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CD REVIEW CDS CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL FILE UNDER?

2 Sono Luminus CDs

By [Christian Carey](#)🕒 JUL 15, 2020 📌 [CD review, File Under ? blog, Sono Luminus](#)

Páll Ragnar Pálsson

[Atonement](#)

CAPUT Ensemble, conducted by Guðni Franzson, Tui Hirv, Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir

Sono Luminus CD/Blu-ray (2020)

Halldór Smáráson

Stara

Siggi String Quartet, Emilía Rós Sigfúsdóttir, Geirprúður Ása Guðjónsdóttir, Helga Björg Arnardóttir, Tinna Thorsteinsdóttir, Gulli Björnsson

Sono Luminus CD/Blu-ray (2020)

In recent years, the prominence of Icelandic composers on the international stage has grown considerably, many of them championed by the Sono Luminus label. New discs on the imprint are portraits of two more composers whose careers are in ascent: Páll Ragnar Pálsson (b. 1977) and Halldór Smáráson (b. 1989). They are abetted by some of Iceland's finest chamber musicians, the Siggi String Quartet and CAPUT Ensemble.

This is Pálsson's second solo CD, consisting of works written from 2011 to 2018. He has a varied background. In his twenties he was a rock musician and then took an extended sojourn for studies in Estonia. *Atonement* encompasses those experiences and is also about the composer's return to Iceland after his time abroad. Pálsson says that the importance of place is a significant touchstone for his approach to composing.

Relationships also play a pivotal role in his work. The abundantly talented soprano Tui Hirv is Pálsson's spouse. She features prominently in several pieces, singing minute shadings and sustained high passages with tremendous dynamic control and expressivity in the title work. On *Stalker's Monologue*, singing a text

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adapted from the Tarkovsky film, Hirv demonstrates more vocal steel and the accompaniment takes on a bleary-eyed cast. *Midsummer's Night* features recited text instead of singing, with a poem by Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir.

The CAPUT Ensemble acquits themselves admirably as well. *Lucidity* features the ensemble crafting microtonal shadings and exaggerated trills, the latter sometimes doubled in strings and winds to kaleidoscopic effect and punctuated by swells of percussion. The extended ensemble passages on *Wheel Crosses Under Moss* are an excellent response to the keening part sung by Hirv.

Smárason's debut solo CD features the Soggi String Quartet. The title work is a good example of the composer's aesthetic. Spacious use of silence is complemented by long sustained notes that generally have an "edge to them," in terms of dissonance or playing technique. The quartet are dispatched on a similar errand on the piece *Draw and Play*, but the gestures between the rests are more animated. *Blakta*, also for strings, features gentle pizzicato against harmonics and upper register pileups of verticals.

A guitar and electronics piece, *Skúlptúr 1*, requires the performer, Gulli Björnsson, to make his way through a challenging hop scotch of techniques in a specified time frame in order to avoid an alarm from the electronics part. Happily he makes it on the recording.

The best piece on *Stara* is also the one for the largest ensemble, *Stop Breathing*. The Soggi Quartet is augmented with bass flute, clarinet, and piano. Breathy whorls and wind glissandos are set against harmonic ostinato passages as well as aggressive squalls of sound.

A number of current composers are concerned with silence and pianissimo stretches. On *Stara*, Smárason distinguishes himself by filling in the silence with music of an uneasy demeanor from which one receives little respite or release. His work is unerringly paced and delicately unnerving. Both *Atonement* and *Stara* contain excellent performances of provoking works: recommended.

-Christian Carey



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By **[Christian Carey](#)**

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