

Article received on 22nd September 2015

Article accepted on 15th October 2015

UDC: 78.071.1 Видар Ј.

COBISS.SR-ID 223351564

**Romana A. Ribić\***

University of Arts in Belgrade

Faculty of Music, Library

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC OF ICELAND IN THE POST-ROMANTIC PERIOD: JÓRUNN VIÐAR (JÓRUNN VÍÐAR, REYKJAVÍK, ICELAND, 1918–)

**Abstract:** This paper presents a brief overview of the development of Icelandic music through historical and artistic circumstances. We shall also point to the specific social attitude towards the female population and we shall deal with the few Icelandic women composers. Among them Jórunn Víðar particularly stands out, as a pianist, accompanist and music teacher. For over two decades, she was the only woman composer to be a member of the Society of Icelandic Composers. She wrote the music for the first Icelandic ballet suite and the first Icelandic film ever, arranging the old narrative songs called the 'thulur' as a pioneer. Her oeuvre includes a piano concerto, music for theater and film, chamber and choral music and solo songs. She was awarded the Order of the Falcon for accomplishments in music by the president of Iceland.

**Key words:** Iceland, history, culture, music, women composers, Jórunn Víðar

Studying Nordic art music is not common in the Serbian musical environment, particularly with regard to research of the musical history of Iceland. Our interest in Icelandic art and culture dates back to sixteen years ago when we attended a seminar on the digitization and repository of archival material<sup>1</sup> and had the

---

\* Author contact information: romanaribic3@gmail.com

The topic was presented at the International Symposium Women in Music, (Kragujevac, 2–4 December 2011).

<sup>1</sup> We followed the valuable lessons of Matthew Driscoll PhD, at the seminar: *Digital Preservation of Medieval Manuscripts and Early Printed Books* (OSI HESP, Sofia, Bulgaria, 1999).

opportunity to become acquainted with the manuscript archival materials preserved in the Árni Magnússon Institute in Copenhagen<sup>2</sup> and in Reykjavik.<sup>3</sup>

### **Historical circumstances**

Iceland is an European island country in the North Atlantic Ocean and is situated in the area between Greenland, the coast of Norway and Sweden.<sup>4</sup> It occupies an area of about 102,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and has only 330,000 inhabitants. The most numerous are the Icelanders themselves, who mostly live in the capital Reykjavik (93%), the largest town on the island and there are also smaller ethnic groups (7%). The official language is Icelandic.<sup>5</sup> The country is a democratic republic, with the oldest parliamentary arrangement in the world, called the Althing (Alþingi),<sup>6</sup> founded in the year 930.

---

<sup>2</sup> Det Arnarnagnæan Institute is an independent, scientific-research institution as part of the Department for Nordic Research attached to the Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen. It was established in 1956 to study the medieval manuscript collection of charters and documents collected by the Icelandic Árni Magnússon (1663–1730), a scholar and antiquarian. The largest part of the collection consists of manuscripts found on the soil of Iceland, but there are also documents of Norwegian, Danish and Swedish origin. The subject of interest for researchers in the Institute are Old Norse, then modern Icelandic and Faroese (or Føroyskt) language and literature, and even ancient Danish and Swedish. Cf. <http://humanities.ku.dk/>, <http://nfi.ku.dk/english/research/>, [http://nfi.ku.dk/english/collections/arnamagnæan\\_collection/](http://nfi.ku.dk/english/collections/arnamagnæan_collection/), [http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/hver\\_var\\_arni\\_magnusson\\_en](http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/hver_var_arni_magnusson_en) (accessed on 25 August 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. [http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/as2012\\_forsida\\_is](http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/as2012_forsida_is) (accessed on 25 August 2015)

<sup>4</sup> It belongs to the group of Nordic countries, which include Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway. They are connected to three areas with their own government, but under the protectorate of Denmark (Greenland and the Faroe or Føroyar Islands) and Finland (Åland Islands). The Scandinavian Peninsula, however, includes Denmark, Sweden and Norway, and partially Finland (the other part of it occupies the Baltic peninsula). The name of Scandinavia is thus a misnomer for Iceland. Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iceland>, <http://www.iceland.is/>, <http://www.everyculture.com/Ge-It/Iceland.html> (accessed on 25 August 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Icelandic belongs to the family of Indo-European languages, in the group with the other Nordic languages, as well as the northern branch of the Germanic languages. It is derived from the Old Icelandic language but, unlike Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, has not undergone major changes. The contemporary Icelandic language is closest to Norwegian and Faroese. Cf. Gísli Pálsson, “Language and Society: The ethnolinguistics of Icelanders“, in: Paul E. Durrenberger, Gáisli Páalsson (eds.), *The Anthropology of Iceland*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1995, 121–122, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), (accessed on 16 April 2015)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <http://www.mcc.is/english/administration/althingi/>, <http://www.althingi.is/english>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Althing> (accessed on 25 August 2015)

Icelandic history and culture reaches far back into the past, to Viking times. The population originates from Norwegian immigrants who, for military and political reasons, colonized the island from the mid-9th century. The history of Iceland begins in the year 874, when an oligarchy (the rule of a small number of noble families) was established. Christianity was officially accepted in the year 1000, thanks to Pepper,<sup>7</sup> Irish monks – missionaries who found themselves on the island in the 8th century, before the settlement of Norwegians. Due to the fact that Iceland is a volcanic country which even today is geologically active, during the Middle Ages the population was exposed to natural disasters, and there were frequent and deadly epidemics. As a result, poverty ensued, leading to large migrations and a drastic fall in the already small number of Icelanders. The first written documents about music in Iceland date from the 11th to the 15th century. From the mid-13th century, Iceland was under the Norwegian crown and from the mid-14th century and in the next five centuries, under Danish rule. The execution of the Catholic archbishop half-way through the 16th century, established the Reformation there, marked by the presence of the secure and unwavering influence of Danish culture and politics that brought about the isolation of the island, cutting it off from the rest of the world. Therefore, the European Renaissance never arrived in Iceland. The 17th and 18th centuries were recorded as a dark age in the history of Icelandic music, but also in the culture and life in general and such circumstances prevailed until the early 19th century. Famine and poverty, isolation, intensive Danish monopoly (1602–1787) and the bad climate (volcanic eruptions and earthquakes) were widespread. The romantic period of the 19th century strengthened the will of the Icelanders to become independent. The biggest influence on the awakening of national awareness was accomplished by literature, especially narrative poetry, through the stories of the intrepid Vikings. During the 19th century, the Danish monopoly in political and economic terms slowly eased, leaving room for Iceland to eventually turn into a rich, strong and modern state. The Constitution was formed in 1874.<sup>8</sup> In 1882, the first social society was founded and women were then given the right to vote. In 1918, Iceland secured its sovereignty in the framework of the Union with Denmark, and gained full independence.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Papar (from the Latin *papa* = father) were Irish or Scottish monks. Traces of their existence were recorded by the priest Ari Thorlgilsson (Ari Þorgilsson, 1067–1148) in *The Book of Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*, around 1133), the first written history of Iceland, which covers the period from the beginning of colonization until 1120. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papar>, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ari\\_%C3%9Eorgilsson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ari_%C3%9Eorgilsson) (accessed on 25 August 2015)

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Göran Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, translated by Peter Lyne, Reykjavík, Iceland Music Information Centre, 1991, 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, “Outside, Muted, and Different: Icelandic Women’s

However, the release of music from the foreign influence of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Germany, took place very slowly. National poetry was sung to melodies, but it did not have anything in common with the Icelandic irregular metrics of folk songs and their specific pentatonic.<sup>10</sup> In keeping with the national ideology, amateur musicians of different professions and basic education began composing choral music (mostly for men's choirs), solo songs and piano pieces. These were the most suitable for the domestic genres of music, as other musical forms were not of the same origin and consequently had had no development in the past.

Circumstances began to change during World War I, and a few musicians were studying in Leipzig, which became a place of pilgrimage for young Nordic composers.<sup>11</sup> Thus, we record the emergence of the first women amateur composers born in Iceland in the early 20th century, who, in the period between the two world wars, wrote salon songs in the style of the German early romantic Lied (preserved in sound recordings).<sup>12</sup>

Jórunn Viðar (Jórunn<sup>13</sup> Víðar<sup>14</sup>) belongs to the second, middle generation of women composers who created compositions during World War II and later.

---

Movements and Their Notions of Authority and Cultural Separateness”, in: P. E. Durrenberger, G. Páalsson (eds.), op.cit, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Svend Nielsen, *Stability in musical improvisation. A repertoire of Icelandic epic songs. (rímur)*, Acta Ethnomusicologica Danica, 3, translated from Danish by Kate Mahaffy, København, Forlaget Kragen, 1982, 65–96.

<sup>11</sup> They were: Páll Isólfson (1893–1974), who wrote a cantata to celebrate a thousand years since the establishment of Parliament (1930); Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson (1874–1927), author of the national anthem, who was considered to be the first Icelandic professional composer; Jón Thorleifsson (Jón Þorleifsson, 1892–1961); Sigurður Thordarson (Sigurður Þórðarson, 1878–1949). Cf. G. Bergendal, op. cit, 33.

<sup>12</sup> They were: Elisabet Jónsdóttir (unknown), Ingunn Bjarnadóttir (1905–1972) and Thorey Sigurðadóttir (Þórey Sigurðadóttir, 1907–97). Cf. Guy Rickards, “Nordic Women Composers”, Part 4, “Iceland“, *Nordic Sounds*, 2006, 4, 10–17.

<sup>13</sup> The name Jorun (Jorunn), of Norwegian origin, is derived from the Old Norse Jórunn, a compound of the words ‘jór’ (wild boar) and ‘unn’ of ‘unna’ (to love). Cf. Nancy L. Coleman, Olav Veka, *A Handbook of Scandinavian Names*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, 11, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), (accessed on 1 August, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Icelandic surnames are formed in a very peculiar way – on the basis of the patronymic (father's baptismal name), rarely matron (mother's name). The surname of a woman always has the suffix “dóttir” (daughter), and of men it is “son” (s(s)on). Thus, for example, the daughter and son of one Guðmund have the surname Guðmundsdóttir or Guðmundsson. There are, of course, exceptions, such as for the name Viðar, which in Norse mythology refers to the ‘great or wide ruler’ (Víðarr), the son of Odin, the god of vengeance. Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V%C3%AD%C3%B0arr>, (accessed on 1 August, 2015). The Norwegians celebrate the name day of Vidar (a girl's name) or Vemund (a boy's name) on 29 December. Cf. N. L. Coleman, O. Veka, op. cit. 158.

She was born the same year when, by the Act of Union with Denmark, Iceland became an independent state under the patronage of the Danish King (1918).<sup>15</sup> This group of composers also includes Selma Kaldalóns (1919–84), the daughter of the famous Icelandic poet Sigvaldi Kaldalóns (1881–1946) and the self-taught Maria Brynjólfsdóttir (1919–?). The third generation of women composers consists of Karólína Eiríksdóttir (1951), Mist Þorkelsdóttir (Mist Þorkelsdóttir, 1960), daughter of a famous composer Þorkel Sigurbjörnsson (Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson, 1938–2013) – both educated in America, Bára Grímsdóttir (1960) – studied in Iceland, followed by the Netherlands, with Louis Andriessen, (1939), as well as the two authors of mostly choral works – Hildigunnur Rúnarsdóttir (1964) and Elín Gunnlaugsdóttir (1964). Among them we single out Thuridur Jónsdóttir (Þuridur Jónsdóttir, 1967), whose vocal and instrumental works are very often performed and she also has several nominations for the Nordic Music Prize. Their successors were younger colleagues, Anna S. Þorvaldsdóttir (Anna S. Þorvaldsdóttir, 1977) and Thóra Marteinsdóttir (Þóra Marteinsdóttir, 1978).<sup>16</sup>

Jórunn Viðar is a doyen in the world of Icelandic women composers. She was the first to acquire an international reputation and is the first Icelandic woman composer ever educated in America. She wrote the track-music for the first Icelandic film *Last Farm in the Valley* (*Síðasti bærin í dalnum*, 1950), and the music for the first suite of the Icelandic ballet, *Fire* (*Eldur*, 1950), which opened at the National Theatre in Reykjavík. During the period when she was editor of musical programmes on national radio, she arranged a large number of folk songs, the so-called ‘thulur’,<sup>17</sup> which was also a pioneering endeavour. For two

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. Bergendal, op. cit., 72, 73, 75–76; Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, “Viðar, Jórunn“, in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie, second edition, Vol. 26, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, 542; G. Rickards, op. cit., 10–11; John David White, “New Music of Iceland”, Part III, in: John David White, Jean Christiansen (eds.), *New Music of the Nordic Countries*, Hillsdale, New York, Pendragon Press, 2002, 316, [https://books.google.rs/books?id=zyUOv6EQrWcC&pg=PA287&lpg=PA287&dq=john+d.+white+new+music+of+iceland&source=bl&ots=iif1rGKTUF&sig=WYRsUWx6nooW9PN7UVhi4YzD2Y0&hl=sr&sa=X&sqi=2&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=john%20d.%20white%20new%20music%20of%20iceland&f=false](https://books.google.rs/books?id=zyUOv6EQrWcC&pg=PA287&lpg=PA287&dq=john+d.+white+new+music+of+iceland&source=bl&ots=iif1rGKTUF&sig=WYRsUWx6nooW9PN7UVhi4YzD2Y0&hl=sr&sa=X&sqi=2&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=john%20d.%20white%20new%20music%20of%20iceland&f=false); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B3runn\\_Vi%C3%B0ar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B3runn_Vi%C3%B0ar) (accessed on 3 August, 2015)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. G. Rickards, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Thula (Old Norse: s. *pula*, pl. *pulur*): songs of freer forms. There is no division into stanzas, and there is almost no respect for the narrative thread. They were transferred orally. Since they exist also in the Norwegian and Føroyar traditions and are very similar to the Icelandic, indicates the common origin of these people. Cf. Gunnsteinn Ólafsson, Rósa Þosteinsdóttir, [Text from the accompanying booklet of DVD], in: *Raddir Íslands = Voices of Iceland*, Siglufjörð, Iceland, Folk Music Centre, 2009, 9, [http://www.folkmusik.is/en/page/voices\\_of\\_iceland](http://www.folkmusik.is/en/page/voices_of_iceland) (accessed on 23 September 2015).

decades, she was the only woman among the members of the Association of Icelandic Composers.

She grew up in her hometown of Reykjavik where, after her schooling abroad, she has spent most of her life. She came from a musical family. Her great-grandfather, Pétur Guðjohnsen (Pétur Guðjohnsen, 1812–77), a Danish student, first played the only organ on the island at that time<sup>18</sup> and was responsible for printing the first collection of hymns in modern Gregorian notation (1861 and 1864). She received basic lessons in music from her mother, Catherine Viðar. Jórunn was educated at the College of Music in Reykjavik, and studied the piano with Árne Kristjánsson (unknown) and Páll Isólfson (1893–1974). After graduation (1937), in her eighteenth year, she went to Berlin, continuing her studies of this instrument at the Hochschule für Musik. As circumstance would have it, just before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, she decided to leave Germany and continue her education at the Juilliard School of Music in New York (1943–5).

In the period between the two world wars, the question of preserving the national identity, threatened by outside influences, arose again. The problem of the acceptance, assimilation and adaptation of foreign elements were of crucial importance. Dissent between traditionalists and the advocates of modern art was rife and there was much prejudice against the new tendencies, in an attempt to preserve what was rightfully, purely and originally Icelandic. Modern European tendencies were considered an unhealthy influence and a threat to Icelandic culture and art, and they were accepted only later. Thus, the efforts to faithfully represent Icelandic folk art, through the lives of the peasants on the farm and through the ancient saga<sup>19</sup> (which according to many historians is a product

---

<sup>18</sup> In the 19th century, when the cathedrals were completely destroyed in the Holar and Skalholt eruption, the only places for worship in Reykjavik was the oratory in which Magnús Stephensen (1762–1833, lawyer, educator, poet and amateur musician) brought the first modern organ. Cf. G. Bergendal, op. cit, 10, 17–19.

<sup>19</sup> The sagas belong to the oral prose tradition of the first settlers in Iceland. Storytellers were Celtic or Irish professionals in the time of the clan-based society, in public places. Irish priests first recorded them in the 7th century. They were recorded in written literature with the emergence of the Icelandic chroniclers – priests in the second half of the 11th century, first in Latin and then in the Icelandic language (cf.: A. Thorgilson, *The book of Icelanders*, note No. 7). Theme: the hero's lives from birth to the first feats. Form: the epic tale is often interrupted with verses, consisting of established schemes of epic formulas, the connection of which is left to the will of the narrator. The most famous are the *Egil Saga*, *Njals Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Cf. *Речник књижевних термина* [*Dictionary of literary terms*], главни и одговорни уредник [editor in chief] Miloš Stambolić, Београд [Belgrade], Nolit, 1985, 690–691; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saga>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sagas\\_of\\_Icelanders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sagas_of_Icelanders), (accessed on 3 May 2015)

of exclusively Icelandic tradition),<sup>20</sup> misinterpreted fascist tendencies. The end of the 19th century saw the rise of a socio-cultural phenomenon called ‘Nordic race’, based on the German national-socialist ideology of Hans Friedrich Karl Günther (1891–1968)<sup>21</sup> and the activities of the so-called ethnic organization Nordic Society (Nordische Gesellschaft, 1921–1957), which promoted the “Nordic idea”, deeply rooted in the “authentic” German culture. With this effort to emphasize national identity through the trinity of ‘land, language, literature’ on account of the authentic geographical, specific historical circumstances and certain racial characteristics (light skin, hair and eyes, narrow skull),<sup>22</sup> it is obvious that the Icelanders were linked with German notions of racial purity.<sup>23</sup> Neo-Romanticism was thus given a nationalist character. However, when Germany occupied Denmark in 1940, passions subsided and what was considered decadent, now took on a new direction.

During World War II, Iceland ostensibly acquired a strategically important position in the political sense. In fact, American troops were located there throughout the war, under the pretext of the alleged defense of the country from German aggression (as Iceland never had, and still does not have its own troops). This U.S. presence, with its inevitable interference in the country’s internal affairs, sparked a re-awakening of the national awareness of Icelanders, as it was in the 19th century. Immediately after World War II, there were poets of so-called ‘atomic poetry’,<sup>24</sup> as well as novelists, and among them, Halldor Kiljan Laxness (1902–1998), the only Icelandic Nobel Prize winner for literature (1955), for his novel *Atomic Station* (1949).<sup>25</sup> The U.S. military and political dominance,

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf: G. Páalsson, “Language and Society [...],” op. cit, 123.

<sup>21</sup> German racial researcher and eugenicist. He worked at the time of the Third Reich. Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans\\_F.\\_K.\\_G%C3%BCnther](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_F._K._G%C3%BCnther) (accessed on 3 May 2015)

<sup>22</sup> Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nordic\\_race](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nordic_race) (accessed on 3 May, 2015)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hubert van den Berg, “The Early Twentieth Century Avant-garde and the Nordic Countries. An Introductory *tour d’horizon*”, in: Marianne Ølholm, Hubert van den Berg (eds.), *A Cultural History of the Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries 1900–1925*, Amsterdam, Brill Academic Publishers, 2012, 24, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), (accessed on 3 May, 2015)

<sup>24</sup> Steinn Steinarr, born Aðalsteinn Kristmundsson (Aðalsteinn Kristmundsson, 1908–1958), Stefán Hörður Grímsson (Stefán Hörður Grímsson, 1919–2002), Hannes Sigfússon (1922–1997), Jón Úr Vör (1917–2000). Cf. G. Bergendal, op. cit., 62.

<sup>25</sup> The novel *Atómstöðin* is based on the historical background of the British (1940) and, a year later, the US occupation of Iceland. The conclusion of the secret Agreement to set up the military base in Keflavik at that time, was seen by the population as a potential threat to the country, in terms of a possible nuclear war. Laxness began to work on the novel in 1946, shortly after the US atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Cf. G. Bergendal, op. cit.,

however, continued after their withdrawal at the end of the Second World War and lasted until 2006,<sup>26</sup> because Iceland is, contrary to the will of the majority population, one of the founders and a member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 1949).<sup>27</sup>

At the same time the U.S. administration made it relatively easy for Icelandic artists to go to the United States for further education. So, Jórunn went to the Juilliard School of Music, where she studied and completed her piano and theory courses, and then composition and orchestration with Vittorio Giannini (1903–1966).

During the war years, the American influence on the musical taste of Icelanders was tremendous. American soldiers brought gramophone records with the music of Benny Goodman, Edward Kennedy ‘Duke’ Ellington, Count Basie and Alton Glenn Miller. The National Radio started in 1945 with regular broadcasts of jazz music. The establishment of radio stations opened a whole new era in the history of Icelandic culture, with a wide musical repertoire. Until then, Icelanders had enjoyed the opportunity of listening to music only in modest places, at musical evenings marked by local traditions. Refreshments were brought by numerous artists, immigrants from Germany, who arrived mainly for political reasons, but they were also needed to build up an educated cadre. They brought the European musical spirit of late Romanticism, but also the musical drama of Verdi and Wagner, to the former Iceland’s chances an avant-garde, presented only through broadcasting.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, Iceland was finally liberated by the Danish authorities when the Contract of Union with that country expired in 1943. On June 17, 1944 Iceland became an independent republic.

---

5, 62; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Atom\\_Station](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Atom_Station) (accessed on 3 May 2015)

<sup>26</sup> Iceland and the US government reached an agreement in 1947 that US troops could return to the island, as part of the ‘Marshall Plan’ which was to be realized the following year.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “The Mountain Woman and the Presidency”, in: Gáisli Páalsson, E. Paul Durrenberger (eds.), *Images of Contemporary Iceland : Everyday Lives and Global Contexts*, Iowa City, IA, University of Iowa Press, 1996, 113–114, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), (accessed on 13 April 2015)

<sup>28</sup> Cf. G. Bergendal, *op. cit.*, 62.



\* \* \*

### **Mature years of Jórunn Viðar**

The social and economic status of women in Iceland was constantly exposed to controversy within the female population. They have always been treated as housewives in a relatively developed society that relies on the fishing industry. When, in the early 1920s, women won the right to vote and, therefore, ostensibly, equality with men, a division arose in the class society. At that time, besides their role as housewives dedicated to the care of their offspring, more educated women, who belonged to the higher social class, acquired an extra responsibility in addition to their obligations inside the home. Under the influence of European trends, in 1970, a radical left-wing, feminist movement, the Red Stockings (Rauðsokkahreyfing) appeared, which called for the political and social equality of men and women. Yet, the age-old concept of the woman as a housewife still prevailed. Nevertheless, a decade later, for the first time in the country's history, a woman<sup>29</sup> was elected as the head of state, and the first women's political party was founded. The Women's Alliance, whose views differ from the left-wing, lays emphasis on the quality and role of the woman in society, which in all material respects differs from that of the man. Her role as an independent person, who takes care of the family and participates just as actively in the implementation of all other societal activities, qualifies the woman as the mother of the nation (Fjallkonan).<sup>30</sup> This deeply rooted vision of



Jórunn Viðar (1918)  
(Guy Rickards, "Nordic Women Composers", Part 4, Iceland, Nordic Sounds, 2006, 4, 10.)

---

<sup>29</sup> We have recorded the fact that Iceland in 1980, as the only European country, had its first female president (with a total term of sixteen years). It was Vigdís Finnbogadóttir (1930), also the first president of the country to be elected in a democratic way and to hold the longest mandate, ever, of a woman president, in the world. By education she is a French teacher. In the second half of the 20th century, she was an active fighter in the protest against the presence of NATO troops in the country. Now, she is the Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO. Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vigd%C3%ADs\\_Finnbogad%C3%B3ttir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vigd%C3%ADs_Finnbogad%C3%B3ttir) (accessed on 11 August 2015)

<sup>30</sup> Fjallkonan (Mountain Woman) is a national symbol and patron of the nation, which appeared during the independence movement. The name refers both to the Icelandic culture and the nature. As a fairylike being, she belongs to nature, but she is also part of the civiliza-

the national symbol, as the guardian of the entire Icelandic culture and tradition, shows the ever-present desire of Icelanders for full independence.<sup>31</sup>

Jórunn encountered such a climate on returning to her hometown in 1945. She started a family<sup>32</sup> and then an extremely creative and performative period began in her life that has lasted till today.

Her oeuvre includes a wide range of genres from instrumental, through vocal-instrumental to vocal music:

- Piano Concerto *Touches* (*Slätta*, 1977);
- Two ballet suites: *Fire* (*Eldur*, 1950)<sup>33</sup> and *Ólafur Liljurós* (1951);<sup>34</sup>
- Music for theater pieces;
- Film music:<sup>35</sup> *Last Farm in the Valley* (*Siðasti bærinn í dalnum*, 1950),<sup>36</sup> *Artists* (*Listamenn*, 1983),<sup>37</sup> *The Word Music: Jórunn Víðar* (*Orðið tónlist: Jórunn Víðar*, 2008);<sup>38</sup>
- Chamber music: *Variations* (*Tilbrigði*) on a theme from an old Icelandic folk song, for cello and piano (1962); *Icelandic Suite* (*Íslensk svíta*) *Scenes from Country Life* for violin and piano (1974);

---

tion – a tender, goodhearted, determined being, promoting patriotism, courage and unity. Cf. Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “Public View and Private Voices”, in: Paul E. Durrenberger, Gáisli Páalsson (eds.), *The Anthropology of Iceland*, op. cit, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. I. D. Björnsdóttir: “The Mountain Woman and the Presidency”, op. cit, 116–125.

<sup>32</sup> Husband Larus Fjelsted (1918–85) and three children.

<sup>33</sup> Performed by Icelandic Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Petter Sundkvist. Cf. compact disc Jórunn Víðar, *Mansöngur*, Reykjavík, Smekkleysa 10, [s.a.].

<sup>34</sup> Premiere at the City Theatre in Reykjavik, in 1952. The ballet is inspired by the ancient Icelandic ‘vikivaki’ (vikivakalag), lively dance songs with a refrain which, despite being banned by the church authorities because of its erotic content, survived in the period from the 16th to the 18th century. Theme of the ballet: during a journey on horseback through the cliffs, a young man is surprised by a fire. Nymphs (as erotic beings) assail him with their dancing. He defends himself somehow, but they still sting him to death. Recorded in 1997, with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Paul Schuyler Phillips. Cf. Valgarður Egilsson, “Jórunn Víðar” [Text from the CD accompanying booklet], in: J. Víðar, *Mansöngur*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. <http://www.icelandicfilms.info/person/nr/1621> (accessed on 7 September 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Feature film; the theme is from the legend; directed by Ævar Kvaran; produced by Oskar Gíslason; starring: Þóra Borg Einarsson and others (premiere held on 30 March 1950).

<sup>37</sup> A documentary about the famous Icelandic artist; directed by Þrándur Thoroddsen; co-author of the music Hjálmar Helgi Ragnarsson (premiere held on 8 May in 1983).

<sup>38</sup> Documentary; directed and produced by Ari Alexander Ergis Magnússon; it was nominated for the prestigious Icelandic Edda Prize (Edduverðlaunin) for best film music in 2010 (premiere held on 12 April 2009).

– Piano music: *Meditations (Hugleiðing)* on five themes of Icelandic ballads (1965);

– Mixed choirs: *Children's Ditties (Barnagælar)*;<sup>39</sup> *A Love Song* in the form of a small cantata with piano (duration 11 min.); *Prologue for the Rhymes*<sup>40</sup> of Ólafur the Greenlander (*Mansöngur fyrir Ólafs rímu Grænlandings*, 1950), verses by Einar Benediktson (1864–1940), accompanied by string orchestra;<sup>41</sup> *Christmas (Jól)* with the accompaniment of flute and organ;<sup>42</sup>

– Solo songs for voice and piano: *Six Songs on Poems by Halldor Björnsdóttir* (*6 Sönglog on poems by Halldor Björnsdóttir*); cycle *The Youth in the Woods (Únglingurinn and Skóginum*, 1998); *Icelandic Folk Songs (Íslensk Þjóðlög*, arrangements, 1972).

She is best known for her solo songs accompanied by the piano, which reflects her very distinctive style with roots in folk music. The musical language is only at a first glance in the tradition of late Romanticism, enriched with abundant technical skill and inexhaustible creative freshness. A folk song, for her,

---

<sup>39</sup> Arrangement of folk song noted on 17 March 1898, after being sung by Bjarna Þorsteinssyni (No. 31). Cf. compact disc *Íslensk Þjóðlög (Icelandic Folk Songs)*, performed by Hamrahlíðarkórinn and conducted by Þorgerður Ingólfssdóttir, Reykjavík, Iceland Music Information Centre, 1993.

<sup>40</sup> Rhyme (s. *ríma* = verse; pl. *rímur* = verses) is a form of literary narrative epic poetry popular in Iceland between the 14th and 19th centuries. The oldest known rhyme was written in 1387 and tells about the Norwegian King Olaf. Over the centuries, the rhymes connected the legacy of skaldic poetry (skald = professional singer) with an Icelandic narrative poetry and romantic songs from the south of Europe. The rhyme was performed by a single singer and the listener would sometimes join in at the last stretched syllable of each stanza. They were sung at evening gatherings. Manuscripts were transmitted from farm to farm. They were transmitted orally. The singing was very particular and often one specific tune was connected exclusively with one singer. Performance might be characterized as a style between speech and singing, with the use of a special voice, in a strict metric verse, with minor variations. Cf. G. Bergendal, op. cit., 9–10; Svend Nielsen, op. cit.; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C3%ADmur> (accessed on 24 August 2015)

<sup>41</sup> There is also a version for chorus and piano (1960). The theme is legendary: Ólafur the Greenlander was a conqueror from the 15th century and, with some of his warriors, was the last surviving Icelander in the fight with the Inuit. In addition, the first settlement of Icelanders in Greenland was founded by the father of the researcher Leif Erikson (Leifur Eiríksson, c. 970 – c. 1020), Erik Thorvaldsson (Eiríkr Þorvaldsson, 950 – c. 1003), known as Eric the Red, in the late 10th century, and this period lasted until 1410. Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik\\_the\\_Red](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_the_Red) (accessed on 7 September 2015). Performed by Hamrahlíðarkórinn and conducted by Þorgerður Ingólfssdóttir, with the piano accompaniment by Árni Heimir Ingólfsson. Cf. V. Egilsson, “Jórunn Viðar”, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> There are two more versions: for children's choir; for female choir and chamber orchestra.

is a source of inspiration (such as in *Meditations* or in the *Icelandic suite*), but without the direct use of quotations.

Her best solo songs were published on a CD entitled *The Youth in the Woods*,<sup>43</sup> named after the eponymous song from the album, to the verses of the mentioned Halldor Kiljan Laxness. The songs were written to the texts of contemporary Icelandic poets (Nos. 1–3, 5, 7–10, 12–18),<sup>44</sup> a few on traditional texts (Nos. 4, 11, 19), and one is a poem by the German author Cäsar Fleischlen (1864–1920, No. 6). They are of different content and the theme of nature prevails: 1. “Vigil” (“Vökuró”), 2. “Folkverse” (“Þjóðvísa”), 3. “Morning in June” (“Júnimorgun”), 4. Folk song “Fiddle-Bjorn’s verses” (“Vísur Fiðlu– Bjarnar”),<sup>45</sup> 5. “Springsong at Yuletide” (“Vorljóð á Ýli”), 6. “Im Kahn”, 7. “Night Visitors” (“Gestaboð um nótt”), 8. “Folksong from Elfland” (“Þjóðlag úr Álframri”), 9. “The Window” (“Glugginn”), 10. “Mother Fain Would Sleep” (“Mamma ætlar að sofna”), 11. Folk song “Sea Troll’s Verses” (“Sætrölls kvæði”), 12. “A White Horse in the Moonlight” (“Hvítur hestur í tunglskini”), 13. “By a Chinese River” (“Við Kínafljót”), 14. “Song of the Land in Harpa” (“Varpaljóð á Hörpu”),<sup>46</sup> 15. “In Memory of a Failed Virtuoso” (“Til minningar um misheppnaðan tónsnilling”), 16. “Sung While Walking” (“Sönglað á göngu”), 17. “The Youth in the Woods” (“Únglingurinn í skóginum”), 18. “Lost Are All Cairns” (“Týud er hver varða”), 19. Thula “The Children Must Be Given Bread” (“Það á að gefa börnum brauð”), 20. “Greybeard Sat by the High Rock” (“Kall sat undir kletti”).

Their inventiveness in terms of research in vocal ability inspired Icelandic multimedia artist Björk Guðmundsdóttir (1964), who specifically insists on

---

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Jórunn Víðar, *Únglingurinn í skóginum*, Reykjavík, Smekkleysa 8, 1998.

<sup>44</sup> Jakobína Sigurðadóttir (Jakobína Sigurðadóttir, 1918–1994), Tómas Guðmundsson (Tómas Guðmundsson, 1901–1983), Einar Bragi (1921–2005), Guðmundur Bödvarsson (Guðmundur Bödvarsson, 1904–1974), H. K. Laxness, Davíð Stefánsson (Davíð Stefánsson, 1895–1964), S. Steinarr, Þorgeir Sveinbjarnasson (Þorgeir Sveinbjarnasson, 1905–1971) et al.

<sup>45</sup> The Icelandic fidhla (*fiðla*) is a precursor of the zither. It was known in the 17th and 18th centuries. It consisted of an elongated body, with two or more strings of horsehair or pig intestines. While playing, it rested on the knees or on a small table. The wires were attuned in unison. The basic melody was performed on one wire while other components were added in fifth, as needed. It was played with a bow at the wider end of the instrument, without the use of fingers, except at the end of the melody when the sound stopped. It was most commonly used to accompany singing, but also as a solo instrument. Cf. Amanda M. Burt, “Fidhla”, in: *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, edited by Stanley Sadie, Vol. 1, London, Macmillan Press Limited, 1984, 740.

<sup>46</sup> According to the old Icelandic calendar, Harpa is the first spring month, with days and no nights (from April 14 to May 13). Cf. <https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr/%D0%9C%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B8> (accessed on 25 August 2015).

voice extremes, to arrange a lullaby “Vigil” for mixed choir, on her CD *Medulla* (2004).<sup>47</sup> This song by Jórunn was originally written for the piano and then she arranged it as a solo song on the text of her already mentioned peer, Jakobína Sigurðadóttir. (TABLE 1)

Other songs from the cycle are enthusiastic, cheerful and humorous, deeply experienced texts. The technique of the piano part is particularly developed (sometimes impressionistic in character), which might be expected of such an outstanding pianist as Jórunn. The best illustration are the passages in the song refrain “By a Chinese River” (No. 13), or elements of nocturnes, tarantella and la campanella with an almost Liszt-like technique in a homage to the failed Icelandic virtuoso Jón Pálsson (No. 15).

Quite unexpectedly, when her career was completely stable, at the age of forty-one she went abroad for the last time to continue her piano studies in Vienna (1959–60). Upon her return, she was mainly engaged as an accompanist for solo singers. Meanwhile, she has held numerous solo recitals and was the soloist at the premiere of her own Piano Concerto with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. She ran a music programme on the State Radio for a few years, and for that purpose arranged a large number of folk and thula songs. Until her retirement, she worked as a piano teacher in the Reykjavik Singing School.

She has received numerous honours. The Reykjavik City Council appointed her “City Artist” in 1999. The following year, when Reykjavík was one of nine European Cities of Culture, she was commissioned to write the music for the celebration of this event, which was broadcast on television. The President of Iceland awarded her the Order of the Falcon, the most valuable recognition. An elderly Jórunn still creates, persistently, consistently and diligently.

---

<sup>47</sup> The song “Vigil” on the compact discs of both artists was marked as track number one. As for its origin, it is related to one interesting story. Namely, when Björk requested permission from Jórunn to arrange “Vökuró” in her own way, she was then given an intriguing answer full of enthusiasm: “It’s great to have a little girl. She is certainly a great inspiration to you.” It refers, in fact, to the singer’s daughter Isadora, a little girl with blue eyes (mentioned in the song), who was born four years earlier, at a time when Björk started to work on a lullaby. It seems that Jórunn was a visionary. The compact disc with the unusual title *Bone Marrow* has been nominated twice for a Grammy award. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medúlla>. For sound examples, see on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMsz01RjRkI>, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86Qy6EG\\_atY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86Qy6EG_atY) (accessed on 28 August 2015).

TABLE 1

<i>Únglingurinn í skóginum</i>	<i>The Youth in the Woods</i>
“Vökuró”	“Vigil”
<p>Bærinn minn, bærinn minn og þinn sefur sæll í kyrrð. Fellur mjöll hljótt í húmi á jörð. Grasið mitt, grasið mitt og þitt geymir mold til vors. Hjúfrar lind leynt við brekkurót, vakir eins og við. Lífi trútt kyrrlátt kaldavermsl augum djúps út í himinfirð starir stillt um nótt. Langt í burt vakir veröld stór, grimmum töfrum tryllt, eirðarlaus, óttast nóttog dag. Augu þín, óttalaus og hrein, brosa við mér björt. Vonin mín, blessað brosið þitt, vekur ljóð úr værð. Hvílist jörd hljóð í örmum snæs. Liljuhvít lokar augum blám lítla stúlkan mín.</p>	<p>My farm, my farm and yours sleeps happily at peace. Falls snow silent at dusk on earth. My grass, my grass and yours keeps the earth in spring. Nestling spring hid at the hill’s root, awake as are we. Faith in life quiet cold spring eye of the depths into the firmament staring still in the night. Far away wakes the great world, mad with grim enchantment, disquieted, fearful of night and day. Your eyes, fearless and serene, smile bright at me. My hope, your blest smile, rouses verse from sleep. The earth rests silent in arms of snow. Lily white closes her blue eyes my little girl.</p>

Jakobína Sigurðadóttir, “Vökuró” = “Vigil”, (translated by Rut Magnússon), No. 1, in: Accompanying booklet with the compact disc *Jórunn Víðar: Únglingurinn í skóginum* (Iceland, SMK 8, 1998), 6, 26.

*Translated by the author*