

### Anna Thorvaldsdottir

In June 2015 Anna Thorvaldsdottir was named the New York Philharmonic's Kravis Emerging Composer, the second person to receive that honor. In announcing the appointment, Music Director Alan Gilbert cited her as "one of the most unique and expressive voices in the compositional scene today," adding, "her uncompromising approach to building soundscapes creates a visceral, pictorial aesthetic that is deeply connected to her Icelandic heritage."

Apart from its monetary component, the award included a provision for the Orchestra to extend a commission for a new piece and to perform other music she had already written. The commissioned work lies ahead, in April 2018, when it will be conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen, The Marie-Josée Kravis Composer-in-Residence. This week the Philharmonic introduces her to its audiences through the New York Premiere of *Aerality*, which received its World Premiere in 2011 in Reykjavik and was nominated as composition of the year at the 2012 Icelandic Music Awards.

American music lovers often remark on the prominent role of Scandinavian composers and performers in today's concert scene, notwithstanding the relatively modest population of the Nordic nations. Iceland may be small and remote, but it takes its culture seriously — and that extends to educational opportunities. About 80 music schools exist in this country of 330,000 citizens, most of them funded jointly by municipalities and direct tuition fees, and this ensures that Icelandic students have access to music education beginning at the age of six. While Iceland has championed its composers and performers at home, rather few have staked a place internationally in recent years. In the realm of innovative popular music, the country has gained note for such rock groups as The

Sugarcubes (after it disbanded, lead singer Björk went on to achieve a stellar solo career) and Sigur Rós. Historically, Jón Leifs (1899–1968) was the most famous of the Icelandic nationalist composers; his often austere scores, many of which were inspired by the country's landscapes, have been revived and recorded in the decades since his death.

Following her education in Iceland, Thorvaldsdottir earned a master's degree and doctorate at the University of California–San Diego. In 2012 she received the Nordic Council Music Prize for her orchestral work *Dreaming*. New Yorkers have heard her compositions as part of the Mostly Mozart Festival and in the Composer Portraits Series at the Miller Theatre. Elsewhere, she has enjoyed performances at the ISCM Music Days, Nordic Music Days, Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival, Klangspuren Festival (Austria), Beijing Modern Music Festival, Reykjavik Arts Festival, and Kennedy Center (Washington, D.C.). Her music has been released on a number of recordings, including three all-Thorvaldsdottir CDs: *Rhizōma* (on the Innova label, 2011), *Aerial* (Deutsche

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** July 11, 1977, in Borgarnes, Iceland

**Resides:** in Surrey, England

**Work composed:** 2010–11, on commission from the Iceland Symphony Orchestra

**World premiere:** November 24, 2011, in Reykjavik, by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, Ilan Volkov, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which also mark the work's New York Premiere

**Estimated duration:** ca. 13 minutes

Grammophon, 2014), and *In the Light of Air* (Sono Luminus, 2015). Her symphonic compositions have been performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Oslo Philharmonic, and the Iceland, BBC Scottish, NDR, Aarhus, and Guangzhou symphony orchestras. Other ensembles that have championed her scores include International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), BIT20, Los Angeles Percussion Quartet, Yarn / Wire, The Crossing, Ensemble Intercontemporain, San Francisco Chamber Players, and Either / Or Ensemble.

Although the styles of contemporary Icelandic composers range too widely to suggest adherence to a specific national school, Thorvaldsdottir does often seem to be a descendant of Leifs — in her music’s reflection of natural landscapes and in her embrace of large-textured, sustained, sculpture-like orchestral sounds. She has described *Aeriality* as “consisting of vast sound-textures combined — and contrasted — with various forms of lyrical material.” Her orchestral works in particular may convey massive sounds, but

the individual lines within that texture may be detailed and delicate. In the introduction to her score, she advises the performers:

When you see a long sustained pitch think of it as a fragile flower that you have to carry in your hands and walk the distance on a thin rope without dropping it or falling. It is a way of measuring time and noticing the tiny changes that happen as you walk further along the same thin rope. Absolute tranquility with the necessary amount of concentration needed to perform the task.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and alto flute, two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, hi-hats, metal plates, two large Almglocken (tuned cow bells), two large tom-toms, two bass drums, three bows, large tam-tam, marimba, two large gongs, harp, piano, and strings.

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## In the Composer’s Words

*Aeriality* refers to the state of gliding through the air with nothing or little to hold on to — as if flying — and the music both portrays the feeling of absolute freedom gained from the lack of attachment and the feeling of unease generated by the same circumstances. The title draws its essence from various aspects of the meaning of the word “aerial” and refers to the visual inspiration that such a view provides. “Aeriality” is also a play with words, combining the words “aerial” and “reality” so as to suggest two different worlds; “reality,” the ground, and “aerial,” the sky or the untouchable.

*Aeriality* can be said to be on the border of symphonic music and sound art. Parts of the work consist of thick clusters of sounds that form a unity as the instruments of the orchestra stream together



to form a single force — a sound-mass. The sense of individual instruments is somewhat blurred and the orchestra becomes a single moving body, albeit at times forming layers of streaming materials that flow between different instrumental groups. These chromatic layers of materials are extended by the use of quarter tones to generate vast sonic textures. At what can perhaps be said to be the climax in the music, a massive sustained ocean of quarter tones slowly accumulates and is then released into a brief lyrical field that almost immediately fades out at the peak of its own urgency, only to remain a shadow.

The piece is in one movement and is approximately 13 minutes in duration.

— Anna Thorvaldsdottir