

Creating Music at the Beach: Jón Leifs, the North and Nature

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The Icelandic composer Jón Leifs (1899–1968) used to frequently and elaborately connect music and nature in his extensive production of both musical works and verbal texts. Key examples of his commentaries on nature and music are his monumental *Edda* oratorio, particularly its first part about the creation of the world, and his book *Islands künstlerische Anregung* [“Iceland’s Artistic Challenge”], where he outlines his notion about “normannische Kunst” [“Norman art”].¹ The oratorio is suggestive of music-nature relations, at least according to the popular imagination: firstly, we may expect a musical depiction of nature’s genesis in the oratorio; secondly, Iceland (and its music) seems to have a more intense relationship to nature than most other European countries (again, stereotypically); and thirdly, Leifs, considered to be Iceland’s first and most distinguished composer of the 20th century, would be the canonised first choice for any look at Icelandic classical music, at least from an outsider’s perspective. Although his oratorio does include many parts that can be heard as sound pictures of or about nature, and although Leifs did indeed play an important, pioneering role in the history of Icelandic art music, a closer look at the music and its context will lead to an encounter with certain cultural images of how and where nature and art are created. In this article I will argue that musical images of nature are closely connected to the notion that nature and culture are not totally separated but are in some way connected to each other so that the apparent dichotomy between them is dissolved. Here, I will draw on media scholar John Fiske² and posit the beach as a place between sea and land and, thus, between nature and culture. The beach may, therefore, serve as a demonstrative metaphor for an idea. However, it is also part of the mythological narrative that Leifs has set to music in his oratorio. Furthermore, it plays a certain role in the biopic *Tears of Stone* (1995), which has had a strong

¹ Jón Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung. Bekenntnisse eines nordischen Musikers* (Reykjavík: Islandia Edition, 1951), 9–10, passim.

² John Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 2nd edition (London, New York: Routledge, 2011).

impact on the popular image of Leifs today. What connects all these references to the beach is its characterisation as a creative space. To be sure, the idea of the beach or seashore as a place between nature and culture can be traced back at least to romanticism, for instance, to the romantic preoccupation with mermaids and similar hybrid beings. Nevertheless, I think Fiske's observations on today's popular culture are interesting for a study of Leifs's music, too, because they are based on broader insights into the nature-culture binary, here referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss. The latter's observations also help us understand how prevalent the nature-culture binary is even today.

Before discussing these more general aspects it is necessary to have a closer look at Leifs's way of connecting music and nature both in his music and writings. I will discuss his concept of the Nordic in its historical context and provide references to similar concepts. As the first step, however, I will focus on the music and text of the named first movement of his *Edda* oratorio and examine its relationship to Iceland's nature and culture, particularly Old Norse literature and mythology.

1. Composing Nordic creation myths

Jón Leifs wrote his oratorio, *Edda I – Sköpun heimsins* [*The Creation of the World*], op. 20, between 1935 and 1939. This was thought to be the initial part of a four-part cycle entitled *Edda*, though the cycle remained unfinished.³ The second part, *Edda II – Líf guðanna* [*The Life of the Gods*], op. 42, was composed between 1951 and 1966. The third part, *Edda III – Ragnarökr* [*The Twilight of the Gods*], op. 65, was commenced in 1966 but only existed as a fragment at the time of Leifs' death in 1968. The last part, *Endurreisn* [*Restoration*], only exists as a libretto. During his lifetime, only certain pieces from the first oratorio were performed and the premiere of the complete performance only took place at Hallgrím's Church, Reykjavík, in 2006.

The title, *Edda*, refers to a group of medieval Icelandic texts that we today call the Poetic Edda and the Snorra Edda. The oldest and most complete manuscript versions of these

³ See the lists of Leifs's works in Carl-Gunnar Åhlén, *Jón Leifs. Kompositör i motvind* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2002), and Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, *Jón Leifs. Líf í tónum: aevisaga* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2009).

texts originated in the 13th century. Briefly, the Poetic Edda is a compilation of poems on gods and heroes. The Snorra Edda is an instruction for poets, called skalds at that time, written by the Icelandic scholar and politician Snorri Sturluson. Snorri, who was a Christian like all scholars of that time and place, tried to fit the Nordic myths into a system in the *Gylfaginning* of his Edda to provide information about them for his contemporaries. The Poetic Edda and the *Gylfaginning* are the main sources for narrations of the creation of the world according to Nordic mythology. They tell us that at the very beginning of time there was nothing except for a gaping abyss called the ginnungagap.⁴ Snorri quotes a line from the Eddic poem *Völuspá* [*The Seeress' Prophecy*] describing this primordial state: “Ár var alda / þat er ecki var” (*Gylfaginning* 4 [3], Edda Snorra Sturlusonar 1931, 11) — “It was at the beginning of time, when nothing was” (Snorri Sturluson 1987, 9).⁵ Jón Leifs made this the first sentence of his oratorio.

In order to transform the Old Norse creation myth into an oratorio, Leifs chose passages from diverse Eddic poems and from the Snorra Edda and combined them in a kind of collage. His oratorio is divided into 13 closed movements with the following titles:⁶

1. Ár var alda [Young Were the Years]

2. Ymir

⁴ See John Stanley Martin, “Ár var alda. Ancient Scandinavian creation myths reconsidered,” in *Specvlvm norroenvm. Norse studies in memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. by Ursula Dronke et. al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 357–369 for an overview about the Nordic creation myths and their written record.

⁵ In the Codex regius of the Poetic Edda, the line (*Völuspá* 3) reads differently: “It was in the beginning of time, when Ymir made his settlement” [“Ár var alda, þat er Ymir bygði”, in *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, vol. 1: Text, 5th revised edition by Hans Kuhn, in *Germanische Bibliothek*, 4. Reihe: *Texte* (Heidelberg: Winter 1983), 1]. The first half of the line, although it is the same as in Snorri’s quotation, is translated differently by Larrington: “Young were the years ...” The Poetic Edda, translated with an introduction and notes by Carolyne Larrington (1996), reissued, in *Oxford World’s classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4. Lars Lönnroth, “Iorð fannz æva né upphiminn. A formula analysis,” in *Specvlvm norroenvm. Norse studies in memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. by Ursula Dronke et. al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 310–327, 312, has shown that the expression “Ár var alda” – he translates it as “in olden days” – is “a formula used to begin a new story, much like ‘Once upon a time’ in the fairy tales.”

⁶ The English versions of the titles are quoted from the liner notes in Leifs, *Edda*. Part 1 (CD).

Florian Heesch: Creating Music at the Beach

3. Þursa þjóðar sjöt [The Giants' Palace]
4. Auðhumla, Óðinn ok hans bræðr [Audhumla, Odin and his brothers]
5. Sær [Sea]
6. Jörð [Earth]
7. Himinn, sól, dagr [Sky, Sun, Day]
8. Nótt, morgunn [Night, Morning]
9. Ásgarðr, Askr ok Embla, Miðgarðr [Asgard, Ash and Embla, Midgard]
10. Scherzo: Allir menn urðut jafnspakir [All Men Aren't Equally Wise] (elves and dwarfs)
11. Viðr, sumar, logn [Wood, Summer, Calm]
12. Vetr og vindr [Winter and Wind]
13. Finale: Ífing, níu heimar [Ifing, Nine Worlds]

As these titles suggest, the oratorio provides a rich basis for an analysis of musical images of natural phenomena. In a strictly chronological order, the oratorio illustrates how the elements of the world and its diverse inhabitants are created. Even though the libretto originates completely from the Poetic Edda and the Snorra Edda, it is organised in a different way. In the Poetic Edda, elements of the creation myths are scattered in diverse poems where they often appear in combination with other mythological aspects like the end of the world, which is called ragnarök [doom of the gods]. Besides the *Völuspá*, Leifs makes use of other Eddic poems like *Vafðríðnismál* [*Vafthrudnir's Sayings*] and *Grimnismál* [*Grimnir's Sayings*]. Snorri's rather systematic mythological narrative of the *Gylfaginning* [*The Tricking of Gylfi*] in his Edda provides the chronological basis for Jón Leifs' libretto. However, Leifs often expands parts that are rather short in Snorri. For instance, Snorri tells the creation of the sea in a single sentence (*Gylfaginning* 5 [8]):

Then spoke Just-as-high: 'Out of the blood that came from his wounds and was flowing unconfined, out of this they made the sea with which they encompassed and contained the earth, and they placed this sea in a circle round the outside of it, and it will seem an impossibility to most to get across it'.⁷

⁷ Snorri Sturluson, Edda, translated from the Icelandic and introduced by Anthony Faulkes (London, Melbourne: Dent, 1987), 12. "Þa mælti Iafnhar: Af því bloði, er or sarvm raN ok lavst fór, þar af gerþv

Leifs dedicates a whole movement to each single element of the world, including the sea. The movement *Sær* [*Sea*] is a good example for illustrating how he composes his libretto by combining diverse pieces of Eddic texts which deal with the same subject:

Sær (Jón Leifs, Edda I. Full score, act V)	Sea
<p>Synir Bors drápu Ymi jötun, en er hann fell, þá hljóp svá mikit blóð ór sárum hans, at með því drekkðu þeir allri ætt hrímþursa, nema einn komst undan með sínu hyski. (quotes from Gylfaginning 5 [7])</p> <p>Örófi vetra áðr væri jörð of skopuð, þá var Bergelmir borinn; þat ek fyrst of man, er sá hinn fróði jötunn á var of lúðr of lagiðr. (quotes from Vafþrúðnismál 35)</p> <p>Sær, sílægja, salt, ægir, haf, lögr, sumr, lægir, lagastafr ok vagr,</p>	<p>Bor's sons killed the giant Ymir. And when he fell, so much blood flowed from his wounds that with it they drowned all the race of frost-giants, except that one escaped with his household. (Snorri Sturluson, Edda, 11)</p> <p>Uncountable winters before the world was made, then Bergelmir was born; that I remember first when the wise giant was first laid in his chest.⁸ (The Poetic Edda, 45)</p> <p>Sea, ever-lying, salt, ocean [Ægir], main, wetness, swim, flat one,</p>

þeir sia þan, er þeir gerþv ok festv saman iorþina, ok lavgþv þan sia ihring vtan vm hana, ok mvn þat flestm maNe vfæra þikia, at komaz þar yfir” (Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, 15).

⁸ Larrington translates the Old Norse “lúðr” with “coffin,” which makes sense in the context of Vafthrudnir’s Sayings but not if the verse is interpreted according to Snorri’s narrative about Bergelmir’s escape from the blood stream. “Chest” is a more neutral translation of “lúðr” that fits the image of Bergelmir floating on Ymir’s blood. I am grateful to Beatrice La Farge for expert help with this term. For a detailed discussion on “lúðr” in the Poetic Edda, see Klaus von See et. al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 3: *Götterlieder* (Heidelberg: Winter 2000) and von See et al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 1 (to be published), see also Martin, “Ár vas alda. Ancient Scandinavian creation myths reconsidered,” 359.

<p>gjallr, gnáp, geimi, gnarr, svífr ok marr, súgr, sog, sami, svelgr, röst ok fjörðr. (quotes from Skáldskaparmál 89)</p> <p>Sær heitir með mönnum, en sílægja með goðum, kalla vog vanir, álheim jötnar, álfar lagastaf, kalla dvergar djúpan mar. (quotes from Alvísmál 24)</p>	<p>dead calm and bay, resounding, overhang, emptiness, brawler, rocker and mere, sucker, suck, same, swallower, maelstrom and fiord. (Snorri Sturluson, Edda, 160)</p> <p>Sea it's called by men, and endless-lier by the gods, the Vanir⁹ call it rolling one, home of the eel the giants, "lagastaf" the elves, the dwarfs the deep ocean. (The Poetic Edda, 112)</p>
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Leifs starts with a prose passage from Snorri about the immense stream of blood that resulted from the killing of the giant Ymir at the beginning of the creation. The passage is followed by a verse about the giant Bergelmir. This verse originally occurs in the Eddic poem *Vafðrúðnismál*, but, surprisingly, in this context it has nothing to tell about the sea. To understand how Bergelmir and the sea are associated with each other, we again have to refer to Snorri, who literally quotes the same verse in *Gylfaginning* 5 [7]. Snorri identifies Bergelmir as the only giant who – together “with his household” – managed to escape the blood stream that drowned all other giants. It is quite typical that Leifs follows Snorri’s way of quoting single verses from the Poetic Edda as well as Snorri’s rather systematic interpretation of mythological elements. Basically, Leifs compiles his libretto similar to Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*. At the same time, he obviously assumes detailed mythological knowledge in general and a familiarity with Snorri’s Edda in particular from the listeners of this oratorio. In this case, he has shortened the passage from Snorri by omitting just the crucial sentence that tells us about Bergelmir’s identity. Thus, it would be remarkably difficult to draw any secure conclusion about the relationship between the passage from *Gylfaginning* and the verses from *Vafðrúðnismál*, or even to understand how the fate of

⁹ The Vanir are one tribe of gods besides the other tribe of the Æsir.

Bergelmir is related to the main subject of this movement, the sea, if one were not familiar with Snorri's interpretation of Bergelmir.

The third quotation in this movement originates from another part of Snorri's Edda, the *Skáldskaparmál* [*The Language of Poetry*], or, more precisely, the included lists of names ("þulur" in Old Norse). Within the framework of Snorri's introduction into poetry, those lists provide useful collections of synonyms, like a kind of versified thesaurus. Here, Leifs found a set of synonyms for the word sea. He appreciated the lists of names in Old Norse poetry in an aesthetic, even musical way: "Sometimes, the musical impression of the language seems to be as strictly kept that even long and artificially arranged series of names and genealogies may remind us of the scrolling of thematic material in a fugue."¹⁰

In addition to simple synonyms, Eddic poetry offers a rich nomenclature for natural and mythological phenomena by ascribing different uses of names to different species, like men, Gods, giants, elves and dwarfs. The last passage of the movement *Sær* includes a passage from the Eddic poem *Alvíssmál* about names for the sea as used by those species.

The musical setting underlines the characteristics of the four different text parts and, at the same time, provides an overarching structure for one single development from the beginning until the end of the movement. With regard to the libretto, the voices are, of course, particularly important. As in the whole oratorio, Leifs generally uses two solo voices, tenor and bass, for the rather recitative-like passages and a mixed choir for the other parts. Consequently, the prose part at the beginning of the movement is sung by the solo voices, the bass embodying the main part that is underlined by the tenor at certain emphatic moments. After the bass has sung about "so much blood", the words "Sær, sílægja" ["Sea, ever-lying"] from the third text part sound for the first time, sung in octaves by the choir. Through this layering, the stream of blood is explicitly interpreted as the sea, according to the above quoted sentence from *Gylfaginning* 5 [8]: "Out of the blood that came from his [Ymir's] wounds and was flowing unconfined, out of this they made the sea [...]" From the *Vafðrúðnismál* verse onwards the choir takes over, linking this verse and the "Sær, sílægja" passage via a progression of sound that starts with a unison passage of alto, tenor and bass and ends up in an eight-part sound. It is important to notice how the musical setting relates to the metre given

¹⁰ "Manchmal scheint die musikalische Wirkung der Sprache so streng gewahrt, dass sogar lange und kunstvoll gegliederte Namenreihen und Stammbäume uns an das Abrollen des musikalischen Themenmaterials einer Fuge erinnern könnten". Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, 34.

in the text. *Vafðrúðnismál* is written in one of the Eddic metres, called ljóðaháttur, which characteristically depicts a six-lined verse whose lines are connected by alliteration so that two alliterating lines are followed by a third line that includes its own alliteration. While the alliterating syllables of the first two lines are not more emphasised in Leifs's setting than the stresses would suggest, the alliterations of the third line, here "Bergelmir borinn," is clearly marked by melodic jumps of a ninth upwards and long notes on the first beats of two successive measures. The following, alliterating syllables are also often emphasised rhythmically and melodically. The last passage of the text, quoted from *Alvíssmál*, is directly connected to its predecessor by the mentioned eight-voice sound on the first word Sær, but it also has a different, rhythmically accentuated character, signed as "Più mosso, allegro scherzando". When the diverse mythological species are mentioned, Leifs makes use of some musical characters which he introduced in other movements. For instance, as soon as the giants' word for sea is sung, the rhythmic accent and orchestration, including cassa and tam-tam, embody obvious recollections from the third movement about the giants. Leifs' preference for tone painting can be observed at the very end of the movement, where a falling melodic line illustrates the difference between the fair world of the elves and the low world of the dwarfs. As far as this difference is part of the mythological picture of nature, it represents one of many instances where Leifs musically depicts natural phenomena.¹¹

2. Nordic music

Leifs lived mostly in Germany when composing his creation oratorio during the 1930s, apart from some shorter stays in Iceland. His experiences from life as a student and then as a professional musician in Germany had an important impact on his aesthetic ideas, which he gradually developed into a concept of modern Icelandic musical art. Like many contemporary ambitious musicians from Northern Europe, he moved to the continent to study music. He took the most apparent choice by going to the Leipzig Conservatory, which had become the central place for musicians from the Nordic countries since its foundation by Felix

¹¹ On a more general level, this interest in musical depictions of nature can be noticed as something that Leifs shares with many composers from the North of Europe (cf. Heinrich Schwab, "Epilog: Musik und Landschaft," in *Musikgeschichte Nordeuropas. Dänemark, Finnland, Island, Norwegen, Schweden*, ed. by Greger Anderson, translated by Axel Bruch, Christine von Bülow, and Gerlinde Lübbers (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2001), 397–425.

Mendelssohn in 1843.¹² The Danish musician Niels Wilhelm Gade (1817–1890) was supported by Mendelssohn, and among the many other Nordic musicians in Leipzig were the Norwegian Edvard Grieg (1843–1907) and fellow Icelander Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson (1847–1927). Leifs adjourned to Leipzig together with two other young Icelandic musicians, Páll Ísólfsson and Sigurður Þórðarson, in 1916.¹³ In 1918, Leifs fell in love with a fellow student, the pianist Annie Riethof (1897–1970) who became his first wife in 1921. They started musical careers and a family together. Apart from tours and some extended stays in Iceland, Leifs stayed together with his family in several places in Germany until they left for Sweden in 1944. After divorcing Annie Riethof, Leifs returned to Iceland in 1945.

Leifs's relationship to the National Socialist culture policy was complex.¹⁴ After Adolf Hitler's takeover in 1933, Leifs seemed to have more open doors for his musical career as a conductor and composer than before. His compositions were published by Kistner & Siegel (Leipzig) in 1933. In the following years, his music was performed more often than before, by among others the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, which devoted one of its concerts in 1936 to the music of Leifs and Richard Wagner. But then it became increasingly difficult for him and his family to live and work in National Socialist Germany. At first his wife suffered from oppression because of her Jewish origins. Around 1940, the differences between the official Nazi culture and Leifs's modernist aesthetic became increasingly obvious, culminating in harsh criticism by audiences and critics after a performance of his *Organ Concerto* op. 7 in Berlin 1941. Finally, Leifs' music was banned from performances and he was isolated. Thanks to Hilmar Oddson's internationally successful movie *Tears of Stone* (1995), a

¹² Cf. Eva Öhrström, "Schwedische Musiker in Deutschland – deutsche Musikästhetik in Schweden," in *Wahlverwandtschaft. Skandinavien und Deutschland 1800 bis 1914*, ed. by Bernd Henningsen et. al. (Berlin: Jovis, 1997), 233–236, here 234; see also Harald Herresthal, "Wechselwirkungen in der Musik – Musik ohne Grenzen," in *Wahlverwandtschaft. Skandinavien und Deutschland 1800 bis 1914*, ed. by Bernd Henningsen et. al. (Berlin: Jovis, 1997), 223–226.

¹³ For biographical details see Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, *Jón Leifs*. For a short biographical summary in English by the same author see the entry on Jón Leifs at Iceland Music Information Centre, <http://www.mic.is> (accessed 2 August 2013).

¹⁴ Cf. Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, *Jón Leifs*, 175–247. See also Áhlén, *Jón Leifs*, especially for his references to important original sources; Áhlén's interpretations include some criticism against Leifs's partial sympathising with National Socialist ideology, although he tends to emphasise his obvious sympathy for the "kompositör i motvind" ["composer experiencing headwind"].

biographical portrait of Jón Leifs, a relatively broad audience knows the dramatic story of how the composer and his family left Nazi Germany.

In 1940 and 1941, not long after completing the first part of his Edda oratorio, Leifs sketched 100 pages of a book manuscript in the German language. It was a personal account of his encounter with the central European culture and his concept of a Nordic, especially an Icelandic, artistic identity. In a note to the introduction, Leifs declares that a main personal motivation to write the book was to show the difference between his own concept of the North and the National Socialist's attempts to impose their idea of a Nordic ("nordisch") culture that includes their control of Iceland and the other Nordic countries.¹⁵ He states that he showed the manuscript to German authorities just to receive the expected reply that its publication was undesirable in Germany. He finished the manuscript in Stockholm 1945¹⁶ and the book was published under the title *Islands künstlerische Anregung* ["Iceland's Artistic Challenge"] by Islandia Edition, Reykjavík, in 1951, probably at his own expense (cf. *ibid.*).

In the book, Leifs outlined his concept of modern Icelandic music which he connected to a certain image of the North. However, to distinguish his concept from the misappropriation of the adjective "nordisch" by the National Socialists, he speaks about "normanische Kunst" ["Norman art"].¹⁷ The core of his argument is built on a dualism of North and South or North West and South East respectively. Even though Leifs is mainly interested in developing a Nordic or North Western art, he strives to diplomatically point out that both the North and the South can be seen from different perspectives and, thereby, reveal either bad or good qualities. He published the first versions of his dualistic concept as early as in the 1920s in several articles for music journals, for instance his text about "National music and Germanism",¹⁸ showing that, even by then, he had already systematised the dualism in the form of a chart which he developed in several slightly different versions. The version included in *Islands künstlerische Anregung* is the most sophisticated.

Characterising the South or South East	Characterising the Norman or North West
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¹⁵ Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, 7–8.

¹⁶ Cf. Åhlén, *Jón Leifs*, 164.

¹⁷ Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, 9–10.

¹⁸ Jón Leifs, "Nationalmusik und Germanentum", *Deutsches Musikjahrbuch* 2 and 3 (1925): 11–21; cf. also Åhlén, *Jón Leifs*, 164.

[Das südländische oder südöstliche Charakterisieren]		[Das normannische oder nordwestliche Charakterisieren]	
admirers [Verehrer]:	dispraisers [Verächter]:	dispraisers [Verächter]:	admirers [Verehrer]:
Warm [Warm].	Sticky [Schwül].	Cold [Kalt].	Chilly [Kühl].
Fully ripe culture of fruitful magnificence [Vollreife Kultur fruchtreichster Üppigkeit].	Decadent culture which has come to an end [Zu Ende gelangte, dekadente Kultur].	Undeveloped culture [Unentwickelte Kultur].	Hardly formed, suppressed culture [Kaum entstandene, unterdrückte Kultur].
Elastic [Geschmeidig].	Sneaky [Kriecherisch].	Clumsy, square [Plump, eckig].	Stiff, straight [Nackensteif, geradling (sic)].
Soft-heartedness and emotional charm [Weichherzigkeit und Gefühlszauber].	Weak character, submissive and longing sensuality [Charakterschwäche, unterwerfende und schmachtende Sinnlichkeit].	Cold-blooded, non-sensual emotional life [Kaltblütiges, unsinnliches Gefühlsleben].	Aggressive, martial (hard) sensuality [Angreifende, kriegerische (harte) Sinnlichkeit].
Grace and softness [Anmut und Weichheit].	Flattery and vagueness [Schmeichelei und Unklarheit].	Gruff wiriness [Grobdrähtigkeit].	Decided Hardness [Deutliche Härte].
Snuggling [Anschmiegend].	Catchy, suits the taste of the masses [Eingänglich, dem Geschmack der Masse entgegenkommend].	Barbarism [Barbarismus].	Uncatchy, therefore unpopular [Uneingänglich, daher unpopulär].
Agile [Gewandt].	Volatile, loose [Sprunghaft, locker].	Hard [Hart].	Firm [Fest].
Diplomacy, circuitous [Diplomatie, auf Umwegen wandelnd].	False, unreliable [Falsch, unzuverlässig].	Frivolous banditry [Frivoles Räubertum].	Frank, on straight ways, adventurous, looking for danger, Vikingness [Offen, auf geraden Wegen, abenteuerlich, gefahrstuchend, Wikingertum].

Chart 1: Excerpt from the chart in Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, no pagination follows after page 28. The German original is quoted in parentheses; translation F. H.

Although Leifs developed his dualistic concept by himself over more than 15 years, it is much less “home-made” than Carl-Gunnar Åhlén describes it in his biography of the

composer.¹⁹ An early prominent concept of the North-South dualism can be found in Tacitus (ca. 56–120), whose opposition between the Germanic North and the Roman South in his *Germania* became widely circulated throughout Europe during the era of Renaissance humanism.²⁰ The notion that a society's main attitudes are influenced by the local climate can be traced back to Montesquieu, whose positive image of the freedom-loving North was affirmatively received by many theorists in the 18th and 19th century.²¹ One of them was Paul-Henri Mallet, a Swiss scholar in Copenhagen, who combined the climate theory with a positive view of Old Norse literature and mythology in his French writings,²² texts which were widely received and translated in several languages and, thus, promoted positive images of the Norse tradition in many European countries. Since the era of Romanticism, many influential voices in both continental Europe and the Nordic countries have helped to construct stereotypes of the North. In Germany, scholars like Johann Gottfried Herder and, later, Jacob Grimm, argued for inscribing the Old Norse literature and mythology into the “Germanic”, and, thus, “German” cultural heritage. On a musical level – but not only – this notion was most influentially adopted by Richard Wagner in his operatic tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ([*The Ring of the Nibelung*], Bayreuth 1876). Stereotypes of the North – its people, art, nature and mythology – were further popularised during the Wilhelmine era. This is certainly only a very rough sketch of a cultural development that is far more complex.²³ What is important regarding Leifs's concept is the observation that his encounter with German culture from 1916 obviously included strongly rooted stereotypes of what “the

¹⁹ Åhlén, *Jón Leifs*, 164, talks about Leifs's “home-carpentered dichotomy” (“hemsnickrade dikotomi” in Swedish original) and his “home-made climate doctrine” (“hemgjorda klimatlära”).

²⁰ Cf. Henningsen, “Der Norden: Eine Erfindung”, 22–26.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*

²² *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc, ou l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des mœurs et des usages des anciens Danois* (1755) and *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (1756).

²³ Cf. Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth, “The Norse Muse. Report from an International Research Project,” *alvissmál. Forschungen zur mittelalterlichen Kultur Skandinaviens* 9 (1999): 3–28, von See, *Barbar, Germane, Arier*, Julia Zernack, “Anschauungen vom Norden im deutschen Kaiserreich,” in *Handbuch zur ‘Völkischen Bewegung’ 1871–1918*, ed. by Uwe Puschner, Walter Schmitz, and Justus H. Ulbricht (München: Saur, 1996), 482–511, Julia Zernack, “Nordische Götter in Werbung und Propaganda,” in *‘Sang an Aegir’: Nordische Mythen um 1900*, ed. by Katja Schulz and Florian Heesch, in *Edda-Rezeption* 1 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), 323–369.

North” is and how North and South may differ from each other. As Pamela Potter has shown, in the 1920s Leifs was among those interested academics who tried to collect empirical proof for hypotheses by scholars like Oskar Fleischer and Hans Joachim Moser, according to whom the music of the Germanic people stands out as singular, innovative and even superior than other music.²⁴ Leifs’s ethnological research on Icelandic folk melodies led him to the observation that these “without doubt” reveal “features of primordial Germanic masculinity”.²⁵ Continuing Potter’s observations, we can see that Leifs’s concept of Nordic [“Norman”] art and his notion of a north-south dualism are also most probably inspired by Moser’s work. Moser published his monumental *Geschichte der deutschen Musik* [“History of German Music”] in three volumes in the early 1920s.²⁶ He argued for an essentialist continuity from the Germanic to German culture based on a notion of inheritance that was explicitly “völkisch”. In an article from 1925 in which Moser defended his nationalist search for the specifically German in music, he even provided a chart that opposes Germany with its two “biggest competitors in music”,²⁷ namely France and Italy. Although Moser’s argumentation differs from Leifs’ in that the first is interested in an ideal of German rather than Nordic music, the basic principle of systematising an alleged competition of cultures is quite similar. Like Leifs, Moser mingles artistic aspects with aspects of temperament and *weltanschauung*, ascribing “fire” and “optimistic” to Italy, “passion” and “tragic” to Germany, and “pathos” and “pessimistic” to France.²⁸ In his text, Moser also refers to essentialist stereotypes such as the climate-based opposition between north and south and the language-based opposition between Romans and Germanics: “Similarities between France and Germany in opposition to Italy are probably based on the rather climatic opposition of

²⁴ Pamela M. Potter, *Die deutsche der Künste. Musikwissenschaft und Gesellschaft von der Weimarer Republik bis zum Ende des Dritten Reichs*, translated by Wolfram Ette (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2000), 270.

²⁵ “zweifelsohne Merkmale urgermanischer Männlichkeit”, Jón Leifs, „Isländische Volksmusik und germanische Empfindungsart“, in *Die Musik* 16 (1923), 45, quoted in Potter, *Die deutsche der Künste*, 270.

²⁶ See Potter, *Die deutsche der Künste*, 258–66 for a detailed discussion of Moser’s works and their context.

²⁷ “größten Wettbewerber in musicis”, Hans Joachim Moser, “Über die Eigentümlichkeit der deutschen Musikbegabung,” in *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters* 31 (1925): 35–45, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44; cf. Potter, *Die deutsche der Künste*, 259–60.

northern – southern, as between France and Italy in opposition to Germany [are based] on the rather linguistic opposition of Romans and Germanics.”²⁹

Then, Moser also draws explicitly on racist notions by stating that Germany and Italy differ from France “for race reasons, because the Graeco-Italic people and the Germanics are apparently more close in some aspects than they and the Celts are who probably play a crucial role in the forming and development of French and English character.”³⁰ It is important to note that Leifs at least stays some distance from cultural racism: “One-sided race theories or party political aspects do not lead to truth. Even the Northmen were already racially mixed somehow. [...] Also people of ‘different race’, if you will, can experience the Northmen’s way together with us and take part in the Normanic renaissance.”³¹ Nevertheless, his view of the Nordic culture draws undeniably on similar essentialist notions of whom or what is Nordic. Regarding (in Leifs’s view) more distant cultures like African or Afro-American, Leifs openly adopts racist arguments of white supremacy:

Somebody else may reply that fifths occur in other folk musics, too, even among the Negroes. But anybody who has heard those tone sequences of Negro fifths, recklessly and fast tootled like by chance, would easily notice that there is a different inner attitude than in the insistent unerring and majestic fifths-songs of the North.³²

Furthermore it is notable how easily Leifs transfers his dualistic world-view on the opposition between the allegedly southern Jewish culture and the North. Talking about visual

²⁹ “So erklären sich Gleichheiten zwischen Frankreich und Deutschland gegenüber Italien vermutlich aus dem mehr klimatischen Gegensatz nördlich-südlich, solche zwischen Frankreich und Italien gegen Deutschland aus der [sic] mehr sprachlichen von Romanen und Germanen”, Moser, “Über die Eigentümlichkeit der deutschen Musikbegabung,” 37.

³⁰ “aus Rassegründen, weil Graecoitaliker und Germanen sich in manchem Betracht anscheinend näher stehen als den Kelten, die gerade da vermutlich an der Ausprägung französischen und englischen Wesens einen entscheidenden Anteil zeigen”, *ibid.*

³¹ “Einseitige Rassen-Theorien oder partei-politische Gesichtspunkte führen nicht zur Wahrheit. Auch die Nordmänner waren schon irgendwie rassisch gemischt. [...] Auch die ‘Andersrassischen’, wenn man von solchen sprechen will, können die Nordmänner-Art mit uns erleben und an der normannischen Wiedergeburt teilnehmen”, Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, 30.

³² “Ein anderer mag erwidern, dass Quinten auch in sonstigen Volksmusiken vorkommen, sogar bei Negern. Wer aber die wie zufällig sorglos und schnell hingedudelten Tonfolgen der Neger-Quinten gehört hat, wird leicht merken, dass da eine andere seelische Haltung herrscht als in den nachdrücklich zielsicheren und majestätischen Quinten-Liedern des Nordens”, *ibid.*, 93.

figures, he divides the Nordic use of triangles from the Jewish as represented by the Star of David. Any distance from German National Socialism seems to be forgotten when he immediately continues with his view on the swastika as a Nordic symbol that he even conflates with the hammer of the Norse god Thor:

There is a different expression in the triangles of Old Norse house gables than in more southern gable buildings or even in the triangles of the ‘Star of David’. The swastika also occurs on oriental carpets and among diverse Asian peoples but nevertheless has been considered a Nordic emblem. It uses a different expression according to its use: In the North, it is called ‘Thor’s hammer’, after the god Thor.³³

It would certainly be erroneous to call Jón Leifs a National Socialist or view his book as advocating for the National Socialist ideology. He never joined the NSDAP and his distance from the German officials around 1940 is obvious. Nevertheless, at least in the early years of the NS regime he could identify with the notion of a Nordic-Germanic Germany. For instance, in a letter from 1933 he expressed open sympathy with Alfred Rosenberg’s and Adolf Hitler’s ideas:

In short, I am seriously concerned about the cultural connection between the North and Germany, — firstly because it still cannot be clearly seen that the new Germany shall be oriented in a Nordic-Germanic way. The hopes that for example Rosenberg’s Myth³⁴ and the Führer’s politico-cultural speech in Nuremberg aroused in us northerners are still unaccomplished.³⁵

As we have seen, the main aspects of an ideal of Nordic art and culture that occur in Leifs’s concept were developed and circulating before the rise of National Socialism in

³³ “In den Dreiecken der alt-nordischen Häusergiebel steckt ein anderer Ausdruck als in südlicheren Giebelbauten oder gar in den Dreiecken des ‘David-Sternes’. Auch das Hakenkreuz erscheint auf orientalischen Teppichen und bei verschiedenen Völkern Asiens und wurde trotzdem als nordisches Wahrzeichen betrachtet. Je nach Art der Anwendung bekommt es einen anderen Ausdruck. Im Norden nennt man es ‘Thors Hammer’, nach dem Gotte Thor”, *ibid.*

³⁴ Alfred Ernst Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (München: Hoheneichen, 1930); *The Myth of the 20th Century: an evaluation of the spiritual-intellectual confrontations of our age* (Torrance, Calif.: Noontide Press, 1982).

³⁵ “Ich habe, kurz gesagt, ernste Sorge um die kulturelle Verbindung zwischen dem Norden und Deutschland, – zuerst weil man immer noch nicht deutlich erkennen kann, dass das neue Deutschland nordisch-germanisch gerichtet sein soll. Die Hoffnungen, die z. B. Rosenbergs Mythos und die kulturpolitische Rede des Führers in Nürnberg bei uns Nordländern erweckten, sind noch unerfüllt”, Jón Leifs, letter to Thilo von Trotha, 23rd November 1933, quoted in Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, *Jón Leifs*, 390.

German politics, yet this makes the concept no less ideological. Altogether, Leifs's way of thinking about the North seems rather close to what had been called "völkisch" in Austria and Germany in the early 20th century.³⁶ Leifs's ambivalence towards National Socialist politics can also, for instance, be observed in his attitude toward Richard Wagner. In his book, Leifs often refers to particularities of the Eddas and sagas which also served Wagner as main sources for his opera tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In order to characterise the typical alliterations in Old Norse poetry, Leifs uses terms like "snappy, masterful, dynamic" that – at least in the German original "zackig, herrisch, dynamisch"³⁷ – sound similar to NS jargon. Wagner, according to Leifs, failed to transfer the alliterations into the libretto of his *Ring*. There, they do not sound "zackig, herrisch, dynamisch", and, thus, they do not suit the Old Norse literature.³⁸ In contrast to the German National Socialist mainstream, Leifs distanced himself from Wagner, whom he saw as a Southern rather than a Northern composer.³⁹

Another aspect of Leifs's North/South dualism is its obvious gendering. As deconstructionist and feminist studies have repeatedly shown, dualistic concepts have been quite influential and widespread in Western culture, including concepts in music history, and they are always connected to masculine/feminine dualisms.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, Hans Joachim Moser also used the attribute "masculine" to describe the best artistic aspects of German music and its heroes.⁴¹ It is easy to see that many details in Leifs's chart match the common gender stereotypes, such as, for instance, the feminine "Grace and softness" versus the masculine "Decided hardness" or "Vikingness" (see chart 1). Even the dualism of mass culture versus "uncatchy" art is a common gendered stereotype, as Andreas Huyssen

³⁶ Günter Hartung, "Völkische Ideologie," in *Handbuch zur 'Völkischen Bewegung' 1871–1918*, ed. by Uwe Puschner, Walter Schmitz, and Justus H. Ulbricht (München: Saur, 1996), 22–41.

³⁷ Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, 32. Leifs marks this expression as a quotation from an author named Schirmer, but he does not provide further bibliographical information.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 60, 75.

⁴⁰ Cf. Nina Noeske, "Dualismus," in *Lexikon Musik und Gender*, ed. by Annette Kreuziger-Herr and Melanie Unseld (Kassel: Bärenreiter, Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2010), 190–192; Leo Treitler, "Gender and Other Dualities of Music History," in *Musicology and Difference. Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. by Ruth A. Solie (1993), paperback edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 23–45.

⁴¹ Cf. Potter, *Die deutscheste der Künste*, 379–80.

expressed in the formulation “Mass Culture as Women: Modernism’s Other”.⁴² We can see that Leifs uses stereotypical concepts of masculinity to connect his Nordic musical art with high culture and modernism. This even implies an argument about why his music does not suit the taste of the feminized masses.

It has become clear that Leifs’ concept of Nordicness is based both on his views of the Icelandic nature and the Old Icelandic literature. According to him both are strongly connected: “The fundament of all cultural consideration of Iceland and the North is the Old-Icelandic literature. [...] The only way towards a complete understanding of this literature is by considering the real primordial landscape of Iceland and its local conditions.”⁴³ In another passage he connects the Eddic creation myths directly to the Icelandic nature:

The images of the creation of the world, as they are told in the Edda, have an Icelandic character: mountains and sea, raging storms, hunting clouds, pale immovably suspended twilight, waterfalls, glacial streams and glaciers, black lava, even the meadows so eternally fresh green like in springtime, and finally, the endless clear and vast prospect. The most famous poem ‘Völuspá’ [‘The Seeress’ Prophecy’] can be seen as the depiction of a volcanic eruption. Also Sigurd’s ride through the fire points at something volcanic.⁴⁴

Against this background, many musical features of Leifs’s Edda oratorio can be viewed as being based on his ideologically informed concept of the North. Just to mention a quite prominent example, the often observed use of *tvisöngur* in his compositions is not only an element of Icelandic folklore; Leifs makes unmistakably clear that the *tvisöngur* are a masculine form of music in his view and he depicts the Old Icelandic literature as mainly

⁴² Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

⁴³ “Grundlage aller kulturellen Betrachtung Islands und des Nordens ist die alt-isländische Literatur. [...] [V]oll verstehen lässt sie sich erst aus der eigentlichen Ursprungs-Landschaft Island und den dortigen Verhältnissen heraus”, Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, 11.

⁴⁴ “Die Vorstellungen der Edda von der Welterschaffung tragen denn auch isländischen Charakter: Berge und Meer, tobende Stürme, jagende Wolken, blasse unverrückbar hängende Dämmerung, Wasserfälle, Gletscherflüsse und Gletscher, schwarze Lava, auch die so frühlingmässig ewig frischen grünenden Wiesen und schliesslich die in endlose Fernen klare und ausgedehnte Sicht. Das berühmteste Gedicht ‘Völuspá’ kann als Schilderung eines Vulkanausbruches betrachtet werden. Auch Sigurds Ritt durch das Feuer deutet auf Vulkanisches”, *ibid.* 12.

masculine.⁴⁵ Having said this, Leifs' use of both the *tvísöngur* and the Eddic literature must be regarded as being based on his ideological North-South dualism.

3. The beach

In his study of Australian beaches, the media scholar John Fiske interprets the beach as a place between nature and culture. The beach inhabits an anomalous status because it is situated at the border between sea and land and, thus, it “is neither one nor the other but has characteristics of both. This means that it has simply too much meaning, an excess of meaning potential”.⁴⁶ The anomalous status of the beach is not a simple result of its geographical position between land and sea but is a product of culture.

Man [...] overlaps the physical structure of Land/Sea with the social structure of Nature/Culture, where he can create mediating categories that are both physical and social. The land, then, becomes culture, the city, civilization; the sea becomes nature, untamed, uncivilized, raw. The beach mediates this terrifying boundary.⁴⁷

Fiske demonstrates how beaches are culturally marked and used as that kind of anomalous place. At the beach, people can feel like being in nature and at the same time keep their cultural ideals, norms and structures of power. As an anomalous place between nature and culture, the beach offers opportunities for anomalous practices, like topless bathing, which is neither being naked nor being clothed, or surfing, which is neither swimming nor boating.⁴⁸

Fiske's “reading” of the beach concerns certain aspects of local beaches in Perth, Australia. Nevertheless, it offers some general observations that can even teach us something about the relationship between music – obviously an element of culture – and nature. Fiske derives his basic argument from Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose “work demonstrates how all cultures are concerned to articulate this distinction between nature and culture in one way or another, and thus make meanings in and for the culture”.⁴⁹ Lévi-Strauss also developed the distinction between nature and the natural:

⁴⁵ Cf. Leifs, *Islands künstlerische Anregung*, 24–25.

⁴⁶ Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 34.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

Nature is pre-cultural reality. It is that external world before any cultural perception or sense-making process has been applied to it. But the natural is what culture makes of nature. In other words, the natural is a cultural product, and nature exists only as a conceptual opposition to culture.⁵⁰

The beach, then, offers unique possibilities to create something natural. Regarding Jón Leifs, we have seen that, in his view, music is not diametrically opposed to nature. Instead, he tries to keep the music and nature relationship as tight as possible. With Fiske and Lévi-Strauss, we can now conclude that Leifs constructs music as something natural, placing it metaphorically on the beach between nature and culture. As we can learn from Fiske and observe in Leifs, such practices of naturalising are often concealed. Leifs struggles to describe Icelandic culture, beginning with the medieval Eddas and sagas, as something directly connected to nature, neglecting all those cultural processes of transforming nature into literature and then into music. Leifs's aesthetic ideal is about creating art on the beach. In this way music becomes natural.

Again, the Edda oratorio is a musical example of particular interest, because it depicts the creation of nature, or, better, a certain mythical narrative of creation. As a creation oratorio, it includes musical images of land and sea, and even the beach plays a certain role later in the narrative. We can associate that with Fiske's picture of the beach, seeing that he refers to the geographical opposition between land and sea as described in another creation myth, namely the *Book of Genesis*.⁵¹ That association is interesting not only because it underlines the metaphor of creating the natural at the beach but also because it sheds a light on a certain aspect of how Leifs transformed the Nordic creation myth. Regarding the primary mythological sources, it is a characteristic element of the Biblical creation myth to conceive the difference between land and sea as a binary opposition. In *Genesis* I, 10, God confirms His separation of land and water by giving them their names, earth and sea.⁵² In contrast, the Poetic Edda and Snorra Edda do not express a comparable binary opposition between land and sea. They do indeed describe the creation of land and sea as different parts of the creation

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Bibel in gerechter Sprache*, ed. by Ulrike Bail et al., 3rd edition (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007).

but not as the result of a division into two parts. Here, the gods created earth and sea together with mountains and sky out of the giant Ymir's body, as is said in *Vafþrúðnismál* [*Vafþrúdnir's Sayings*] 21:

From Ymir's flesh the earth was shaped,
and the mountains from his bones;
the sky from the skull of the frost-cold giant,
and the sea from his blood.⁵³

A single line in the Eddic poem *Völuspá* (4) tells that the earth has been “brought up” by the gods. But even though this has led to the disputable suggestion that the earth originates in the sea,⁵⁴ the verse, which does not even mention the sea, does not proclaim a sea-land separation comparable to that in *Genesis*. Regarding binary oppositions in the Eddic sources, *Gylfaginning*, especially, points out a different one, namely the opposition between cold and hot, represented by the mythic places of Nifelheim and Muspell.

Interestingly, Leifs's musical transformation of the Nordic creation myth turns out to converge to the rather Biblical than to the Norse opposition of earth and sea. As we have seen, his libretto draws exclusively on Eddic sources, arranging them in a new configuration that includes a single movement called *Sær* [*Sea*] followed by a movement called *Jörð* [*Earth*]. Earlier, I exemplified Leifs's style of composing different Eddic verses on the basis of the movement *Sær*. Similar to this characterisation of the sea, the following movement, *Jörð*, consists of verses that depict the creation and characteristics of the earth, including the quoted verse “Ór Ymis holdi...” [“From Ymir's flesh...”] in the *Gylfaginning* version.

⁵³ The Poetic Edda, translated with an introduction and notes by Carolyne Larrington (1996), reissued, in *Oxford World's classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 43, “Ór Ymis holdi var iorð um scopuð, / enn ór beinom biorg, / himinn ór hausi ins hrímkalda iotuns, / enn ór sveita síor.” (Edda 1983, 48); cf. *Grimnismál* (Grimnir's Sayings) 40. The verse is quoted in *Gylfaginning* 6 [8] (Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, 16).

⁵⁴ Kurt Schier, “Die Erdschöpfung aus dem Urmeer und die Kosmogonie der *Völuspá*” (1963), in Kurt Schier, *Nordlichter. Ausgewählte Schriften 1960–1992*, ed. by Ulrike Strerath-Bolz, Stefanie Würth, and Sibylle Geberl (München: Diederichs 1994), 15–52.

Furthermore, the opposition between sea and earth is confirmed by the overall structure of the oratorio. Beginning with the fifth and sixth movements, *Sær* and *Jörð*, respectively, the order of the movements is obviously based on binary oppositions: day versus night, men versus elves and dwarfs, summer versus winter. In this respect, Leifs's creation oratorio is rather more in sync with the example of Joseph Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* [*The Creation*] and the genre tradition closely connected to the performance of Biblical subjects, than in marking a certain non-Christian Norse speciality. It is important to remember that even the Eddas are not pre-Christian sources but were written down by Christian writers. Literary scholars have identified a range of Christian elements in those Nordic sources. Having said this, my observation on Leifs's almost Biblical image of a land-sea opposition does not aim to suggest that he made the Nordic creation myth more Christian than it was before. What is important here is that Leifs's oratorio confirms the widespread cultural relevance of the land-sea opposition in the era of Western modernism which is grounded on a Christian tradition. Leifs did not intend to create any archaic premodern music and, in contrast to some of his contemporaries, he did not express any significant interest in the revival of pagan religion. His oratorio is a composition of its time which even includes the depiction of earth and sea. The land-sea opposition originating in *Genesis* is similarly relevant here as it is in the culture of Australian beaches analysed by Fiske.

Indeed, the beach itself is part of the Nordic creation mythology, even according to the Eddic sources. As we have seen, the beach is described as the place where the first pair of human beings were created: Askr and Embla were like two trees lying as flotsam and jetsam at the beach when the gods Odin, Hænir and Lodur found them and gave them life:⁵⁵

Önd þau né átto, óð þau né höfðo,
lá né læti né lito góða;

⁵⁵ The sources of this myth diverge in some details: *Gylfaginning* 6 [9] mentions the place explicitly as (sea) beach ("sævar strand", *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 16; "sea shore" in Faulkes' translation, *Snorri Sturluson, Edda*, 13), while *Völuspá* 17 just tells about land (the same word in Old Norse). According to *Völuspá* 18, Odin appears together with Hænir and Lodur, while *Gylfaginning* 6 together with the previous chapter identifies his companions as Vili and Ve. Leif in his libretto quotes passages from *Gylfaginning* as well as from *Völuspá*, thereby creating a version that includes Snorri's compound "sævar strönd" and identifies the three gods as Odin, Hænir and Lodur.

Florian Heesch: Creating Music at the Beach

önd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hænir,
lá gaf Lóðurr oc lito góða.

Breath they had not, spirit they had not,
character nor vital spark nor fresh complexions;
breath gave Odin, spirit gave Hænir,
vital spark gave Lodur, and fresh complexions.⁵⁶

Leifs imitates this creation process musically by using two simple pieces of wood as orchestral instruments. This again confirms the anomalous status of the beach between nature and culture. The pieces of wood are not instruments and, thus, do not belong to culture, but because they are used as instruments neither do they belong to nature. Like the beach, they are anomalous and a strong sign of the natural in Leifs's oratorio. They are also an outstanding, although blatant, example for the creation of music at the beach.

When we look beyond Leifs's concept and composition towards his current image as a composer, we can recognize that even here the notion of the beach as a *natural* (in Lévi-Strauss's terminology) creative place is effective. Consider Hilmar Oddsson's biopic *Tears of Stone* [*Tár úr steini*, 1995]. The movie has been an influential depiction of Leifs's personal life and his music for the international public today. In one of its key sequences, we see Leifs (performed by Þröstur Leó Gunnarsson) at several places in Icelandic nature: at the Geysir among others, but also at an obviously Icelandic seashore with drift ice being washed on the beach by the rolling waves. The clash of sea and land is materialized in those millions of pieces of ice. The sequence is overlaid with Leifs's *Overture to Galdra Loftur*, op. 10, for Orchestra (1927). While listening to his own music, we watch the composer and the Icelandic beach from four different angles. At first, we look from behind his back with the sea in the background, seeing how he stands at the beach facing towards the water. Then, the camera seems to take his point of view, watching the waves rolling at the shore from the beach. The

⁵⁶ Völuspá 18, Edda 1983 (Old Norse) and The Poetic Edda 2008 (English translation). For the sake of completeness it should be remarked that the translation of the Old Norse words for the three gifts, especially "óðr" and "lá", is not at all secure and therefore disputed among scholars.

third angle is a close-up view on Leifs – at this point we know where he stands and where he looks – with typical Icelandic snow-topped mountains in the background. Finally, a long shot from a somewhat higher angle at the side shows the ice-scattered beach with Leifs at the centre, the sea at the left, the mountains at the right. Recalling Fiske's picture of the beaches in the area of Perth, Australia, this Icelandic one is certainly a different kind of beach: although it is definitely depicted as a border between land and sea, the land behind the lonely figure represents culture to a much lesser degree than another part of nature. Thus, the composer at the beach is indeed imagined as standing on a border but this border is situated not between nature and culture but within nature. However, culture is present too at least in the soundtrack, which consists of Leifs' music.

One narrative of the sequence is obviously a passage from the biographical plot, more precisely a solitary encounter between the protagonist and Icelandic nature during a temporary stay in his home country. But there is a second narrative in the multimedia staging. This narrative tells us that Leifs' music is created at the beach; maybe at a real beach, maybe at an imagined one, but certainly at a *natural* place between nature and culture. Furthermore, this narrative underlines the importance of Iceland for Leifs's artistic work, while Iceland signifies nature rather than culture. Those who know more of Leifs's music may even easily connect the icy beach scene with his orchestral piece *Havís [Drift Ice]*, one of his programmatic compositions about characteristic elements in Icelandic nature.⁵⁷ This association only confirms the impression of Leifs' music being created in nature. At this point, we have to consider his canonical position as Iceland's most established classical composer. Given this authority, Leifs's artistic concept, his compositional work and his public image seem to be strong contributors to the actual image of Iceland being a *natural* place for the creation of music.

Finally, I must say that I do not at all aim to mythologise the beach. But as we have seen, the beach can serve as a helpful metaphor to understand the notion of a creative place between nature and culture. It is important to see how widespread this notion of a *natural* creation is. It will be interesting to further investigate how effective this notion is with regard to other music about the natural; music from Iceland as well as from any other place in the world. Maybe the beach metaphor will prove to illustrate the notion of *natural* creation in

⁵⁷ The other ones are Geysir, Hekla (named after the volcano) and Dettifoss (named after the waterfall).

Florian Heesch: Creating Music at the Beach

general. In any case, from the perspective of music scholarship, the most interesting thing will always be to consider particular phenomena concerning the relationship between music and nature, issues which are ripe for investigating further. From my point of view, Leifs's creation oratorio can serve as an inspiring springboard in spite of the ideological background and Leifs' musical work offers more perspectives to consider.