



Hafliði Hallgrímsson  
choral works



Schola Cantorum Reykjavík  
Hörður Áskelsson (conductor)

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## Choral works

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Hörður Áskelsson *conductor*

Björn Steinar Sólbergsson *organ*

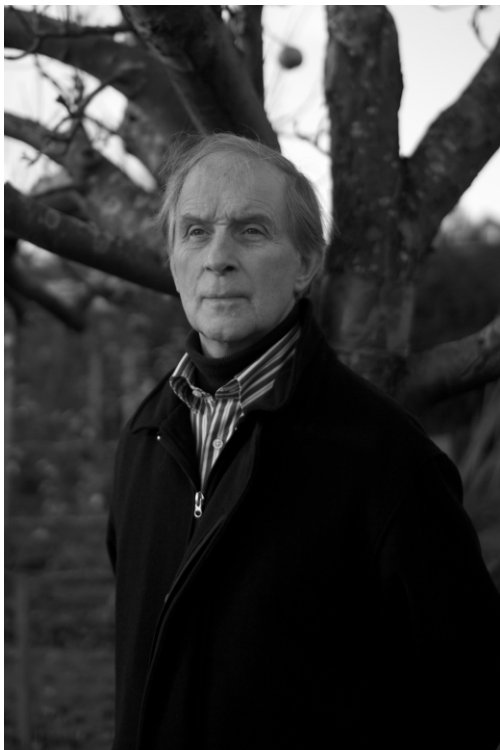
Elísabet Waage *harp*

Ásgeir H. Steingrímsson *trumpet*

Steef van Oosterhout *percussion*

- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| 1. <b>Rúra, rúra barni</b> (2010)                | [4:07]  |
| 2. <b>Myrtuskógur</b> (1993)                     | [9:31]  |
| <b>Níunda Stund</b> (1993/2006)                  |         |
| 3. Engill  | [2:31]  |
| 4. Níunda Stund                                  | [3:46]  |
| 5. Nótt  | [3:59]  |
| 6. <b>Endurkoma</b> (2012)                       | [4:24]  |
| 7. <b>Sónhenda LXXVIII</b> (2010)                | [4:06]  |
| 8. <b>Your Image</b> (1986/2010)                 | [10:15] |
| 9. <b>Lofið Guð I hans helgidómi</b> (1996/2012) | [9:17]  |
| Total playing time                               | [52:05] |

*All tracks are world premiere recordings*



Hafliði Hallgrímsson  
(Photography: Stefan Hafliðason)

### The choral works of Hafliði Hallgrímsson

Choral music represents a small but growing part of Hafliði Hallgrímsson's output. With the exception of his *Passia* of 2000, these works are all relatively small in scale and, with the further exception of some folksong arrangements, all of these shorter works are represented on this disc. Many of them were commissioned by their performers here, the Schola Cantorum Reykjavík.

Hallgrímsson's writing for choir is principally harmonic. There is little in this collection that is complex in terms of polyphony. When the polyphony is richer, as in *Endurkoma*, for example, it is for specific dramatic effect. More often a single melody is closely followed by a swirl of harmony in the same way that a calligrapher's pen gives depth and life to a line through tiny changes in pressure or angle. Hallgrímsson is led by his ear and his instincts, honed over many years of careful self-criticism. "Like a painter," he says, "you dip into the box and come up with something that works, naturally, from experience, from your instinct." It is essential for the chords to "bloom".

*Rúra, rúra barni*: sleep, sleep now darling. The disc begins with one of its simplest, but most immediately affecting pieces, an arrangement of a traditional lullaby from

the Faroe Islands. Hallgrímsson's personal maxim is never to use a text until it has become an old friend. However, when unexpectedly – "and I do not know why" – he was sent the original lullaby by a Faroese composer, he decided to arrange it as a Christmas gift for Hörður Askellsson, the conductor of the Schola Cantorum.

The subtle and occasionally eerie *a capella* choral writing (reference to "hitting the wall" is a traditional method for warding off evil spirits) is bolstered by the addition of a trumpet soloist playing gently curling ornaments. The text refers to "Pappa blowing his big lur", an Icelandic and Scandinavian trumpet of the Bronze Age, curved into a twisted S-shape. Although its function has been lost to us, the lur is a fabled instrument in northern Europe. Its sound, however, like that of many ancient trumpets from around the world, was probably somewhat raucous. This quality has not been retained by Hallgrímsson, whose super-restrained writing adds warm but melancholy echoes (father is away with his horn, possibly hunting, maybe at war) and a resonant, dreamlike space around the mother's song.

*Myrtuskógur* is the first of several of these pieces to have been written as a memorial to someone close to Hallgrímsson. In this case the dedicatee is his late sister. The music is a

setting of the poem *Silva myrtea* ('The Fields of Sorrow') by the 4th-century Latin poet Ausonius. The text's mood of mournful twilight wandering is established through a gently striding harp. The harmony suspends itself between open arpeggios and thick chromaticism, the sweetness of each tonal chord dissolving as swiftly it is tasted, like sugar in hot tea. At the midpoint, with the mention of running streams, the pace quickens. But this is a temporary change – the waters are not flowing, and the dim light of twilight returns.

Although he is not an especially religious man, Hallgrímsson has often turned to Christian-inspired texts in his vocal music – the most obvious example being his *Passía*. Baldur Óskarsson (b 1932), one of the authors set in that work, is an old friend of the composer, and was the source for the text for *Niunda Stund*, a meditation on "the ninth hour", or the hour of Christ's death on the Cross.

Hallgrímsson's setting follows the three-part structure of Óskarsson's poem, which focuses in turn on the descent to earth of a prophetic angel; some of the physical signs of the moment of Christ's death, as described in Matthew 27; and us today, looking back to find meaning. The music follows the imagery of the text closely:

a hushed cluster explodes into a fanfare announcing the angel's arrival; tense chromaticism evokes the piercing beam of light that strikes the gravestones and awakens the dead, and the eldritch sight of "blood on the moon"; a fragmented texture is our modern-day uncertainty. Only at the end – with the words "Let us hold hands" – do the voices come together in some sort of conditional unity.

Hallgrímsson has set Michelangelo's Sonnet LXXVIII once before. On that occasion it appeared in one of his highest profile works, *Ríma*, for soprano and string orchestra, a commission for the Lillehammer Winter Olympics of 1994. This second take is more modest, composed in memory of the harpsichordist, Helga Ingólfssdóttir. Michelangelo's text is sombre enough, but to avoid morbidity, Hallgrímsson has cut three lines that dwell explicitly on death. By this simple means he is able to substitute the darkest drama of Michelangelo's poem for a quiet and resolute reflection. The remaining text divides into three stanzas. The first and third are set in the simplest hymn-like homophony, and provide ample opportunity to appreciate Hallgrímsson's harmonic skill, as the texture gently thickens and thins, the tone turns sweet or sour. The melody of the second stanza, in which the poetic voice briefly turns to the first person singular,

is given to the sopranos alone, with the lower voices providing a soft underbed. Each stanza ends with a variation of the opening "O night" refrain, and again there are slow shifts from shade to light, like clouded moonlight.

*Endurkoma* ('Return') is another religiously-inspired text, this time an image of Christ's return at the end of the world. It was written by the Icelandic poet Hannes Pétursson (b. 1931), whose poetry Hallgrímsson also set in *Passía*. Like several works on this disc, it has been revised. In its original version it was considerably larger and more dramatic, and involved four double basses and percussion. The revision has compressed, shortened and refocused the score.

It has not lost its essential dramatic shape, however – a movement in the text from violent arrival (God forging his way to earth at the speed of light) to grace and gentleness (Him passing no judgment) that is matched in the music. At the start the music is characterised by a loud dynamic, dazzling harmonies and syncopated rhythms. Even the range of the singers (from low E in the basses to top B in the sopranos) is deployed to emphasise the sense of apocalyptic ecstasy. No longer bound to a communal spirit, solo voices or pairs of voices repeatedly burst out of the texture. Over the course of four minutes, however,

each of these dimensions is calmed until at the very end an even, chorale-like serenity is achieved.

A final memorial piece comes in the form of *Your Image*. This has a dual dedication, to Einar Vigfússon, one of Hallgrímsson's former teachers, and Mary Miller, a blind music lover who took many music students as lodgers in her London home. Vigfússon was the first to stay with her, and, when he moved to London to study at the Royal Academy, it was natural that Hallgrímsson should too. He describes her today as "the closest I have known to a saint".

The music sets lines from two poems by Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968): three from his well-known *Enemy of Death*, and his complete short poem *Suddenly it is Evening*. The former take up the first of two short movements. In the second both poems, "like two little trees that intertwine", says the composer, are increasingly woven together. The music throughout treads an honest path between lament and anger, with agitated outbursts that are soothed into a more gentle remorse.

As shown by its singable melody and resonant harmonies, Hallgrímsson's music has faith in certain absolutes of beauty. But at the same time it is aware of the fragile line on which

our existence stands. Everything in his music – harmony, rhythm, mode – is ever-changing, resisting the arrogance of certainty. This is clearest in the final piece on this album, composed for the “Sailors’ Sermon”, a service held every May in Reykjavík to honour those who are among the most respectful of natural forces that they cannot conquer – North Atlantic fishermen.

The text combines a psalm translation by the 16th-century German priest Burkard Waldis with two short verses by Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1674), taken from his *Passíusálmur* (‘Passion Hymns’). A former fisherman himself, Pétursson was an important contributor to Lutheran hymnody and is one of Iceland’s most beloved religious poets. (The Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavík, Iceland’s largest church and where this album was recorded, was built in his honour.)

Hallgrímsson’s original setting was intended only for a single performance in 1996. For this recording he has revised the work, elaborating it considerably into an almost fantastical whirl of sound. In between declamatory choral phrases, organ, trumpet and harp spin out waves of ornamented scales that ripple over each other. If this is an evocation of the sea, it is beautiful and awesome, yet also other-worldly and unknowable. One can hear too an echo of

the distant lur in *Rúra, rúra barni*.

As an outsider, it is tempting to distill this spirit of Hallgrímsson’s music into something essentially Icelandic, something of the raw land of fire and ice at the remotest, northernmost corner of Europe. The composer himself would probably resist such a national characterisation. And yet “Landscape probably influences us more than we realise,” he admits. “In Iceland we see a lot of dramatic landscape. The interior of the country is bleak, disturbing in a way. Nature is serious ... It has a quiet inner rapture.”

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*Tim Rutherford-Johnson is a freelance editor and prolific writer on contemporary music. He founded and maintains one of the first internet blogs on contemporary classical music, and among his publications is the sixth edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music.*

*Scores of the works from this recording can be obtained from the Icelandic Music Information Centre ([www.mic.is](http://www.mic.is)).*



Schola Cantorum Reykjavík  
(Photography: Rut Ingólfssdóttir)

## Texts & translations

(Excluding original texts in copyright)

All English translations by Sigurður Ingólfsson

### 1. Rúra, rúra barni (*Sleep, sleep now darling*)

Rúra, rúra barni  
Krýtin steður í jarni.  
Mammam situr og treskir korn  
Pápin blæsur í lúðurhorn  
Systirin seymar gullið uppá barnið  
Vil ekki barnið tiga  
Tak um legg slá í vegg,  
So skal barnið tiga

*Sleep now darling, sleep,  
All evil is held at bay,  
Mother sits to grind the corn,  
father blows his lur  
sister is sowing gold on your dress  
hush little darling hush now  
take a leg, hit the wall.  
Then the child will sleep.*

Faeroese folk song

### 2. Myrtuskógur

Errantes silva in magna et sub luce maligna  
inter harundinesque comas gravidumque papaver  
et tacitos sine labe lacus, sine murmure rivos,  
quorum per ripas nebulosum lumine marcent  
fleti, olim regum et puerorum nomina, flores.

Myrtuskógur (*continued*)

*Wandering through a great forest at twilight,  
between reeds rich with poppies  
a spotlessly silent lake, barely makes a sound.  
The flowers on the banks as a light swathed in mist  
the lily droops her head having borne the  
names of princes and kings.*

Ausonius (c. 310 – c. 394)

Níunda Stund (*Ninth Hour*)

3. Engill (*Angel*)

*He gathered the clouds and  
lit the rainbow over his head,  
held forth the book, stepped,  
feet burning onto the earth – onto the ocean.*

*Within the darkness I heard the thunders talking.*

4. Niunda Stund (*Ninth Hour*)

*A piercing beam of light  
through the palm  
struck the burial mounds, opened the graves.*

*They looked up  
and saw blood on the moon.*

Níunda Stund (*continued*)

5. Nótt (*Night*)

It is still written on the tablets.  
Where do we go?  
Seer, you who dwell upon the predictions  
within fallen walls.  
Silent houses and  
the frame – a gleaming quadrant.

World of light, let us hold hands.  
And the knot of time will never be undone,  
never.

Baldur Óskarsson (b. 1932)

6. Endurkoma (*Return*)

With the sound of trumpets  
I learned that he would come  
- on the speed of light.  
in the fullness of time.  
Forging his way  
a blue wall through the clouds  
and from the highest heavens  
down to the ocean and the land  
he will be seen  
as white as lighting.

Endurkoma (*continued*)

Will he arrive like this?  
Or will he just come like the ray  
who now ascends the mountain  
on the golden orange evening cloud  
- a staff of light touching  
the earth in silence and grace.  
passing no judgement  
on the living or the dead?

Hannes Pétursson (b. 1931)

7. Sónhenda LXXVIII

*Oh night, how sweet your darkest moment  
Who metes out peace at the end of every day.  
If men have sight and sense they will adore you  
And bow to you in their uncowed spirit .*

*With you we throw away all fear and frailty  
Drowning in the silent web of darkness,  
Embraced by dreams till the heavens open  
You carry me from earth up towards my hopes.*

*Absorbed in darkest shadow wrought in silence  
And blithely dries our tears and makes us stronger  
And frees the righteous ones from anger and sorrows.*

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)  
Icelandic version: Þorsteinn Gylfason (1942-2005)

## 8. Your Image

Text by:

*Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968)*

*English version by Jack Bevan (b. 1920)*

## 9. Lofið Guð I hans helgidómi

*(Praise the Lord in his hallowed house)*

Lofið guð í hans helgi dóm  
Kristnir menn á jörðu  
Segi lof, þökk með sinum róm  
Svo orð hans viðfræg yrðu.  
Þau um lönd öll hljómi snjöll  
Hans makt og heidri lysi  
Hátign vors guðs þeir prísi.

Praise the Lord in his hallowed house  
All Christians here on earth  
Sing his praise and your gratitude  
To give fame to his every word  
The words in every land  
The words resounding with greatness  
Showing his grace and wisdom  
The highness of the Lord abounding

*Gísli Jónsson (c. 1515 - 1587)*

Þú gafst mér akurinn þinn  
Þér gef ég aftur minn  
Ást þína á ég ríka  
Eigðu mitt hjarta líka

Lofið Guð *(continued)*

Ég gefi og allan þér  
Á meðan ég tóri hér  
Ávöxtinn yðju minnar  
Í garði kristinnar þinnar.

You gave me your field  
To you I give mine back.  
Of your love I have aplenty  
so please accept my heart.

I would give you everything  
while I'm alive, your praise to sing  
from the road my religion yields  
to the roots of my Christian fields

*Séra Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674)*

## Schola Cantorum Reykjavík

### Soprano

Birna Helgadóttir  
Elfa Martét Ingvadóttir\*  
Halldóra Viðarsdóttir  
Margrét Sigurðardóttir\*  
Særún Harðardóttir

### Alto

Auður Guðjohnsen  
Guðrún Edda Gunnarsdóttir\*  
Hildigunnur Einarsdóttir  
Jóhanna Ósk Valsdóttir

Also singing in *Rura, rura barni & Sónhenda*:

Sólveig Samúelsdóttir\* (alto), Örn Arnarson (tenor) and Matti Kallio (bass).

*Myrtuskógur:*

### Soprano

Ásdís Kristmundsdóttir  
Lára Bryndís Eggertsdóttir  
Margrét Sigurðardóttir  
Þórunn Vala Valdimarsdóttir.

### Alto

Guðrún Edda Gunnarsdóttir,  
Guðrún Finnbjarnardóttir,  
Jóhanna Ósk Valsdóttir,  
Sólveig Samúelsdóttir.

\*Octet in *Niunda stund*

### Tenor

Björn Thorarensen  
Helgi Steinar Helgason\*  
Halldór Hauksson  
Skarpéðinn Þór Hjartarson\*

### Bass

Benedikt Ingólfsson\*  
Hafsteinn Þórólfsson\*  
Hreiðar Ingi Þorsteinsson  
Egill Gunnarsson

### Tenor

Björn Thorarensen  
Guðmundur Vignir Karlsson  
Þorbjörn Sigurðsson  
Örn Arnarson.

### Bass

Alex Ashworth  
Benedikt Ingólfsson  
Hjálmar P. Pétursson  
Stefán Sigurjónsson.

## Schola Cantorum Reykjavík

The Schola Cantorum Reykjavík was founded by the conductor and cantor at Reykjavík's Hallgrímskirkja, Hörður Áskelsson, in 1996.

With a constantly growing reputation both at home and abroad the choir regularly performs a wide repertoire, ranging from Renaissance through to contemporary music, and regularly appears in the Festival of Sacred Arts at the Hallgrímskirkja.

Internationally the Schola Cantorum has performed in Norway, Finland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and in France, where the choir won top prize in the prestigious Picardy International Choir Competition in 1998.

A year later the Schola Cantorum made its debut recording, *Principium*, an album of Renaissance works and two years later they recorded a disc of contemporary Icelandic music, *Audi Creator Coeli*.

In their most recent release, *Foldarskart* (Earths bright gems), Schola Cantorum sings many of Iceland's most beloved songs, including arrangement of old folk songs.

Schola Cantorum has also participated in recordings of choral orchestral works by the Icelandic composer Jón Leifs (1899–1968)

with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, (issued on the Swedish label, BIS) as well as recording and performing with artists as Björk, Sigur Rós and the Swedish experimental band Wildbirds & Peacedrums.

The Schola was appointed the City of Reykjavík Official Music Group in 2006 and was also nominated for the 2007 Nordic Music Prize.

[www.scholacantorum.is](http://www.scholacantorum.is)

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Recorded in the Hallgrímskirkja, Reykjavík, Iceland during  
February 2008 (*Myrtuskógur*), February 2011 and March 2012.

Producer, & Engineer: Sveinn Kjartansson  
Executive Producer: Adam Binks  
Recorded at 24-bit / 96kHz resolution  
Cover painting: Hafliði Hallgrímsson

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