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**Recordings of the  
Month**

April

### Vernacular

**Páll Ragnar PÁLSSON (b 1977)**

*Afterquake* (2018) [14:09]

**Thuridur JÓNSDÓTTIR (b 1967)**

*48 Images of the Moon* (2017) [15:03]

**Halldór SMÁRASON (b 1989)**

*O* (2017) [11:34]

**Hafliði HALLGRÍMSSON (b 1941)**

*Solitaire, Op. 1* (1969, rev 1991) [17:21]

Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir (cello)

Magnús Bergsson (tape: Jónsdóttir)

rec. 2018, Sono Luminus Studios, Boyce, USA

**SONO LUMINUS DSL92229** [58:07]

There was a time when instrumental soloists made records and simply listed the names of the pieces on the sleeve. Nowadays the artists, or their labels market a concept. Artist portraits thus have one-word titles which rarely have pertinence to either artist or repertoire. So it's good to find an exception in the shape of Icelandic cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir's debut solo disc. In her incisive introduction, she alludes to her sensitivity to aspects of musical sound *per se* and links it to her experience of the distinctive flavours of her ancient native language. She suggests there is an overlap between words and music in terms of their shared ability to happen on new sounds and modes of communication that are borne of old means. Hence 'Vernacular'. The composers of the four items for solo cello (one with tape) on this Sono Luminus disc at times stretch the technical capabilities of the instrument to the limit, and in so doing seek new expressive potential.

Ms Thorsteinsdóttir performed Páll Ragnar Pálsson's recent cello concerto *Quake* in both the UK and USA. *Afterquake* for solo cello is a kind of sequel. A quiet, unassuming opening which hints at microtonal inflections develops into a withering, creepy ascending *glissando*. Across a duration of fourteen minutes, *Afterquake* covers an expansive terrain, with the cello producing sounds of tenderness and purity, which are in turn contradicted by textures which feel rough, agitated and tentative. Tiny individual episodes are separated by loud silences. Little *ostinati* threaten to lead somewhere but tail off, lost. It is hard to envisage Pálsson's scoring of some of the passages in the cello's highest register, so fragile do they sound – at times they approach inaudibility. If the cello is often likened to the human voice, here it doesn't just speak and sing, it growls, shakes, rustles, boils and exhales. These are the rumblings and breathings of a strange planet and its even weirder inhabitants. Visiting seabirds drop in briefly at 13:00. It's a piece rich in subtle incident, rivetingly performed. It's also very difficult to imagine it being composed by someone who's not Icelandic.

In *48 Images of the Moon*, Thuridur Jónsdóttir explores this kind of concept more forensically by incorporating a field recording of nocturnal activity at Ónundarfjörður fjord (in the remote north-west corner of Iceland), so the soloist literally interacts with nature sounds recorded in real time. It is impressive that the cello seems to fit so naturally and inevitably into this sonic backcloth, to the point that the player seems ensconced in a secret dialogue with the night. Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir insists that the cello in this piece 'quite literally breathes' and listening to it one can only concur. Ms Jónsdóttir clearly has a sensitivity to texture and nuance that at times seems exclusive to composers from the northernmost extremities of Europe – one can detect it also, for example in much of Kaija Saariaho's string music. The dynamic markings in *48 Images of the Moon* only seem to exceed *mp* in the last five minutes of the work. One cannot help but feel that the importance of the message conveyed by the cello in this strange music is in inverse proportion to the quietness of its production. It certainly focuses one's listening.

Living in a largely industrialised area of north-western England, one completely takes for granted the provision of artificial light and heat during the extended darkness of the winter months. Of course this is not the case in various parts of the world, many of which remain inaccessible and defiant in the face of technology. In her introduction, Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir makes the point that in Iceland, while it is ahead of the game technologically in many areas of life, some remote parts of the country still make full use of the old ways. The humble candle remains an important giver of light and heat in these places, and Halldór Smáráson's fascinating three-movement work 'O' explores the function and meaning of the candle. The first movement *Ljós* (Light) seems to absorb the sounds of human (presumably the soloist's) breathing and blowing into its weave. The sounds are muted to start with, gradually becoming starker and brighter, the vocal 'noises' constituting an implied counterpoint for the cello line, such as it is, before an abrupt breath removes the flame. *Minni* (Memory) follows, its title a reference to the light in the darkness, to what we might see when the candle is extinguished, or when we close our eyes. This is characterised by silence, solitary pizzicato notes, scrapings, sounds which denote breathing, gestures which often occur in tandem. A mournful hint of suppressed melody features in its latter stages. The sound of a match striking triggers an extraordinary percussive sequence before the flame is once more blown out. The concluding *Slokkna* ('quenched', or more pertinently here 'Extinguished') requires the cellist to play a repeated note as warmly and expressively as possible (the passage in the work which most resembles a conventional 'romantic' cello sound), before a sequence of vocal and played pyrotechnics evokes the smoke trail of the



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Feinberg Piano Sonatas



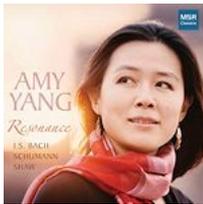
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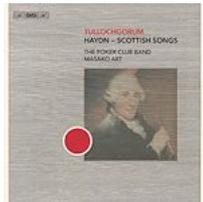
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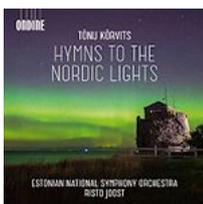
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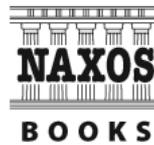


extinguished candle. *O* is very fragmentary and stop-start, but Ms Thorsteinsdóttir's characterful, absorbing playing is captivating.

The final piece on the disc is the oldest, and was composed by Hafliði Hallgrímsson, arguably Iceland's most famous composer from the previous generation (certainly in Britain). His five movement *Solitaire* from 1969 was his official 'opus 1'. Its five movements could be said to constitute a primer of the technical and expressive possibilities available to a cellist, and although *Solitaire* was revisited and revised in 1991, compared to the other works on this disc, it seems a little 'old school', but it's none the worse for that. So the opening *Oration* draws out expressive, controlled melody from a *pizzicato* motif. This is unquestionably a sound that Witold Lutoslawski, for example, might recognise. *Oration* projects a lyrical warmth that is also, perhaps more overtly present in the subsequent strummed *Serenade*, its direction at times recalling the Britten's Cello Suites. The long central *Nocturne* burns with a quiet, sustained intensity, and concludes with an eerie *tremolando* passage triggering the reiteration of its opening. The following short *Dirge* is built over a deep pedal/drone, its keening song reminiscent of a lamenting human voice. In marked contrast is a concluding *Jig* which, while noticeably lighter on its feet than the four preceding movements, can barely be said to radiate Celtic, Nordic or even Icelandic joy.

The current recording world seems densely populated with charismatic, virtuosic, characterful and adventurous young cellists, but on the basis of this questing and exploratory disc Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir can hold her head up high among the best of them. And given the apparent abundance of fine Icelandic composers and their productivity, it seems unlikely that she'll run out of fresh, original repertoire any time soon. Her debut continues Sono Luminus's evangelical espousal of new Icelandic music, while it goes without saying that the sound produced for her by this Audiophile label is beyond outstanding. While this is patently a disc for Icelandophiles or those interested specifically in new solo cello music, there is much for the contemporary music lover outside these niche groups to enjoy here.

**Richard Hanlon**



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Liszt Sonata

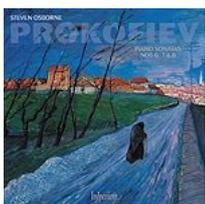
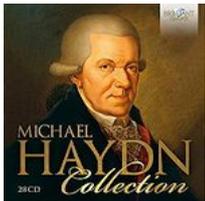


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