

## Now the Sun Sinks in the Sea: The Sacred Works of Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson

By Kristín Jónína Taylor\*

*Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson's contributions to Icelandic music were manifold, encompassing teaching, composition, arts administration, music criticism, radio program hosting, solo and chamber performance, conducting, and countless other accomplishments. He remains the most prolific of all Icelandic composers with over 350 compositions. Those works for which Þorkell is best known are his exquisite sacred works, of which there are at least fifty. For that reason, this paper will focus on Þorkell's sacred works and the diversity of approaches he utilized. Þorkell had familial connections with the Iceland Lutheran Church. A number of his compositions were settings of his father's poetry, including the hymn *Nú hverfur sól í haf*. The most notable and famous of his hymns is *Heyr, himna smiður*, a setting of a 13<sup>th</sup> century hymn text by Kolbeinn Tumason. Other prominent works include several choral settings of Psalms of David, a *Missa Brevis*, and the oratorio *Immanúel*, which was based on text by Þorkell's brother Bishop Karl Sigurbjörnsson. The sacred works Þorkell wrote are not restricted to choral compositions, as there are several instrumental works (including *Blessed Be the Feet of the Peacemaker* for organ pedals).*

### Introduction

After centuries of the widespread worship of the ancient Viking gods (*Ásatrú*) in Iceland, Christianity formally took hold in Iceland in 1000 A.D. The country then made the transition from Catholicism to Lutheranism in the years 1530-50. Since 1874, the official state religion of Iceland has been the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Church, headed by a bishop located in Reykjavík. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Iceland is currently "organized into 266 congregations all around the country, serving under one bishop."<sup>1</sup> The constitution of 1874 (and also in the constitution of the Republic of Iceland in 1944) guarantees religious freedom, but in Article 62 of the constitution, it specifies that the "Evangelical Lutheran Church is a national church and as such it is protected and supported by the State." At this time, 70% of the population is a member of the church.<sup>2</sup>

Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson<sup>3</sup> (1938-2013) was one of the most renowned Icelandic composers of the 20th century. His contributions to Icelandic society are manifold, whether it was in his compositional contributions, his devoted

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\*Assistant Professor of Piano, University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA.

1. Þjóðkirkjan, <https://kirkjan.is/default.aspx?pageid=be2c918d-c248-11e8-941f-005056bc0bdb>. [Accessed 7 June 2020.]

2. Ibid.

3. The Icelandic Þ ("thorn") will be used in this article for Þorkell instead of "Thorkell."

involvement in Icelandic concert life, his profound career as a teacher and mentor, or the vital callings he had to key administrative duties in Icelandic arts organizations. Approximately a quarter of his prolific compositional output of over 350 works are either sacred/liturgical or based on religious poetry. A sampling of Þorkell's music on sacred topics reflects a diversity of approaches that are sometimes rooted in medieval practices, and other times, are highly experimental and forward-looking.

### Biographical Background

Þorkell was born to Sigurbjörn Einarsson (a Lutheran minister, religious historian, and poet) and Magnea Þorkelsdóttir (a homemaker exceptionally gifted in embroidery and needlework, including Icelandic national costumes). The family, as a whole, has played a remarkable role in Icelandic religious, educational, and musical life. His father, Sigurbjörn, became a much beloved Bishop of Iceland, and nearly all of Þorkell's brothers became Lutheran ministers. His brother, Karl Sigurbjörnsson, also became Bishop of Iceland. Þorkell's music is frequently performed in Iceland and throughout the world. The Hamrahlíð Choir (Hamrahlíðakórinn), for example, includes at least one piece by Þorkell in every season's program.<sup>4</sup> The result is that awareness of his compositions and his contribution to Icelandic music culture is steadily increasing.

Þorkell began his studies at the Tónlistarskólinn í Reykjavík (now the Reykjavík College of Music), where he studied violin, piano with Wilhelm Lanzky-Otto and Árni Kristjánsson, organ with Páll Ísólfsson, music theory with Róbert A. Ottóson, and music history with Victor Urbancic. He then received a Fulbright grant to study at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, earning his Bachelor of Arts degree. He went on to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to study composition with Kenneth Gaburo and electronic music with Lejaren A. Hiller. During his graduate studies, he traveled to Nice, France for the International Academy of Music, where he listened in on Alexander Tcherepnin's compositions classes and studied orchestral conducting. After obtaining his Master's in Music, he traveled to Darmstadt in 1962 and for a summer course which included lectures by Stockhausen, Ligeti, Boulez, and Maderna.

Like many other Icelandic composers and musicians, he returned to Iceland after his summer in Darmstadt and became heavily involved in Icelandic musical culture. During the following decades, he was a pianist (mostly in a collaborative role), composer, teacher, conductor, administrator, newspaper music critic, and radio personality. He began by teaching at Barnamúsíkskóli Reykjavíkur (the

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4. Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, *Þorkell: Kórverk eftir Þorkel Sigurbjörnsson*, CD Recording (Reykjavík: Smekkleysa, 2008), 2.

Children's Music School, now Tónmenntaskólinn í Reykjavíkur) and writing several children's operas for them. He also taught piano, music theory, and music history for many years at Tónlistarskólinn í Reykjavík and is credited with helping establish the Department of Music Theory and Composition. In fact, he taught many of the present-day generation of Icelandic composers, including Snorri Sigfús Birgisson and Karólína Eiríksdóttir. More recently, he taught at the Iceland Academy of the Arts. He served as chairman of the avant-garde music group Musica Nova, the Reykjavík Arts Festival, the Icelandic Musician's Association, and the Union of Icelandic Artists. Additionally, he was President of the Society of Icelandic Composers, secretary of the Nordic Music Committee (NOMUS), and he headed the Icelandic Music Information Centre for many years. Moreover, Þorkell hosted a radio program on Ríkisútvarpið (Iceland National Broadcast Service) for 20 years, in which he introduced Icelandic society to modern music. Þorkell received an honorary doctorate from Hamline University and is a member of the Royal Swedish Music Academy. In addition to a voluminous contribution to the choral repertoire, Þorkell's compositions include many chamber works, children's operas, smaller symphonic works, an oratorio, and a chamber opera.<sup>5</sup>

Not only is Þorkell the most prolific composer in Iceland, but he also wrote more sacred music than any other Icelandic composer.<sup>6</sup> Many of his sacred works are inspired by the Psalms of David. Those vocal works that are not strictly sacred represent poetry reading like a Who's Who of Icelandic poets: Hallgrímur Pétursson, Páll Kolka, Kolbeinn Tumason, Valdimar Briem, Matthías Jochumsson, Þorsteinn Valdimarsson, Rósa B. Blöndal, and Þorkell's father, Sigurbjörn Einarsson, bishop of Iceland. He also makes use of a sequence by a significant figure in Western music history, Notker Balbulus. Furthermore, Þorkell utilizes texts and melodies from the *Office of St. Þorlák*<sup>7</sup> and *Hymnodia sacrae*,<sup>8</sup> both important religious works in Icelandic literature.

Several factors need to be considered when studying, learning, or performing Þorkell's music. At the outset, most of his output remains in handwritten form and can be difficult to read. Further, most of his compositions have not been professionally recorded or recordings are no longer available, so the recorded

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5. Some sources list Þorkell as having written three chamber operas. During a conversation with the author, Þorkell unequivocally corrected this, stating that his only chamber opera was *Gréttir*, and the remainder of his operas were written for Barnamúsíkskóli Reykjavíkur.

6. Hákon Leifsson, *Ancient Icelandic Heritage in Icelandic A Cappella Choral Music in the Twentieth Century*, DMA Dissertation (Seattle: University of Washington, 2004), 125.

7. One of the oldest Icelandic musical documents from the 13<sup>th</sup> century containing medieval Catholic Offices honoring St. Þorlák, bishop of the diocese of Skálholt.

8. Iceland's largest manuscript songbook from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Written in 1742 by Guðmundur Högnason, a priest in the Westman Islands, it contains 101 hymn melodies, many of them unique to this source.

history is marginal. The vast majority of Þorkell's works have not been performed since their premiere and are virtually unknown. The lion's share of professional recordings which have been made focus on his choral works, despite that much of his opus focuses on smaller chamber works. The reasoning for this is simple: Þorkell wrote for the occasion, the occasion is finished, and now the need for the piece is no longer present, and many of the pieces were not professionally recorded at the premiere.

Another facet of Þorkell's writing can be compatible with what Paul Hindemith termed "*Gebrauchsmusik*," or "music for use." This practicality of purpose of his composing has also been compared to that of Haydn, who most often composed music for what was needed at the Esterhazy court. During his lifetime, Þorkell was often asked to write for an occasion: The opening of Harpa Concert Hall, the opening of Perlan Water Towers in Öskjuhlíð in Reykjavík, the arrival of Icelandic saga manuscripts from Denmark, the celebrational service at Hallgrímskirkja on the completion of the steeple and wings of the church, etc. So much of what Þorkell wrote was for a particular occasion or by the request of a certain performer, and consequently it was never played again. Part of this was because Iceland was and is so small a nation, and the need to have things performed more than once is not always feasible, or indeed, desired. But it also shows a great closeness between Þorkell and the performers of his works, a great humility he had for his own work and, likewise, a great respect he had for other musicians.

## Literature Review

Research into Þorkell's work is virtually non-existent except for liner notes to the recordings that exist, personal interviews he generously gave to various people regarding his compositions, Icelandic newspaper articles about performances of his works, a masters and a doctoral document over selected works, and limited articles from such journals as *Nordic Sounds*. Therefore, the work in this article mostly consists of original research undertaken during my time as a Fulbright Scholar in Iceland in the Autumn of 2010.

## Methodology

The research that was conducted for this document included one-on-one interviews with the composer, his family members, as well as musicians who performed his music, my own music theory analysis of his works, and compiling the limited written research into his compositions.

No systematic categorization of his music exists. Therefore, the works discussed here will be grouped into six categories to guide the reader in a more

organized manner. The reader should understand that there are a multitude of approaches in which Þorkell's music can be classified:

1. **Hymns:** Choral pieces included or were meant to be included in the Icelandic Lutheran Church hymnal.
2. **Settings of religious texts/poetry:** Vocal works not strictly sacred or meant for use in religious ritual.
3. **Settings of sacred texts:** Vocal pieces with texts from the Bible, the Psalms of David, or other sacred writings.
4. **Song Cycles:** Vocal pieces grouped together or part of a larger set.<sup>9</sup>
5. **Folk songs:** Vocal pieces based on folk songs, either Icelandic or foreign.
6. **Instrumental Music:** Non-vocal works which might be centered on settings of hymns, settings of folk songs, or instrumental works inspired by Biblical texts.<sup>10</sup>

## Hymns

Þorkell's contributions to the Icelandic hymnal include twelve original compositions and eight pieces that are four-part harmonization settings of pre-existing melodies.<sup>11</sup> The melodies Þorkell harmonized range from Icelandic folk songs, to French and Dutch melodies, to melodies composed by Martin Luther and Hans Puls. One hymn, *Dagur er, dýrka ber*, is included in *Hymnodia sacra*, the 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscript hymnbook.

The hymns that Þorkell contributed to the Icelandic hymnal are valuable to Icelandic sacred music. Not only are these beautifully intimate works, but they tend to be relatively easily "singable". In many ways, "It is personal music, written for people, but addressed to God."<sup>12</sup> Many of the texts that will be discussed in this chapter seem to be a prayer, a plea for God's mercy and protection, and show great humility before the Maker.

The Icelandic hymn *Heyr, himna smiður* (Hear, Heaven's Maker) stands out as one of Þorkell's masterpieces and the most performed of all his works, especially at funerals in Iceland. The original version, written for SATB choir and published on commission by the Icelandic Organist Association, was probably written in

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9. In some cases, only a few of the works from these sets are sacred in nature. These separate works could also be classified into other categories listed above but were listed in their proper groupings for ease of finding them in published editions.

10. Many of these purely instrumental pieces can be cross-listed with other categories listed above, but were separated into this group for instrumentalists.

11. All of these are included on the website <http://tru.is/salmabok>, which lists all hymns in the official Icelandic Church Hymnbook.

12. Patrick M. Ryan, *Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson: Sacred Works for Unaccompanied Chorus*, Master's Lecture Recital Paper (Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University, 2006), 19.

1972.<sup>13</sup> The version for children's choir/women's choir was written on January 30, 2001. The male choir version is from a set of two hymns, *Tvö sálmalög*, and the date of composition of this arrangement is also unknown.

Shortly after Þorkell's death, this hymn became wildly popular after a performance by Icelandic band *Árstíðir* in a video recorded in a train station in Germany circulated quickly through social media platforms and online articles.<sup>14</sup> Many articles and social media posts erroneously stated that the music was from the 12th century. Indeed, the text is by Kolbeinn Tumason of Viðimý (1173-1208), and it is the oldest extant religious poem in Scandinavia. But, the music, including the haunting melody, was of Þorkell's own composition.

Kolbeinn Tumason was a powerful Icelandic chieftain who helped Guðmundur Arason to become bishop. Guðmundur believed in clerical independence and begrudged interference from the chieftains. Soon, the two came to a disagreement, resulting in a battle that led to Kolbeinn's death. This poem was said to be written by Kolbeinn the night before the battle. This is a strikingly beautiful poem; in many ways, it is an Icelandic Kyrie, humbly asking for strength and mercy in his own impending demise. A plea for mercy from creature to creator, from slave to master, the lyrics also hold a recognition of God's power and righteousness as God.

It is easy to see the humility in first verse of the poem:

<i>Heyr, himna smiður,</i>	Hear, smith of the heavens
<i>hvers skáldið biður,</i>	what the poet bids,
<i>komi mjúk til mín</i>	bring soft to me
<i>miskunnin þín.</i>	your mercy.
<i>Því heit eg á þig,</i>	I beg of you,
<i>þú hefur skaptan mig,</i>	for you created me.
<i>ég er þrællinn þinn,</i>	I am your slave,
<i>þú ert Drottinn minn.</i>	you are my Lord. <sup>15</sup>

Þorkell describes the impetus behind this extraordinary composition:

I was on a committee with several organists, choral conductors, and composers. Its purpose was to edit an appendix to the Icelandic Hymnal. The head of the committee was one of my old teachers, Dr. Robert A. Ottosson. He called me one Saturday morning, asked me over for morning coffee. He showed me some newly acquired tunes or different arrangements of well-known ones from English, German, American, or Nordic publications. Then he mentioned that oldest hymn in a Nordic

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13. One source says the music was composed in 1972 with the first performance in 1973 at the Skálholt Festival under the direction of Dr. Róbert A. Ottósson.

14. At the writing of this article, the author elicited 7,402,427 views on YouTube of "*Árstíðir Heyr himnasmiður*."

15. Translation from *Þorkell: Kórverk eftir Þorkel Sigurbjörnsson* (2008), CD recording, Reykjavík: Reykjavík: Smekkleysa, 23.

language, “Heyr, himna smiður”. Oh, yes, I remembered that. One had, sort of, learned it in high school. It didn’t have a fitting tune. On the way home . . . one had to drive up a hill. It was snow and ice; cars without snow tires were spinning all over the place. I had nothing to do but to wait, stuck. How was that old hymn? I tried to bring it back to memory, remembered the first verse and scraps of the second and third. Then, some Aeolian harmonies appeared. When I finally came home, I could just sit down, and write it out.<sup>16</sup>

The “writing it out” took about five minutes, according to Porkell.<sup>17</sup>

Porkell’s harmonic approach to this hymn is typical in the way he approached all his works: It was specific to the purpose and the spirit of the composition. This is a hymn set to words from the medieval period; It seems appropriate, therefore, that he made the hymn sound “old,” even though to a trained ear, one can perceive 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century harmonies abundant with 7<sup>th</sup> chords and non-chord tones of all types, most notably the luscious 4-3 and 9-8 suspensions. Nonetheless, this is a marvelous piece which can be easily analyzed in a variety of approaches. After performing a traditional Roman numeral analysis, one could observe the use of Aeolian (natural minor) and Dorian (if the F-sharps are taken into account) modes, which soften the functionality of a Roman numeral analysis. The Picardy third at the end suggests salvation of the poet pleading for mercy and strength. In other words, this piece uses the old church modes which are most normally associated with medieval music harmony. Furthermore, the melismatic qualities of the melody suggest something from Gregorian chant of medieval times. This was likely done on purpose by Porkell to capture the archaic quality of the poetry. Additionally, as Hákon Leifsson points out,<sup>18</sup> there is a strong presence of intervals of fourths and fifths in the work, both in the harmony and the melody. This suggests the influential presence of *tvísöngur*, a type of medieval Icelandic folk song whose definition “is commonly used to refer both to polyphonic pieces in manuscripts dating from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, and to an oral folk practice of singing in parallel fifths.”<sup>19</sup>

Another hymn, *Nú hverfur sól í haf* (Now the Sun Sinks in the Sea), was written in 1983. It is a setting of a poetic text by Porkell’s father, Sigurbjörn Einarsson, who was bishop of Iceland at the time. The poem is at the end of his book, *Af hverju, afi?* (Why, Grandfather?). This work is a plea for God’s healing and a confession as to how absolutely dependent the human is upon God. There are many references to nature in this poem, as well. Porkell considered this hymn to be one of his favorite works from his immense compositional output. He took great

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16. Ryan, 15.

17. Porkell Sigurbjörnsson, in a conversation with the author, Autumn 2010.

18. Leifsson, 125-128.

19. Ingólfsson, “*These are the Things You Never Forget*”: *The Written and Oral Traditions of Icelandic Tvísöngur*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Harvard University, Boston, MA, 2003).

pride in that this hymn is even included in a Taiwanese hymnal. The first two verses are as follows:

<p><i>Nú hverfur sól í haf og húmið kemur skjótt. Ég lofa góðan Guð, sem gefur dag og nótt, mínn vökudag, mínn draum og nótt. Þú vakir, faðir vor, ó, vernda börnin þín, svo víð sem veröld er og vonarstjarna skín, ein stjarna hljóð á himni skín. star.<sup>20</sup></i></p>	<p>Now the sun sinks in the sea Dusk will soon close tight. I praise good God who gives day and night, My waking day, my dream and night. You are wakeful, our father, oh guard your children, through the world wide and far and to hope's shining star, Shining in heaven, a single, silent star.</p>
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There is a distinct pattern in the texts Porkell chooses for his sacred compositions: A gentle Father who protects His flock with hope, faith, grace, peace, and healing.

This piece also makes use of modality, but it does not eschew functional tonality. The singable melody is strictly Aeolian, but Porkell hints at harmonic and melodic minor scales in the melodies (the bass line in measure 4 outlines the g melodic minor scale).

Porkell's masterful use of compositional form is omnipresent, whether it be eleven measures (such as this hymn) or much larger works. The subtle text painting in this work is astonishing, especially in how the form is used in conjunction with the text painting. In the AAB structure of this hymn, Porkell changes the harmonic progression on the repeat of the section so that it advances to a VI chord in measure 6 (on the word *Guð/God*). There follows a succession of major chords (on the words *sem gefur dag og nótt/who gives day and night*). Another example of text painting can be found in the first phrase (*Nú hverfur sól í haf*), which is a melodic arch, suggesting a sunrise in the initial rise of the minor 6th and a sunset in the descending stepwise B-flat, A, G. This melodic motive is repeated no less than six times in the various vocal parts. On the seventh repetition of the motive, it is modified so that the initial intervallic leap is now a perfect fourth, suggesting that the soul is more at peace. In yet another example of skillful compositional technique, the melody is in the soprano in the first line; the sun is still in the sky. The second line sees much activity in the alto and tenor voices, suggesting that the sun is in the ocean and causing ripples in the water. The third line displays busy melodic activity in the bass, insinuating that the sun has now fully disappeared into the sea. Also noticeable is the delightful voice

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20. Translation by Bernard Scudder, *Vorkvæði um Ísland*, CD Recording (Reykjavík: Smekkleysa, 2002), 29.



imitation, repetition of text for emphasis of the text, and the plentiful use of non-chord tones, all of which are useful for descriptive purposes.

### Settings of Religious Texts/Poetry

Seventeen of Þorkell's works can be categorized into works not strictly sacred in nature but set to religious texts or poetry. The poets include Hallgrímur Pétursson, Notker Balbulus, Valdimar Briem, Sigurbjörn Einarsson, St. Þorlákur, Matthías Jochumsson, Þorsteinn Valdimarsson, and Rósa B. Blöndal.

One work in this category is *Haec est sancta solemnitas*. Completed on January 31, 2001, it was written for either a children's or women's choir. The text is an Easter sequence by Notker Balbulus (840-912), the Benedictine Monk of S. Gall. The piece is dedicated *til Jóns og "eðalgrallara"* (to choir director Jón Stefánsson and the members of his children's choir, which Þorkell titles in a whimsical yet affectionate manner).

*Haec est sancta solemnitas solemnitatum*  
This is the holy festival of festivals  
*Insignata triumpho Christi*  
Engraved in the triumph of Christ  
*Tu post crucem per orbem gentibus omnibus*  
After the cross, you control all nations throughout the world  
*Omnipotens filius Dei*  
Almighty God's son

The whole work is in 5/8 time and refers intentionally to the stammering speech impediment of Notker Balbulus. Motives are used from Notker's original sequence, repeating them in small stumbling patterns. Þorkell masterfully uses imitation and canon between the vocal parts to create the stuttering effect.

Manuscripts such as *Musica enchiridias* demonstrated how polyphony began in the 9th century with the use of parallel octaves, fourths, and fifths. Using his exceptional understanding of music history, Þorkell employs a healthy dose of quartal and quintal harmonies in *Haec est sancta solemnitas*, both in the melody as well as in the harmonies. The influence is likely from the medieval harmonies, but from a 20<sup>th</sup> century aspect, the influence could be said to come from composers such as Hindemith who used quartal and quintal harmony extensively.

*Mariukvæði* (a.k.a. *Mariuvísir*) is one of Þorkell's most performed works. Written in 1974 for the play about Jón Arason by Matthías Jochumsson (performed at the National Theatre of Iceland under the direction of Gunnar Eyjólfsson), the setting for this Hymn to the Virgin Mary is set for soprano and mixed choir. Jón Arason (1484-1550) was an Icelandic Roman Catholic bishop and poet who was executed in his struggle against the imposition of the Protestant Reform in Iceland. Þorkell uses modality in this work to capture the time period of the play.

The prayer used in this song is directed to the Virgin Mary and contains many metaphors that are typical in Catholic imagery. Additionally, the piece

contains a mix of Icelandic and Latin, with Icelandic versions of the Latin words. “The poetry is mixed with Latin like often customary in hymns and religious poetry. *Matróna* is a housewife, *gemma pólórum* is the gem of the skies, *glória sanctorum* is the beauty of the holy, *björgun miserórum* is the safety for the weak, and *mater gloriósa* is the glorious mother.”<sup>21</sup>

*María, meýjan skæra,  
minning þín og æra,  
verðugt væri að færa  
vegsemd þér og sóma,  
soddan sólarljóma  
Þú varst ein, ein, ein,  
Þú varst ein svo helg og hrein  
hæstum vafin blóma.*

Maid Mary, shining pure,  
your remembrance and honour,  
fitting it would be to present  
praise and glory to you,  
such a brilliance of sunshine.  
You alone, alone, alone,  
were alone so holy and pure,  
wrapped in highest honour.

*Blessuð meðal manna,  
matróna englanna  
fæddir frelsarann sanna  
fríð gemma pólórum  
glória sanktórum.  
Þú ert blóm, blóm, blóm,  
þú ert blóm með blíðan dóm  
og björgin miserórum.*

Blessed among mankind,  
matron of angels,  
you bore the true Saviour,  
lovely gem of the poles,  
glory of the saints.  
You are a flower, flower, flower,  
you are a flower, in judgment mild,  
and succour of the wretched.

*María móðir skæra,  
meýja blóm og æra,  
mesta mærd skal stæra  
mater gloriósa  
drottning allra drósa.  
Fannstu náð, náð, náð,  
fannstu náð yfir lög og láð  
lífandi Drottins rósa.*

Mary, shining-pure mother,  
flower and honour of maidens,  
she will enlarge the greatest praise,  
glorious mother,  
queen of all ladies.  
You found favour, favour, favour,  
you found favour over sea and land,  
living rose of the Lord.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout most of the work, Þorkell uses the male voices in quintal harmony ostinato drones. Yet again, his use of medieval techniques creates an atmosphere fitting of the time period of the play. The stark simplicity of the piece is exceptionally moving and beautiful.

### Settings of Sacred Texts

Þorkell’s compositions using sacred texts include an oratorio (*Immanúel*), a *Missa brevis*, a *Missa miniscula*, two *Sanctus* settings, and a setting of the Seven

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21. Ingólfsson, *Þorkell: Kórverk eftir Þorkel Sigurbjörnsson*, 19.

22. *Ibid*, 16.

Last Words of Christ on the Cross. Additionally, eight of his sacred works use Psalms of David (*Davíð 92, Davíð 117, Davíð 121, Hosanna David's Son* uses Psalm 118, *Psalmus CL, Psalmus David 116, David 96 & 98 in Lofsöngur til Marteins*, and Psalm 150 from *Five Laudi*). Other works use biblical references from Isaiah, Luke, Corinthians, and various references to the Holy Ghost.

The settings of Psalms of David constitute a large portion of Þorkell's sacred works. Þorkell often used psalm texts that referred to singing or use of musical instruments. According to Patrick Ryan:

These Psalm settings contain some of Þorkell's more difficult writing for chorus, including frequent *divisi*, controlled aleatory, and more advanced harmonic language than most of his choral compositions. Frequent polyrhythms, particularly the use of close *stretto* and canonic devices, provide challenges to many performers. Owing to the nature of the texts, these psalms are sectional in nature, and highly expressive.<sup>23</sup>

*Hosanna David's Son* (*Hósianna Davíðs son*) was written for the Langholtskirkja Church Choir in 1977. Þorkell comments on the work, "One can say that the timbres of a mixed choir are in the foreground. [I treat] the choir not only as a combination of four basic parts (sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses) but also as a collection of many individuals with various claims to freedom."<sup>24</sup> The text uses words from Psalm 118:26, plus some additions:

Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest.<sup>25</sup>

The work begins with proclamations of *Hósianna* in rising intervals of perfect fourths echoing between the bass and tenor. When the soprano and alto enter, they also are echoing one another in cathedral bell-like proclamations of perfect fourth intervals. In fact, this quartal harmony theme continues through the first two pages.

When the beginning section of echoing comes to a close, the altos, tenors, and basses repeat a pattern (again based on quartal harmonies) over and over in an indeterminate manner while a soprano soloist sings a *liberamente* melody in a manner akin to cantoring in a Jewish synagogue. The repetitive pattern marked with a long line is something that Þorkell uses quite often in his works. It gives a truly improvised, free, and unmetered feeling.

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23. Ryan, 10.

24. Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson, *An Anthology of Icelandic Choir Music*, CD Recording (Åkersberga, Sweden: BIS Records, 1993), 5.

25. *Ibid*, 18.

## Choral Cycles

The bigger multi-movement sets of works that Þorkell wrote tend to be settings of folk songs, Christmas songs, and hymns. Certainly, the most substantial set is the *Fourteen Icelandic Folk Songs* for solo voice and piano, but others such as the *Sjö jólasöngvar (íslensk og erlend)* and the *Tvö jólasálmur ur "Hymnódíu"* are to be noted. But the set of *Fimm lofsöngvar* (Five laudi) stands out as one of Þorkell's most remarkable works.

*Fimm lofsöngvar* was written between late 1972 and early 1973. The different performing forces for each movement suggests that they are not necessarily meant to be performed as a set, so the individual movements are often performed alone. The texts are all Icelandic translations of the original Latin texts.

The first movement, *Lofsöngur Simeons* (Song of Simeon) was completed January 4, 1973. Set for mixed choir, the piece begins with longer held notes in all but one voice, which has a small florid motive. This unifying motive is tossed between the various voices. The work's strikingly colorful harmonies reward the choir willing to take on the challenge.

*Lofsöngur engla* (Latin title of "Gloria," or "Song of the Angels") was completed January 7, 1973 for mixed choir. This astounding work starts with a Gregorian chant-like statement sung in unison, followed by eight-part divisi. The dividing of the choir goes even further, 19-part at one point. Additionally, the piece is virtuosic for the choir. "Its harmonic language and sustained singing demand a very high-level performing ensemble."<sup>26</sup> On the word *friður* (peace), the choir moves gradually downwards in half steps to create an extraordinary effect. This is text painting, whereby the angels start in the heavens to sing *Dýrð sé Guði í upphæðum* ("Glory to God in the highest"), then moving towards Earth to sing *friður með þeim mönnum sem hann hefur velþóknun á* ("peace with the men with whom He is most pleased").

*Lofsöngur Maríu* (Latin title of "Magnificat," or "Song of Mary"), the third movement, was completed January 6, 1973. Befitting the title (a prayer to the Virgin Mary), it is written for women's choir. This work is canonic and echoes thoughts between the voices. A rather interesting trait of the piece is the proclamatory nature, often followed by markings of suddenly getting softer (*piano subito*) after *crescendo* markings, as if the woman is remembering her place and must not speak too loudly.

The fourth movement, *Te Deum*, was completed January 5, 1973 and is set for children's voices and harp. The work demonstrates its innocence not only through the younger performing force but also through less complicated harmonies than previous movements. The swaying motion of the harp keeps a steady tempo on which the pentatonic melody of the voices can float. Þorkell

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26. Ryan.

wrote of the work, "*Te Deum* is an ancient hymn, often attributed to bishop Ambrosius, but most likely written by the bishop Niketas (ca. 400) of Remesiana (nish) in Serbia. This translation [is] by bishop Sigurbjörn Einarsson. . . This was composed as a consecration gift to my brother Karl, when he was consecrated to the Vestmannaeyja [Westmann Islands] in 1973."<sup>27</sup>

The final movement, *Lofsöngur Davíðs* (English title of "David 150," English translation "Song of David"), was the first work composed of the *Five Laudi*, completed November 17, 1972. Written for mixed choir and organ, it also makes use of drums. The choir reiterates phrases indeterminately (marked with "2x," "3x," "4x," etc.) while other musical material starts or is taking place. The lack of time signature is a signal from Porkell that the music should have an unmeasured quality.

One can sense that Porkell tended to compose very quickly, perhaps in breathtaking surges of inspiration (or, alternately, out of timely necessity). These *Five Laudi* are only one example of this swiftness and compositional ease.

### Folk Songs

Porkell did not make settings of many folk songs with sacred subjects, but one folk song in particular received more attention: *Einn Guð í hæðinni* (*One God on High*). The first version is for soprano and piano, from *Fourteen Icelandic Folk Songs* and is remarkable for its polyrhythmic texture between singer and pianist. The version for soprano, alto, and women's choir (from 1995), in contrast, is contrapuntal. He additionally wrote a version for children's choir (date unknown), a version for soprano, flute, and cello (from 1999), and a setting for 2 to 3 cellos that was written in 1997. Porkell also included an arrangement of the same work in a setting of six Icelandic folk songs for flute, violin, and cello in 1988.

Yet again, the first verse reveals that Porkell has set a text about humility and God's comforting protection of his flock. The song is a lullaby:

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27. Porkell Sigurbjörnsson, *Koma*, CD Recording (Reykjavík: Smekkleysa, 1989), 12.

<i>Einn Guð í hæðinni</i>	One God on high
<i>huggarinn þinn.</i>	your comforter.
<i>Líknsamur hann huggi þig,</i>	Merciful, may he comfort you,
<i>litli ljúfurinn.</i>	my little sweet one.

## Instrumental Music

The eleven instrumental compositions by Þorkell center on settings of hymns, both Icelandic as well as foreign. One work is based on Biblical text (*Hversu yndislegir eru fæddur friðarboðans*, for organ, pedals only, from Isaiah 52:7). More often than not, an organ is involved. In two pieces, the instrumental setting was previously made as a choral work or arrangement (*Einn Guð í hæðinni* and *Til þín, Drottinn hnatta og heima*). In other works, a more “serious” formal structure is used (*Auf meinen lieben Gott* is a fantasy on a chorale; *Kirkjusónata* is a church sonata on Georg Neumarks’ Chorale *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten*; and *Prelude and Chorale* has the structure suggested in the name).

Þorkell’s *Prelude and Chorale* for two organs is an example of *Gebrauchsmusik*. Subtitled *Orgelflutningur, eða “afhendingur”* (Organ moving, or “delivery”), it was written in 1992 for the brief moment in which the new Klais organ in Hallgrímskirkja Church had arrived and the old organ was still in the church. The work was to be performed on the two organs before the old organ was moved out of Hallgrímskirkja. According to Bishop Karl Sigurbjörnsson, “The plan was to sell the little Frobenius. But it stayed and is still in the church.”<sup>28</sup>

*Hversu yndislegir eru fæddur friðarboðans* (Blessed Be the Feet of the Peacemaker) is also known as *Fótaferð*, or “Foot travels.” Written in 1970, it was dedicated to Haukur Guðlaugsson who was the organist at Akranes Kirkja Church at that time.<sup>29</sup> This unique work was composed for organ, using pedals only (demonstrating Þorkell’s beautiful ability with humor). Using Isaiah 52:7 as its inspiration, this work could serve either as a prelude or postlude in a church service or as a concert piece. Even though *Fótspor* is virtuosic, it is still ergonomically and comfortably written for the feet.

There are numerous allusions to footsteps, journeys, and travels in this work. Sometimes the work runs with joy. Other times, there are stumbling footsteps and turning of ankles, so the journey can be difficult and exhausting. The book of Isaiah describes journeys to bring good news, but other scriptural references refer to excursions (David leaving Jerusalem, Moses wandering in the desert for forty years, Saint Paul’s foot and sea journey in Corinthians 2:16, the journey of Jacob in Genesis, hind’s feet in Habakkuk 3:19, not to mention the extensive travels of Jesus). This work was written for Haukur’s concert tour in Germany. Perhaps the footsteps (*fótaferð*) were also a figurative reference to Haukur’s travels.

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28. Email conversation with Bishop Karl Sigurbjörnsson, February 27, 2016.

29. Four years later, Haukur was named Music Director of the National Lutheran Church of Iceland.

Porkell starts the piece with a descending scale pattern with many repeated notes. The repeated notes are especially enunciated with an alternating foot and heel articulations. A second line serves as imitative counterpoint to the first line. This canonic statement may be a suggestion to how no one ever walks alone, or a reference to Jesus sending his disciples out two by two. *Fótspór* is a highly motivic work. In areas like measure 14, the motivic chromatic statements are repeated, but adding notes, and the span of the footsteps grow bigger. A unique feature of this piece is toe trills. The second page has a strange request for the heel to be used, making the organist twist the ankle to reach the note (twisting one's ankle while walking?).

Another remarkable attribute of this work is how it utilizes many different pipes and colorful stops, either individually or building up on top of one another. There are reed pipes, flute pipes, various mixtures, and bigger principal pipes. There are a few occasions of the use of the swell pedal. Furthermore, frequent changes of tempi occur, hinting at an influence of Bach toccatas (and perhaps also suggesting the journey becomes alternatively easier and more difficult). At the end of the work, the hands join the feet to create a triumphant ending.

This work is only one of very many in his oeuvre demonstrating Porkell's role as an experimental composer. He was a founding member of Musica Nova in Iceland, and he had a great interest in electronic music, as well. Compositions for organ involving feet only is an innovative concept, but Porkell demonstrates how using experimental techniques doesn't have to be a cheap trick, but rather it is inherent to the concept of the piece and helps to tell the story of the work.

## Conclusion

Choosing a select few of Porkell's compositions for discussion presents a challenge, as much of what he composed could serve as an excellent specimen for demonstrating his compositional mastery and technique. Exploring descriptive examples of the wealth of his sacred music opens doors to a broader awareness of Porkell's magnum opus for future performers, researchers, and audiences. Whether the writing includes a strong harkening towards modality, hockets, and other compositional techniques of the medieval period, or the use of twentieth-century techniques such as indeterminacy, extreme choral divisi, lack of meter, and even societal commentary on topics such as misogyny, each of his compositions has a unique, thought-provoking, and often playful story that confirms why he remains a beloved and revered composer in Iceland.

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