sings are original compositions, typically written by the group’s conductor. One man in

the group explained that *Fjallabræður* considers itself to be nationalistic without being political. He further explained that the songs typically emphasize a heritage of fishermen, the Icelandic environment, and the “old” traditional ways of life that are becoming harder to find in modern Icelandic society. While all of the men I spoke with insisted that the group is apolitical, they have performed in a handful of public protests against the Icelandic government in the post-economic collapse environment. This group’s success was affirmed when pop-singer Mugison incorporated them into his December 2011 performance at Reykjavík’s new waterfront concert hall, Harpa (see Chapter 3). One of their most popular songs performed that evening was “*Minn hinsti tónn*” (My Last Tone/Song), a slow, earnest song with the men singing in rhythmic unison and minimal harmonic variation. The electric guitar and drum kit backing add to the forceful, emotive performance. The text below engages with the tropes of nature, masculinity, and the Icelandic nation.

**Minn hinsti tónn (My last tone)**

Inn dalinn berast tónar.	The tone is carried in the valley
Tónar þeirra er landið eitt sinn byggðu.	The tone there is the land once built
Frá tímum þeim er orð manna dugðu.	From the time of them are words
Heyr minn söng.	Hear my song
Það er mín eina bón.	That is my one prayer
Um gljúfur og göng.	Through canyon and tunnel
Heyr minn hinsta tón.	Hear my last tone
Ofan jökli óma söngvar.	On top of the glacier the singer resounds
Söngvar þeirra er fjöllin eitt sinn klifu.	The singer is the mountain on its cliffs
Frá þeirri tíð er mannsins gildi hrifu.	From their time are man’s values carried
Heyr minn söng.	Hear my song
Það er mín eina bón.	That is my one prayer
Um gljúfur og göng.	Through canyon and tunnel
Heyr minn hinsta tón.	Hear my last tone

Úr hafinu dynur taktur.	From the ocean there is a rhythm
Taktur þeirra sem sjóinn eitt sinn sóttu.	The rhythm of those that sailed
Frá árum þeim er menn hetjur þóttu.	From the years when sailors were heroes.

Heyr minn söng.	Hear my song
Það er mín eina bón.	That is my one prayer
Um gljúfur og göng.	Through canyon and tunnel
Heyr minn hinsta tón.	Hear my last tone

This song positions the singers as lone, almost desperate individuals pleading to be heard. As read in the text, the words are to be carried over the landscape, including canyons, glaciers, mountains and cliffs.

### *Söngvaka*

Unlike choral music, in which a group of singers typically rehearses and performs repertoire together in a presentational format, *söngvaka* bring together singers to perform for each other with no other audience present. I attended one such evening on March 16, 2012 in Borgranes at the local Red Cross. On this evening eighteen men and seven women of mostly retirement age gathered in a small room with a grand piano at the front. I had been invited to attend the evening by one of the *kvæðamaður* and was warned in advance that I would need to participate, not merely observe. We sang through seventeen songs photocopied in two small packets handed out to each person in attendance. These songs were sung through in order without repetition or many pauses in between. After the ninth song of the evening, one of the men came to the front of the room and proceeded to offer a sort of stand-up comedy routine interspersed with solo singing. We then sang through eight more songs before an extended coffee

break.

Just as I returned to my seat with a cup of coffee, I was approached by the organizer of the evening asking if I would mind sharing an American song with the group. This served as a poignant moment in my song research, as I myself am a trained American singer, and yet I could not think of an appropriate song to represent my own cultural heritage. Sensing my hesitation, the organizer quickly suggested I sing “Home on the Range”. I was rushed to the center of the room to sing this wild-west song to an audience of elderly Icelanders. I could only remember the first verse of the song, however, and with the pianist insisting I sing through at least four verses I relied on my iPhone to provide the unknown texts. Had a researcher been present investigating contemporary song learning and performance by Americans, this would have no doubt been a worthwhile moment.

For the rest of the evening, the individuals in attendance took turns singing for each other in small groups. A few of the singers took turns chanting *rímur* for the group. The participatory format of the *söngvaka* created a space in which singing united these Icelanders through a shared activity.

## **Conclusion**

Based on my field research, I understand the various forms of singing and song learning described in this chapter to be vital components of contemporary everyday life in Iceland. This material also demonstrated how music mediates senses of Icelandic identity. While my analysis of youth and adult sites of song-learning and performance help to develop a picture of the diverse

elements at play with singing in Iceland, much remains to be discussed, including the role of seasonal songs that are sung at particular holidays or life-events, such as the late-winter *þorrablót* festivals, Christmastime, birthdays, and the changing of the seasons. While a few of the singers with whom I spoke discussed such songs, it is my experience that there is no great societal consensus on when or how such songs are supposed to be sung. Further analysis of foreign influence on what many Icelanders perceive to be traditional Icelandic songs is another topic that merits further research. By focusing on these particular practices, including early childhood music education, *rímur* societies, choirs, and *söngvaka*, these less-well known forms of music making in Iceland are situated alongside the popular and art music forms introduced in earlier chapters. In the following chapter I continue the discussion of choral music, but I focus on Icelandic and larger North Atlantic choral activities abroad, particularly in Denmark.

## Chapter 5: North Atlantic Choirs in Copenhagen

This chapter shifts attention from music making in Iceland itself to musical practices of Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Faroese in Copenhagen. During fieldwork with Copenhagen's North Atlantic choirs in 2011, I explored how these singers engage with the "noise of pastness," as explored in Chapter One. While my focus in this chapter is on Icelandic choral singing, I also discuss collaborations between Icelandic choirs in Copenhagen and other choirs, including Greenlandic and Faroese choirs. This approach invites further discussion of how national identities and ethnicity in the North Atlantic continue to be shaped within a larger regional context.

Despite its distance from Iceland (over 1200 miles away), Copenhagen was the capital city of Iceland since the dissolution of the Kalmar Union in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century until 1918 (Karlsson 2000, 103). At the time, there were no urban centers in Iceland and the island was an integral component of the Danish kingdom. In addition to serving as an educational and cultural center, all of the political power over Iceland was concentrated in Copenhagen. This legacy of Copenhagen as the capital of Iceland is the topic of a highly anticipated forthcoming book in both Denmark and Iceland funded by both governments, *Kaupmannahöfn, höfuðborg Íslands í 500 ár (Copenhagen, Capital City of Iceland for 500 years)* (2013). Reykjavík is now the financial, cultural, and political capital of Iceland, yet these connections forged in Copenhagen have not entirely dissipated.

Choral singing among Icelandic, Greenlandic, and Faroese individuals in Copenhagen is a vibrant practice that directly forges both an Icelandic community and, on occasion, a larger

North Atlantic community. Yet these musical practices have consistently fallen under the radar of folklore and musicological research in Denmark. For example, during a scheduled trip to the Danish folklore archives in May 2011, I had a very brief meeting with one of the lead archivists during which he appeared skeptical of a research focus on choral musicians. He said that there was nothing about such practices in any of the archives. It seems that since choral music is a ubiquitous practice in Denmark and greater Scandinavia, North Atlantic choral musicians are taken as just another version of a supposedly unremarkable and somewhat bland aspect of musical life in Denmark. Drawing on the work of Ruth Finnegan and her study of amateur music making in the English town of Milton Keynes, research on such ubiquitous musical practices, however, often reveals a range of overlooked social and cultural dynamics at play (Finnegan 1989, 3).

### **Positioning the Study**

Late in the afternoon on December 10, 2011, I stood outside Copenhagen's *Helligåndskirken* (Church of the Holy Spirit) in the bitter cold waiting for the doors to open for the annual *Nordatlantisk Jule Koncert*, or the North Atlantic Christmas Concert. At the time I was living in Reykjavík, but I had flown back to Copenhagen for this concert as the culmination of the fieldwork I began in Copenhagen earlier that year with seven Icelandic, Faroese, and Greenlandic choirs all based in Denmark. On this evening, five of the choirs I had worked with joined together, along with an additional Greenlandic choir, to present a diverse concert of Christmas music from the North Atlantic for their friends, families, and other interested people.

Throughout the five months I spent with these choirs earlier in the year, they spoke frequently of the importance of this annual concert as well as the feast and party for all of the choirs after the concert. My research with these choirs examined music and the embodiment of community among these North Atlantic musicians.



Figure 7: North Atlantic Christmas Concert. Copenhagen, Denmark. December 10, 2011. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

The fieldwork I conducted with these choirs in early 2011 took a pan-North Atlantic approach. I was interested in countering the nation-centric narratives of Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and even Denmark itself, that depict these locations as self-contained entities that have evolved into their current nation-state formations through mostly internal processes of development and struggle. I sought to research music making across national boundaries to investigate how specific national identities and a larger regional identity continue to be formed through relationships and encounters across these locations.

Recognizing that my research has been intentionally region-focused from the beginning, I frame this chapter around the Icelandic choirs in Copenhagen. I do this not to abandon the regional context, but instead to highlight the inter-relatedness of the North Atlantic in music making and other cultural practices. That is, by focusing specifically on Icelandic choirs, the vital relationships between Iceland and the larger North Atlantic clearly emerge. Furthermore, this approach demonstrates that while Iceland is now politically separate from Denmark, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland, it remains strongly connected to each of these locations across cultural, political, and even economic spheres.

From the outset, however, it is important to understand that none of the choirs I worked with focused on stylized or folkloristic performances. Neither of the Icelandic choirs I worked with performed in the Icelandic national costume, and many of the singers explicitly informed me that they would never consider performing in such costumes. The choirs work with highly diverse repertoire that includes arranged nationalist songs originating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and in many cases, these were originally composed in Copenhagen); arranged songs and ballads considered folksongs within the Icelandic realm; songs from the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and other Nordic areas; and many 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century choral compositions from Icelandic and international composers. Finally, the choirs were not exclusively comprised of people born or raised in Iceland. The Icelandic Ladies Chorus, for example, conducts its rehearsals in Icelandic, making the ability to understand Icelandic the only pre-requisite, while Staka conducts its rehearsals in Danish and had members from Iceland, Germany, Denmark, and the Faroe Islands.

Through this diversity in repertoire and membership, the choirs firmly identified as distinctly Icelandic.

### **Choral Music in Iceland & Denmark**

Choral singing in Iceland itself has a relatively short history compared with the other Nordic areas and many other areas in Europe. Two-part singing in Iceland, particularly in parallel fifth movement (*tvísöngur*), has a well-documented history, but singing in more than two voices at one time was not common practice until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Faulkner, in his study of Icelandic men's choruses, traces the introduction of three-part singing in Iceland to Pétur Guðjohnsen, an Icelander who relocated to Copenhagen for music education in 1837 and then returned to Iceland in 1841. Guðjohnsen brought back to Iceland a three-part hymnal to be used in church, which then spawned a national fervor for multi-part singing instead of the local vocal practices in place at the time (Faulkner 2013, 59).

Guðjohnsen's introduction of three- and eventually four-part singing to Iceland through his hymnal came at the same time that Icelanders were becoming increasingly aware of the differences between their vocal music practices and more dominant styles found in Western Europe as discussed in Chapter Two. Faulkner describes Icelanders who studied music abroad in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as often returning home with a "missionary zeal to travel around the country on horseback, urging communities to organize formal church choirs, reject *tvísöngur* and practice these new musical forms" (Faulkner 2013, 59). Additional publications followed Guðjohnsen's initial 1861 publication, including Jónas Helgason's volume *Sálmalög með þremur*

*röddum: ætluð til söngkennslu í skólum og á heimilum* (Hymns with three voices: exercises for song teaching in school and at home).

Since the 19th century, choral singing in Iceland has developed into a common practice found in casual and everyday life contexts, as well as in large national celebrations. As described earlier, the national awakening in the 19th and early 20th centuries codified nationalized practices, and choral music was heavily implicated in this process. This codification was clearly articulated in the various national festivals held at Þingvellir in the early 20th century. At the 1931 Þingvellir festival held to commemorate 1000 years of Icelandic settlement, discussed more fully in Chapter Two, choral singing was a main musical attraction. A festival choir was established for the June 17, 1944 declaration of independence at Þingvellir (Faulkner 2013, 55).

With roots in the musical experiences of Icelanders studying abroad in Copenhagen, the first mixed voice choir in Iceland began rehearsals in 1880. This led to a number of other choirs popping up across the country, and even to a national choir of 45 men and women who performed at a festival in 1901 to celebrate the new century in Iceland (Faulkner 2013, 61). Faulkner argues that of all the music imports to come to Iceland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romantic four-part choral singing from Germany and Scandinavia was the most significant (Faulkner 2013, 61). He further argues, “It is probably fair to say that no other musical institution is more intrinsically linked to the romantic nationalist movement, to the construction of new Icelandic identity and to the struggle for Icelandic independence, than the Icelandic male voice choir movement” (Faulkner 2013, 61). Faulkner and other scholars have argued that the rise of the male voice choir in Iceland dominated the soundscape, leaving little space for women’s

choruses. It is worth noting that at the time of my research (2011), however, there were no Icelandic male choruses in Denmark, but there was a female chorus.

As previously mentioned, choral singing in Denmark is a sort of unseen everyday practice for many across the country. Many people either sing in a choir themselves or support friends and family members of choirs. Choirs are formed for liturgical and non-liturgical performances at universities, retirement homes, community centers, school, and churches. With Lutheranism the state sanctioned religion in Denmark, the government pays trained choral singers to perform in church services across the country each Sunday morning. Many professional and semi-professional choirs also exist throughout Denmark without affiliations to a school, church, or other community fixture. Across all of these levels, choral music is firmly entrenched in contemporary Danish culture.

Group singing, outside of formal choral arrangements, is also a common and vibrant musical practice in Denmark. The Christmas season, more than any other time of year, highlights the practice of Danes singing together in casual ways as a part of social events. Christmas dinners, held throughout November and December, during which colleagues, groups of friends, families, or roommates gather, are never complete until the group sings through numerous holiday and drinking songs. Christmas itself brings families together as they dance around the Christmas tree inside their homes, holding hands and singing carols. Beyond the formal holiday season of Christmas, an average night spent drinking with friends in Copenhagen might also bring out a round of singing.

## Copenhagen as Metropole

When I returned to Copenhagen in early 2011, following previous research trips in 2008 and 2009, I intended to research contemporary musical practices that engaged with the legacy of the North Atlantic in Denmark. This approach was necessarily complemented by observations of physical representations of the North Atlantic, in the form of artwork, buildings, and place names, as well as related social and political matters that shaped the lived experiences of North Atlantic individuals in Iceland. To this day, the city remains physically marked by the legacy of imperialism and mercantilism in the North Atlantic. *Islands Brygge* (Iceland's Wharf), a posh neighborhood on the urban island Amager, still bares the name of the area in which goods brought down from Iceland were stored. *Nordatlantisk Brygge* (North Atlantic Wharf), located in the heart of Copenhagen, is home to a series of old warehouses that stored goods brought down from Greenland by the Royal Greenland Trading Department. One of these buildings is now home to the North Atlantic House, a joint cultural center for the North Atlantic, as well as the Greenlandic and Faroese representations in Denmark, and the Icelandic embassy.

Visual artwork representing Danish and North Atlantic relations are also scattered throughout Copenhagen. Christianshavn square is home to Svend Rathsack's Greenland monument, a set of three sculptures depicting traditional Inuit themes including a hunter standing near a kayak and women cleaning fish below that was installed in 1938.



Figure 8. Copenhagen, Denmark. February 24, 2011. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

*Vestre Kirkegård*, or the western cemetery, is home to a monument to the Faroe Islands constructed by Elof Risebye and another monument to Greenland constructed by Jan Buhl. The Danish National Art Museum has in its collections paintings by prominent Icelandic and Faroese painters, including paintings by the Faroese artist Sámal Joensen-Mikines and the Icelandic artist Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, both of whom were trained at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. But the most significant physical representations of the North Atlantic in Copenhagen are the three separate cultural houses that function as meeting centers for the Greenlandic, Faroese, and Icelandic populations in Denmark.

The Icelandic house in Copenhagen is not only significant for its contemporary purpose, but also for its historical use as the former home of Jón Sigurðsson, the de facto political leader

of emergent Iceland in the 19th century (Karlsson 2000, 210). This house includes meeting spaces, a library, and a small museum dedicated to Jón and his work. The house hosts Icelandic language classes for both children and adults; services such as Alcoholics Anonymous, social hours, concerts, parties; and serves as the rehearsal space for Copenhagen's two Icelandic choirs: *Staka* and *Íslenski Kvennakórinn í Kaupmannahöfn* (Icelandic Ladies Chorus in Copenhagen). Jónshús is also an occasional site of visits from modern day Icelandic political leaders, as demonstrated by the two-hundred year anniversary of Jón Sigurðsson's birth in 2011.

On this day, June 19, 2011, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland at the time, gave a speech in Icelandic from Jónshús. She addressed those in attendance with a summary of the long history of Copenhagen as the political, intellectual, and cultural capital of Iceland as well as the center of 19<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic nationalism. She stated,

The story of Iceland is interwoven with the story of Copenhagen and it is suitable that we have gathered here together to commemorate the 200-year anniversary of Jón Sigurðsson's birth. Copenhagen was in reality the capital city of Iceland beginning in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century up until when executive power was moved to Reykjavík with the establishment of home rule in 1904. The king and his ministers sat in the city, the chancellor and finance ministers were managed by Iceland.

But Copenhagen was also the capital city of Iceland in many other senses. The centuries together nearly all Icelandic commerce came to this city and from there came most of the cultural and intellectual innovations to Iceland. When Icelanders came to fight for the restoration of *Alþing*, to fight for Icelandic industry and extended autonomy beginning in

the 1830s, their center point, as is well known, was conducted out of Icelandic educated men in Copenhagen (Sigurðardóttir 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Both the speech itself and the location of where the speech were given illuminate the vital role that Copenhagen historically played in the formation of Icelandic nationalism.

Today Jón Sigurðsson's former house is perhaps the most visible remnant of the Icelandic independence movement that was born and then flourished in Copenhagen. But throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Icelanders living in Copenhagen produced some of the most influential documents in the independence movement. This historical position of Copenhagen as the North Atlantic metropole remains relevant to understanding the musical and cultural life of modern North Atlantic migrants living in the city. The relationships between Icelanders, Faroese, Greenlanders, and Danes have long been actively and often problematically negotiated and articulated in Copenhagen. The contemporary North Atlantic choirs in Copenhagen build on this legacy in a situation significantly more complicated than being thought of as immigrant or ethnic minority musical groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Saga Íslands er samofin sögu Kaupmannahafnar og því er vel við hæfi að við komu hér saman til þess að minnst 200 ára ártíðar Jóns Sigurðssonar. Kaupmannahöfn var í raun höfuðborg Íslands allt frá því um miðja 15. öld þar til framkvæmdavalið var að verulegu leyti flutt til Reykjavíkur við stofnun heimastjórnar árið 1904. Í Kaupmannahöfn sat konungurinn og frá ráðuneytum hans í borginni, Kansellínu og Rentukammerinu, var málefnum Íslands stjórnað.

En Kaupmannahöfn var líka höfuðborg Íslands í mörgum öðrum skilningi. Öldum saman fór nær öll Íslandsverslun um þessa borg og þaðan komu flestar þær nýjungar í menningarlegum og andlegum efnum sem bárust til Íslands. Þegar Íslendingar tóku að berjast fyrir endurreisn Alþingis, endurreisn Íslenskra atvinnuvega og aukinni sjálfstjórn upp úr 1830 var þungamiðja þeirrar baráttu, eins og kunngt er, háð af íslenskum menntamönnum í Kaupmannahöfn.

It was common for Icelandic societies in 19<sup>th</sup> century Copenhagen to publish nationalistic journals aimed at both their own members and people back in Iceland. Of these publications, *Fjölnir*, was one of the most important. This journal featured articles about Icelandic nationalism, reports of activity in Denmark, and poetry written in Icelandic. In the first volume of *Fjölnir*, published in 1835, the authors directly address those at home in Iceland in an attempt to validate the publication and explain that outside of Iceland, such publications are read daily and by the millions (Hallgrímsson 1835, 30).

This first volume of *Fjölnir* featured a newly composed poem by the Icelandic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson, based in Copenhagen at the time. The poem was titled simply “*Ísland*” with the opening line “*Ísland! farsælda-frón og hagsælda hrimhvíta móðir!*” (Iceland, fortunate isle! Our beautiful, bountiful mother!). This poem has since been set to a pre-existing melody and is commonly sung by Icelandic choirs both in Iceland and abroad in the style of *tvísöngur*. This song was included in Bjarni Þorsteinsson’s key publication *Íslensk þjóðlög* (Icelandic Folk Songs) twice, where he described it as the best example of all Icelandic *tvísöngur*. He also wrote that people across the entire country of Iceland were likely to know this particular song (Þorsteinsson 1909, 522). With the composition and initial publication of the text to Hallgrímsson’s *Ísland*, as well as the subsequent funding and publication of Þorsteinsson’s volume containing the musical notation, all occurring in 19<sup>th</sup> century Copenhagen, the city was clearly the cultural and political heart of the Icelandic nationalist movement. This situation was mirrored in the activities of Faroese and Greenlandic students based in Copenhagen at the same time.

Copenhagen remains the meeting point for people from the North Atlantic and a key site of ongoing negotiations of North Atlantic identities. Yet despite the common location and practices of the North Atlantic nationalist movements in Copenhagen, Icelanders did not necessarily see themselves as having much in common with Denmark's other colonized peoples. Tensions came to a head in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Icelanders were to be presented alongside Greenlanders, Faroese, and Virgin Islanders at the *Dansk Koloniudstilling* (Danish Colonial Exhibition) to be held in Copenhagen's Tivoli gardens in 1905 (Schramm 2011, 105). At this exhibition, goods and everyday life objects were to be put on display along with people from each of these locations. Icelandic students in Copenhagen strongly protested the involvement of Icelanders in this exhibition, arguing that Icelanders were part of a "cultural nation" as opposed to the "nature nations" represented by the other locations in the exhibit. Icelanders, they argued, were not the same as the more primitive subjects of the Danish crown. Kristín Loftsdóttir, in a recent analysis of the exhibit, points out that the Icelandic protests to the exhibition not only revealed that Icelanders saw themselves as unique among the Danish territories, but that they tended to share negative and paternalistic attitudes that the Danes held towards the other colonies (Loftsdóttir 2012).

The resistance to this early 20<sup>th</sup> century attempt to display Icelanders and Icelandic cultural elements alongside Faroese and Greenlanders is significant in that a century later, Icelanders willingly and gladly join with Faroese and Greenlanders in Copenhagen, as demonstrated by the annual North Atlantic Christmas concert. This is not to say that old tensions between these locations have entirely dissipated, but the musicians I worked with expressed a

general sense of camaraderie and shared experiences based on a common North Atlantic background.

### **North Atlantic Choirs in Copenhagen**

Staka and the Icelandic Ladies Chorus, along with the Faroese choirs Mpiri and Húsakorið, and the Greenlandic choirs Aavaat, Ikingut, and Akuttat, were the focus of my fieldwork in Copenhagen in early 2011. I made contact with each of the choirs by emailing the director or foreperson of each group to explain my research and to seek informed consent to visit choir rehearsals and talk with musicians. Each of the choirs were welcoming, open, and even curious about why I thought they were worthwhile sites of research. In each case, I was told that I was welcome to attend rehearsals, performances, and social events on the condition that I sing with the choir whenever they asked. With some of the choirs, including Húsakorið and Aavaat, this meant that I became a regular singer and was expected to sing with them in public performances. For the other choirs, I was asked to fill in the alto section whenever a regular singer was unable to attend a rehearsal.

The Icelandic Ladies Chorus rehearsed each Monday evening from 6:30 – 9:30 p.m. in Jónshús, while Staka rehearsed in Jónshús on Wednesday evenings. Both choirs divided their rehearsals into two parts with a break for coffee, snacks, and socializing. These two groups were remarkably different and had very little overlap in membership. Only one woman, Sigrún, sang in both Staka and the Ladies Chorus. She explained that she was only temporarily singing with the Ladies Chorus in order to help them out on an upcoming tour to perform in Iceland. One obvious difference between the two choirs was that the Ladies Chorus was exclusively

comprised of women, whereas Staka had a roughly equal mixed gender membership. Another difference between the groups was that the Ladies Chorus was entirely comprised of Icelandic women who had permanently settled in Denmark for work, school, or family reasons. Staka, on the other hand, tended to attract slightly younger musicians who were often only temporarily living in Denmark while completing university degrees. As previously mentioned, Staka's membership was also more mixed with Danes, a German, and a Faroese man singing in the group along with the Icelanders. Staka's rehearsals were conducted in Danish, while the Icelandic Ladies Choir conducted their rehearsals in Icelandic.

### *Member Motivations*

In conversations with musicians from each of these choirs, I always asked the singers why they had chosen to sing in these particular choirs. The answers varied quite significantly and, while many emphasized the desire to stay connected to Iceland, some adamantly denied that that was part of their motivation. One trend I noted was that the women who sang in the Icelandic Ladies Chorus more often described themselves as immigrants feeling split from their homeland than did the singers in Staka. The first choir member I interviewed was a woman in the Icelandic Ladies Chorus who had lived in Denmark since 1972 and echoed these sentiments. She explained that she lives about an hour outside of Copenhagen with her husband and children, none of whom speak Icelandic, and that she gladly travels by train each week into the city in order to sing with the choir. She also explained that she does not always like the music that the choir sings, but that she wants to maintain her social connections with other Icelanders (Personal

Communication, March 14, 2011). On that same evening a friendly woman offered me tea during the rehearsal break and then explained that she had lived in Denmark for over thirty years and works as a nurse. She expressed feeling “split” in that she feels like an immigrant whenever she’s at home in Iceland but she never feels quite Danish enough when she’s in Denmark (Personal Communication, March 14, 2011). For this woman, singing in a choir with other women in similar circumstances was the most meaningful aspect of belonging to the group.

I also spoke with Sigga, the director of the Icelandic Ladies Chorus, that evening. Sigga was friendly, outgoing and seemed eager to talk about her experiences as a director and musician. While we would later have more extensive conversations, on this first evening she explained that she had been living in Denmark for over twenty years with her Danish husband. She also explained that she sings with the Faroese choir Mpiri on Wednesday evenings because even though she likes being connected to other Icelanders, she does not feel that all of her social and musical activities should center on Iceland (Personal Communication, March 14, 2011).

The following week I returned for another rehearsal of the Icelandic Ladies Chorus. That evening I had my first of many conversations with Sigrún, a marine biologist who had left Reykjavík nearly twenty years ago to pursue graduate education in the United States. She had completed her M.A. at the University of Washington in Seattle, which created an immediate connection between her and myself. She explained that when she first came to Denmark she was surprised by how similar Denmark and Iceland were. This, along with the frequent and cheap flights between Reykjavík and Copenhagen made life in Denmark for Sigrún “not so bad” (Personal Communication, March 21, 2011).

On Saturday, March 26, 2011, the ladies met at a nearby church for an all day rehearsal in preparation for an approaching homecoming concert in Iceland. The ladies spent the day singing through a combination of Icelandic, Danish, Norwegian, and Faroese pieces that they were planning to sing in Reykjavík in April during their homecoming tour. When the lunchtime break approached, the ladies invited me to join them, giving me the opportunity to chat with them. I sat across from a woman who had an infant child with her that day. She explained that her son was only three months old and that she had not intended to join the choir again for at least another six months, but she had grown tired of staying home all day and missed the social connections the choir gave her. Her partner is Danish and the family speaks only Danish at home, including their five-year-old son. She had lived in Denmark for ten years at this point and prioritized the connections to other Icelanders that singing in this choir provided (Personal Communication, March 26, 2011).

I had also started to attend rehearsals of Staka at the same time. Both choirs rehearsed in the main meeting space of Jónshus, a large room with light blue walls and hardwood floors with a portrait of Jón Sigurðsson, namesake of Jónshus and a leader of the Icelandic independence movement, hanging on the wall directly above the grand piano. After attending



Figure 9: Copenhagen, Denmark. March 30, 2011. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

my first rehearsal of Staka on March 16th, I received an email from one of the singers letting me know that she was interested in talking more with me about my research and her experiences singing with Staka. At the March 23rd rehearsal of Staka I sat down with this woman for our first of many conversations. She explained that she grew up in Iceland with an English father and an Icelandic mother. Her father is a relatively well-known composer who had come to Iceland in

1977 from England and now works with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. She had first moved to Copenhagen to attend the university in 2006 but returned to Iceland in 2008 to have a baby. She then returned to Copenhagen to finish school in 2009. She was the first musician to directly bring up Iceland's recent economic catastrophe, explaining that when she had first come to Denmark, before the crash, she had been nervous about being Icelandic in Denmark because the perception was that Icelanders were buying up all of the businesses in Copenhagen, including the well-known department store, Magasin. She explained that now, post-crash, she was nervous about being Icelandic in Denmark because of the perception that Iceland had tanked the European economy. For this singer, singing in the choir provided a safe space in which to be Icelandic in Denmark, even though she already knew at the point of our conversation that she would return to Iceland to live in just a few months (Personal Communication, March 23, 2011). This type of movement back and forth between Iceland and Denmark was a common phenomenon for many of the past and present singers in Staka.

These conversations demonstrate that for many of the singers, feeling a connection to Iceland and to other Icelanders was a primary motivation for singing in these choirs. This was not true for everyone, however. At a rehearsal of Staka on March 30, 2011 I had a conversation with a young Icelandic man who had been living in Copenhagen for over four years while studying at the university. He had sung with Staka for one year at this point. He explained that he had been at a choir performance with a friend and that one of the songs he heard particularly touched him. After this experience he started to think about how neat it would be to sing in a choir in his own language, despite not having sung since he was a child. He did not know about

Staka at that point, but he searched on Google for an Icelandic choir in Copenhagen and found an old website with the contact information for Stefán, the conductor. He emphasized to me that his desire to sing with Staka was not really a nationalistic choice, and that if he had not easily come across Stefán's contact information, he would have tried to sing with the choir whose performance had moved him. While he appreciates the opportunity to sing in Icelandic, he explained that singing with the choir was the only way in which he engages with the larger Icelandic community in Denmark, saying that he did not move to Denmark in order to just hang around other Icelanders (Personal Communication, March 30, 2011).

Additional conversations with singers in both Staka and the Icelandic Ladies Chorus showed that singers had a wide range of motivations for singing with these choirs. Most of the singers in the Ladies Chorus told me their stories of having resettled in Denmark and wanting to retain some connection to Iceland and to other Icelanders, expressing sentiments similar those expressed by the woman discussed above. The singers in Staka were often more motivated by the social connections within the choir itself, than by choral singing itself. A few of the non-Icelandic singers explained that they joined the choir because they were friends with one of the other singers first. For the Faroese man singing with Staka, he was motivated to sing with the choir because he appreciated the North Atlantic connection but felt that the Faroese community in Copenhagen dominated most other aspects of his social and professional life and he needed an occasional break. In general though, the motivations for singing in these choirs described above demonstrate the paramount role of maintaining a sense of connection to Iceland. The origins of these choirs show similar motivations.

### *Choir Formations*

Both Staka and the Icelandic Ladies Chorus developed out of efforts by the singers to establish Icelandic singing groups in Copenhagen. Sigga, the director of the Ladies Chorus, explained that as of 2011 she had been the director of the choir for twelve years. Prior to her taking on this position there had been an Icelandic woman in Copenhagen who decided to start the Ladies Chorus, following the rise of women's choruses in Iceland during the late 20th century. When this woman returned to Iceland after two years of directing the choir, Sigga was approached by some of the women in the choir and asked to take over as conductor. At the time Sigga was directing an Icelandic church choir in the northern Danish town of Alborg, where she had completed her music studies. The choir now retains a core group of about nine women who have been with the group from the beginning. Sigga was initially hesitant about directing the group, but explained that it has turned out quite well. She herself is a trained musician, but the majority of women in the choir do not have any particular musical training and most of them are not entirely comfortable with reading standard choral notation (Personal Communication, May 13, 2011).

Staka was formed in 2004 by a group of Icelanders living in Copenhagen who had been friends as music students back in Iceland. As of 2011 there were still two singers in the choir who had been with the group from the start. The motivations behind starting Staka included the social and community elements also found in the origins of the Ladies Chorus, but there was a stronger emphasis on wanting to form a group in order to perform contemporary Icelandic choral

compositions. Stefán, the conductor of the group, is also a composer and occasionally writes new compositions for the choir to perform. Stefán had been part of the initial group of friends in music school together in Reykjavík and was asked to direct the choir after the first director returned to Iceland. Staka has over the years served as a temporary home for many Icelandic musicians living in Copenhagen, and many of the musicians I went on to work with in Iceland had either sung in Staka at one point or knew someone who had. Staka as a choir is both a catalyst for forming Icelandic-based social and community connections in Copenhagen, but it is also one of the most active chamber choruses specializing in new Icelandic compositions whether from inside or outside of Iceland.

### *Icelandic Choirs Abroad*

Both the Icelandic Ladies Chorus and Staka maintain connections to the other North Atlantic choirs in Copenhagen, but Staka is more strongly connected to a network of Icelandic choirs around Northern Europe. On April 9, 2011, I travelled with Staka to Oslo for the biennial Icelandic Choirs Abroad concert. Six Icelandic choirs based in Norway (Oslo & Bergen), Denmark (Copenhagen), Sweden (Gothenburg & Lund), and England (London) joined together on this evening for a combined concert and large dinner party for the choir members afterward. Just as with the North Atlantic Christmas concert that was described earlier in the chapter, the post-concert social events of this evening were equally, if not more, significant for the choirs as the concert itself. The choirs met early in the day to rehearse the combined pieces that they

would perform and then each had an opportunity to run through their solo section in the performance space.



Figure 10: Program of the Icelandic Choirs Abroad Festival. April 9, 2011. Oslo, Norway. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

In addition to the shared concert and social gatherings built into this event, there were other aspects that also highlighted the embodiment of community among these choirs with similar yet disparate elements. A long-standing tradition in these gatherings is that each of the choirs puts great effort into designing the name-tags to be used by their members. Of the six choirs in attendance this year, two of the choirs had remarkably similar name-tags with a white background and similarly colored lettering. The significance of the design was initially unclear to me, but the singers from all of the choirs were quick to explain that this design was based on the logo of the failed Icesave bank accounts. This catastrophic economic venture was seen as one of the biggest culprits in destroying the Icelandic economy in 2008 and tarnishing relationships between Iceland and investors from across Europe who had deposited money into these accounts. This was particularly relevant on the weekend of the choir festival because voters back home in Iceland were going to the polls to vote on whether or not the Icelandic tax payers should pay restitutions over the lost investment of foreigners in the Icesave accounts. The name-tags and the frequent speculation over what the voting at home might result in demonstrated the choir's connections to not only each other, but to events taking place in Iceland at the same time.



Figure 11: Icelandic Choirs Abroad Festival name-tag. Oslo, Norway. April 9, 2011. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

Following the concert, the choirs collectively travelled by bus across Oslo to the building where the evening's dinner and party were to be held. Staka took residence in the back of the bus and proceeded to sing casually together through their repertoire for the duration of the bus ride. Once at the site of the party, the choirs joined together outside to share a toast while waiting for dinner to be served. As is common at most social events in both Iceland and Scandinavia, alcohol was heavily consumed by nearly all in attendance throughout the evening. Once inside the dining hall, each of the choirs were seated amongst themselves at long dinner tables covered in white tablecloths with a small stage positioned at one end of the room. The dinner served that evening bared no resemblance to traditional Icelandic dishes of sheep's head, fermented shark, or blood sausage but instead consisted of salads, fresh fish, bread, and small cakes for dessert. As the

evening wore on, the atmosphere became more jovial with each of the choirs taking turns to sing for each other in a much more casual manner than they had during the rehearsals or performances that took place earlier in the day.

In both the Icelandic Choirs Abroad festival as well as the North Atlantic Christmas concert, the staged public performances and the private party for the choirs afterwards were both vital activities in the embodiment of community. The acts of singing together in a presentational format, eating together, and performing for each other each serve different roles and provide different connections between the choirs.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter shows how the issues of national identity, post-colonialism, and senses of history remain relevant to Icelandic music making both at home and abroad. Furthermore, the attention paid here to Icelandic choirs in relation to Greenlandic and Faroese choirs in Copenhagen demonstrates the ongoing importance of regional connections across the North Atlantic. As discussed in Chapter Two, Icelanders tried to disengage from the other Danish colonial subjects during the independence movement in order to be aligned with the more powerful European nations. One hundred years later, in the early 21st century, the North Atlantic is now strongly aligned, with Iceland serving as model of independence from Denmark for both Greenland and the Faroe Islands. This dynamic was highlighted by the Icelandic singer Björk in her 2007 song and music video “Declare Independence.”

In this video, Björk stands on a small stage wearing a grey military-style uniform in front of a small band of about twenty people in similar costuming. A small Greenlandic flag is stitched to her left shoulder and a small Faroese flag is stitched to her right shoulder. Each of the individuals standing in front of her wear a grey helmet and have either a Faroese or Greenlandic flag stitched to the shoulders of their grey jumpsuits. Björk then begins to sing with increasing urgency into a microphone to the people in front of her calling:

Declare independence!  
 Don't let them do that to you!  
 Declare independence!  
 Don't let them do that to you!

Start your own currency!  
 Make your own stamp!  
 Protect your language!

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Damn colonists  
 Ignore their patronizing  
 Tear off their blindfolds  
 Open their eyes

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With a flag and a trumpet  
 Go to the top of your highest mountain  
 Raise your flag!

This song, released on Björk's album *Volta* (2007), was dedicated to both Greenland and the Faroe Islands, with Björk commenting in an interview that "there are still two Danish colonies, namely the Faroe Islands and Greenland. They are still trying to gain independence, and it just is not happening. Greenland was almost independence, but then the Danes found oil

there, so it did not happen” (Wind-Friis 2007). Björk’s role as a public figure gives her a powerful platform to criticise ongoing colonialism in the North Atlantic. The North Atlantic choirs that I have focused on in this chapter, however, are not well known outside of their own networks. Nonetheless, their activities and the connections that they have forged with each other powerfully demonstrate how the North Atlantic as a cohesive region remains actively embodied through music making.

## Chapter Six: Sound Distinctions

This final chapter remains focused on the issues of post-colonialism, national identity, and senses of history in relation to Icelandic music while also introducing a case study of music and dance in the Faroe Islands. This approach returns to the issue of boundary formation in the North Atlantic among these populations with common roots. As previously established, literature and language in Iceland are the centerpieces of Icelandic cultural heritage. Music in Iceland, however, has historically been disregarded or written out of historical Icelandic narratives as an embarrassing or shameful relic of Iceland's pre-modern days. At the same time, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, music has in fact played a fundamental role in producing and mediating senses of Icelandic identity and locale for both Icelanders and non-Icelanders alike. In this concluding chapter, I revisit these points but also position the Faroe Islands as a compelling counter study for Iceland.

Combining a study of music in the Faroe Islands and music in Iceland allows for a deeper understanding of the main issues presented in this dissertation, particularly in regard to national identity and music. I draw on Philip Bohlman's argument that,

Music is malleable in the service of the nation not because it is a product of national and nationalist ideologies, but rather because musics of all forms and genres can articulate the processes that shape the state. Music can narrate national myths and transform them to nationalist histories. Music marks national borders, while at the same time mobilizing those wishing to cross or dismantle borders (Bohlman 2011, 5).

The material presented here on music and dance demonstrates how music has marked national borders between Iceland and the Faroe Islands. This material is also significant in positioning

music as a key aspect of nation building in both Iceland and the Faroe Islands instead of the more common focus on the novel as a prime nation-building genre (Marnersdóttir 2007, 154).

As discussed in Chapter One, Iceland and the Faroe Islands share similar histories of settlement and have much in common in terms of language, religion, and other cultural elements. But the different tracts on which these similarities developed in the two locations creates a compelling study of music making in the North Atlantic. I remain interested in how the role of language and literature in the North Atlantic influenced local musical practices and the constructed narratives of such practices. Where Iceland's language and literature overshadowed its music making, the Faroese language emerged in written form only in the late 18th century (Árnason 2011, 3). Without a written language, song texts in Faroese were primarily transmitted orally until well into the 19th century, making Faroese balladry and song traditions of primary importance to the Faroese language. Unlike in Iceland where music making continues to be overlooked in favor of the Icelandic language in cultural policy and educational matters, songs and singing in the Faroe Islands are symbols of cultural continuity and longevity in the face of subordination and Danification.

### **Considering the Faroe Islands**

The 18-island archipelago of the Faroe Islands stretches across the North Atlantic roughly halfway between Iceland and Norway. There are roughly 48,000 inhabitants in the Faroe Islands (Árnason 2011, 3), equal to only 15% of Iceland's population of 320,000. The Faroe Islands form an autonomous region within the *Rigsfællesskab* (Danish Union). Unlike their Icelandic

neighbors to the north, the Faroe Islands weathered the recent European economic crisis relatively well. Yet ongoing marginalization of the Faroe Islands, as enacted through hegemonic Danish policies, have created an atmosphere of perpetual political and economic insecurity among many Faroese. In the midst of this insecurity, Faroese have conscientiously fostered senses of cultural security through narratives and performance practice of dance and music. These artistic expressions have helped Faroese to create and articulate differences between their culture and Danish culture.

I draw on my own experiences with dancing and balladry in the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Denmark. Between July and September of 2012 I conducted research specifically in Tórshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands. During this time I attended musical performances across traditional, popular, and classical genres and also conducted interviews with musicians, educators, and politicians. In addition, I attended the Faroese Summer Institute hosted by the University of the Faroe Islands, where I studied the Faroese language and other aspects of the society along with other students from across North America and Europe. As part of this program, we received lessons on the history of the chain dance and accompanying balladry and also participated in an evening of chain dancing and singing with local musicians. Outside of this institutionalized setting, I participated in evenings of chain dancing and singing at celebrations, festivals, and other gatherings in both the Faroe Islands and in Denmark.

The Faroese dance consists of dancers creating a chain by linking hands with the person to the left and to the right and then alternatively taking two steps to the left and one step to the right in time with the ballad sung at the same time. Instead of dancing around like this in one big

circle, the group moves in a serpentine manner so that dancers come face to face with each other throughout the movements. This creates a closed circle that has been likened to a self-contained universe with the dancers turning their backs to the chaos of the outside world (Jackson 1991, 16). The physical aspects of the dance, as well as the narratives that surround it, contribute to the dance's role as a vital marker of continuity in contemporary Faroese society.

### *Faroese History*

A history of subordination under the Danish crown and ongoing concerns of sovereignty and minority rights in the Faroe Islands have contributed to the importance that notions of cultural longevity and agency have for many Faroese. As a dependent territory of Denmark, but a member of neither the European Union nor the Schengen Zone<sup>1</sup>, the Faroe Islands are precariously positioned. Their situation maintains strong parallels with Greenland in the efforts to secure viable pathways towards full sovereignty. But while Greenlanders fuel their drive for political self-determination with the search for minerals and other natural resources, such as natural gas and oil, Faroese attempts to increase economic revenue from their main natural resource, fish, have been met with great resistance from the international community. As of late 2013, the islands are in conflict with the European Union and a group of nations known as the Coast States that includes the European Union, Russia, Norway, Iceland, and the Faroes over

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<sup>1</sup> The Schengen Zone is a political group of 26 European countries that have eliminated border control between themselves. This means that people can move freely between any of these states without having to obtain a passport or individual state visas. This zone is not coterminous with the European Union, as there are EU member states who are not part of the Schengen Zone, while some of the Schengen Zone countries are not part of the EU (including Iceland).

fishing quotas. In late August 2013 the Faroe Islands declared that they would triple their quota of herring and mackerel catches, up from the lowest share among Coast State members at 5%. The European Union then enacted punitive measures against the Faroe Islands by instituting fierce trade sanctions against the Faroes (Jolly 2013, B6). With fish and fish products comprising 95% of all export from the Faroe Islands, these sanctions stand to debilitate the Faroese economy while creating an even tenser political atmosphere.

The longevity of crisis in the Faroe Islands correlates with Henrik Vigh's description of the potential for those experiencing endemic crisis to experience long-term "existential incoherence" (Vigh 2008, 9). Taking into account the political, economic, and cultural history of the islands, a sense of this existential incoherence continues to permeate the social fabric. Yet in tandem with the political and economic concerns, the Faroe Islands thrive with music making, dance, theater, and the visual arts. In what follows, I explore contemporary music making and dance in the Faroe Islands as modern cultural practices that work to forge senses of continuity and cohesion among Faroese people both in the islands and those already living abroad. The arts in the Faroe Islands have had a close relationship with the drive for self-determination and sovereignty, as I will discuss in relation to the formalization of the Faroese language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as forming a key component of national narratives that tend to underpin empowering Faroese self-understanding.

The Faroese dance, when seen as a contemporary practice, is a dynamic expression of such agency. Yet there is a tendency to dig for the historical roots of the dance and view it as a

“preserved” historical practice that had long died out elsewhere. In *Faroe: The Emergence of a Nation*, John F. West wrote:

The Faroese ring dance has preserved into modern times a medieval ballad tradition of great interest, centuries after it has perished everywhere else. It is believed to be related to the line dance, which originated in French courtly circles in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and over the next 200 years spread all over Europe (West 1973, 41).

Just a few pages later, West concludes that “the isolation imposed by distance and by commercial monopoly thus preserved in Faroe a cultural pattern that had long since become extinct elsewhere” (West 1973, 44). Here it is important to tease out the extent to which language of preservation and extinction work to render the Faroese as somehow more traditional or rooted in the past than contemporaries elsewhere, as this discourse is directly linked to the pseudo-colonial relationship between the Faroe Islands and Denmark. Johannes Fabian noted that colonizers frequently imposed alternative space and time to the colonized, whether by trying to remove the colonized bodies from a shared space, as in the context of the United States and Australia, or by dividing and allocating space between colonizers and colonized, as in South Africa (Fabian 1983, 30). In this chapter I work to tease out how such narratives enable the Faroese to construct empowering notions of cultural longevity and agency, while resisting the idea that contemporary cultural practices in the Faroe Islands render islanders as overtly tradition-bound or pre-modern.

### *Faroese Distinctions*

The ongoing relationship between the Faroe Islands and the Danish realm represents a sort of political and economic quagmire that has deep roots in the history of the islands. Unlike in Iceland where there are more precise accounts of the settlement period, the date of the first

settlement in the Faroe Islands is contested, but thought to have been near 825 C.E. (Arge 1991, 101). Scant documentation exists of the first few hundred years of settlement on the islands, although the Icelandic sagas suggest that initial Norse settlement of the islands was fueled by a desire to escape tyrannical rule in medieval Norway (see *Flateyjarbók*, for example). While substantiation of such claims is difficult, they form a powerful backdrop to frequently evoked narratives of the strength and endurance of the strong willed Faroese facing oppressive foreign rulers. As the centuries progressed the Faroe Islands, along with Iceland and Greenland, were brought into union with the Danish crown. Karen Oslund, in writing about these North Atlantic relations, argues, “Much of Faroese history, from the thirteenth century on, can be understood in terms of its relationship with Denmark and a relationship with Europe that was largely mediated through Danish interpretations of the Faroes” (Oslund 2011, 124). This mediation of the Faroe Islands through Danish interpretations had large-scale implications throughout Faroese society.

Other scholars have narrowed in on the inextricable link between Faroese-Danish relations and political and linguistic issues in the Faroe Islands (Knudsen 2010, 128). Language policy in the Faroe Islands was a clear site of institutionalized “Danification” of the Faroese. This was reinforced with the introduction of compulsory schooling in Danish and the ultimate goal to enforce Danish as the national language of the Faroe Islands in the 19th century (Knudsen 2010, 129). By this time, the Faroese language had already taken on the status of a “low” spoken variety, while Danish was established as a formalized written “high” variety. The subordination of Faroese to Danish officially ended in 1938 when the two languages were recognized as equal by the Danish government, but efforts to develop an orthography for the

Faroese language remain an ongoing project. Despite the desire to separate Danish and Faroese cultural elements, particularly through language, scholars have noted that in the efforts to assert a Faroese linguistic identity separate from Danish, the Faroese have essentially turned to Icelandic as their new model (Oslund 2011; Knudsen 2010; Nauerby 1996).

While the Faroe Islands gained considerable autonomy from Denmark throughout the 20th century, Faroese economics remains inextricably tied to Denmark. After a period of private individuals holding trading rights over the islands, starting in 1709 and ending in 1856, the Danish king held an absolute monopoly over trade in the Faroe Islands. The sole commercial establishment in the Faroe Islands was the royal monopoly's warehouse in Tórshavn. Their exports were almost entirely comprised of wool and woolen goods and products from fishing, fowling, limited agriculture, and whale hunting. Wylie points out that there was no Faroese middle class during this time; there were a few tenant farmers with the rest of the population kept at poor living standards due to the iron fist of the Danish monopoly (Wylie 1993, 378). At the same time, the Danish king owned over half of the land in the islands and extracted significant taxes from the inhabitants (West 1973, 13).

In addition to the seat of the trade monopoly and royal power, Copenhagen served as the primary site of education for many Faroese individuals, as well as Icelanders and Greenlanders, seeking a university education in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Loftsdóttir 2012, 60; Jensen 2012, 111). The presence of Faroese students in Copenhagen during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Denmark itself underwent a pronounced national awakening, directly influenced a subsequent national awakening in the islands. Faroese students worked to apply the same ideals of the Danish

national awakening to their own homelands. Thus the late 19th century brought increased efforts to foster senses of political and cultural cohesion to the Faroe Islands. At the forefront of many of these efforts was a growing desire to differentiate themselves politically and culturally from the Danish realm. Such efforts to establish differences in otherwise relatively similar populations are central to understanding the larger Nordic realm, a point I have highlighted throughout this dissertation (Wylie 1981, 9).

Another site of “Danification” in the Faroe Islands came with an 1828 law regulating the use of family names within the Danish realm. Up until this point it was common in both Denmark and in the Faroe Islands for individuals to hold patronymic last names and in the case of the Faroe Islands, last names also indicated the location of where a family came from in the islands. The 1828 law mandated that all last names within the Danish realm end in “-sen”, effectively obliterating the local naming practices in the Faroe Islands. It was not until 1992 that the Faroese home-rule government was given the right to determine naming laws for people within the Faroe Islands. In Denmark proper, a 2005 law finally reintroduced the possibility of using patronymic last names in both the Faroe Islands and Denmark. This law also mandates that Denmark’s Ministry of Integration can work together with the Faroe Islands to approve names that abide by Faroese naming law.

Desire for separation from Denmark came to a head in 1946 when, two years after Iceland declared independence, the Faroese held a referendum and voted for independence from Denmark. The Danish government in turn ignored this vote (Debes 1995, 63). Two years later, in 1948, the Faroe Islands were instead granted home rule and incorporated as an *amt* or county.

Malan Marnersdóttir characterizes this refusal by Denmark to acknowledge the vote for independence as “utterly frustrating” (Marnersdóttir 2007, 152). She further argues that “These events have since become a traumatic feature of Faroese politics. Due to these facts, the national consciousness is high regardless of one’s opinion about Faroese sovereignty” (Marnersdóttir 2007, 152). The desire for independence runs high in the islands, but a significant portion of the population remains in favor of staying in the Danish realm. Regardless of which side of the debate individuals are on, there is a general consensus that the islanders should be free to choose.

The Faroe Islands continue to be a peripheral area within the Danish realm, teetering back and forth between pushing for independence and remaining with Denmark. One of the main obstacles towards independence is the significant financial subsidy given to the Faroe Islands each year by the Danish state. The Danish government has said that the Faroe Islands would be free to break from the kingdom, but that the subsidy would quickly end. For now, at least, the Faroese government has not seen this as a viable route as they would need significantly more time to properly “de-colonize” and disassociate from the Danish funds.

### **Continuity and Dance**

Due in part to the nature of Danish hegemony throughout modern Faroese history, cultural heritage in the Faroe Islands tends to be viewed as precious and fragile. The Minister for Education, Research, and Culture in the Faroe Islands remains invested in the preservation and maintenance of Faroese “cultural heritage” as a key link between past, present, and future generations. This emphasis on linking generations together reflects Whyte’s argument that “one

of the basic ways in which people everywhere, including those in chronic crisis, experience time is through the relationships between generations” (Whyte 2008, 99). Relationships between generations in the Faroe Islands are in part shaped by actual texts of the ballads, which for so long formed a key component of Faroese oral society. While the lyrics sometimes served as pseudo-genealogies, the narrative value surrounding the history of balladry and dance in the islands have created connections between generations.

The majority of texts addressing cultural heritage and the politics of tradition in the Faroe Islands focus on language, to which song and dance are closely connected. Jens Christian Svabo, one of the Faroese students in Copenhagen during the mid-18th century, transcribed some of the Faroese ballads and created an early prototype for the reconstruction of written Faroese. V.U. Hammershaimb was also active in collecting and transcribing the oral ballads of the Faroese. Hammershaimb’s 1891 publication *Færøsk Anthologi* contained texts of multiple ballads as well as a second edition of his previously published Faroese grammar (Clausen 2006, 197). The Faroese ballads continued to be at the forefront of the transition of Faroese from an oral language to a written language, both for their linguistic value and for the performance practices associated with singing the ballads, including the Faroese dance. Of all the different genres of oral poetry documented in the Faroe Islands, the heroic poems are currently the most commonly performed (Wylie 1981, 70).

The cultivation of uniquely Faroese modes of expression continues to play a major role in forging senses of cohesion within the Faroe Islands. I experienced a great diversity of musical expression in the islands over a three-month period in the islands during the summer of 2012.

The most impressive participatory music and dance events I observed occurred just after midnight on July 30th when over 20,000 people filled the main square of Tórshavn. This evening concluded *Ólavsøka*, the Faroese national holiday, and people from all over the country had joined together for an evening of song and dance. We sang together from small songbooks published just for this event with a few individuals leading the group through each song over a PA system. Immediately after the last song, a chain of dancers began to form as people linked hands and started taking two steps to the left and one step to the right in rhythmic unison. A lone voice broadcast over the crowd sang the verse of the evening's first ballad with the public joining in for each chorus. The chain of dancers quickly grew as nearly everyone in attendance joined in and began the annual chain dance through the town center that lasted until the early morning. All around me, adults, children, and even a few dogs, were dressed in national costume.

Significantly, this was not a stylized performance of "traditional" song and dance by costumed Europeans performed as a relic of Herderian peasant authenticity. The Faroese chain dance and accompanying balladry (*kvæði*) are together often perceived as "the most precious Faroese musical inheritance... that make the Faroe Islands exceptional in the world" (Tórshavnar Kommuna 2000, 31).



Figure 12: Ólavsøka Midnight Song. Tórshavn, Faroe Islands. July 29, 2012. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

Chain dancing and the related ballads, along with the Faroese language, are common markers used to depict the Faroe Islands as home to a population that is closely tied to medieval peasantry, even in the 20th and 21st centuries. In a 1960 report about a then-recent recording expedition to the Faroe Islands, Matts Arnberg wrote,

The most important part of the material we collected is the Faroe walking dance, the only survival in the northern countries of the chain dance of the Middle Ages, which has for many generations been the favourite popular entertainment of the Faroe people. In spite of very great difficulties the people of these islands have stuck to their heritage of old nordic culture, a heritage brought over from Norway and further developed according to the demands of their way of life. Here we find a real, living peasant culture, which has for a long time almost disappeared from the other northern countries (Arnberg 1960, 82).

The choice of language here, in which Arnberg claims to have found a “real, living peasant culture” that has disappeared in other locations, risks positioning the Faroe Islands as pre-modern holdout on the fringes of Europe.

This emphasis on the historical roots of the dance works to reinforce a sense of legitimacy for otherwise marginalized cultural practices. Richard Wolfram, among others, has written about the pan-European nature of chain-dancing dating back to the bronze age. Wolfram also highlights a common understanding that the chain-dance as practiced in the Faroe Islands originated in medieval France (Wolfram 1956, 33). But Wolfram argues that this idea is born out of a lack of evidence of the dance in the Faroe Islands prior to around the 14th century, instead of evidence connecting the Faroese and medieval French practices. A historical approach to the study of dance and music in the Faroe Islands certainly has its place in academic study, but as noted earlier, recognizing the contemporary nature of dance practices in the Faroe Islands of today is also essential.

The dance style and balladry create an embodied sense of continuity and cohesion for those participating. As described earlier in this chapter, the dance is performed by a group of people holding hands to form a closed loop. Everyone in the group then moves in unison, repeatedly taking two steps to the left followed by one step to the right, while being led by a *skipari*. The *skipari* takes the lead in singing ballads that range in subject matter from heroic tales to satirical commentary. He or she typically sings each of the verses and then leads the entire group for unison singing of the chorus. Most of the *kvæði* have multiple variations, and it is the job of the *skipari* to select which version will be sung and to determine the tempo and style.

*Kvæði* are almost always in repetitive verse-chorus format, enabling the group to pick up the chorus with ease. This is a highly participatory performance practice, meaning that nearly everybody in the near vicinity of the dance joins in.

The performance practice of the Faroese dance allows for a large range in the number of people that can participate. Groups may be as small as ten and there is almost no limit on how large the group can be, apart from the physical constraints of the site of performance. The dancers can typically squeeze into a relatively small space by forming a twisting chain-like shape, instead of one large circle. This movement guarantees close contact with the rest of the dancers. As the dancers snake in and out, they will at one point or another come face to face with each of the other dancers. Depending on where the dance is being performed and in which context, the dancers are forced to acknowledge and quite literally forced to face everyone else in attendance. This contributes to the forging of a sense of cohesion among the dancers in the group.

During my time in the Faroe Islands, I experienced the chain-dance in multiple settings and contexts. In addition to the final hours of *Ólavsøka*, I also participated in a chain-dance during a wedding celebration for two well-known Faroese musicians, as well as in courses and activities held for foreigners studying the Faroese language at the local university in Tórshavn. It is also possible during the summer for tourists to learn about the dance and participate in one as part of a tourist package. Wylie has argued that the Faroese dance “is one of the few activities in which all Faroese – and only Faroese – may participate fully; foreigners may learn the steps, but are unlikely to learn the words, let alone become *skiparar* (leaders)” (Wylie 1981, 117). While

there are definite language barriers in place for non-Faroese speakers, it is worth noting that I, myself non-Faroese, was always eagerly welcomed to participate in the dance without hesitation. Furthermore, the Faroese dance is used in advertising campaigns by the official Faroese Tourist Board to entice tourists to come and experience the islands for themselves. The Faroese dance, as currently practiced, is not exclusionary based on ethnicity or background.



Figure 13: Learning to chain dance at the University of the Faroe Islands. Tórshavn. August 12, 2012. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.



Figure 14: Wedding chain dance. Tórshavn, Faroe Islands. July 14, 2012. Photo by Kimberly Cannady.

The dance is also practiced outside of the Faroe Islands. In Copenhagen, a group called *Fótatraðk* meets every other week in the Faroese House. This house, located in Copenhagen's Vesterbro district, serves as a hub of Faroese life in Copenhagen, with meeting and rehearsal spaces, and a restaurant and bar. Every other Sunday evening a group of Faroese people living in Copenhagen comes together for about three hours to chain dance and share food. In addition to two separate Faroese choirs based in Copenhagen, this dance society provides an opportunity for Faroese living in Copenhagen to come together regularly. When I attended a meeting in April 2012 there were twenty people in attendance; the youngest was three and the oldest were in their 70s. The dance, along with the Faroese House itself, is a vibrant site of performing Faroese-ness and creating cohesion among Faroese living abroad. It furthermore fosters continuity between the experience of living in the Faroe Islands and living abroad.



Figure 15: View of the Faroese House. Copenhagen, Denmark. April 5, 2011. Photo by Kimberly Cannady

The Faroese dance is not, however, merely a metaphor for continuity based on performance practice. The dance is steeped in the rhetoric of cultural heritage and the priority placed on “having roots” in efforts to legitimize marginalized practices and people. Just as Knudsen argued that language policy in the Faroe Islands is predicated on a sense of purism that works to differentiate the Faroese language from Danish (Knudsen 2010, 128), the continued

prevalence of chain dance in the Faroe Islands also creates a divide between Faroese practices and Danish practices. Even though these categories are hardly fixed in everyday life, pillars of distinction such as language and art create senses of differences. In the hands of more powerful groups, such as the Danes, monolithic and narrow articulations of a national culture can take on hegemonic qualities, yet for marginalized minorities, seemingly similar articulations can be a tool of empowerment.

### **Cultural Heritage Revisited**

Exactly how participation in performing arts becomes empowering as a site of national expression, particularly for post-colonial communities like the Faroe Islands, extends beyond an ability to create group identity and extends into the realm of cultural heritage. Dancing the Faroese dance in the Faroe Islands or among Faroese in Denmark is not necessarily a site of articulating a singular Faroese-ness, instead it is a performance practice that effectively brings diverse people together into one unit. During my stay in the Faroe Islands I observed an openness to who could participate in the chain dance. Even some of the Faroese individuals I came to know who steered clear of nationalistic markers such as the traditional costumes willingly participated in social dancing. I also noticed that, while sexual minorities experience legal and social discrimination in the Faroe Islands that is unseen in other Nordic areas, there seemed to be no taboos in terms of sexual orientation limiting who can participate in the dance. To borrow from Victor Turner's classic work, *The Ritual Process*, the Faroese dance can be seen as a

‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties (Turner 1969, 68).

This experience leads to what Turner refers to as “*communitas*,” a cohesive unit comprised of diverse people who feel unified even if only for the length of a dance. In the case of the massive *Ólavsøka* chain dance, anyone in the town square would be welcome to join in the dance. But the power of the Faroese dance is not only found in the effects of dancing, but also in the way it intersects historical associations and values determined by the Faroese state and other vested parties.

The framework of cultural heritage reinforces a priority expressed by politicians and cultural workers on claiming roots and continuity for people around the globe. Laurajane Smith has written about the preoccupation with artifacts and physical items in heritage discourse, noting that the term cultural heritage itself is most often taken to mean the physical, with “intangible” cultural heritage encompassing areas such as language, performance, music, and dance (Smith 2006, 3). Clearly designating certain items or practices as official cultural heritage is deeply tied to the values and priorities of those doing the designating. Cultural heritage is also tightly connected to the idea of memory, both collective and individual.

For people and societies who have experienced serious political and cultural hegemony, there is potentially great power in having the freedom to self-determine group values and priorities. For the Faroese, institutional support of the chain dance and balladry, both in terms of education and financial support from the government, demonstrates the decision to promote and continue to cultivate the dance. But there are also risks associated with cultural heritage

discourse for marginalized populations, such as the perception that some groups are more tied to their past or, at worst, pre-modern. The government of the Faroe Islands is aware of such risks, and has actively tried to ensure that the dance is taught and performed not as a static relic of the past, but as a modern living practice (Tórshavnar Kommuna 2000, 31).

In a study of the relationship between music and culture in contexts of disjuncture and displacement, ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman notes that music is particularly useful because it simultaneously represents “a form of expression common to humanity, and as one of the most extreme manifestations of difference” (Bohlman 2011, 31). Bohlman continues in his description of how these manifestations of difference played out in colonial situations with the colonizers often working to limit local musical styles. Clearly articulations of difference and distinction can be a powerful tool for people on both sides of the power equation.

Despite the strong relationship between Denmark and the Faroe Islands, the articulation of a certain “Faroese-ness” as distinct from Danishness rose in importance throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Denmark experiencing its own national awakening, the Faroese had worked to distinguish their language from both spoken and written Danish. At the same time, the continued practice of chain dancing and the accompanying balladry remained key signifiers of a distinct Faroese cultural heritage. This cultural heritage now informs state level policy making in the Faroe Islands and is a vital source of empowering narrative formations.

## **Sound Distinctions in the North Atlantic**

Iceland and the Faroe Islands have much in common with each other in terms of settlement history, migratory patterns, political relations, geographic positioning, and modern state formations. In both locations music has been a vital component in the forging of distinct local identities, yet the processes through which this occurred differ in significant ways between Iceland and the Faroe Islands. While language and literature became paramount to narratives of history and heritage in Iceland, they were marginalized in the Faroe Islands leaving music as one of the prime sites of expressive culture for the Faroese well into the 20th century. When viewed in relation to Iceland, the material on the Faroe Islands presented in this concluding chapter repositions this dissertation in the regional framework in which it was originally designed.

The case studies presented in Chapters Two through Five provide specific examples of how Icelanders use music to assert who they are and how they aspire to be seen as a nation. Through these case studies I have explored the specific processes of nation building in relation to identity, post-colonialism, and senses of history that took hold in Iceland. In any study of nation-building, it is important to recognize that such processes tend to be ongoing throughout the duration of national formations. The material presented here relating to contemporary musical and cultural policy, the popular music industry, and everyday musical activities highlights the relationships between modern nation-building and music in Iceland. As discussed, the “noise of pastness” is rarely a quiet sound in Iceland and people negotiate the weight of their history in often advantageous ways. Yet, to view Iceland as a temporal hold-out, whether in relation to

music or other cultural forms, is to engage disempowering narratives directly linked to colonialist mentalities.

In future work I intend to build upon the idea of “sound distinctions” in a North Atlantic context to position music making in the region in relation to the political entanglements, inter-regional migration, and extra-musical cultural practices. This approach will also more equally focus on Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Denmark. Each of these locations has seen the localizing of so-called imported musical practices in processes similar to what I have described here, particularly in Chapter Two. This material demonstrates the role of music making in negotiating both regional and local identities in the North Atlantic. It also explores how Denmark and the insular North Atlantic were instrumental to each other’s musical practices and the forging of distinct identities.

This dissertation provides critical accounts of cultural history and contemporary musical life in an understudied part of Europe. While there are many factors in the development of musical life that are unique to the North Atlantic region, the issues that underpin my research, namely national identity, post-colonialism, and senses of history, resonate far beyond the Nordic realm. I hope that this research, as well as future research, helps to position the North Atlantic and Scandinavia in global processes and histories.

## Appendix 1

### *Áramótaskaupið 2011 lokalagið<sup>2</sup>*

Þarna fer hún  
Harpan út á haf  
Höllinn sem kreppan oss  
Af gjafmildi sinni gaf.

There it is  
Harpa out in the harbor  
The castle that squeezed us dry  
Generously gave.

Gamla settið það siglid líka út.  
Svei mér það losaði  
í maga mínum hnút.  
Nýir tímar þeir nálgast okkur hratt.

Old it sails also out.  
It seems to have loosened  
The knot in my stomach.  
New times, they approach us quickly.

Nýtt ár er framundan  
og það gamla verður kvatt.  
Það er einhver eldur inn'í mér.  
Eldur sem lýsir veginn  
bæði hjá mér og þér.

The new year is ahead  
And the old will be gone.  
That is at once the fire inside me.  
The fire that lights the way for  
Both me and you.

Við kyndum bálið  
og berjumst áfram.  
Við byggjum saman  
þetta stórkostlega land.  
En hagfræðin og hamslaus græðgin.  
Við hendum báðum.

We fuel the fire  
And fight onward.  
We build together  
This magnificent land.  
But the economics and unruly greed.  
We have both.

Svo 2012!!!  
(Fengum upp í háls,  
laus við þetta lið)  
Tökum nýjan sið.  
(Loksins orðin frjáls,  
tökum upp nýjan sið.)  
Við hreinsum til í hólf og gólf.  
(Fengum upp í háls,

So 2012!!!  
(We're up to our necks,  
relieve with assistance)  
Take up new civilization.  
(Finally become free,  
Take up new ways)  
We clean the walls and the floors.  
(We're up to our necks,

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<sup>2</sup> Translations to English are my own.

laus við þetta lið)  
Og við byrjum upp á nýtt.

Kannski gleymist stundum hverjir taka við.

Við krakkarnir ykkar þetta pínulitla lið.  
Hlustum því á hjartað alla tíð.  
Högum okkur skynsamlega bæði ár og síð.

Við kyndum bálið og berjumst áfram  
Við byggjum saman  
þetta stórkostlega land.  
Já, kyndum bálið og  
brennum ruglið og röflið, bullið.

Svo 2012!!!

Tökum nýjan sið.  
Við hreinsum til í hólfi og gólf.  
Og við byrjum upp á nýtt.

2012!!!

Tökum nýjan sið  
Við hreinsum til í hólfi og gólf  
Og við byrjum enn að nýju.

2012!!

Tökum nýjan sið  
Við hreinsum til í hólfi og gólf  
Og við byrjum enn að nýju.

Horfum útum allar opnar dyr.  
Höllum á tækifærin sem ei buðust fyrst.

Stýrum bátnum, brunum ekki í strand  
Berjumst svo fyrir þetta vil til fundna land.

relieve with assistance)  
And we start all over again.

Maybe it's sometimes forgotten who is  
taking over.

With your kids this little troop.  
Listen to your hearts all along.  
We behave wisely in both year and ways.

We fuel the fire And fight onward.  
We build together  
This magnificent land.  
Yes, fuel the fire and  
Burn this nonsense and cut the crap.

So 2012!!!

Take up new ways.  
We clean the walls and the floors.  
And we start all over again.

2012!!!

Take up new ways  
We clean the walls and the floors  
And we start all over again.

2012!!!

Take up new ways  
We clean the walls and the floors  
And we start all over again.

We look out at all open doors  
We lean on opportunities that weren't  
offered first.  
Steer the boat, don't dash into the beach  
Fight for this country.

## Terms

*Aavaat*: A Greenlandic choir based in Copenhagen with whom I worked in 2011.

*Akuttat*: A choir of Danish retirees dedicated to the performance of Greenlandic choral music. The name derives from the Greenlandic term for Danes (“*blege ansigterne*” in Danish / “The Pale Faces” in English).

*Alþing*: The name for parliament in Icelandic.

*Fiðla*: A zither type traditional Icelandic instrument.

*Fjallabræður*: A male choir based in Reykjavík with whom I worked in 2012. Their name means “Mountain Brothers”.

*Huldufólk*: “The Hidden People,” sometimes translated as “elves.” A subject of folk belief in Iceland.

*Hákarl*: Term for shark in Icelandic, particularly the Greenlandic Shark that is commonly eaten by Icelanders.

*Húsakorið*: A Faroese choir based in Copenhagen with whom I worked in 2011. The name means “The House Choir,” and they are based in the Faroese House in Copenhagen.

*Íslenska Kvennakorinn*: The Icelandic Ladies Chorus in Copenhagen with whom I worked in 2011.

*Iðunn*: The name of the Reykjavík based *rímur* society with whom I worked in 2011-2012.

*Jónshús*: The name of the Icelandic cultural house in Copenhagen. Formerly the home of Jón Sigurðsson.

*Kvæðamannafélög*: Societies of *rímur* performers found throughout Iceland.

*Kvæðamaður*: The term for one who chants *rímur*.

*Langspil*: A zither type Icelandic instrument that is still made and performed today, unlike the now extinct *fiðla*.

*Leikskóli*: Icelandic preschools.

*Mímir*: The name of the Icelandic language school based in Reykjavík where I attended courses.

*Nordatlanten*: The Danish term for the North Atlantic which is typically used to refer specifically to the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland.

*Nordatlantisk Julekoncert*: The North Atlantic Choir Concert, occurs annually in Copenhagen just before Christmas in Copenhagen.

*Reykjavík*: Capital city of Iceland.

*Rímur*: A traditional type of Icelandic singing.

*Staka*: An Icelandic choir based in Copenhagen with whom I worked in 2011.

*Svið*: An Icelandic speciality food item consisting of seared and boiled sheep's head.

*Söngvaka*: A song evening; *söngvaka* are held throughout Iceland.

*Tvísöngur*: Twin singing, or singing in parallel fifth movement. This is generally a component of traditional Icelandic singing.

*Tónlist*: Literally translating to “tone art”, this is the term for music in Icelandic.

*Þingvellir*: The original location of Iceland's parliament. This is now a preserved national park.

*Þorrablót*: A feast traditionally held at the end of the month of Þorri in the old Icelandic calendar. A feast is now held at this time in which Icelanders eat traditionally prepared meats and other foods.

*Áramótaskaupið*: The extremely popular television program broadcast nation wide each New Year's Eve in Iceland.

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