

New Music Concerts presents

# Grettir

An Icelandic Saga

Sunday January 8, 2006 • Betty Oliphant Theatre

NMI

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New Music Concerts  
Robert Aitken, director

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Greetings to all those taking part in the **New Music Concerts** series in Toronto.

For more than three decades, this concert series has brought the work of contemporary composers to life. It continues to celebrate musical and cultural diversity by presenting performances of new music by talented composers from across Canada and around the world.

As Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for Status of Women, I offer my congratulations on New Music Concerts' 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary season. Many thanks to the organizers and, particularly, the talented composers and musicians from across the country and abroad who have helped make this concert series a success.

Enjoy the concerts!

Liza Frulla

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New Music Concerts  
Robert Aitken, director

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35th season | 290th event  
Sunday January 8, 2006  
**Betty Oliphant Theatre**  
Two Performances  
at 2:30 and 8:00 pm  
Illuminating Introduction at 7:15

New Music Concerts presents

# Grettir

An Icelandic Saga

Guest Artists: **Cast of the Bayreuth Youth Festival**  
**Gudmundur Emilsson**, artistic director

**Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson** (Iceland 1938) – *Grettir* \* (2004)  
a chamber opera in three acts for 5 singers and 6 instruments  
libretto by **Bödvar Gudmundsson**  
based on the Icelandic “Saga of Grettir”  
\* North American premiere

Spes: **Regína Unnur Ólafsdóttir**  
Elja: **Dóra Steinunn Ármannsdóttir**  
Dromund: **Bragi Bergthorsson**  
Old Man and Bishop: **David Ingi Ragnarsson**  
Eigurd: **Hugi Jónsson**

Ensemble conducted by **Gudmundur Emilsson**

New Music Concerts thanks **Roger D. Moore** for his generous support;  
**Gail Einarson-McCleery**, Honorary Consul of Iceland in Toronto,  
for all her efforts in making the Toronto performance of *Grettir* possible;  
**Markus Örn Antonsson**, Icelandic Ambassador to Canada,  
for hosting a reception in the lobby following the evening performance;  
and **Viking Tree Services** for providing a White Ash log for the set.  
**Icelandic Sponsors:** The Music Fund of the Icelandic Ministry of Culture;  
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# New Music Concerts

Robert Aitken, c.m., Artistic Director

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## PRECIS

Produced for the Young Artists Festival in Bayreuth in August 2004, the opera *Grettir* is based on the medieval Icelandic *Saga of Grettir the Strong*; poet-warrior and outlaw. The backbone of the story takes place in Iceland around 1000 AD and brings the audience to the outlaw's remarkable places of refuge. Iceland's natural wonders are constantly in the background, visually and aurally and literally through recent sound recordings - soundscapes. Volcanoes, glaciers, mysterious caves, lava fields, hot-springs and waterfalls and the high winds of the North-Atlantic all play an important dramatic role. Grettir and his family were international figures. Their Epic begins in Norway, moves to Iceland — from where America was discovered in 1000 AD — and brought to a dramatic climax in Istanbul, Turkey. The work thus encompasses the entire world as known by the Vikings of old and is a timeless, universal drama; a work fully comparable to those of Dante and Shakespeare. Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson is one of Iceland's most important composers. A number of Sigurbjörnsson's works have been composed for Robert Aitken and New Music Concerts first performed his music during a European tour back in 1976, giving the premiere of *Solstice* at the Nordic Music Days Festival in Reykjavik.

## GRETTIR — GENESIS AND SYNOPSIS

By Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson

I was a child with measles, when I first read the *Saga of Grettir*, the story of the greatest and most famous outlaw in Iceland. It was not easy reading at that time. There were also those incomprehensible verses, supposedly by Grettir, full of obscure interlocations [kennings]. But, my father was also sick, so he had time to help me understand them. In my childish way, I felt an immediate sympathy with Grettir. Like him, I wasn't allowed to be with other children, I was sick in bed. I could easily pretend trying to fight off enemies, both awake and asleep! I could easily associate my itching measles spots with evil witchcraft from ancient times!

As a teenager I read the "Saga of Grettir" with more objectivity, but also with sympathy. One had begun to understand a little about the psyche, the inevitable hubris of a classical hero.

His mother protects him through the atrocities he committed as a child. Instead of serious punishments, reprimands, or good motherly advice, she gives him a sword.

An opera about Grettir seemed to me to be out of the question! One could not imagine Grettir singing his own praises!

Fifteen years ago, when I was reading the “Saga of Grettir”, I realized that one could retell it simply in the words and tones of his half-brother, Dromund. Thus an idea for a ballad-opera was born.

Fortunately, the poet Bödvar Gudmundsson, who previously collaborated with me, agreed to write the text using the appendix to the “Saga of Grettir” as the starting point.

It all starts in Constantinople: Dromund, Grettir’s half-brother, has searched all across Europe for the murderer of his brother, Grettir. According to Nordic laws at that time, it was Dromund’s rightful duty to avenge him. He has never seen the killer Ongul, although he and Dromund heard Ongul boasting about having killed the strongest and most inaccessible outlaw in Iceland. Dromund jumps up, and chops off Ongul’s head in mid-sentence. Immediately thrown into jail, Dromund is left to rot for eternity with another prisoner. But he will forever sing his brother’s praises and entertain his fellow prisoner.

Here is where the ballad opera in three acts begins: in a filthy Constantinople dungeon, with Dromund singing his hopes of escape. Spes, a rich woman, and her maid pass by the prison. Spes hears Dromund’s beautiful voice, and she is enchanted. She buys the prisoners’ freedom on the condition that Dromund will sing for her, for ever and ever.

Act Two sees Dromund furtively visiting Spes, entertaining her and her maid Elja with fantastic stories of Grettir. The old prisoner has by now transformed into Spes’ jealous husband, Sigurd. Although he suspects that his wife is unfaithful, he can never catch her with Dromund. Spes threatens to seek a divorce from Sigurd, if he continues to accuse her of infidelity.

The beginning of Act Three reveals Spes in her garden, where Dromund secretly visits her, and continues to entertain her with more fantastic stories of Grettir. Sigurd, however, almost catches the pair together, but Dromund manages to escape. Infuriated with Sigurd, Spes runs out to seek a divorce. On the way to the Bishop in Hagia Sophia, Spes encounters a mud puddle. Spes asks a tramp (Dromund in disguise) to carry her across. This he does, but stumbles and almost falls, touching Spes’ thigh. She accuses the tramp of behaving indecently, but the Bishop appears and calms her. A moment later she can swear with good conscience that she has never been unfaithful to her husband. Nobody else has ever come close to her, except that tramp who touched her thigh. Everybody, including the Bishop, could see that it had been an accident. After hearing of her plight with Sigurd, Spes is granted a divorce. Dromund reveals himself and immediately proposes to her

and Spes accepts his hand in marriage. Elja has also some quiet thoughts to herself: “Now Sigurd is also free. Hadn’t he always shown his liking for me?” The Bishop thinks that this is all happening too quickly: “But who am I to put a sour note into good harmony?” he mutters.

## CREATIVE TEAM

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### Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson, composer



Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson was born in Reykjavik. He began his music studies with violin and piano at the Reykjavik School of Music, with further studies in the United States. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, followed by a Master’s Degree from the University of Illinois, with additional summer courses in Nice, Darmstadt, and at the Tanglewood Festival. Since 1962 Sigurbjörnsson has taught at the Reykjavik College of Music, and, in recent years, at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts as well. In addition to being a pianist and an organizer of musical events, Sigurbjörnsson served for over thirty years as a moderator of New Music with the Iceland National Radio. As one of the most important composers of contemporary music in Northern Europe, Sigurbjörnsson worked tirelessly to promote new music and has influenced a new generation of composers and artists. His oeuvre ranges from simple children’s pieces to large orchestral works which have been performed all over the world. Sigurbjörnsson is a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music and a Doctor of Fine Arts from Hamline University.

### Bödvar Gudmundsson, librettist



Bödvar Gudmundsson studied Icelandic history, literature, and linguistics at the University of Iceland and The Christian Albrechts University in Kiel, Germany. He received his Candidatus Magisterii degree from The University of Iceland in 1969. Winner of 1996 Icelandic Literary Award for the “Tree of Life”, Bödvar is a well-established Icelandic poet, playwright, and novelist. He has published 6 volumes of poetry; 2 collections of short stories, 3 novels, and has had 10 of his plays presented on stage. He has also translated novels, plays and poetry from German, English, Swedish, and Danish, among them works of Cole Porter, Bertold Brecht, Heinrich Böll, and H. C. Andersen. Most recently, Bödvar has

mainly been working on a collection of letters from Icelandic emigrants in Canada and the U. S. A. His recently published books include "The Icelandic America Letters" and "Where the Winds Dwell".

#### **Gudmundur Emilsson, conductor**



Dr. Gudmundur Emilsson was born in 1951. He received his early musical education at the Reykjavik College of Music and graduated with honors in 1971. He continued studies in the United States, receiving a Bachelor's Degree with high distinction in 1975, and in 1981, a Masters' degree from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. In 1983 he was awarded a Doctor of Musical Arts degree, specializing in orchestral conducting, from Indiana University.

In 1982 Emilsson founded the Icelandic Chamber Orchestra, which specialized in 20th Century music, especially of the Nordic countries. The orchestra premiered many new works and toured at home and abroad. He served as Director of the Icelandic Chamber Orchestra from 1982-92. Since 1982 Emilsson has conducted opera performances at the National Theatre of Iceland and in continental Europe. In 1997 Emilsson conducted the first western opera ever premiered in Beijing: *Moonlight Island*, by Nordic Prize winner, Atli Heimir Sveinsson. In 1989 he was appointed Head of Music at the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service. In this capacity for eight years, he was responsible for all studio and concert recordings of foreign and native artists, choirs and ensembles, live international concert broadcasts, and recordings of the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra and other orchestras, and artists. From 1999-2001 Emilsson served as Cultural Director of the Grindavik – Blue Lagoon area, Iceland's renowned tourist region. Since 1976 Emilsson has acted as a private advisor to His Excellency Dr. Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, President of Iceland, and conducted presidential concerts in Latvia, Poland, and the United States.

#### **Dr. Sveinn Einarsson, director**



Dr. Sveinn Einarsson was born in Reykjavik in 1934. He received his education at the Universities of Stockholm and Sorbonne, Paris where he studied Comparative Literature, Philosophy, and Theatre Research, with further studies in Oxford, Copenhagen, and Reykjavik. He was awarded his doctorate in 1964. During the 1960s Einarsson served as

Artistic Director of the Reykjavik Theatre Company and Principal of its Theatre School. He was Artistic Director and General Manager of The National Theatre of Iceland from 1972 until 1983. In addition to being counselor for the Ministry of Culture 1983-1989, Einarsson worked as Director of Program Production, Icelandic State Television 1989-1993, and as Artistic Director of the Reykjavik Arts Festival 1998-2000. Since 2001, Einarsson has served as a member of the Executive Board of UNESCO and Director (ad hoc) of the Icelandic Culture House. He has served on the governing boards of the International Theatre Institute 1979-81, Nordic Theatre Union 1978-82, The Swedish-Icelandic Fund for Cultural Collaboration from 1994 to the present. Einarsson has been President of the Icelandic National Commission for UNESCO since 1994.

As a stage director, Einarsson has directed over 85 productions of works by Aiskylos, Sophocles, Molière, Ibsen, Strindberg, Beckett, Gombrowicz, Tardieu, Mrozek, Schéhadé, Ghelderode, Buero Vallejo, and Icelandic playwrights, Johann Sigurjonsson, Mattias Jochumsson, David Stefansson, and his own plays in Iceland, the Nordic Countries, and England. In addition to first performances of plays by Jokull Jacobsson, Halldor Laxness, Oddur Bjornsson, Jonas Arnason, Árni Ibsen, and Kjartan Ragnarsson, Einarsson has directed operas by Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, Atli Heimir Sveinsson and L. Udbye. His productions have been at festivals in Caracas, Toronto, Seoul (Theatre of Nations), London, Bonn, Tallin, Copenhagen, Oslo, Helsinki, Aarhus, Trondheim, and Torhavn. Einarsson is the author of eight plays for the stage. Several of his books have become standard works of theatre studies. He has written of his experiences as theatre manager with "My Nine Years Down There" 1984, and "My Eleven Years Up There" (2000). Einarsson's most recent projects include productions with the Bandamenn Theatre Group of *The Amlodi Saga* (1996) and *Edda.Ris* (2001). In 1997 he produced and staged the first performances of the oldest Norwegian opera to celebrate the 1000th anniversary of the founding of Trondheim. Working with the distinguished designer, Elin Edda Arnadottir, Einarsson staged Racine's *Phaedra* (1999) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which was awarded as the finest theatre production in Iceland in 2002. Since 2003 Einarsson has dedicated much of his time to working with UNESCO and preparing the festival "De glace et feu", a celebration of Icelandic culture in Paris in the autumn, 2004.

## SINGERS



**Regína Unnur Ólafsdóttir**, soprano was born 1982 in Reykjavík. She studied piano from age 8 at The New School of Music and later at The School of the Musicians' Union, where Svana Víkingsdóttir was her teacher. Regína has sung in many choirs: Gradualekór Langholtskirkju, Kór Langholtskirkju, and was one of the founding members of Graduale Nobili under the leadership of Jón Stefánsson, choir director.

Regína started her studies at The Reykjavík Academy of Vocal Arts in 1998. Her teachers there were Ólöf Kolbrún Hardardóttir and Kolbrún Sæmundsdóttir. Regína graduated in the spring of 2003. Regína sang the part of Zweite Knabe in the production of The Icelandic Opera of *The Magic Flute* by Mozart in the fall of 2001. In the fall of 2003 Regína went to The United States of America on a Rotary scholarship and studied at The University of Georgia. Her main teacher there was Dr. Stephanie Tingler and her accompanist was Paolo André Gualdi. She also attended lessons with Dr. Gregory Broughton and Stephanie Pierce. Regína returned to The Reykjavík Academy of Vocal Arts in 2004 and finished her ABRSM diploma in the spring of 2005. Her teachers were Ólöf Kolbrún Hardardóttir and Kristinn Örn Kristinsson. While attending The Reykjavík Academy of Vocal Arts Regína sang the roles of the Countessa in *Le Nozze di Figaro* by Mozart, The Princess in *l'Enfant et les Sortilèges* by Ravel and Mimí in *La Bohème* by Puccini. Regína has participated in masterclasses with Mark Wildman (2004), Kristinn Sigmundsson and Jónas Ingimundarson (2005) and Robin Stapleton (2005). At the moment Regína is studying in Copenhagen in Denmark with Kirsten Buhl Moeller, professor at Det Kongelige Musik Konservatorium and Ulrich Stärk.



**Dóra Steinunn Ármannsdóttir**, was born on December the 14th 1983. She took piano lessons from Bjarni Jónatansson at The New Music School. At eight years old she became a member of the Choirschool of Langholtskirkja, founded and conducted by Jón Stefánsson. From there she went on to the Graduale Choir of Langholtskirkja and then the Graduale Nobili until the age of eighteen. Dóra Steinunn studied classical singing at The Reykjavík Academy of Singing and Vocal Arts, graduating in 2004. Her teachers there were Ólöf Kolbrún Hardardóttir and Kolbrún Sæmundsdóttir. Dóra Steinunn graduated from Menntaskólinn við Sund (High-School/College) in 2003. She attended Master Classes with Kristinn Sigmundsson and Jónas Ingimundarson in 2002 and 2003. Finally she attended

Robin Stapleton's Master-Class in 2003 where she was also given the opportunity to sing for Dame Kiri Te Kanawa. Dóra Steinunn sang with the Choir of The Reykjavík Academy in the performance of *Aida*. She sang the leading role in *Stúlkán í vitanum* (The Girl in the Lighthouse) by Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson, autumn 2000, and the third boy in *The Magic Flute* by W. A. Mozart at The Icelandic Opera, in the autumn of 2001. She also sang with The Summer Opera in Reykjavík 2002 and 2003. She sang both the role of the First Witch and also in the choir in *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell. Dóra Steinunn sang Amore in *The Coronation of Poppea* by Monteverdi. Moreover she performed as a soloist on the 50th anniversary of The Reykjavík Academy in March 2004. Dóra Steinunn sang in the choir of the Icelandic Opera in *Sweeney Todd* by Sondheim in 2004 and *Tosca* by Puccini in 2005. She sang with The Icelandic Opera Choir in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at Carnegie Hall in November 2004. Finally she performs in the trio, *Næturdrottningar* (Queens of the Night). At the present, she continues her studies in Vienna.



**Bragi Bergthorsson** was born in Reykjavík in 1981. He did his undergraduate studies at the Reykjavík College of Music with Thorunn Gudmundsdóttir. Later he finished his M.Mus degree of the Postgraduate Vocal Training course at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London under the guidance of Adrian Thompson. He is currently studying with Rudolf Piernay on the Opera Course at Guildhall. Bragi's operatic experiences include Zsupan from *Der Zigeunerbaron* (Strauss), Kilian from *Der Freischütz* (Weber) and Fracasso from *La Finta Semplice* (Mozart). He has sung the role of Dromundur before in Bayreuth, Germany the summer of 2004.



**Hugí Jónsson** was born in Reykjavík in 1979. Hugí started his music education at the age of nine. In 2001 he began studying at the Reykjavík Academy of Singing and Vocal Arts with Bergthór Pálsson until 2003. Since then, Hugí continues studies with Alina Dubik at The New Music School. He has performed in student productions such as *Le Nozze di Figaro* as Almaviva.



**David Ingi Ragnarsson** was born in 1983. In 1993-94 he sang in the St. Lukes Church Choir while living in Chicago. He is currently studying at The Reykjavík Academy of Singing and Vocal Arts with Sigurdur Bragason. He has also studied with Snæbjörg Snæbjarnardóttir. He sang with the Reykjavík Chamber Choir from 2001-05, often as a soloist.

## INSTRUMENTALISTS

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**Antonia Havesi** was born in Hungary. She began piano studies at the age of 10, and graduated in 1988 from the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest with a Masters Degree in choral conducting and the teaching of singing and theory. In 1990 she studied the organ with Prof. Otto Bruckner at the Music Academy in Graz, Austria. She has participated in many courses, and been active as an organist and accompanist all over Europe. She has participated in Master Classes with Dalton Baldwin, Lorraine Nubar, and Olivera Miljakovic, and attended courses at the Academie Internationale d'Été de Nice. Antonia moved to Iceland in 1992. In 1998 she published "25 Organ Pieces", and won first prize in a competition for a hymn, celebrating the 1000th anniversary of Christianity in Iceland. She is an organist of the Church of Hafnarfjordur, the Artistic Director of the Noon Concerts series, sponsored by the Cultural Office of the city of Hafnarfjordur, and perhaps the most active repetiteur (including The Icelandic Opera) in Iceland today.

**Gudny Th. Gudmundsdottir**, violin. Gudny currently studies at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, where her teacher is Sigrun Edvaldsdottir. In 2001-2004 she studied under the guidance of Prof. Ildiko Moog in Freiburg, Germany. She has attended several masterclasses among others with Earl Carlyss, James Dunham, Jan Talich, Kati Sebestyen and Almita Vamos.

**Gudrún Rutsdottir** has played the trombone from the age of 10. Her main teachers have been Sveinn Birgisson, trumpet player, Lárus Sveinsson, trumpet player, Oddur Björnsson, first trombone in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra and Sigurdur Thorbergsson, second trombone in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. She has participated in master classes with Nitzan Haroz, Ben van Dijk, Thomas Dahlkvist, John Kotka, and others. Gudrún has just finished her B. Mus. degree from the Icelandic Academy of the Arts where her main teacher was Sigurdur Thorbergsson. She is currently studying in Sweden.

**Sigrún Erla Egilsdottir** was born 1971 and started playing cello when she was eight years of age. Her first teacher was Pétur Thorvaldsson. After finishing a BA-degree in Psychology at the University of Iceland, she returned to the cello. Her teachers have been Lovísa Fjeldsted, Sigurgeir Agnarsson, Shauna Rolston and Roland Vamos. Sigrún Erla Egilsdottir completed a B. Mus. degree from the Iceland Academy of the Arts, spring 2004.

Clarinetist **Sigurjón Bergthór Dadson** was born in 1984. He studied with Kjartan Óskarsson at the Reykjavík College of Music where he graduated in the spring of 2005. He now studies at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm with Hermann Stefánsson.

**Oddur Thorri Vidarsson** began music studies at the Reykjavik School of Music, studying music theory, classical guitar, and eventually electric bass guitar. His teachers were Petur Jonasson for five years, and then Pall Eyolfsson. He played in the school band and also the band of Sigursvein's Music School. He played in the band, Jacob Hagedorn-Olsen. Advanced music studies continued at the Musician's Union School, where Vidarsson studied classical music theory, jazz harmony, and electric bass. Johann Asmundsson, bass player in *Mezzoforte*, was his teacher in 2004-2005.

## PRODUCTION TEAM

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**Elin Edda Arnadottir**, Stage and Costume Design, studied fine arts in Reykjavik, and theatre design at the Wimbledon School of Arts in London. In addition to being a trained dancer, Arnadottir has designed major shows for the Icelandic Dance Company. She has worked for the Iceland National Theatre and The City Theatre for many years, and designed *Three Sisters* by Chekhov and *The Tempest*, by Shakespeare for the Swedish State Theatre in Stockholm. Arnadottir received the Iceland Theatre Award for designing costumes for *Chicago* at the City Theatre in 2004. Arnadottir has worked with Sveinn Einarsson on several occasions, including Racine's *Pbaedra*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and the prize winning production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

**Olafur Haukur Matthiasson**, Stage Technician, is the stage manager of the Small Stage of the Icelandic National Theatre. He has worked for the National Theatre for twenty years.

**Kristin Hauksdottir**, Production Manager, graduated from Mountview Theatre School in 1981. Since then, she has been stage manager at the National Theatre, and has managed numerous productions, the most recent being *The Flying Dutchman*, *Singing in the Rain*, *The Full Monty*, and *Edith Piaf*. In 1996, she served as Production Stage Manager for Iceland's first performance of Richard Wagner's "Ring" under the direction of Wolfgang Wagner.

**Bjorn Bergstein Gudmundsson**, Lighting Design, has been a lighting designer for The National Theatre of Iceland for two decades. He has designed lighting for many productions including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Cyrano De Bergerac*, *The Flying Dutchman*, and *The Celebration*, for which he received the Iceland Theatre Award in 2003.

**Bjarni Bragi**, Sound Design, was born in 1965 in Hafnarfjordur, Iceland. Since 1990 he has worked full time as a sound engineer in various fields of audio. At first, he worked mainly in live-sound for rock and pop bands in Iceland. Asynchronously he worked in the theater, in the field of designing sound and mixing numerous musicals and plays. In 1996 Bjarni Bragi undertook the task to design and build a Mastering-suite in a major recording studio in Reykjavik. Since then, along with recording and live mixing, he has been the head of that department, and mastered and edited hundreds of album releases. His work covers all music styles, from pop and jazz to classical and contemporary music and everything in between.

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Premieres by Palmer, Ristic, Dion & Wuorinen.  
**Glenn Gould Studio** | 7<sup>15</sup> Intro • 8<sup>00</sup> Concert



Sunday April 30, 2006 • **Baltic Currents**  
Guest composer **Raminta Serksnyte** curates a concert of  
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**Glenn Gould Studio** | 7<sup>15</sup> Intro • 8<sup>00</sup> Concert

Saturday + Sunday May 27/28, 2006 • **Elliott Carter at 97**  
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**Glenn Gould Studio** (28<sup>th</sup>) | 8<sup>00</sup> Concert



Friday June 9, 2006 • **Music of Iannis Xenakis**  
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