

THE STORY IN TONES

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For anyone studying the history of classical music in Nordic countries, this disc is self-recommending. This, however, is not a particularly large market, and one wonders about the appeal of Icelandic music for violin to a general audience. I can testify that for anyone who is curious about music beyond the standard repertoire, this is a very gratifying recording.

Björn Ólafsson was a pioneer of classical music in Iceland. Born in 1917, he studied at the first music school in Reykjavik and then in Vienna. Upon graduation in 1939 he was offered a position in the first violin section of the Vienna Philharmonic, whose principal conductor at the time was Wilhelm Furtwängler. Before starting, Ólafsson went to visit his family in Reykjavik, and the outbreak of war prevented his return to Vienna. Instead he became a major figure in the music life of Iceland, as a teacher and performer. Based on the recordings collected here, all of which come from the archives of the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service and date from the 1940s through 1974, he was an extremely gifted violinist.

Jón Nordal (b. 1926) is one of Iceland's most important composers and is represented here by a *sonata for violin and piano* (for which the composer proves himself to be a skilled pianist in accompanying Ólafsson). The sonata is a conservative tonal work, tautly constructed and Neoclassical in idiom; it is distinguished by some lovely melodic material. Nordal's *Three Sisters* is a very early work (composed when he was 18). The music is charming and attractive. The central piece of the three is the longest, and is a lyrical outpouring of real beauty. But the listener would have benefitted from an explanatory note. Who are these three sisters? How do their musical portraits reflect them? A little online searching reveals that the three sisters belong to Icelandic legend. This points out one flaw in an otherwise fine production: the brief biographical notes about the composers do not tell us nearly enough about them, their music, or the performers. For example, the pianist in *Three Sisters* is Wilhelm Lanzky-Otto, who was a very important French horn player and pedagogue in Iceland, and whose son Ib became an even more famous hornist.

For me the most exciting discovery was the *Overture and Double Fugue on BACH for unaccompanied violin* by Þorarinn Jónsson (1900–1974). Jónsson studied at the Belin Conservatory and remained in Berlin until 1950, when he returned to Iceland. His music apparently achieved some popularity in Germany during his life. This 15-minute work is obviously modeled on the Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas of Bach. While it may not have the remarkable degree of invention and imagination of its models, it is closer in quality to them than you might anticipate. Any violinist who chose to put this work on a program that also included one or more of the Bach works would find a very appreciative audience. Ólafsson's performance, recorded in the 1940s, is masterful. He produces a wide range of lovely tone in the Overture, and a perfect clarity of contrapuntal lines in the Fugue. Jónsson's *Humoresque* is, as its title suggests, a much lighter work of considerable charm.

The other work for unaccompanied violin, Jón Leifs's *Prelude and Fughetta* also takes Bach as its model, although the style is more rhapsodic in nature. Leifs (1899–1968) is credited as being Iceland's first internationally known musical figure, as both a composer and conductor. Once again Ólafsson's playing exhibits complete command of his instrument and the music. His intonation, a critical factor in unaccompanied playing, is spot on. Even slightly off-center tuning would ruin the atmosphere that Leifs creates.

Helgi Pálsson (1899–1964) is represented by the last two of his *Six Folksongs*, which I found to be the least interesting music on the program. Even so, in both this and Jónsson's Humoresque collaborative pianist Árni Kristjánsson is particularly alert and involved.

The disc ends with three of the five movements from the *Folk Suite* by Jórunn Viðar (1917–2017). Viðar was one of the earliest important female composers in Iceland. She graduated from the Reykjavik College of Music in 1937 and went on to study at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik before furthering her studies in New York at Juilliard. Icelandic folk music was a frequent source of inspiration for Viðar, and these three lovely movements make for a charming conclusion to a very enjoyable release.

Despite originating over a long span of years, the recorded sound is consistently natural and clean. Based on the uniformly good quality of his playing here, I would love to encounter a major violin concerto recorded by Björn Ólafsson.

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