



THE GROTESQUE & THE SUBLIME

DANÍEL BJARNASON
ICELAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



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1-7. FEAST

I. a voluptuous scene that masquerade	4:35
II. the presence of a masked figure	4:14
III. the brazen lungs of the clock	2:19
IV. dance of the mummer	3:24
V. the revelation	3:16
VI. one by one dropped the revellers (<i>danse macabre</i>)	6:07
VII. dominion over all (<i>skeleton procession</i>)	1:36

8. Fragile Hope 14:17

In memory of Jóhann Jóhannsson

9-11. Inferno

1. The Bells	13:53
2. A Passage	6:08
3. Dark Shores	10:53

Total Time: 70:48





Daníel Bjarnason

Composer, Conductor

Daniel Bjarnason is one of Iceland's foremost musical voices today, in demand as a conductor, composer and programmer. He is Artist in Collaboration with The Iceland Symphony Orchestra, an appointment that follows his tenures as Principal Guest Conductor and Artist in Residence. 2025 saw the world premieres of two major works - a song cycle *Hands on Me*, premiered by the LA Philharmonic, and Bjarnason's first symphony-length work, *I Want To Be Alive - Trilogy for Orchestra*, premiered by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under Gustavo Gimeno. The latter is already scheduled to be performed by Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Iceland Symphony Orchestra, and Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. Equally in demand as a conductor, Bjarnason has been invited by orchestras including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gothenburg Symphony, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Toronto Symphony, Detroit Symphony, and Tokyo Symphony orchestras.

harrisonparrott.com/artists/daniel-bjarnason

Daníel Bjarnason is a hub-like figure in the group of composers who could be said to constitute a First Icelandic School. But he also stands slightly apart from his peers. As the nation's foremost conductor, he has premiered and recorded works by its central protagonists including Jóhann Jóhannsson, Anna Thorvaldsdóttir, María Huld Markan Sigfúsdóttir and others (notably on the Sono Luminus series *Emergence, Recurrence and Occurrence*). But Bjarnason's own music has long sprawled beyond the borders of the school's distinct aesthetic and incorporated non-abstract forms such as opera, dance and film scores.

While some Icelandic orchestral music enacts a gradual transformation on a vaporous orchestra, akin to the shifting shape and colour of a North Atlantic cloud, Bjarnason's formative orchestral works often cleave to a solid, defined musical object which might be distorted or obscured before emerging again intact. His music has never shied away from the slow, drone-lagged music of Icelandic archetype but it has also used more varied tempi and more urgent rhythmic profiles. It has also deployed different time scales in parallel – notably in works such as *Emergence* and *From Space I Saw the Earth*, in which planes of music operating at different speeds momentarily sync. This brings to his music a sense of what the late Danish composer Per Nørgård described as 'the timeless forces of existence – nature in the broadest sense.'

Those works had their roots in breakthrough concertos for cello and piano, *Bow to String* and *Processions*, both of which thrive on the process of expanding strong, fertile material by zooming deep in or stretching wide out – a more thematic, less spectral approach than that of Icelandic fashion but one that still sees Bjarnason reveling in the properties of sound itself.

The composer's storytelling instincts lie behind the satisfying dramatic through-line that can be sensed in many of his scores and which is often realized by the carrying of one musical idea through to an end point. A good example comes in *FEAST*, a second concerto for piano written for the dedicatee of the first, the Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson. *FEAST* is thread almost entirely from a simple rising motif heard at its opening. New here is an existing,

external narrative – Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Masque of the Red Death*.

Bjarnason had been keen to write a piece reflecting the collective experience of the Covid-19 pandemic but not confined to its particular historical and cultural coordinates. He was considering an artistic response to plagues and suffering – and his own fascination with the *memento mori* and the tradition of the Dance of Death – when he chanced upon Poe's work. Two of the writer's images made a particular impression: the first was that of the impenetrable gates, behind which Prince Prospero and his revelers sequestered themselves from the horrors beyond, hoping to indulge in blissful ignorance. The next was the vast pendulum clock whose inexorable chimes mark off our allotted time on earth – a feature particularly ripe for Bjarnason's interest in processional musical progress.

The resulting concerto is the most programmatic of Bjarnason's orchestral works. 'I try to inhabit Poe's world of the fantastical, the grotesque, and the sublime,' the composer writes in his own programme note, suggesting the work 'stands as a *memento mori*, a solemn reminder of death's inescapable embrace.' But the traditions to which the piece refers are lined with celebration, as in the musical form of the Totentanz. Bjarnason also describes his concerto as 'a monument to life's fleeting beauty.' Its title, he writes, 'serves as a reminder to savour life's banquet with fervor and abandon while we still can.'

The score follows the trajectory of Poe's story, opening with a dense and decadent party punctured by its own 'reverie' for solo piano. A passage of luminous serenity at the end of the movement prefaces the arrival of the masked figure of the second movement, the solo piano slowing the upward-treading motif that had underpinned the frenetic party. The ominous sound of bells in the third movement stills the orchestra before the mummer's dance, the 'revelation' that the figure is in fact death (in which the upward-treading motif becomes lyrically expansive) and a 'danse macabre' in which the motif is turned on its head by the soloist but appears as a cantus firmus in the strings. After a skeletal procession, the concerto dissolves into dust.



The continuous, almost passacaglia-like presence of the upward-pining motif gives the piece the feeling of a journey from birth-to-death, reflecting Bjarnason's observations on life. The composer also points to the weight of influence any pianist feels writing for the instrument. 'There are so many people looking over your shoulder,' he says. 'I tried to embrace that and incorporate it into my language instead of resisting it. I let it become a conversation with what's already in my mind and in my body and in my spirit, as a musician.' *FEAST* was first performed by Ólafsson with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Walt Disney Concert Hall under Esa-Pekka Salonen on 18 February 2022.

The thread running through *Inferno* is that of its solo percussion instruments – fewer in number than might normally be found in a contemporary percussion concerto. 'I wanted the soloist to be a little more grounded,' says Bjarnason. But the primary objective was sonic: a focus on particular sound worlds, rather than a mad dash between many instruments.

Those instruments were chosen because they exist in the collection of Martin Grubinger, the Austrian percussionist who pursued Bjarnason to write the piece. They encompass the comparatively dark-hued lineup of drum kit, wood blocks, txalaparta, marimba, Japanese taiko drums, kick drum and timpani (the three orchestral percussionists play a far wider range of instruments). *Inferno* was first performed by Grubinger and the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra under Tomas Djupsjöbacka on 2 November 2022 at the Musiikkitalo in Helsinki. The piece was revised in 2024.

The concerto's title refers to Dante's signature work and a journey to the underworld, though there is no express narrative here as in *FEAST*. Bjarnason does, however, point to the symbolism of the journey from tuned marimba to the txalaparta – a traditional Basque instrument comprising a set of wooden planks, with no fundamental pitch but a rich overtone spectrum. 'You can think of it metaphorically because the soloist starts out with the marimba [in the first movement, 'The Bells'] and goes to the timpani where she has oarsmen from the orchestra join her, which is like the journey to the underworld [two orchestral percussionists draw the second movement, 'The Passage', into the

third, 'Dark Shores', on supplementary timpani]. She returns to the same place, almost almost only playing the txalaparta which has no pitch compared to the marimba. It's like she's in a ghost-world, trying to find the colours of life, but voiceless.'

Inferno tends not to pit dynamic, rhythmic percussion against a fundamentally harmonic, horizontal-sounding orchestra. Rather, it uses rhythmic definition to lubricate other musical processes including that sense of harmonic progress which is a Bjarnason hallmark (partly assembled from the slippery chorale the horns struggle to grasp early in the opening movement). All manner of lyrical threads, dances, harmonic waves and walking bass-lines pass from soloist to orchestra and back, sometimes via the conduit of the orchestral percussionists whose joining of the soloist on timpani throw the work's constant sense of cumulative momentum into focus. Another Totentanz takes root in the final movement before the fragments of the chorale come together in the distance, offering the soloist a portal or a glimpse, perhaps, into another existence.

The death of Icelandic composer Jóhan Jóhannsson in 2018 hit Iceland's tight-knit musical community hard. 'He was someone who was incredibly brave in his approach and had such a strong will and strong voice,' says Bjarnason of his late colleague. 'He had an extraordinary gift for navigating different musical worlds, seamlessly inhabiting various forms while remaining unmistakably himself.'

With the band Sigur Rós and others, Jóhannsson's music would prove a vital reference point for the First Icelandic School's own signature sound – that post-minimalist music of gradual progress and vaporous changeability that would find such a natural home in the acoustic symphony orchestra. *Fragile Hope* is Bjarnason's tribute to his former colleague and an ode to that period in Iceland's musical history when a distinct national aesthetic was emerging – to the extent, perhaps, that those closest to it probably couldn't grasp its prevalence. He describes his score as 'a reflection on the beauty [Jóhannsson] brought to the world, through both light and shadow.' *Fragile Hope* was commissioned by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, which premiered it under Christian Karlsen on 21 February 2024 at the Gothenburg Concert Hall.

The commission was for a work reflecting on Icelandic nature, to which that whole aesthetic is inevitably and logically linked. The work opens with the low growling strings, percussion noises, thwacks, judders and microtonal pitch bending that might signal a classic slow-moving Icelandic sound tapestry. But the music emerges as more wide-ranging than that, traversing varied landscapes and events. Bjarnason fingerprints include the orchestra feeling its way to harmonic consensus and falling into the slipstream of fluttering repeated notes. At its peak, from around 10'20 on this recording, comes a direct melodic reference to 'Odi et Amo' from Jóhannsson's music for the Icelandic play *Englabörn*, which would become the composer's breakthrough album in 2002.

Andrew Mellor, 2025

Andrew Mellor is author of *The Northern Silence: Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture* (Yale University Press, 2022)







ICELAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

The Iceland Symphony Orchestra is Iceland's national orchestra and a cornerstone of the country's cultural landscape.

The orchestra's home is the award-winning Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavík. Widely praised for its performances and recordings, the orchestra presents a full season of subscription series each year, school and family concerts, and concerts devoted to new music.

Eva Ollikainen is the Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the orchestra, position previously held by distinguished conductors including Osmo Vänskä, Petri Sakari, Jean-Pierre Jacquillat, Ilan Volkov and Yan Pascal Tortelier. Anna Thorvaldsdóttir, composer, and Daníel Bjarnason, composer and conductor, are Artists in Association with the orchestra.

Barbara Hannigan will assume the role of Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra beginning with the 2026/27 season.

The Iceland Symphony Orchestra offers a variety of programs, spanning everything from well-known classics to world premiere performances of new works by Icelandic and international composers. A commitment to performing new Icelandic music has been widely praised and recordings by Deutsche Grammophon, BIS, Chandos, Naxos and Sono Luminus include accolades such as MIDEM-awards and Grammy Award nominations for Best Orchestral Performance.

The majority of the orchestra's concerts are broadcast live on radio by the National Broadcasting Service and selected concerts are televised on national TV. The Iceland Symphony Orchestra has appeared widely throughout Europe and beyond, including performances at the BBC Proms, the Wiener Musikverein, New York's Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center.

en.sinfonia.is



VIVI VASSILEVA

Described as 'an artist who thrills her audience, exploring and shifting the limits of the percussive world', Vivi Vassileva is being celebrated not only for her technical perfection, but her astonishing virtuosity, combining agility and power in her performance, leading a new generation of percussionists in their pursuit to showcase percussion as the instrument of the 21st century. Recent highlights include the premiere of the percussion concerto *A Savage Beat* by Sauli Zinovjev with Beethoven Orchestra Bonn, concerts with Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Vienna Symphony and Residentie Orchestra, a tour with Luxembourg Philharmonic, and recordings of two highly renowned percussion concertos, Daniel Bjarnason's *Inferno* with the Iceland Philharmonic Orchestra, and Gregor Mayrhofer's *Recycling Concerto* with the SWR Symphony Orchestra. Since 2023/24, she has been leading the Percussive Planet series at the Wiener Konzerthaus, which she took over from her former teacher Martin Grubinger. Vivi Vassileva is passionate about commissioning new works to expand the percussion repertoire, including works by Avner Dorman, Bushra El-Turk, Gregor Mayrhofer and Sauli Zinovjev. Renowned for her innovative programming style, Vivi Vassileva offers new, accessible and engaging ways for audiences to connect with percussion, such as the *Recycling Concerto* featuring instruments made from recycled materials, blending musical invention with environmental consciousness.



FRANK DUPREE

Frank Dupree, winner of the International Classical Music Award and the Opus Klassik, stands as one of the most versatile pianists and conductors of the new generation. Known for his infectious energy and unbridled enthusiasm, Dupree captivates audiences not only as a soloist, sharing the stage with renowned orchestras worldwide, but also as a play/direct artist, conductor, and the leader of his own jazz ensemble, the Frank Dupree Trio. Dupree's recordings of Nikolai Kapustin's piano concertos have attracted much international attention (New York Times: "One of the most entertaining and put-on-repeat recordings [of the] year"). From 2023, Frank Dupree has been the Artistic Partner of the Württembergisches Kammerorchester Heilbronn, performing several projects each season as both conductor and soloist. Recent highlights are his solo debut with London Symphony Orchestra / Sir Antonio Pappano, hr-Sinfonieorchester / Patrick Hahn, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra / Santtu Matias Rouvali, Philharmonia Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia, NDR Radiophilharmonie, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège and Bern Symphony Orchestra, amongst others. In chamber music, he performed at New York Lincoln Center, Royal Albert Hall, Wigmore Hall, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Philharmonie de Paris, Konzerthaus Berlin, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, Alte Oper Frankfurt, Tonhalle Zürich, Konzerthaus Wien, Brucknerhaus Linz and Concertgebouw Amsterdam.





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17 January 2025 (Inferno) – Eldborg Hall

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21 January 2025 (Feast) – Eldborg Hall

22 January 2025 (Feast) – Eldborg Hall

11 November 2025 (Harp overdubbing) – Norðurljós Hall

12 November 2025 (Harp overdubbing) – Norðurljós Hall

Conductor: Daniel Bjarnason

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