

Áskell
MÁSSON
(b. 1953)

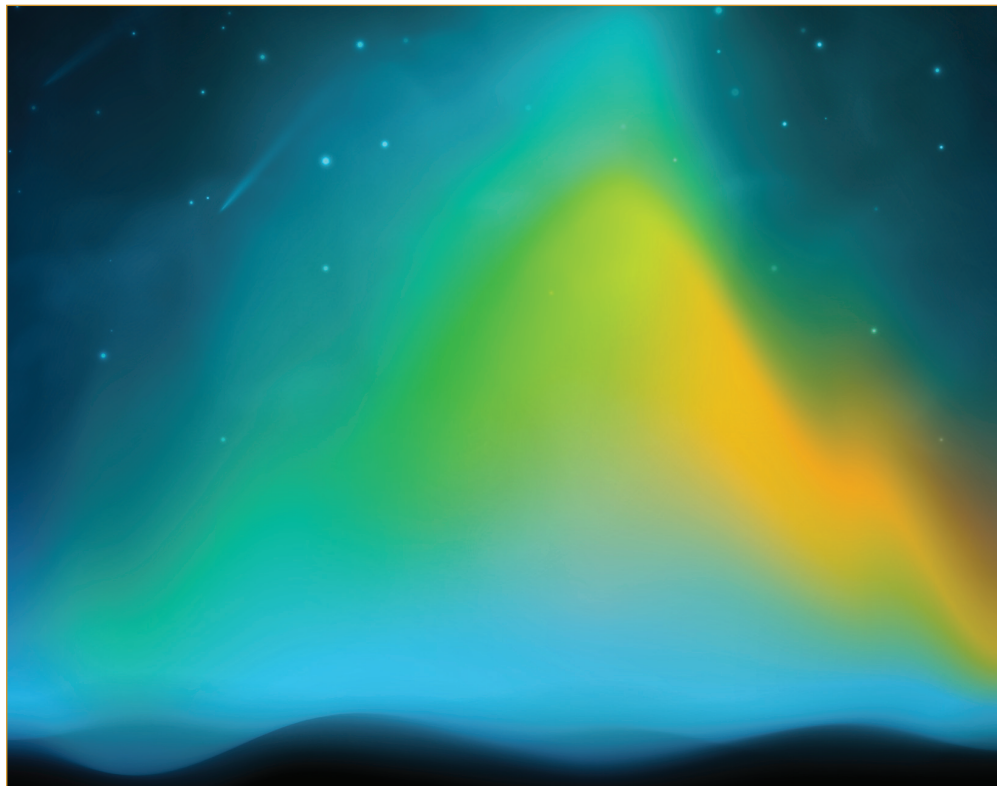
Music for Clarinet

Einar Jóhannesson

Bryndís Halla Gylfadóttir, Cello • Örn Magnússon, Piano

Robyn Koh, Harpsichord • Áskell Másson, Goblet Drum

Reykjavik Wind Quintet



Áskell Másson (b. 1953)
Music for Clarinet

1 Blik (Gleam) for solo clarinet (1979)	5:41
Sonatina for clarinet and piano (1998)	12:33
2 I. Andante –	5:23
3 II. Allegro –	2:59
4 III. Adagio	4:11
5 Seasons – Fantasy on a Chinese poem for clarinet and goblet drum (1987)	6:58
Three Bagatelles for solo clarinet (1991)	7:17
6 I. Leit (Quest)	2:00
7 II. Dans (Dance)	1:25
8 III. Hugleiðing (Meditation)	3:40
9 Fantasia for solo clarinet and harpsichord (1990)	13:47
10 Trio for clarinet, cello and piano (1985)	13:47
Quintet for Winds (1991)	16:41
11 I. Allegretto con fuoco	7:27
12 II. Vivo (attacca) –	5:48
13 III. Moderato	3:25

Born in Reykjavík in 1953, Áskell Másson could be considered the very epitome of the Icelandic composer: widely travelled, eclectic in his interests and influences, and, in the sheer breadth of his writing, ‘useful, and to the living’, as Britten once described his own music.

Known at the start of his career primarily as a performer and composer for clarinet and percussion, Másson came to international attention at the age of 26 with his *Clarinet Concerto*, written for Einar Jóhannesson, then principal clarinet of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. The work was featured at the International Rostrum of Composers in Paris in 1980. Since then, Másson has written music for the theatre, for films, radio and television, as well as for the concert hall and opera house. Másson’s works to date include the opera *The Ice Palace* (1983-87), the oratorio *Cecilia* (2006-8), three symphonies, sixteen concertos, and numerous works for chamber ensemble and orchestra which have been performed throughout Europe, North America and Asia.

Largely self-taught as a composer, Másson studied percussion with James Blades in London, and has worked



Photo: Mbl/Brynjar Gauti

in Copenhagen, Stockholm, London and Paris, collaborating with musicians such as Roger Woodward, Evelyn Glennie, Gert Mortensen and Christian Lindberg. His own distinctive sound world owes much to the influence of individual soloists with whom he has worked, and to his love of impressionism and so-called world musics. In recent years, the influence of Icelandic folk-music has become increasingly audible: the pentatonic harmonies and melodies of *tvisöngur* (quint song), and the distinctive rhythms of the ancient verse known as *rimur* often shape his work.

Blik (Gleam), a five-minute solo work from 1979, was inspired by and composed for Einar Jóhannesson, and premièred at the Festival of New Music for Young People in Helsinki in 1980. Based on short motifs, and bright shards of virtuoso gesture which dart between the instrument’s extremes of range, the piece explores many clarinet techniques, such as multiphonics (overtones, mixed with a fundamental note) and quarter-tones. These are used not only for display purposes, but to give the music a unique and distinctive expressive fingerprint. As such, it has proved

itself something of a Måsson classic, and continues to be enjoyed worldwide.

The *Sonatina* for clarinet and piano was a commission from Einar's contemporary and colleague, the clarinetist Sigurdur Ingvi Snorrason. The composer suggests, tentatively, that Snorrason's time spent studying in Vienna could have had some influence on the character of the piece. However, Måsson composed it in 1998, in Stromness, during the tour of Orkney which had inspired his *Tuba Concerto*, *Maes Howe*. The work was premièred in Reykjavik's Idno Theatre that year.

The *Sonatina's* three movements are played without a break. The opening *Andante* is a dark, slow waltz — a spectre, perhaps, of old Vienna — with its tightly coiled motifs leading to a more lyrical, meditative duet, before trilling straight into the rollicking, frisky *Allegro*. Notes flutter and rise in blithe larksong, before staccato dancing. After a brief silence, the piano has a loose-limbed, improvisatory interlude before the music dances its way back, tightening and teasing its musical material to a high climax point before subsiding into the *Adagio*. This returns to the dark, sober piano chords of the opening, and a cadenza-like clarinet passage seems to reflect on all that has gone before.

Seasons: Fantasy on a Chinese poem for clarinet and goblet drum is one of the most unusual of Måsson's chamber works. It, too, was composed for Einar Jóhannesson and for the percussionist-composer himself, for a tour of China in 1987. Måsson plays the Darabuka, or Goblet Drum, used by Berlioz for the exotic *Dance of the Nubian Slaves* in *Les Troyens*.

The *Fantasy* is a musical reflection on a short poem by Li Po, from the golden age of the mid-Tang dynasty (705-762). Its evocations move from glimpses of spring's first greening of the land to the white waterlilies of summer, the gold and russet heathers of autumn, and finally winter's bare landscapes. The composition itself was shaped by a numerological scheme or pattern which the composer applied to both pitch and rhythm at the same time, and which gradually metamorphoses its way through the music, as one season evolves into another.

Just after the premiere of *Blik* in Helsinki in 1979, Måsson made a sketch for the first *Bagatelle* in this triptych. Twelve years later, in October 1991, he returned to the sketch, and composed three more inter-linked *Bagatelles*,

which Einar Jóhannesson premièred in Reykjavik that year. Each piece is characterised by Måsson's trademark juxtapositions of extremes of pitch and dynamic contrasts, and tight, teasing motifs.

Leit (Quest) darts out, its fleet moods and gestures unified by reappearances of a sustained crescendo of a note and its echoes. *Dans* (Dance) is an elegant, high-stepping movement of playful semiquavers, sequences of upward spirallings and a final rising whirl, before a low sustained note is played, like the bow at the end of a dance. *Hugleiðing* (Meditation), is a triple-time Andante, rising slowly and inexorably from darkness to light, with vibrating, microtonal dying falls, as the clarinet, ever more enervated, attempts moments of song before a tranquil end.

The *Fantasia* for clarinet and harpsichord was originally composed for oboe in 1990: in its present form, it was premièred in 1991 in London by Einar Jóhannesson and Robyn Koh. With its contrapuntal melodic lines, and its frequent quarter-tones, the work makes considerable demands on each player. An opening *Adagietto fluido* oscillates nervously, the pungent voice of the clarinet high and hushed over the harpsichord's patternings. A semi-improvisatory, coppery harpsichord section leads to the clarinet stretching into wide-arching song and multiphonics. A sustained passage, wound ever tighter by both instruments, leads to a haunting clarinet solo interlude. This, in turn, tiptoes into an *Allegro moderato* of delicate interchanges, jazzy syncopations, and hots up, riff-like, with drumming harpsichord, to short, sharp silences. More fierce virtuosity leads back to an *Andante* for harpsichord solo, before returning to the original tempo in serene counterpoint. Notes lengthen as the work winds down, in slow-motion memories of what has gone before.

The *Trio for clarinet, cello and piano* was a commission from a Norwegian trio who wanted a companion piece for Beethoven's *Clarinet Trio in B flat, Op 11*. Måsson chose to reflect on the Italian aria, '*Pria ch'io l'impegno*', used by Beethoven in the variations of the *Trio's* finale, adding an Icelandic folksong '*Blástjarnan*' ('Blue Star') into the weave. The *Trio* was given its première in 1985, the year of its composition, at the Nordic House in Reykjavik.

A haunting dream-dialogue, this *Trio* has an almost orchestral richness of resonance, and is one of Måsson's most rhapsodic works. From a gentle, purring opening, it

moves to a passage of spectral shared dialogue, recalling Icelandic *tvisöngur* (quint song) and seeming to play with the piano's rhythmic echoes and shuddering, windswept tremolandos. Tender piano chords, glassy clarinet multiphonics and echoing cello harmonics accelerate to a jazzy jamming session before a cello cadenza leads to a quiet lullaby of a coda, a chorale-like affirmation of the work's material, and high cello harmonics which fade to silence.

The *Woodwind Quintet* dates from 1991, and was a joint commission from the Reykjavik Wind Quintet and a Swedish ensemble from Vaxjo. It had its première in January 1992 in Iceland, and then travelled to Sweden, Denmark, London's Wigmore Hall and on to the US and Australia.

After a bright, celebratory fanfare figure, all five

instruments fragment and transform it into a robust workout which becomes increasingly anarchic and unpredictable. Themes are characteristically trilled on their way, contracting, expanding and colliding, in Másson's typically challenging and imaginative understanding of each instrument.

With its strange repeated and oscillating notes, the second movement, marked *Vivo*, shimmers with semitonal shifts and is pointillistic in effect. Finally, a skittering flute sets up the finale, with barking horn, rapid wingbeats as of a demented humming-bird, repeated notes and trillings; and, after a short stretch of nocturnal serenading, the *Quintet* is brought to a short and sudden end.

Hilary Finch



Einar Jóhannesson

Einar Jóhannesson was born in Reykjavik and studied the clarinet at the Reykjavik College of Music and the Royal College of Music in London with Bernard Walton and John MacCaw. There he won the Frederic Thurston prize, awarded in memory of the great English clarinetist. In 1976 he won a competition to participate in Sir Yehudi Menuhin's Live Music Now, and three years later he was awarded the Sonning Prize for young Nordic Soloists. He is one of the clarinetists featured in Pamela Weston's book *Clarinet Virtuosi of Today*. He has appeared as soloist and chamber musician all over the world and recorded for various radio and television networks, often presenting pieces especially written for him. Einar Jóhannesson was principal clarinet of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra from 1980–2012 and is a founding member of the internationally recognized ensemble, the Reykjavik Wind Quintet.



Bryndís Halla Gylfadóttir

Bryndís Halla Gylfadóttir graduated from the Reykjavik College of Music in 1984. She continued her studies at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston with Colin Carr and Laurence Lesser and after finishing her master's degree took up the position of principal cello in the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. She has appeared as a soloist and chamber musician in many European countries, Japan and North America, often with Trio Nordica of which she is a founding member. She has won several awards for her playing and recordings. Composers, both Icelandic and of other nationalities are especially fond of writing for her and having their works, ranging from chamber music pieces to concertos given their premières by her.



Robyn Koh

Robyn Koh was educated at Chetham's School of Music in Manchester. She made her début on the piano at the age of sixteen in Moscow, performing also in Kiev and Leningrad. Four years later she graduated with honours from the Royal Academy of Music in London on both piano and harpsichord having studied with Hamish Milne and Virginia Black. Post-graduate studies followed at the Royal Northern College of Music and at the Mozarteum, Salzburg with Kenneth Gilbert. Robyn Koh has been the recipient of many awards including from the Craxton Memorial Trust and the Young Concert Artist's Trust. She has performed in Europe, South-East Asia, the United States and the United Kingdom and has broadcast for various international radio stations. Based in London, she is very much in demand as a collaborative musician and a teacher.



Örn Magnússon

Örn Magnússon graduated from the Akureyri Music College in the north of Iceland and then went on to further studies in Manchester, Berlin and London for the next six years. He is a highly active and sought after musician, participating in a rich variety of concerts and recordings, both as a soloist and a chamber musician, having performed in Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and many other European countries as well as Japan. He is particularly known for his interest and devotion to Icelandic music, old and new, especially the music of the towering figure amongst Icelandic composers, Jón Leifs, whose complete works for solo piano he has recorded as well as the complete songs for voice and piano with singer Finnur Bjarnason for which they gained the Icelandic Music Prize. Örn Magnússon is currently organist and cantor in the church of Breiðholt in Reykjavik.



Reykjavik Wind Quintet

**Bernharður Wilkinson, Flute • Daði Kolbeinsson, Oboe • Joseph Ognibene, Horn
Einar Jóhannesson, Clarinet • Hafsteinn Guðmundsson, Bassoon**

Based in the world's northernmost capital, the internationally acclaimed Reykjavik Wind Quintet was established in 1981 by its present members, all key players in the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. Individually, they are among the most prominent and active participants in Iceland's vibrant musical community. The RWQ has made its reputation

both at home and abroad, performing at major music festivals in a wide variety of venues throughout Europe, Asia, North America and Australia. Their travels have taken them to some of the world's most renowned concert houses, including Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall and the Sydney Opera House, as well as to the Schleswig-Holstein, Cheltenham and Flanders Festivals.



Manuscript pages from *Fantasia*

Photo: Áskell Másson

Áskell Másson's unique and distinctive expressive fingerprints are nowhere better encountered than in his music for clarinet, here played by his great champion Einar Jóhannesson. *Blik* explores diverse clarinet techniques, not least multiphonics, and continues to be one of his best-loved works whilst the *Sonatina* evokes sombre darkness as well as blithe lyricism. The unusual *Seasons* features the *Darabuka*, or Goblet Drum. The *Trio for clarinet, cello and piano* was written as a companion piece for Beethoven's *Clarinet Trio, Op. 11* and is a haunting dream-dialogue into which Masson has woven Icelandic folk-song.

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Full track details will be found in the booklet

* **WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS**

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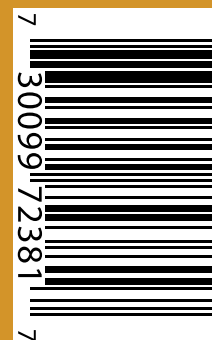
Recorded at Víðistaðakirkja, Hafnarfjörður, Iceland, 11 March 2002 (track 10); 27 June (1, 6) and 17 September 2003 (5, 7–8); 9 January (11–12), 19 April (13), 9 June (2–4), & 29 October 2004 (9)
 Producer: Bjarni Rúnar Bjarnason • Engineer & Editor: Halldór Víkingsson, Fermata Recordings
 Publishers: Editions Bim, Switzerland (1–9, 11–13), ICE-MIC (10) • Booklet notes: Hilary Finch
 Cover image: Lonely__ / istockphoto.com



9.70238

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Playing Time
77:42



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