

GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

THE SOUNDS OF ICELAND

Andrew Mellor listens to cinematic and hauntingly evocative music from a nation with an emerging and distinctive national style



Effortlessly perfect scoring: DG has issued two film scores by the late Jóhann Jóhannsson

The late **Jóhann Jóhannsson** (1969–2018) has certainly not been forgotten at Deutsche Grammophon HQ. The label will soon release the Icelandic composer's *Drone Mass* in a new recording masterminded by Paul Hillier. Here it sustains the appetite with two very different film scores. The release of *Personal Effects* could be considered opportunistic were its music not so cleansing and revealing. David Hollander's 2008 tale of love and loss disappeared without much of a trace but the way he talks about Jóhannsson in the booklet suggests he approached it without compromise (particularly the music).

Listening in alphabetical order (by accident), I sensed the gradual emergence of the distinctive chord progression that surely formed the picture's emotional

undertow. That harmonic sequence could have been lifted straight from Philip Glass but wherever the pre-Golden Globe-winning Jóhannsson is learning or borrowing from colleagues – Arvo Pärt is another presence here – the new context he creates for material and/or device lets him off the hook. It's not so much about the apparently effortlessly perfect scoring as the distinctive placement of the sounds in white space that would have let the movie breathe; 'Annie's Death', with its simple upward scales, is an example.

Rarely if ever is Jóhannsson cheap – some achievement for an ambient composer – though the cue 'Wrestling' veers close, going all Coldplay (at least Jóhannsson banishes the drum kit to another room). By the time of *Last and First Men* the composer was sure enough of his objectives to stick to his guns: the

score, made with Yair Elazar Glotman, is a testament to the composer's Brucknerian rigour when it came to giving the form the space it needs to unfold.

Then again, Jóhannsson could call the shots, as he commissioned and cut the film for its first outing at the Manchester International Festival in 2017. Seven years earlier he had come across photos of brutalist war memorials from the former Yugoslavia, structures resembling 'prehistoric, Mayan and Sumerian art'. *Last and First Men* is a musical, cinematic and narrative response – a combination of prose by the science-fiction writer Olaf Stapledon (read by Tilda Swinton) and the composer's own film and score. DG offers both here, the Budapest Art Orchestra, with guest vocalists and instrumentalists, giving us the score.

It is music from the abyss: the dark, slow slab of sound that conforms to current Icelandic archetype but just as subtle as *Personal Effects* and just as judiciously scored and mixed (as at the introduction of human voices in 'The Navigators'). It is interesting from a spectralist perspective (particularly in 'Childhood/Land of the Young') but also from a basic harmonic one – how Jóhannsson traces a harmony-inducing line against a fixed note.

No label is serving Icelandic music better right now than Sono Luminus. The second disc in its essential series with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra featured *Quake* (3/20), a striking cello concerto by **Páll Ragnar Pálsson** (his violin concerto *Nostalgia* was released on Smekkleysa in 2018) and the label follows up here with a complete disc of his chamber music, much of it with voice, spoken or sung by the composer's Estonian wife Tui Hirv. The organic tendencies in Pálsson's music are arguably better suited to larger ensembles – or at least better appreciated in them – but you sense his releasing of one sound from the timbre and colour of another best in *Midsummer Night* and *Wheel Crosses Under Moss*.

The latter curls itself serpent-like around material from an Estonian hymn and carries a sensuality that grates interestingly with an otherwise Finno-Ugric straight back. Pálsson's vocal lines float aloof, not unlike Anders Hillborg's, and Hirv's voice conveys them magically, though words are sometimes stretched beyond the point of legibility. The sextet *Lucidity* lives up to its name but can, like the title-track, *Atonement*, feel too long for its material. The Caput Ensemble play with delicacy.

Lucidity begins with an *echt* Icelandic gesture: a snap-and-judder followed by a bounce, which is echoed in *_a_at_na*, the final track on the same label's portrait of composer **Halldór Smárason**. This piece judders and creaks like so much contemporary Icelandic music – echoes of a nation formed by a tectonic tug of war between Europe and America. Here, it tracks the composer's struggles with anxiety.

Despite the odd surface cliché, the music on this disc anchored by the Siggi Quartet emerges as highly focused, inspiringly conceived and cunningly written. *Stop Breathing* for ensemble goes far beyond the obfuscating breath noises of its opening to describe the slow formation of a harmonic framework that then disintegrates. Similarly, *Skúlpúr 1* for guitar describes an ice sculptor working at Edward Scissorhands-like speed as his material melts, with electronics gracefully but fleetingly conjuring up the finished work. *Blakta* for string quartet is a description of a fluttering flag that does nothing that might have been obvious; it's all about what happens at the edges of the sustained notes, as vibrato of differing densities describes the behaviour of the fabric's edges in winds neither fierce nor zephyr-like.

Best of all is Smárason's string quartet *Stara*, shaped by the loss of eyesight experienced by his mother as it stares into space. The music appears to be sucked into a tunnel vision, a single violin emphasising the point at one stage via an extended upward glissando. It's slow, it plots a long line, and if that weren't Icelandic enough for you it contains more of those creaking/tapping gestures heard in *_a_at_na* that are also features of music by Thorvaldsdottir, Bjarnason, Vaka and even Jón Leifs. **G**

THE RECORDINGS



Jóhannsson Personal Effects
City of Prague PO / Němcová
DG (P) (CD) 483 8386



Jóhannsson Last and First Men
Various artists
DG (P) (CD + Blu-ray) 483 7410



Pálsson Atonement
Caput Ens Sono Luminus
(P) (CD + Blu-ray) DSL92241



Smárason Stara
Various artists Sono Luminus
(P) (CD + Blu-ray) DSL92242

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