

Jón Leifs ICELAND OVERTURE op. 9 (1926)

Páll Isólfsson PASSACAGLIA (1938)

Henry Cowell SYMPHONY NO. 16 ICELANDIC (1962)

ICELAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

WILLIAM STRICKLAND, conductor

AS ITS CATALOG ATTESTS, Composers Recordings, Inc. has devoted its efforts primarily to contemporary American music. However, CRI has made, and will continue to make, periodic excursions into the work of contemporary composers from other countries—in particular those who have remained relatively unknown in the United States, despite the standing of high distinction that they enjoy in their own countries. For example, the first recorded performances of music by the Norwegians, Olav Kielland (*Concerto Grosso Norvegese*) and Bjarne Brustad (Symphony No. 2) available in the United States are to be found on CRI 160.

The three performances by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra on the present disc are the first recordings to be made by this orchestra for commercial distribution, and they offer for the first time in the United States representative symphonic works by two of Iceland's most distinguished composers, Jón Leifs and Páll Isólfsson. Together with these, the Iceland Symphony Orchestra introduces the Symphony No. 16 (*Icelandic*) by the renowned American composer, Henry Cowell—a work which was commissioned for the orchestra's 1962-63 season at the suggestion of William Strickland, its American conductor during that period.

ICELAND, the “land of fire and ice,” that island-nation of some 180,000 people, claims rightfully the longest democratic parliamentary tradition in the world, dating back to 930 A.D.; the Eddas and Sagas preserved there since the tenth century remain among the great literary treasures of Western civilization; and in our own time Iceland has produced a Nobel Prize winner in writer Halldór Laxness, as well as impressive painting from the hand of Johannes Kjarval. International recognition has come somewhat later, however, to Icelandic composers, partly because the 19th century European influence of Lutheran church music long remained a dominant factor in Icelandic art-music until the early 1930's.

It was in 1930 that a Music Society was established in Reykjavik in order to give solid support to regular performances by musicians both of Iceland and from abroad; and at the same time there was founded a College of Music for conservatory training. Clearly new currents were stirring that were to lead to the appearance in our own generation of a vital school of Icelandic composers, most of them seeking to find inspiration in their ancient cultural inheritance that would allow their music to speak for their own land and in their own terms. The two Icelanders represented on this recording are among the senior members of this group.

Unique interest and importance attach to Iceland's musical traditions, chiefly because circumstances conspired there to preserve for us well into the 20th century among living singers from the folk a number of very old musical practices that heretofore were thought to have survived only in general historical descriptions or in the form of ambiguous notation.

When Christianity came to Iceland, in the year 1000, the music that came with it was Gregorian Chant and its initial form of polyphonic elaboration known as organum. Because of the distances and climatic conditions that kept the small communities of Iceland separated over the following centuries—and which kept Iceland itself outside the main stream of European cultural developments, practices of *organum* and other medieval musical devices have continued in outlying settlements to a time within living memory, this despite the Europeanization of taste created in Reykjavik and other sizeable towns by the music of the Lutheran Reformation after the mid-16th century.

Thus we encounter in the oldest surviving traditional music of Iceland the phenomenon of *tvisöngur*, or double-singing — which consists in two voices, one singing the *cantus firmus*, the other proceeding with it at the interval of a perfect fifth—above or below the *cantus*: in other words the organum of the Middle Ages. Both Jón Leifs and Henry Cowell have adapted and elaborated on this device in the course of their works represented on this disc.

Another aspect of traditional Icelandic musical style—although it well may be related to styles of bardic chanting once current throughout the entire medieval world—is to be found in a large body of melodies known as *rímur* (rhyme-songs). These melodies are still used rather commonly, to carry improvised verses of compliment, greeting, or celebration—much as toasts are offered elsewhere. Variety of metric pattern is especially characteristic, wherein measures of 4, 3, and 2 beats are combined in many ways; and there is evidence to connect the metric patterns of these tunes with the style of ancient Icelandic skaldic poetry.

The rich body of still existing *rímur* melody has provided the only traditional Icelandic tune appropriated by Cowell—for the second movement of his Symphony. This same tune is also one of several traditional melodies to be heard in the course of Leif's *Iceland Overture*; and it is also worth noting that Leifs has arranged the *rímur* tune in question for chorus (see Monitor MP 585 for a recording of it by the Icelandic Singers), and has also used it as the finale of his *Icelandic Dances*, Op. 11. The tune can also be heard in traditional folk form, used as a greeting on Band 15 of the first volume of *Music of the World's Peoples*, which Henry Cowell selected and edited for Folkways Records (P 504).

By 1930, when musical activity in Iceland began to become organized along its present-day-lines, Jón Leifs (b. 1899 at Sólheimar in northern Iceland) had been busy for almost a decade as composer and folklore scholar, dividing his time between Iceland and Germany. It was while completing his studies at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1921 that Leifs undertook a close study of the comprehensive collection of Icelandic folk songs and hymns that had been compiled at the turn of the century by Bjarni Thorsteinsson (1861-1938) from ancient manuscripts and from wide-ranging field trips. Following the example of Bartók in Hungary, Leifs then went out into the field himself with notebook and cylinder phonograph to collect more of the old folk dances and melodies, many of which had survived intact from medieval times.

As a twentieth century nationalist, Leifs sought to demonstrate from the very outset of his original creative work how old Icelandic music could provide a foundation for a viable contemporary Icelandic art-music; and indeed, many titles among the fifty-odd opus numbers comprising the Leifs catalog of compositions testify to this pre-occupation: the *Iceland Overture* recorded here, a set of *Icelandic Dances* (1931), the *Iceland Cantata* (1930—composed for the millenary celebration of the Icelandic Parliament), an *Edda Oratorio* (1943), and *Saga Symphony* (1950). Chief among Leifs' stage works have been *Loftr* (1925) and *Baldr* (1950). He has also written three string quartets, songs and choral works, and Icelandic folksong arrangements. Beyond his own creative work, Leifs has been a steadfast organizer of concerts and propaganda on behalf of his country's music. He was music

director of the Iceland State Broadcast Service during 1934-35 and was founder both of the Composers' Society of Iceland and of the Performing Rights Society STEF. He has written much on Icelandic music for European musical journals and his views have been summed up in a book, *Íslands künstlerisches Anregung (The Artistic Inspiration of Iceland)* Reykjavik, 1951.

Jón Leifs composed the *Iceland Overture*—also called *Minni Íslands (Toast to Iceland)* after the poem by Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) in 1926. He was in his middle twenties then, and the music was occasioned by a tour that he himself had organized with the Hamburg Philharmonic Orchestra through Norway, the Faeroe Islands, and Iceland. A prefatory note in the published score (Islandia Edition, Reykjavik, 1950) describes the ancient Icelandic music in which the *Overture* is rooted, and Leifs adds: “This work also can be said to have been inspired by Icelandic landscape and legend—the beginning being evocative of the Viking Age, the middle part reflecting the harsh times of suffering that came after, while the end becomes the promise of re-birth.”

A number of old Icelandic melodies figure in the music, notably the brass chorale in fifths that is heard after the first 18 bars of atmospheric introduction. This melody is one that inspired Iceland's great poet-naturalist of the 19th century, Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845) to the writing of his most famous patriotic poem, *Ísland, farsaelda frón* (Iceland! Gracious Land).

The final pages of the *Iceland Overture* are dominated by a grandiose recapitulation of thematic material from the opening pages, climaxed by the organum-style chorale. For optional use at this point on especially festive occasions, the Leifs score provides patriotic texts by the poets Benediktsson and Hallgrímsson mentioned above, to be sung by mass chorus of men, women, and children. This version of the finale is not employed here, however.

PÁLL ISÓLFSSON (b. 1893 at Stokkseyri in the south of Iceland) is the foremost representative of the long tradition of Lutheran cathedral music in Iceland. Himself the son of an organist-composer, Isólfsson studied in Leipzig—where he became principal assistant to Karl Straube at Bach's own Thomaskirche—and later in Paris under Joseph Bonnet. Presently organist of the Reykjavik Cathedral, Isólfsson is known throughout Europe as a distinguished recitalist, and his performances of both classic organ repertoire, as well as of some of his own works, are available on EMI Parlophone-Odeon LP discs (CPMA 5/6) as recorded at the Reykjavik Cathedral.

As teacher and administrator, Isólfsson headed the Reykjavik College of Music from its establishment in 1930 until 1955; he was musical director of the Iceland State Broadcast Service from 1935 to 1959, and is Lecturer on sacred music at the University of Iceland.

As a composer, Isólfsson writes solidly in the Germanic-Scandinavian cathedral music tradition; but by no means has he confined himself to organ works and festive cantatas—such as that for the 1000th anniversary of the Icelandic Parliament in 1930. His catalog includes a substantial number of songs and piano pieces, as well as incidental music for dramas by Ibsen and by Icelandic playwrights. His organ works have been widely performed throughout Europe, and in the U.S.A. by E. Power Biggs.

Páll Isólfsson's *Passacaglia*—or more strictly, *Introduction and Passacaglia in F Minor*—was composed in 1938 and was first performed that year during the Scandinavian Music Festival at Copenhagen. A solo organ version, as published by the Danish firm of Engstrom & Sodrings, is available in the U.S.A. through C. F. Peters Corp.

A toccata-like introduction precedes the passacaglia proper, whose 8-measure theme, heard in the contra-basses, becomes the ground for seventeen variations. The climactic Variation 17 dissolves into an epilogue in major that brings the music to a close on a note of lyrical serenity.

HENRY COWELL (b. 1897 in California) encountered Icelandic traditional music for the first time in 1931, when his attention was called by Erich von Hornbostel at the University of Berlin to the wax cylinder field recordings that had been made in Iceland by the young Jón Leifs. Some thirty years later, when he had also done some exploration in depth of music among Icelanders living in the United States, as well as some writing on the subject, Cowell was asked to compose the *Icelandic Symphony* recorded here. The work bears a dedication to the memory of Vilhjámur Stefánsson, eminent Icelandic-American explorer and friend of the composer.

The first movement (*moderato con moto*) of the *Icelandic Symphony* evokes the misty crags of the island-nation's spectacular volcanic landscape. The music is based on the Icelandic "double-singing" (*twísöngur*) style; and during the course of the movement, the composer leads the basic Lydian modal pattern into atonality.

The *allegro* second movement is bright and amiable; and here the composer uses an actual Icelandic melody, the traditional *rímur* tune mentioned before. The diatonic melody is treated tonally here.

The *adagio cantabile* slow movement harks back in imagination to the chanting of the skalds, those news-bearing minstrels of the Norse folk in saga times, to whom Iceland's history and culture owe so much.

The fourth movement (*vivace*) takes the form of a lively dance, related in style to some of the old Icelandic folk dance tunes recorded by Leifs.

The finale (*maestoso-molto vivace*) draws together elements from the earlier movements, and in yet another way relates these elements to 20th century atonal procedures. There are four 12-tone rows here, given relatively uncomplicated dodecaphonic treatment.

It is worth pointing out in connection with Cowell's use of 12-tone technique in the *Icelandic Symphony* that the rows were arrived at diatonically through the use of fifths. This in effect carries forward the actual practice of the old "double-singing," whose parallel perfect fifths, having to take account of the augmented fourth in the Lydian mode, bring in both B-flat (when the *cantus* tone is F and the counterpoint is added below the *cantus*) and F-sharp (when the melody tone is B-natural and the added fifths form a descant above the tune). Had secular European music retained the Lydian mode, instead of concentrating upon the possibilities of the Ionian and Aeolian modes, atonality might have developed into a major Western style long before the 20th century.

Cowell's diatonic approach has discovered, in short, wholly unanticipated roots for atonality in the music of a living people. The 12-tone row, therefore, might have grown naturally out of a tonally oriented historical development, instead of being brought to birth as the aurally artificial serial row that it actually was—based on arithmetical relationships instead of acoustical ratios.

NOTES BY D. H. & W. W.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)