

# Mythology and Humor:

## The Flute Works of Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson

The composer, teamed with two important flutists, launched Iceland's flute music tradition. His *Kalaís*, written in 1976, is considered the oldest piece in Icelandic solo flute repertoire.

by Jonathan Borja

As musicians, we often think of the wonderful collaboration between composers and performers and how they mutually inspire and spark each other's imaginations. In Iceland, a country with a relatively young tradition in instrumental music, the collaboration between composer Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson (1938–2013) and Canadian flutist Robert Aitken (b. 1939) as well as Brazilian-born Austrian flutist Manuela Wiesler (1955–2006) was pivotal to the development of the combination between Icelandic musical life, flute playing, and avant-garde techniques. Without these two flutists, according to Thorkell,<sup>1</sup> "Icelandic flute music would be much poorer. They did inspire us, composers, both through encouraging us to write it and being magnificent performers."<sup>2</sup> Thorkell composed works for these two performers, and as a pianist, he performed with each of them on numerous occasions. These collaborations led him to understand the performers' individual virtuosity and inspired him to compose three important works: *Kalaís* for solo flute (1976), *Olsórraell* for flute and piano (1982), and *Finnskur poki* for flute and piano (1985).

As a composer, teacher, pianist, critic, and radio commentator, Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson worked throughout his career to promote modern Icelandic music. He studied piano, violin, and organ at the Reykjavík College of Music; continued his education in the United States at Hamline University, Minnesota; and earned a master's degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. After his graduation, he attended the 1962 seminars at Darmstadt where he attended lectures by Pierre Boulez and György Ligeti. Back in Iceland, he taught at the Reykjavík College of Music, worked for the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, led the Icelandic Information Centre, was chairman of Musica Nova (a concert organization founded in 1959), and served as president of the Society of Icelandic Composers, among many other activities.<sup>3</sup> His reluctance to accept an academic position, instead choosing a varied career, simply served the musical life of Iceland. He often compared himself to Haydn—who wrote music in the styles needed for specific occasions—saying, "you must write music that people want to listen to and to play."<sup>4</sup>

While heading Musica Nova, Thorkell's programming was innovative at a time when the standard repertoire had yet to be performed in Iceland. While there is a long tradition of vocal music in Iceland, instrumental music there is relatively new; the first documented concert of instrumental music in the country occurred in 1876.<sup>5</sup> Professional instrumental ensembles existed in Iceland since the 1920s, as well as performances by touring groups. But the story of Icelandic instrumental music (in both composition and performance) really begins in the 1940s when composers living in that country began to write orchestral and chamber music.<sup>6</sup> When Thorkell returned to Iceland in the 1960s, therefore, the cultural life of the country was primed for what his generation was prepared to do. He devoted his career into making Iceland a center for contemporary music.

Canadian flutist Robert Aitken first came to Iceland in the summer of 1968 and remained a regular visitor for many years to come, so much so that people began to think that he lived there. He became friends with several of the young composers in Iceland, including Thorkell, with whom he would later tour.

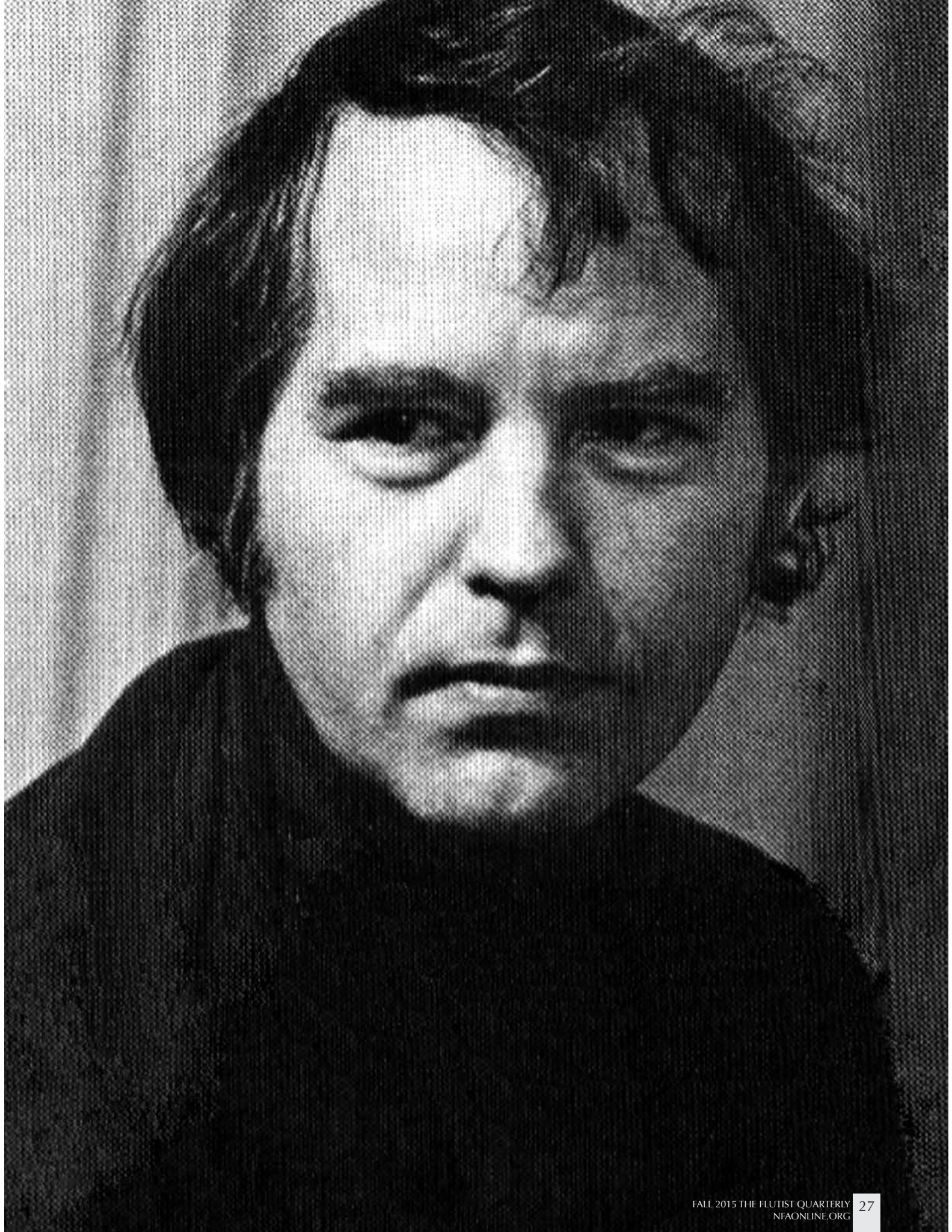
It was on one of these tours in 1976 that *Kalaís* was composed.<sup>7</sup> *Kalaís* (or *Calais*, as it is often spelled) is considered the oldest piece in Icelandic solo flute repertoire.<sup>8</sup> As in many of Thorkell's works, the title comes from Greek mythology. In this case, Kalaís is the son of Boreas, the North Wind, who is shown in Icelandic maps playing the lute. Thorkell, however, argued that the flute was a better instrument for Boreas and chose to portray him as a flutist instead.<sup>9</sup> Like many works of this decade (not just in Iceland), *Kalaís* is filled with extended techniques such as whistle tones, glissandi, key slaps, noises through the mouth (such as a kissing sound), singing while playing, inhaling with the nose while uttering the consonant "s," and exhaling into the flute (which Thorkell labels ingressive and egressive breathing). (See example 1, page 28).<sup>10</sup>



Above: In spring 1974, Thorkell (left), flutist Robert Aitken, and cellist Hafliði Hallgrímsson created the Icelandic Canadian Ensemble (I.C.E.), which toured for several seasons. Right: Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson.

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Example 1. Opening page of *Kalaís* with the ingressive and egressive breathing marks.

The score consists of six staves of music. The first staff is labeled 'flute solo' and includes a 10-second 'S' (Sustained) section and a 6-second 'F' (Faded) section, with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The second staff features 'key clicks' for 4 seconds, followed by a 6-second 'S' section and a 4-second 'F' section, with a dynamic marking of *f*. The third staff includes 't k t k' markings, a 10-second section with 'move away from mouthpiece' and a dynamic of *f*, followed by a 6-second section with 'SH (ee) move to mouthpiece' and a dynamic of *pp*. The fourth staff has a 6-second section with '↑(oo)' and a dynamic of *ff*, followed by a 4-second section with 'T "breathy"' and a dynamic of *pp*, and another 4-second section with 'SH (we, we, we, .....)' and instructions 'move away from m thpiece' and 'move to m thpiece'. The fifth staff has a 6-second section with '↓ dl, dl, dl, .....', a dynamic of *f*, and a *gliss.* section. The sixth staff includes 'accel.' and 'rit.' markings with dynamic markings of *f* and *p*.

Example 2. Final section of *Kalaís*, in which the “unseen assistant” plays the wind tube while the flutist plays in shakuhachi style.

The score consists of three staves. The first staff is labeled 'wind hose\*' and includes the instruction 'take off mouthpiece; play shakuhachi fashion, finger pitches indicated' and '(approximate pitches)'. The second staff is labeled 'w. hose' and includes 'tk, tk' markings and a 2-second section with 'away from flute' and a dynamic of *p*. The third staff is also labeled 'w. hose' and includes 'tk, tk' markings and a 2-second section with 'away from flute' and a dynamic of *p*. The music features triplet rhythms and dynamic markings of *f* and *p*.

\* swung by an unseen assistant, alternating slow and fast, few or more overtones.

Breathing is an essential part of living—and of flute playing—and to Thorkell, this work represented a type of treatise in breathing.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most challenging section of the work is its last 27 bars, for which the composer asks that the flute be played like a shakuhachi by removing the head joint and blowing through the tube of the body of the flute. Thorkell’s sense of humor heard here consists of a quotation from the Intermezzo of Brahms’ Third Symphony.<sup>12</sup> Also, at this moment, an off-stage assistant plays a wind hose, creating a hauntingly beautiful end to the work. (See example 2, below left). In *Kalaís*, Thorkell explores various ideas that will become staples in some of his subsequent flute works, including humor, extended techniques to serve a musical purpose, and the use of mythology to create a sense of narrative.

By the time *Kalaís* was composed, Brazilian-born Austrian flutist Manuela Wiesler had been living in Iceland for three years, and many composers had already written works for her.<sup>13</sup> Wiesler was the dedicatee of most of Thorkell’s works for flute, including his flute concertos *Euridice* (1979) and *Columbine* (1982); works for flute and piano: *Olsórraell* (1982, also available as a solo flute work) and *Finnskur poki* (1985); and works for solo flute including *Til Manuelu* (1981) and *Ömmulag* (1995).<sup>14</sup> As Thorkell did with Aitken, he spent a substantial amount of time touring and recording with Wiesler. Thorkell described Wiesler as “an outstanding flutist and a ‘difficult’ person.”<sup>15</sup> However, from looking at the music, their discussions were clearly filled with not only strong views but also humor and respect.

One of these works, *Olsórraell* (Oslo Reel), was composed while Thorkell and Wiesler were in Oslo. The flutist recalled:

We were rehearsing Thorkell’s flute concerto *Euridice* with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. After the dress rehearsal we were sitting in a restaurant and discussing ceaselessly again. As we left we improvised a proper dance. “That was a real Raell,” said Thorkell. “A what?” I countered and was informed the very next day by means of a sheet music. “With compliments, a Raell!”<sup>16</sup>

Example 3. Opening page of Olsórraell, where one can see the two musical ideas that make up the rest of the work.

The first system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is a single melodic line in treble clef, marked with a tempo of  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 132$  and a dynamic of *f*. The middle and bottom staves are a grand staff in treble and bass clefs, with a dynamic of *mf*. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature.

The second system consists of three staves. The top staff is a single melodic line in treble clef, marked with a dynamic of *pp*. The middle and bottom staves are a grand staff in treble and bass clefs, also marked with a dynamic of *pp*. The music continues with the same key signature and time signature.

The third system consists of three staves. The top staff is a single melodic line in treble clef, marked with a dynamic of *f* and a *va* (ritardando) marking. The middle and bottom staves are a grand staff in treble and bass clefs, marked with a dynamic of *f*. The music continues with the same key signature and time signature.

The fourth system consists of three staves. The top staff is a single melodic line in treble clef, marked with a dynamic of *p*. The middle and bottom staves are a grand staff in treble and bass clefs, marked with a dynamic of *f*. The music continues with the same key signature and time signature.



**Example 4.** The final section of *Oslórraell*, in which the flutist is to sing and play, do a tongue click, and finally perform a foot stomp.

The musical score is divided into four systems. The first system shows the flute part with a melodic line and the piano part with a simple accompaniment. The tempo is marked "in tempo" and the dynamics range from *poco rit.* to *f*. The second system continues the melodic development in the flute, with the piano part providing harmonic support. The third system features a more complex rhythmic pattern in the flute, marked with "Sva" and "rep. ad lib.". The fourth system concludes with a "tongue click" and a "tap foot" instruction, indicating the final gesture of the piece.



Thorkell Sigurbjornsson with Manuela Wiesler.

In the flute and piano version, an argument is clearly going on between the two instruments. (Thorkell would have played piano.) The work is based on two musical ideas: 1) a fanfare-like figure with the interval of a major seventh in the high register of the flute and 2) a jig-like passage in the low register. The first musical idea represents the argument in the piece; as the composer repeats the figure, it becomes rhythmically diminished, giving the impression of a tantrum-like conversation. (See example 3, page 29.) The jig-like section follows. The two ideas alternate back and forth as shriek-like sounds increase in the flute.

The harmonies are quartal (perhaps associated to a Norwegian hardanger fiddle), with octatonic scales and almost whole-tone scales.<sup>17</sup> Toward the end of the piece, and to reinforce the idea of an argument, the piano part slowly quiets down, while the flute part moves towards extended techniques such as singing-and-playing and tongue clicks. One might believe the flute emerges victorious in this musical argument, for the final gesture is a foot stomp from the flutist—a humorous move. (See example 4.) Even in a work with more than one player, Thorkell avoids the use of meter throughout, a dimension that also appears in other works.

This lack of notated meter also appears in *Finniskur poki* or Finnish Bag, written in 1985 for a Swedish project called "In the Realm of the Winds." As in *Kalaís*, Thorkell turns to mythology for a narrative. According to Icelandic lore, Finnish sea captains carry a magic bag with them that can be opened when favorable winds are needed. However, the magic wind must be used wisely; otherwise, the ship will sink and all will drown.<sup>18</sup> *Finniskur poki*, unlike *Kalaís*, includes very few extended techniques and more aleatoric elements. Thorkell offers different musical cells in the flute and piano parts that are to be repeated a specific number of times. Rhythmically, these cells do not line up, and in performance, the end result will always be different. (See example 5.)

In this piece without an indication of meter, Thorkell sets the mood by marking "tempo di barcarolle." After a piano introduction, the solo flute

Example 5. One of the aleatoric sections of *Finnskur poki*, where the flute and piano parts do not align.

The image displays a handwritten musical score for an aleatoric section of the piece "Finnskur poki". The score is written on multiple staves, with the top two staves representing the flute and the bottom two staves representing the piano. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Key annotations include "lento" at the top, "flautas" on the flute staff, "tempo 10" and "pno stop" on the piano staff, and numerical markers "15..." and "8..." indicating specific measures. The score illustrates a section where the flute and piano parts do not align, as indicated by the caption.



Example 6. In the final measures of *Finnskur poki*, the composer notates “Glugg! Glugg!” to depict the crew drowning.



## Flute-Related Works by Thorkell

- Ballade* for flute, tenor, viola, and guitar (1960)  
*For Renée* for flute, cello, piano, and percussion (1973) (New York: Boosey and Hawkes)  
*Kalaïs* for solo flute (1976) (London: Universal Edition)  
*Solstice* for flute, marimba, and double bass (1976) (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre)  
*Euridice* for flute and orchestra (1979) (Norsk musikforlag, Oslo)  
*Til Manuelu* for solo flute (1980) (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre)  
*Columbine* for flute and strings (1982) (Norsk musikforlag, Oslo)  
*Oslórraell* for flute solo or flute and piano (1982) (Norsk musikforlag, Oslo)  
*Liongate* for flute and orchestra (1983)  
*Hverafulgar* for flute, guitar, and cello (1984)  
*Hraera* for wind quintet (1985) (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre)  
*Finnskur poki* for flute and piano (1985) (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre)  
*Six Icelandic Folk Songs* for flute, violin, and cello (1988) (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre)  
*Ömmulag* for solo flute (1995) (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre)  
*Örlagaflug* for flute, clarinet, and string quartet (1998)  
*Dropaspil* for two flutes (2002)  
*Farewell* for flute, viola, and harp (2007)

introduces a melody that is then repeated with piano accompaniment. The following section is contrastingly fast (perhaps the opening of the wind bag) where the piano and the flute are to play short musical cells that are to be repeated. A version of the opening flute melody returns, but the ideas are quickly inverted (or taking a down-turn) and lead to a new section with repeated cells that culminates in a piano cluster followed by the flutists making a “glugg! glugg!” sound (as indicated in the score) to depict the drowning of the ship’s crew. (See example 6).<sup>19</sup>

When looking at Thorkell’s works for flute, even in a short survey, it is evident that certain elements are common (such as the avoidance of regular meter and extended techniques) but, like his humor, his philosophy was not to subscribe to a specific school. As he stated, “I have not subscribed to any manifestos or a credo in music. But I do not feel inclined to repeat what I have already heard. I want to compose something I have not heard before. It has to do with curiosity.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the single aspect that can be traced through Thorkell’s flute works is creating contrast through playfulness. Quoting a Brahms symphony or having the flutist stomp on the stage reflect this approach. Playfulness exists in all of Thorkell’s works, not just the ones for flute. It was a trait of Thorkell’s personality, that of a man who led a happy life.<sup>21</sup>

*Jonathan Borja is assistant professor of music at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse, where he teaches flute and music history. He holds degrees from the University of Missouri–Kansas City and Principia College, where his primary teachers were Mary Posses and Marie Jureit-Beamish.*

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Sigurbjörnsson, Thorkell. *Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson: Short Stories for Flute and Piano*.

Performed by Jonathan Borja and Kristín Jónína Taylor. CD, Smekkleysa SMK 85, 2015. This recording contains *Kalaïs*, *Oslórraell* (flute and piano version), and *Finnskur poki*, along with other works for flute and piano and solo flute.

Sigurbjörnsson, Thorkell. *To Manuela: Works for Solo Flute*. Performed by Manuela Wiesler. CD, AB BIS 456, 1995.

This recording includes Thorkell’s *Til Manuelu* for solo flute and the solo flute version of *Oslórraell*.

Sigurbjörnsson, Thorkell. *Liongate: Manuela Plays Flute Concertos by Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson*. Conducted by Tamás Vetö. Performed by Manuela Wiesler. South Jutland Symphony Orchestra. CD, AB BIS 709, 1995.

This recording includes all flute concertos by Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson and *Kalais*.

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Wiesler, Manuela. Notes to *To Manuela*. Trans. Andre Barnett. CD, AB BIS 456, 1995.

## ENDNOTES

1. It is customary in Iceland to refer to people by first name. As a country that uses the patronymic system, surnames in Iceland serve as a lineage designator, which is slightly different than a family name. In this case, Sigurbjörnsson means that the composer is the son of Sigurbjörn.

2. Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson, quoted in Ewa Murawska.

3. Bergendal, 94–95.

4. Bergendal, 93.

5. Bergendal, 15.

6. Bergendal, 55.

7. Murawska, 30–32.

8. Murawska, 43.

9. Bergendal, 99.

10. Interestingly enough, in the 1876 concert in Iceland, a reviewer said that the instrumentalist had done both singing and playing, an activity that would likely not be seen in the future of Icelandic music. Bergendal, 16.

11. Murawska, 89.

12. Bergendal, 99.

13. She lived there 1973–1983. Murawska, 34.

14. Murawska, 43–44.

15. Murawska, 88.

16. The title makes reference a dance such as a Scottish reel. In this case, Thorkell was simply making a reference to the dance that he and Manuela did at the restaurant. Wiesler, 1995.

17. Kristín Jónína Taylor, notes to *Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson: Short Stories for Flute and Piano*, 2015.

18. Taylor, 2015.

19. *Finnstur poki* is often left out of work lists, perhaps because of the complex nature of the aleatoric sections of the work that the author, along with Kristín Taylor, worked out with the composer for the first recording, *Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson: Short Stories for Flute and Piano*.

20. Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson, as quoted in Smith, 132.

21. Murawska, 89.

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