

**Music Department**

**Composition**

# **Songs of Longing and Greed**

*An orchestral version of the Song Cycle written for  
bass-baritone singer Ólafur Freyr Birkisson*

**Critical Reflection** submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of **M.Mus in Composition**

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## Analysis of “Songs of Longing and Greed” (Orchestral Version)

### Background and approach:

During the studies at the MA program at LHÍ I signed up for a course that had the aim to have singers and composers collaborate to create a piece of music. Since I had started working with singers as a choir conductor and wanted to get better at writing for the voice, I was positive that this course would be of benefit. At this course I met singer Ólafur Freyr Birkisson who is a Bass-Baritone singer. Ólafur requested to have the composer write something dramatic for him which was very much within my style. We worked together on finding the text until Ólafur suggested the poem “Nirfillinn” by Davíð Stefánsson. This poem is about a person who indulges in his lust for money.

At the end of the course, we were both very satisfied with the piece and we decided that it would be a natural continuation to make a whole song cycle. The theme should evolve around greed, but this later become too one-sided, so we introduced the positive opposite to greed in the form of longing and positive anticipation. This cycle would showcase both positive and negative sides of the human characteristics regarding greed, longing, lust, love. This has a relevance both on a personal level, as we all deal with these emotions, and it also has a relevance for our culture and the world in general as it is these emotions that drive many aspects of society. People in power want to hold on to their power and money – greed, people long for things they do not yet have or once had, such as love, youth, summer or other.

The completed song cycle consists of 7 songs of which there are 2 songs sung in Danish, 1 in English and 4 in Icelandic. The cycle has the name: “Songs of Longing and Greed”.

*(Pieces marked with \* are the once that I have included in this final project)*

Nirfillin *(text by Davíð Stefánsson)* \*

Lóan *(text by Rósa B. Blöndals)*

Ørkenens Søn *(text by H.C. Andersen)* \*

Sjálfuvísur *(text by Anton Helgi Jónsson)* \*

Bird in a Cage *(sign language poem by Elsa G. Björnsdóttir, translation into text by Haukur Darri Hauksson)*

Krummi *(text by Davíð Stefánsson)* \*

Et evigt liv tør jeg ikke kræve (*text by H.C. Andersen*)

It is from these 7 songs that my final project has taken its shape. I have arranged 4 of these songs for a small orchestra consisting of: 1 flute doubling piccolo, 1 oboe doubling English Horn, 1 clarinet doubling bass clarinet, 1 bassoon, 1 horn, 1 trumpet, 1 trombone, 1 piano, 1 percussion player, 2 violins, 1 viola, 1 cello and 1 double bass. The performing ensemble is called Caput and is an established new music ensemble in Iceland. On top of this ensemble, I have added the element of a solo singer. The 4 songs have a total duration of 15 minutes.

The decisions of arranging rather than to create new music for this project was one that I had to think a lot about. I ultimately went this route because it was important to me to take full advantage of the opportunity of having an orchestral ensemble. What I mean by this is that by not having to spend much time on the development phase of the music, I could rather spend my focus on the orchestration part of the writing. My goal became to make as good as an orchestral score as possible, training my orchestration skills. I am happy with this choice, and it have also had an unexpected benefit that I did not foresee. By taking my piano scores from the cycle and orchestrating them, I naturally had to view the music in a different way, and this gave birth to new musical ideas that I then later could add to my piano score (*See figures 1-4*). The orchestra made me think of the music from new angles, and the multiple layers that the orchestra offers made it possible for me to improve the original ideas. It has had a big impression on me, and this is something that I will take with me in my future writings. It can be easy to accept a product, but one always can deconstruct it and improve on it. I will though also say that I believe that staying too long with the same material can end in making it worse than it was when it came to life. This is a balance that each composer must find.

Figure 1 shows a musical score for the orchestra part of the song 'Krummi'. It includes staves for Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score features dynamic markings of ppp and p with swells.

Figure 1. „Krummi“. Swells in the orcehstra part bar 23-26. This idea eventually made it into the piano score

Figure 2 shows a musical score for the piano part of the song 'Krummi'. It includes a vocal line with lyrics and piano accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings of pp and ppp, and a note about 'Small swells at random'.

Figure 2. „Krummi“. Swells in the orcehstra part bar 23-26. This idea eventually made it into the piano score



Figure 3. "Ørkenens Søn" bar 56-59 of the piano version. The pizzicato in the strings gave this sections a more dance-like character that I decided to add to the piano version.



Figure 4. "Ørkenens Søn" bar 56-59 of the orchestral version.. The pizzicato in the strings gave this sections a more dance-like character that I decided to add to the piano version.

### Form of the piece:

The 4 songs are created independent from each other and could be performed as standalone pieces. The same is true for all the 7 songs of the original song cycle. Despite this, I have tried to make the order of the songs so that they make sense in the setting of a performance.

The first song is "Nirflinn". It is a piece in 3 sections where each section becomes more and more dramatic. I achieve this by intensifying the music via changes in the tempo, dynamic, color and expression. This mirrors the poem that speaks of increasing greed for money. This piece end on a G major chord with an added major 9<sup>th</sup>. This piece is followed by "Sjálfuvisur" which has a constant intensifying feeling. This piece begins on a g-minor chord with an added minor 9<sup>th</sup>. These two pieces are therefore linked, as the transitional chords between them makes it natural. The third song is "Ørkenes Søn". This piece is performed without singer in this arrangement and has the function of an intermezzo. The piece describes a lonely man riding a horse in the desert in the search for love. The last piece of the arrangement is "Krummi". I have placed this piece last as it features a unique element that I would like the audience to remember: The singer will be playing on the Icelandic instrument *Langspil*, a small violin/guitar-like instrument that is played with a bow. It dictates the key of the whole piece as it is always in the D-mixolydian mode. The singer will improvise on this instrument on designated times. The orchestration features multiple extended techniques in the obvious attempt to imitate a raven (see figure 5-6).

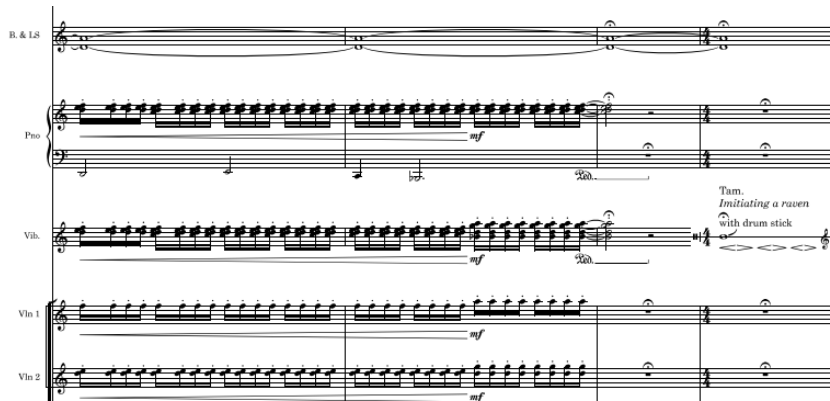


Figure 5. "Krummi" bar 6-9. The percussion player uses a drum stick to scrape the tam-tam which creates a screaming/crying sound.

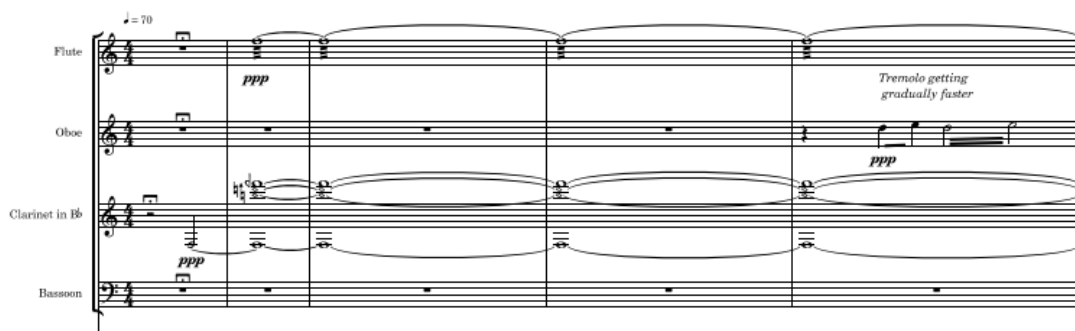


Figure 6. "Krummi" bar 1-5. The clarinet plays a multiphonic that gives a distorted impression of the cry of a raven. The clarinet player was given a video as instructions. I found this notation on youtube and the performer used this as guidance.

All the texts that have been chosen contains a very clear message, and so it was fairly simple to draw inspiration from that when composing the music. I am not trying to hide or conceal the meaning of the text, but I rather support the meaning of the poems in a quite traditional way. I want the message of the poems to come out clearly in a dramatic and entertaining manner. This music is in other words not a big exploration of the unknown, but it is on the other hand an exploration on how to communicate music in a relevant way. The musical language is unique, yet it carries elements from traditional music. The pieces are compact and brings an intense experience to the listener which I think is suitable for many people.

## Influences

### Being a pianist:

My past as a pianist has had a big impact on my compositional endeavors. It is often that I use the piano as a medium to express my musical ideas through improvisation. I believe that this has strengths in the form of the element of the random. I do not have perfect pitch, and this leads to many “mistakes” when I play. These mistakes are oftentimes brilliant material for new ideas. It is also helpful to record myself playing when I get a good idea, so that I will not forget it. I have an advantage when writing for the piano because I know the practicality of playing it very well, and so my piano parts are well written but also challenging at times.

Downsides to using the piano may include technical limitation. This can result in monotone or repetitive material. A pianist’s hands may follow previously learned patterns, and this can dictate your music rather than you dictating it. I have experiences of going down the same musical path over and over when playing piano, so it is good to be aware of who is the master of your creations, you, or your physical habits.

Another result of me being educated as a piano player is the percussive nature of some of my music. I played a lot of aggressive Russian piano music and I find great pleasure in the brutal sounds that the piano can produce. This has become somewhat of a trademark in some of my music – using the piano as a percussive instrument. It is therefore safe to say that my pianistic past has made its mark on me as a composer. (*See examples below*)

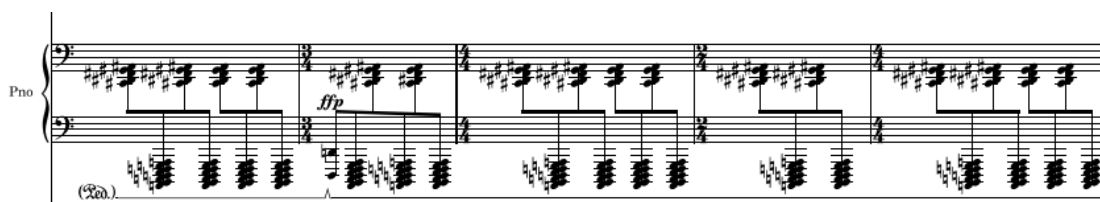


Figure 7. "Sjálfuvisur". Bar 5-9

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: B. & Chim., Pno, and Sn. Dr. The B. & Chim. part is written in a single staff with lyrics: "Ha, ha ha! ord. orm - a -". Above the staff, there is a note: "Sing on notes or as shouts". The Pno part consists of two staves with complex chordal textures. The Sn. Dr. part is written in a single staff with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

Figure 8. "Nirfillin". Bar 36-39

### Composers of influence:

My gateway drug to new music was György Ligeti's "Musica Ricercata" which I studied and performed. Ligeti showed me that you can have freedom in terms of form, note selection, patterns, and style. I was at this point not yet aware of the wide possibilities of music, as I until then mainly had played music by the greats such as Beethoven, Chopin, Bach, Brahms etc. Following my newfound interest in new composers I started to dive further and came across composers like Thomas Adés, Peter Schickele, Leos Janáček. I also began to appreciate the French composers of Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc, and others – this largely due to the brilliant orchestration skills of these composers. As this final project is a study of orchestration, I have at times drawn inspiration from some of these composers. In the piece "Sjálfuvisur", there is a small section that draws parallels to Ravel's "Bolero". The similarity comes in the form of doubling the melody, but in different intervals, such as a third, fifth and even a seventh to bring out overtones.

The image shows a musical score for multiple staves. The top part shows a melody line with dynamics *p* and *mf*. Below it, there are several staves with dynamics *p*, *pp*, and *mf*. The bottom part shows a melody line with dynamics *mf* and the instruction "To B. Dr." above it. The lyrics "ef sjálf - a mæst i fók - us." are written below the bottom staff.

Figure 9. "Sjálfuvisur". Bar 42-45. Piccolo plays the melody line but in thirds above which adds color to this passage.

I want to put attention to Peter Schickele who introduced me to humor in music. Schickele writes “serious” music but also writes comedic music which I find very entertaining, but also very relevant. I like to break the formalities of the world of classical music, maybe to make it more mainstream, or maybe because I do not like the strict and formal way that the classical scene often is presented in. I support a relaxed and inclusive way of presenting music rather than it being for the sophisticated or knowledgeable only. When it comes down to it, music is entertainment, and we should not shy away from that.

### **Being a conductor as well as a composer:**

Shortly before I started writing music, I began my studies as a conductor. Being a conductor means that you are forced to involve yourself with all kinds of instruments and people, and this has helped me a lot as a composer. I do not feel estranged from instruments in the same way that I might have if I had never been involved with them as a conductor. When you study scores for conducting, you also study the way that composers use the instruments. It gives you many reference points and a lot of inspiration.

The same is the case if you conduct choirs. By being surrounded by voices and working on how to make people sound good, you get a lot of insight in how to write for voices. And then there is the element of the written word. Text and poems have had a tremendous influence on how I write music. I like to use texts for inspiration, even for music that does not have voice in them. Texts gives you a certain idea of mood and character from the get-go and it encourage musical creativity. Poems will often present you with a form, so this eliminates the struggle of creating a form for your piece (as is the case with Nirflinn). Words in themselves have expression and sounds and can also be used as material for composing. An example of this can be seen in “Sjálfovísur” where I use the letter “S” as a point of expression, which is then highlighted in the orchestra (*See example on next page*).



Figure 10. "Sjálfuvisur". Bar 16-22. The S's of the singer is highlighted by the Crotales, piano and 2nd violin.

**Being a project creator and innovator:**

It is natural for me to create new projects and start initiatives. At my first year at academy in Denmark I set up three piano concertos by Bach with orchestra, the year after it was Mozart's 23<sup>rd</sup> piano concert, then it was Rhapsody in Blue by Gershwin and Carnival of the Animals. Alongside this I have created a constant flow of initiatives for children. It is meaningful to me to engage the young audience in music and try to pass on the joy that I get from it. It is our responsibility as musicians to educate the new generation and create foundations for musical growth in the future.

I will briefly describe one of the most recent projects for children that I have done. “The Ugly Duckling” is a story by H.C. Andersen that I created a stop-motion video to, using my own music as a soundtrack. The video is made of 16 frames per second, and I had to take every single picture manually using a wooden set-up that I had built myself to get the shadow effect that I was looking for.



Figure 11. Screenshot of my video for "Litli Ljóti Andarunginn"

My most relevant project by the time of writing is called “Look at the Music”. This is creation of art that is equally enjoyable for both deaf as well as hearing. This initiative has gained great momentum and popularity, so the creators of this project have decided to establish a non-profit organization called “Art Across” which goal is to promote activities that reached cross boundaries that is usually seen as an obstacle or otherwise limiting. The project can be described as following: *The scope of this project is twofold, with a branch that is purely artistic and a branch that regards the sociology and inclusivity of the creative process. “Art Across” is a direct continuation of a previous endeavor, also called “Look at the music”, which resulted in a concert gathering a variety of innovative concepts sharing a common goal: bringing together hearing experience and deaf experience, sign-language arts, and music. The pieces presented in the concert tried various ways at conveying a unifying experience to two different audiences, focusing on the musical aspect and the inclusion of sign-language.*

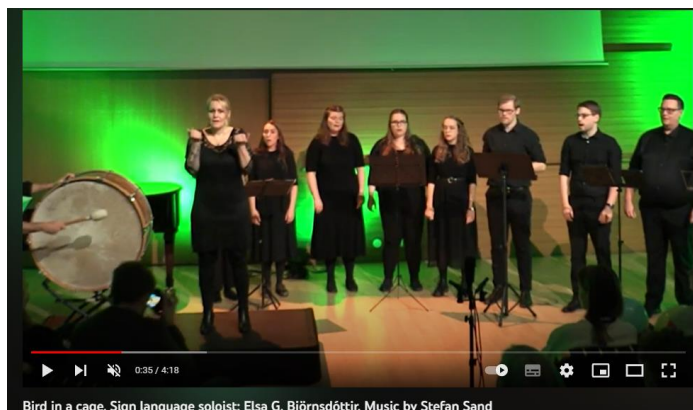


Figure 12. The piece "Bird in a Cage" is written by the deaf performer in the video Elsa. I have used this sign language poem in my song cycle. Elsa made a translation of the poem into English which is the text that I use.

### **Moving to Iceland:**

Iceland has changed my life in a multitude of ways. Iceland gave me the opportunity to redefine myself, from a pianist to a conductor and composer. I have suffered an injury that caused me to abruptly stop my master's degree in piano performance. This initially led me to discover new paths and brought me to Iceland. It was liberating to move to a new country because I did not carry any history with me. It was a battle to rebrand myself in Copenhagen because I was known as a pianist, so building a new identity in Iceland was very freeing. Eventually, I decided to stay in Iceland as I love being here and have gained a good life here. Iceland is a breeding ground for experiments and innovation, and it is a place of the future. People are open to new things and the nature of the small population makes it easier to get things moving around and to be seen. The nature of Iceland is an eternal source of awe and beauty as well as the Icelandic Language has many fascinating assets.

### **Reflection and continuation**

I want to use the last part of this paper to discuss some things that I have learned during my time at LHÍ as well as my future.

This program has left me with more confidence in myself and my artistic voice. It has been hard at times to figure out what way to take things or how to execute my music. But in the end, I have realized that you must stay true to yourself, and you absolutely must enjoy the process of what you do. The process of your work is most of your time. There is always a next thing, a next commission, a next concert, and in the end of the day, you must get up in the morning and start writing again. A performance or an event will give you a moment to remember but I do not think that you can fuel your work life purely on achievements. Ambition is necessary but I would like to think that I balance between that, and life joy is a good thing to consider.

Another consideration that I have made is regarding output. I often make a conscious

decision of being less critical than I am capable of. It is yet again a matter of balance, and each must find their own. I have no lack of self-critical behavior and thoughts which can be devastating to a creative process as you begin to lose sense of the point of the music and get stuck in certain loops of criticism. I therefore write my music rather quickly to begin with and will in this part of the process disregard thoughts about details. The result of this is a lot of music of mixed quality. I record all my ideas on my phone so that I can access them later with a fresh mind. When I have a rough sketch of the music in all its aspect, I will dive into the nitty gritty of the details which is a whole separate journey. Here I will think about texture, color, technique, performance practicalities etc. This works well for me as it allows me to let go of my judgment and embrace my artistic voice, and it also allows me to control the amount of detail in which I want to give the music. One of my favorite pieces that I have written was composed in a single day. This is the piece “Shadow” for Clarinet and Piano. Another piece of mine that I am very proud of took me around 2 years to write, “Konan með Eggin“, a choir piece written for The University Choir of Iceland.

The processes of writing these two pieces were very similar as the first part of the writing happened in a very short amount of time, but the post-work on details and edits took a very different amount of time.

### **Look at the Music / Art Across**

Shortly following my graduation from this degree, I will be going on a Tour with a group of 13 people as part of the project with Art Across that I mentioned earlier. We have been granted with the opportunity to take our ideas to three different countries where we will perform our music for sign language and choir and afterwards have workshops where people from the local deaf communities can join us in creating a new piece of art that includes sign language and music. On this to that goes to The Faroe Islands, Denmark, and Norway, we bring with us a choir of 8, 2 sign language soloists, a workshop leader and 2 project leaders including myself. The conclusion of this tour will be 4 concerts in Tjarnabío, Reykjavík, where the pieces that were created on the Tour will be shown in a fully staged form. This includes light design, costume design, dancers, and a choir of 12. My job as the composer is to put the sign language art into music. I can do this in various ways, and we are constantly researching new ways to merge these two arts. This project is

very experimental, and we are updating and adapting our methods on the go. There are a few major staples that are used which for examples include vibrations. As deaf people don't hear the sounds, we are using vibrations and rhythms to a larger degree. We use lights to support the mood, shadows to create variation and atmosphere and then of course a lot of movement and sign language. The choir that is singing is also made to use sign language and sings all music by heart to enable free movement. This sort of musical creation becomes a mix of many types of expression and results in a multi-sensorial experience that is very engaging. For me as a composer, this is a playground of opportunity. I am developing new types of art and the collaboration between all these different types of artists makes for a unique writing process. It feels very gratifying to be part of something new that involves creating new forms of art. It has not been done before that sign language is translated into music since it is typically done the other way around, with sign language interpreters translating music into sign.

### **Future goals**

My hope is that I will be able to continue my work both as a conductor and a composer. There are many examples of these two occupations going hand in hand where legends like Leonard Bernstein and the Icelandic Daníel Bjarnasson comes to mind. The result of being both conductor and a composer becomes a type of positive feedback loop where they each benefit and improve the other. As a composer I have an easier time understanding and interpreting music that I am conducting, and as a conductor I have a very clear image of what different instrumental combinations will sound like, and I therefor rarely have any doubt about what my music will sound like.

I want to continue in the field of education for reasons that I have stated before. A long-time dream of mine is to create a boarding school-type of school inspired by the Danish concept of "Efterskole" where kids in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades move to a school that is both a school and a living space for a year or two. These school are often themed with sport, drama, music or other. I participated in this type of school when I was 15 and it was the best year of my life, and it had a deep impact on how my life looks today. Kids learn to be independent, practice their social skills and get an experience of how it is to be an adult.

According to the association of boarding schools in Denmark, the number of kids going to Efterskole the season of 2022-2023 is 32.447. It is hugely popular and something like this is missing in Iceland. I would present a musical themed school, which realistically would be combined with other themes due to the low population in Iceland.