

Violin Concerto

Daníel Bjarnason

In the realm of innovative popular music, Iceland — a country of some 330,000 citizens — has gained international note for such rock groups as The Sugarcubes (after it disbanded, its star singer, Björk, went on to individual fame) and Sigur Rós. In the past decade or so, a new generation of young Icelandic “classical” composers has also taken the world by storm.

Daníel Bjarnason has emerged as an important figure among them. Born in Copenhagen to Icelandic parents, he was raised in Denmark and Iceland. After studying piano, composition, and conducting in Reykjavik, he headed for the University of Music Freiburg to pursue advanced work in conducting. His career has been international since then, but he also remains deeply involved in the Icelandic music scene. He is associated with Bedroom Community, a music collective and recording label founded there in 2006; it includes in its circle not only Icelandic composers but also musicians from abroad, including the Americans Nico Muhly and Nadia Sirota (who has been named Creative Partner for the New York Philharmonic’s 2018–19 season).

As a conductor, Bjarnason has led many esteemed ensembles, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic (he was co-curator, with Esa-Pekka Salonen, of that organization’s Reykjavik Festival in 2017), Iceland Symphony Orchestra (where he served for three years as artist-in-residence), BBC Philharmonic, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, and Tokyo and Toronto Symphony Orchestras, as well as The Icelandic Opera. In the 2016–17 season he was named composer-in-residence at the Muziekgebouw Frits Philips Eindhoven in the Netherlands.

His compositions range widely in character, sometimes employing tonally based

themes, often following a freer approach to tonality, sometimes using electronic-acoustic combinations. Formal clarity would seem to be the watchword in his scores, which are filled with specificity of momentary gestures and long-term trajectory; while they employ an advanced musical vocabulary, their narratives are within reach of engaged listeners.

Bjarnason has contributed compositions in many genres, including chamber music, choral works, film scores, and music for dance (such as his *Frames*, choreographed by Alexander Whitley for the contemporary dance company Rambert). He has written collaborative works with the Australian composer Ben Frost and has made arrangements for albums by Sigur Rós and Ólöf Arnalds, and Olivia Pedroli. His first opera, *Brothers* (based on a film by Susanne Bier), was premiered by the Danish National Opera in Aarhus, Denmark, last August; it will receive its Icelandic premiere tomorrow night, June 9, performed by the Icelandic Opera in Reykjavik.

IN SHORT

Born: February 26, 1979, in Copenhagen, Denmark

Resides: outside of Reykjavik, Iceland

Work composed: 2017, on commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, music and artistic director; and the Iceland Symphony Orchestra

World premiere: August 22, 2017, at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, conductor, Pekka Kuusisto, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: this performance which marks the New York Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 20 minutes

Bjarnason has received Icelandic Music Awards twice — as Best Composer / Best Composition in 2010 for *Processions* (for piano and orchestra), and Composer of the Year in 2013 for his works *The Isle Is Full of Noises* (for chorus and orchestra) and *Over Light Earth* (for chamber orchestra). His expertise as a conductor has added to his sensitivity as a symphonic composer. In addition to pieces for orchestra, he has written several for soloist with orchestra, including *Sleep Variations* (featuring viola) and *Bow to String* (with cello). Both of these pieces exist in multiple scorings in which the soloist is joined by ensembles of differing makeup.

Prior to his performance of the Violin Concerto last fall with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London, soloist Pekka Kuusisto stated:

I was ... really excited by the language and by the handling of really massive elements — tectonic plates of music — but also the level of detail in the orchestrations; and the music having a really heavy natural flow, but its being super-detailed at the same time.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, congas, xylophone, tom-toms (low to high), snare drum, roto-toms (low to medium-high), bass drum, temple blocks, piano, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

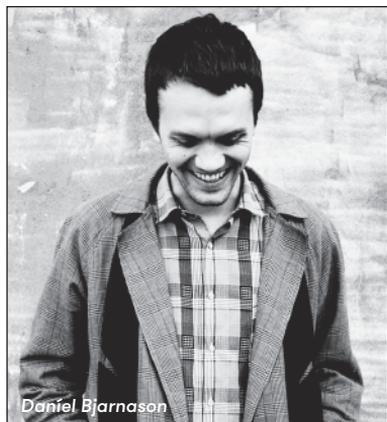
Concerto Collaborators

In a video interview made for the Philharmonia Orchestra in London last fall, soloist Pekka Kuusisto explained how he showed Daniél Bjarnason some special techniques he has used in his playing:

One of them was a thing I do quite often when I improvise, which is doubling my own playing either with my voice or with whistling. So when it's a pizzicato note, in general it's quite a short sound. But if you [play the note and whistle it simultaneously], you can create a sustain.

Bjarnason embraced the idea and ended up using it selectively in both the solo line and the orchestral string parts, as he noted in an interview leading up to the New York Philharmonic premiere:

This piece is in many ways very lighthearted and not too serious, even though it may have a serious undercurrent. But it is playful and theatrical and that is also true of the opening. It is the violinist who is leading the orchestra and us on a journey with his first magic trick.



Kuusisto also pointed out the change of tuning — an adjustment known as scordatura:

It always takes a little while for the string to get used to it, so you get this kind of raunchy [sound] that you don't normally get on a violin. ... It changes the whole resonance of the violin. ... And it's lovely.

Bjarnason was himself surprised by how scordatura tuning took over the concerto, saying, "I wasn't planning on using it for the whole piece, but then I got completely fascinated by it."