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Langspil and Icelandic Fiðla

**The history, construction and function of the two
Icelandic folk-instruments**

Candidate studies in the violoncello, graduation year 2012

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Characters with spaces (without Enclosures/Bilag) 37.879

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Introduction to the project

The music history of Iceland is neither rich nor diverse compared to other European countries. The country was very poor and undeveloped until in the late 19th century. There were no orchestras and no music education available in the country. The only common instruments were small organs in the churches, and the two national folk-instruments, langspil and Icelandic fiðla (fiddle). These two instruments are amongst the very few national instruments the country has and they are not well known. Many Icelandic people have little or no knowledge of the subject and that may lead to the instruments disappearing at all. However, the future of these two un-common instruments may be brightening up now-a-days. More musicians and music historians have gotten interested in playing them and making researches on them and therefore, the instruments are getting increasingly popular.

I myself am not a specialist in folk music. However, I find string instruments and their history very fascinating. Instruments such as the violin or the cello (the instrument I play myself) have dominated the music world through the centuries, even though there are very many stringed folk-instruments to be found. Many of those, the Icelandic ones included, are quite unknown and have fallen into shadow. My goal in writing my thesis about the langspil and the Icelandic fiðla is to help preventing the extinction of my national instruments. In this thesis the reader will get introduced to the instruments (mostly the langspil since the Icelandic fiðla has not been fully discovered and analyzed yet). The reader will not only get the chance to read the general information on these instruments, but also to study photos of them and hear recordings of music played on langspil. The recordings may be found on the CD attached to the last page of the thesis.

It is my hope that the reader may find the subject of the thesis interesting and it will help spreading knowledge about Icelandic folk-instruments, folk music and the music history of Iceland.

A brief history of Iceland and the Icelandic music life¹

The first people known to have inhabited Iceland were Irish monks who came in the eighth century, but left when settlers from the Nordic countries arrived in the years 870 – 930 AD. The main source of information about the settlement period is the Landnámabók (Book of Settlements). Landnámabók was written in the 12th century and gives a detailed account of the first settlers. However, the writer or the writers of Landnámabók were mostly interested in the aristocracy and therefore they say very little on the lower class people, such as the slaves, or the everyday life. Therefore, there are almost no sources of information on folk-music and instruments from this period. The Norwegian chieftain Ingólfur Arnarson was the first settler. He arrived in Iceland with his family, his servants and slaves from many different countries in 874 AD. During the next six decades, Viking settlers from Scandinavia and their multicultural slaves and staff, spread their homesteads over the habitable areas in Iceland. The Settlement period ended the year 930 AD and a constitutional law code was accepted and Alþingi, the oldest parliament in the world, was established.

Christianity was peacefully adopted in Iceland in the year 1000. Iceland's first bishopric was established in Skálholt in South Iceland the year 1056. Another one was established in the north, at Hólar, in the year 1106. Both of them became the country's main centers of education. Jón 'the holy' Ögmundsson was voted the first bishop in Hólar and he reigned until the year 1121. He established a school and had the first Icelandic school building built. This is where the first music teaching in Iceland was given. The Bishop Jón strictly forbade dancing and secular music, or 'singing low-minded songs of love'. Such corruption as writing a naughty poet was forbidden by law and the punishment was serious, even execution. This strict law can also explain why almost no secular music or poetry has been preserved.

¹ The sources for this chapter from:

Viðburðir í íslensku tónlistarlífi 1056 – 1839: Íslensk tónlist í 1000 ár.

Viðburðir í íslensku tónlistarlífi 1840 – 1929: Íslensk tónlist í 1000 ár.

Ferlir: Ingólfur Arnarsson - hinn fyrsti landnámsmaður

See further information in the List of Literature, page 19

Iceland lost its independency and became a Norwegian colony the year 1262, after many years of civil war and belligerency. When Norway and Denmark formed the Kalmar Union in the year 1397, Iceland fell under the sovereignty of the King of Denmark.

Several abbeys were launched in the medieval time in Iceland where people practiced music and other arts. Most literature from the Catholic times were destroyed after the change of religion to Lutheranism so there is unfortunately very limited sources on music and arts from these times. Only very few letters and documents remained, but however, one of the letters show that there was at least one pipe organ in Iceland before the reformation.

The changes from heathendom to Christianity in Iceland were very peaceful. In the 16th century, the Danish king brought about the reformation from Catholic to Lutheran Evangelism and that reformation was not peaceful at all. Iceland was split up in two parts that disagreed on the reformation, the south part wanting to join Lutheran Evangelism and the north wanting to remain Catholic. The last Catholic bishop in Iceland, Jón Arason in Hólar, North Iceland, was beheaded the year 1550. That was the end of Catholic religion in Iceland.

After and during the reformation, things changed dramatically in Iceland, politics, music and arts. Catholic cultural heritage disappeared and was destroyed; the Old Catholic psalms that were sung in Latin gave way for Danish and German psalms, sung with Icelandic lyrics. The first hymnbook in Icelandic was published the year 1549. However, it only contained lyrics since sheet music printing started later, or the year 1589 when the hymnbook by Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson was published.

In the next decades very little happened in Iceland, so it is very appropriate to talk about the Dark Ages. The medieval lasted basically longer in Iceland, due to isolation, lack of education and culture life. There was some music life at the churches and some sacred sheet music was printed. But that was it. In the 14th to the 18th century, the inhabitants of Iceland were mostly sheep farmers or fishermen, or both. People had many children and infant mortality was very common. Icelandic people were poor and uneducated, and had no luxury. A typical Icelandic house was made of turf and rocks. The everyday work was very hard and the spare time was short. During the winter time, the family would gather together in the house and whilst most of them would knit or process the sheep wool, one member of the family would read out loud or sing. This is happening in Iceland whilst in Europe, composer such as J.S. Bach and J. Haydn were writing masterpieces and the music life is growing and developing. Some of Iceland's misfortune can be blamed on the authorities, some on the long

distance from Europe and the isolation, others on the nature. Earthquakes and volcanic activity has always affected the inhabitants of Iceland. In the year 1783 the worst natural disaster in the history of Iceland happened. Mount Grímsvötn erupted, causing famine all over the country. That natural disaster is named Skaftáreldar and it caused the death of 10.000 Icelanders, or more than 20% of the nation at this time.

Things started developing in Iceland soon after the time of the enlightenment and when a man named Magnús Stephensen (1762-1833) moved back home after his stay abroad in Copenhagen, where he studied the law. Just after finishing his education, he moved back home and became a lawyer and a politician. He was shocked to see how horribly the Skaftáreldar effected the country and how badly his compatriots suffered from poverty and hunger. As a man of the enlightenment, Magnús was also unsatisfied with the way of thinking in Iceland. He though Icelanders were old-fashioned and uncivilized. The music life was not an exception. Therefore, Magnús wrote and published a psalm book, since the Icelandic church singing sounded, from his point of view, both awful and out of tune.

The Icelandic music live developed slowly but surely in and after the middle of the 19th century. The first pipe organ was bought and placed in the Cathedral of Reykjavík and around the same time, Ari Sæmundsen published a book on how to learn to play the langspil. This book will be discussed later in this thesis, since it was very important when it comes to the history of the langspil. The first book ever to be written in Icelandic on music theory was published the year 1870 and so on. It was also first in the second half of the 19th century that Icelandic people started composing secular music and publish it. The music was mostly short songs for voice and piano accompaniment.

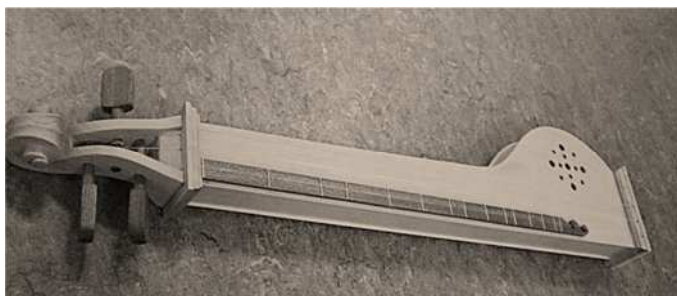
In the world wars, especially the second one, Iceland really started to jump forward into the modern times. English and American military forces occupied the country in the Second World War. That opened up the possibilities for many Icelandic people getting well-paid jobs working for the military. The country became independent from Denmark, the 17th of June the year 1944 the republic of Iceland was founded. In the last hundred years, music life also developed from being almost non-existing to very rich and diverse. The Icelandic Symphony Orchestra was founded the year 1950 and is amongst the best Nordic orchestras and was nominated for a Grammy award in the year 2009. Iceland has an Arts Academy, a national opera, a brand new concert and conference house as well as many other artistic

institutions. Hence it is only fair to assert that Iceland has reached other European nation as far as arts and arts are concerned, in spite of wretchedness and poverty and in the recent times.

Langspil - history and construction²

The Langspil and Icelandic fiðla belong to the zither family of musical instruments. A zither is an instrument where the strings are as long as the body of the instruments.

Instruments such as cello and violin are therefore not zithers since the strings are shorter than



Langspil made by Jón Sigurðsson, 2011. Owned by the author

the instruments themselves. The oldest sources of information on langspil date back to the 18th century. The origin of the instrument is not known but most musicologists and music historians believe that the langspil is an offspring

from other folk-instruments with fretted finger boards that belong to the zither

family. Langspils usually had the shape of a thin, oblong box, one end of it broader than the other. The instrument had a sound hole at the wider end. The shape and size of the sound holes were of all kinds and differed from one instrument to another. The body of the instrument was made of wood and the strings were made of wire.

The number of strings differed from one instrument to another. Instruments typically had from one to six strings and a fingerboard along one side. Most langspils have three strings, one melody string, which runs over the fingerboard and two drone strings that the player does not fret. The wider end of the instrument sometimes has a semi-circular bulge on one side. According to a research carried out by David G Woods the year 1981, langspils varied in size, the shortest one he analyzed was 73 cm and the longest one was 104 cm. The types of woods used in the building of the lanspils varied greatly, according to Woods research. It is theorized

² The sources on this chapter from:

Sæmundsen, Ari. *Leiðarvísir til að spila á langspil og til að læra sálmalög eptir nótum.*

Jónsson, Páll H. og Garðar Jakobsson. *Fiðlur og tónmannalíf í Suður-Þingeyjarsýslu.*

Sigurðsson, Njáll: *Um íslenska langspilid*

Vísindavefurinn: Dr. Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson.

See further information in the List of Literature, page 19

that in the earlier times, peoples used driftwood which was washed upon the beaches around the country. Most of the instruments he analyzed were made of pine. The others were made of birch, Douglas fir, oak or walnut.

The player uses the left hand to press the melody string down onto the fingerboard while holding the bow in the right hand. The bow grip is reminiscent of how people hold a pencil. The bow touches all of the strings at the same time, because the bridge is flat. The instrument can be played either laid across the player's lap or placed on a table. The bow is short, much shorter than a violin bow, and bends outwards like a baroque bow. The Langspil may also be played using a wooden stick. Then the player would hit the strings with the stick, all at the same time. When the stick is used instead of a bow the sound becomes very different. The tones will be shorter and sound more like a guitar.



Langspil by Friðgeir Sigurbjörnsson with a heart shaped sound hole. Kept at the Icelandic Music Museum

Concerning the style of the instrument langspil and the way it is played, it is similar to many other folk-instruments, such as scheitholt from Germany, the Norwegian langeleik, Danish humle, Swedish hummel and the dulcimer from the Appalachian Mountains in USA. The instrument that resembles langspil the most would be the German scheitholt All the instruments mentioned above are zithers with a fingerboard and all of which are believed to be descendants of the medieval instrument called monochord. Another thing they have in common is that they were all used for folk music and folkdances in each of their home countries.

The Langspil was first mentioned in eighteenth century literature as a bowed chordophone. Narrators from abroad wrote accounts of their travels in Iceland, and drew sketches of the instruments, and native people wrote of it as well. However, the earliest descriptions are based on rather limited knowledge of Icelandic folk music and musical instruments of that time. The English traveller and explorer John Thomas Stanley led an expedition to Iceland in 1789 and the group wrote a diary where very interesting information on langspil can be found:



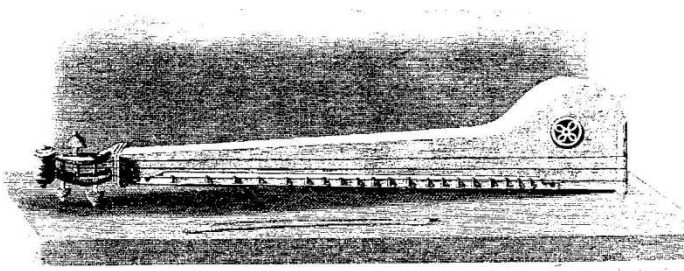
German scheitholt

It was shaped like a pyramid without a top. It had six brass wire strings. The strings were from 12 and half inches to 37 inches long. The instrument itself was five and a

*half inches wide and 39 inches long (99cm). It was played with a bow and the sound was very bad.*³

It is likely that Stanley didn't know how to play the instrument and therefore he failed to impress his travelling companions.

Another account of the langspil comes from Stanley's contemporary, who was a little bit fonder of the instrument. The Icelandic dean Jón Steingrímsson (1728-1791) wrote his biography in the years 1784 until his death and in his book he mentions langspil twice. He tells about Christmas celebration he went to as a young man, where langspil was played and the guests sang along. The other input on langspil is when he visited a farm where the housewife was a very kind woman who would play the langspil for him. The music made the dean feel relaxed and calm, according to his autobiography.



A drawing of a langspil from Mackenzie's diary.

Sir George St. Mackenzie travelled to Iceland the year 1811 and published his travelling diaries a year later. He and his group visited the Danish viceroy Magnús Stephensen where langspil was played during dinner time. Mackenzie and his friends were very impressed

with the music since they had not heard music in Iceland, except some 'pathetic violin playing in Reykjavík'. It was Magnús' children, his son and daughter, who played some music for the guests. They played mostly Danish and Norwegian tunes. Magnús himself was a good player too and had very cultural household. Mackenzie and the other travelers got the chance to take a look at the instrument afterwards. They wrote down a quite precise description on it and compare it to the monochord mentioned before in this chapter. They also mentioned that they thought the langspil sounded like piano to them. Therefore it is likely that Magnús' children used sticks but not bows to play.

The narratives mentioned above, as well as verbal accounts that have been preserved through history, provide us with the knowledge that the langspil was used for individual

³ Woods, David G. 1993, pages 112

pleasure or for entertaining families and guests in the eighteenth and nineteenth century farming communities in Iceland. The instrument was simply constructed out of the wood material available and was used for solo playing as well as an accompaniment instrument. According to parish reports, people did not really think of the langspil as a real instrument. It was written down in one of those parish reports that in this region there were no instruments at all, but there were two langspils. This may be evidence that people simply did not have much respect for langspil, or had some sort of inferiority complexes towards their folk culture. The people who compiled these reports were although not the people playing langspil, but higher class people such as priests. It doesn't necessarily mean that the public shared this 'snobbish' attitude.

In the year 1855, Ari Sæmundsen published the treatise *Leiðarvísir til að spila á langspil*, or *A manual to learn to play the langspil*, in Akureyri, the principal town of North Iceland. It is not only the first book ever that had the purpose of teaching langspil playing to beginners, but also the very first music teaching material ever published in Iceland. The work may have been influenced by the development of the instrument Psalmodikon. (I think it is almost certain that it was) The psalmodikon was invented by J. W. Bruun in Copenhagen the year 1823, but the prototype for that instrument was the medieval monochord. Psalmodikon became very popular in Scandinavia, especially in Norway and Sweden, and was mostly used for singing in the church and at schools. The psalmodikon was developed and spread specifically to teach people the tunes in a new hymn book that was published in Sweden in the early 19th century. Scandinavian musicians wrote teaching material to help the public to learn to play the psalmodikon and these books may have inspired Ari Sæmundsen to write his extended treatise on the langspil. Ari's work provides specific information about the fret design of the instrument and how to tune it in different ways, and acceptable bow technique. He also gives the reader ground knowledge in music theory.

Ari Sæmundsen's book quite possibly made a big impact on the preservation of the tradition of the langspil, since very precise guidance to how to build a langspil appeared in the book as well. Many people tried to use it to build their own instruments. However, the



Ólöf Jónsdóttir from Skógarströnd, playing the langspil

drawing of the fingerboard was not printed correctly and the frets were not completely in the right places according to the book. When people used the guidance to build a langspil of their own, the results would be an instrument that was quite out of tune. In the north of Iceland, two men in the north of Iceland, Benedikt Jónsson and Sigtryggur Helgason, found a solution to that problem by building a portable fingerboard for other people to use in order to correct their own langspils.

The langspil survived into the 20th century but it almost died out soon after the start of the century and for a period of about 70 or 80 years, it seems nobody really played it, although of course it is not entirely known what people were doing out in the farms around the countryside. Now-a-days, the langspil is still being used in folk music even though it is not a widespread instrument. Unfortunately, there is no written sheet music for the instrument and the oldest written source of information on how it may have been played is Ari's treatise from the year 1855, by which time the instrument was already in decline. Consequently, the modern musician has very little to rely on in order to imitate and produce the langspil's 'original' sound.

Icelandic fiðla – history and construction⁴

The Icelandic word *fiðla* (e. fiddle) is very old. It can be found in old documents from the medieval ages, Snorri Sturluson speaks f.ex. of *fiddlers* in his book, *Heimskringla*. There he tell about Huggleikur, king of Sweden, who was not a man of war but a man of culture and at his court were both fiddlers, harp players and actors. It is not clear what kind of fiddle Snorri and other medieval writers are referring to, because there are no descriptions of how the instrument looked or how it was played. It is unlikely that the fiddles referred to in the old documents belonged to the family of modern violins, but bowed string instruments were already popular in Europe in early medieval times. In the famous medieval cathedral of

⁴ Sources for this chapter from
Þorsteinsson, Bjarni. *Íslensk þjóðlög* Sigurðsson,
Njáll: Um íslenska fiðlu. I: *Hugur og Hönd*, 2003, pages 14-17

See further information in the List of Literature, page 19

Nidaros in Norway, Nordic theoreticians have found a little statue of a person playing a stringed instrument, most likely related to the Icelandic fiðla.

The Icelandic fiðla is probably first mentioned in a poem from a 16th century folktale, though the description of it is very unclear.

The first clear evidence of the Icelandic fiðla is in a dictionary or an encyclopedia, written in the 18th century by Jón Ólafsson (1705-1779). He mentions and describes a boxed, cavernous instrument, with two strings. The Swedish explorer Uno von Troil visited Iceland the year 1772 and wrote in his diary that he saw two instruments,

langspil with six brass strings and a fiðla with two brass strings, both played with a

Fiðla by Stefán Erlendsson

bow. The National Museum of Iceland has a simple but clear drawing by the painter Sigurður Guðmundsson, of a fiðla he saw the year 1856. It is believed that the fiðla on the drawing was owned by Sveinn Þórarinnsson, who was well known for his fiðla playing.

The National Museum owns three Icelandic fiðlas. The oldest of the three instruments was

The oldest fiðla kept at the National Museum of Iceland, built circa 1800

probably built around the year 1800. It is however quite unlike the two other one since it has four strings and ornaments such as f-holes and a scroll (the top part of a violins neck) with violin type tuning pegs. The maker of the older fiðla was probably influenced by the design of langspils that were also around at that time. Of the other two instruments, one is thought to be a copy of the other, which was built soon after the year 1900, most likely the year 1905. It came into existence because the priest and folk song collector Rev. Bjarni Þorsteinsson asked the carpenter Stefán Erlendsson to make him a replica of the instruments that Stefán remembered seeing when he was young. Stefán did not only build an excellent instrument, but he also collected information about fiðlas from the people in the area where he lived. Rev. Bjarni collected folksongs and published a big collection of Icelandic music, Íslenzk Þjóðlög

published in Copenhagen 1906 - 1909. He also wrote an extensive article on the Icelandic fiðla, which may be found in the introduction at the beginning of the same book.

According to Rev. Bjarni, the fiðla is very old and from pure Icelandic origin. In his collection of folk music he writes about Magnús Stephensen, who, just like the Uno von Troil, also describes the instrument in the 18th century. According to Magnús, the fiðla is not an elegant thing. Magnús also claims that the fiðla was already becoming very rare. Magnús' description of the fiðla tells that it had strings made of horse hair. Bjarni's contemporaries disagreed with that and many insist that the fiðla has always had wire strings. However, Bjarni earlier fiðlas may well have had horse hair strings if nothing else was available. Bjarni describes the Icelandic fiðla like this:



Jakob Árnason, playing the Icelandic fiðla

...the Fiðla is an oblong box, with surfaces, gables and a bottom. The surfaces and the bottom are made of very thin wood. The instrument is approximately 78 cm long, 14 cm broad on one end and 17 cm at the other end. Two pegs made of wood, approximately 13 cm long, are at the bottom of the instrument, about seven cm between them. Each peg had a hole in it. Two nails were at the other end of the instrument, also seven cm between them as well. The Fiðla had two strings, each string fixed at one nail so the strings were parallel with the side of the fiðla...⁵

Rev Bjarni continues describing the instrument, and according to him, the player would tune the strings to the same note at the highest pitch possible without breaking them. Also, the player would put rosin on both the bow and the strings. The bow used for playing the fiðla was made of horse hair and looked quite similar to a violin bow. The strings were most often made from brass but sometimes of silver. They should be as thin as possible. The player would usually put the fiðla down on a table and play it while standing up. Some players could sit down while playing, keeping the fiðla on a lower table. If there was no table, the player would put the fiðla on a wooden board laid across their knees to play it.

⁵ Þorsteinsson, Bjarni. 1906 page 78

The left hand presses the string nearest the player in order to change the tones. It is done differently than on the langspil, which has a finger board with frets. The left hand is put between the body of the fiðla and the string, the back of the hand faces downwards. The knuckle of the thumb would press up against the string and the nails of the other four fingers would take turns touching the string, changing the pitch of it. The knuckles of the other four fingers would sometimes help if the song that was being played was more complicated. Stefán, the carpenter who built the fidla for Bjarni, knew of several fiðla players in Iceland in the middle of the 19th century but at the end of the century there were almost none left. When the National museum of Iceland had its 125 years anniversary in the year 1988, a violinist called Sigurdur Rúnar Jónsson, aka. Diddi fiðla (e. Diddi the Fiddle) was asked to play one of the fidla that was kept at the museum. A program on Icelandic folk music was broadcasted from the French Radio in Paris later the same year. Diddi, Njáll Sigurdsson and Bára Grímsdóttir, all musicians and specialists on Icelandic folk music traveled to Paris with a brand new Icelandic fiðla, made especially for that reason. After this successful trip to France, Diddi has frequently used that Icelandic fiðla in his music making.



Chris Foster, demonstrating how to play the fiðla

Chris Foster, who also has been very active in the revival of the langspil is at this very moment searching for evidence, such as photos, drawings or old stories, oral or written, that can help him and his co-workers (Rósa Þorsteinsson from the Folklore Department of Háskóli Íslands and composer and folk musician Bára Grímsdóttir) understand more about the history of the instrument. They are also seeking out descendants of old musicians to see what, if any information about their ancestor's music making remain in their families. Chris Foster and Bára Grímsdóttir answered a list of questions about the two Icelandic folk-instruments. Chris and Rósa recently appeared on a TV programme in the same series where Jón Sigurdsson showed his collection of folk instruments where they talked about the fiðla and asked people to contact him if they had any kind of information on the subject. So far they have not made any big discoveries but they received a copy of a photograph of the fiðla made by Stefán Erlandsson for Bjarni Þorsteinsson that they did not know existed before. The photo was taken by rev. Bjarni

himself and it clearly shows that the instrument had a bridge that is now missing. Those who are interested in playing the fiðla have to face the same problem as those who want to play langspil, there's no sheet music and no teaching material whatsoever.

The Icelandic instruments in our times

People's interest in the Icelandic langspil has been growing in the last years and decades, especially after the mid-twentieth century. Good craftsmen in Iceland have been

building langspil throughout the years, both for their own playing and also for souvenirs of old times, or as presents to give good friends. The most

Langpil by Friðgeir Sigurbjörnsson from the year 1963. The fingerboard is chromatic. Kept at the Icelandic Music Museum

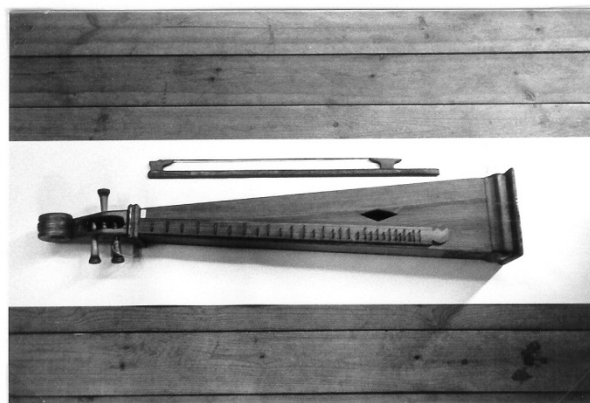
active langspil-builder in the twentieth century was Friðgeir Sigurbjörnsson (1896-1983). He finished carpenter school and worked in the field, but started to build and repair instruments soon after the year 1950. He established his own workshop in Akureyri where he repaired string instruments such as guitars and basses. However he became most popular for his very well made langspils he made for many decades.

The two singers, Guðrún Sveinsdóttir and Anna Þórhallsdóttir, both born at the start of the 20th century, were passionate about this subject and thought it was very important that their compatriots would not forget this part of Iceland's limited cultural heritage. They both played langspil and wrote several articles in the newspapers in order to raise awareness amongst other musicians in Iceland. When Friðrik Guðni Þorleifsson graduated as a music teacher from the Iceland University of Education in the year 1971, he wrote his bachelor essay on the Icelandic langspil. It was the first comprehensive summation on the subject.

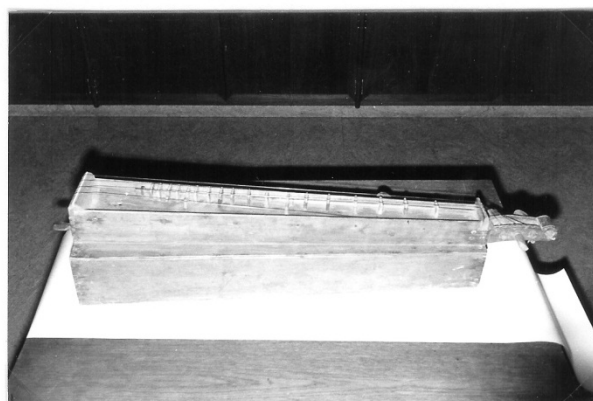
Dr. David G. Woods came to Iceland the year 1981 and completed an extensive research study of the Icelandic langspil. He traveled around the country and visited people and museums that had instruments. He analyzed and compared 21 instruments that differed in size and shape and wrote a report where all the information on these instruments may be found. He kept a track on how long and broad they were and what was the shape of their sound holes,

how old they were and so on. The purpose of his studies was to gather information so that he could design several different copies of langspil and to make some sort of ‘do-it-yourself’ kit for children in music schools, so they could get the change to build their own langspil. After Wood was finished with his researching he wrote an article on it. The article was first translated to Icelandic and published several years later, or the year 1994.

The artists Bára Grímsdóttir and Chris Foster, which have been mentioned earlier in this thesis, have also been active langspil – and fiðla players for the last decades. According to both of them, the musicians who has been the most active in using Iceland fiðla and langspil in his music, and thereby, introducing it to others, is without doubt Diddi fiðla, mentioned it the chapter on the Icelandic fiðla. Ever since the 125th anniversary of the National Museum of Iceland he has been a pioneer in playing the two instruments and introducing Icelandic folk music to music lovers in Iceland and more. He has gotten a very convincing technique and a beautiful tone on both instruments. Not only has he played the instruments in several concerts in Iceland and abroad. He has also appeared on radio and television programs and participated in courses and visited schools, all this in order to educate the Icelandic people about their cultural heritage.



Langspil Number 19
Museum at Akranes



Langspil Number 03
National Museum of Iceland
Reykjavik

Two photos of langspils from David G. Woods' report from the year 1981

If anyone is interested in buying a new Icelandic folk-instrument, Jón Sigurðsson would probably be the best person to contact. On his website, he exhibits several folk-instruments he has made himself. He claims that his interest in all sorts of folk-instrument started when the Estonian music teacher Olavi Kõrre visited the school Jón himself teaches at.

Jón teaches music and woodcraft to children in the West fjords of Iceland in a small town called Þingeyri., but his hobby and side job is to make, play and collect folk-instruments.

Another man being an active langspil builder is the luthier Hans Óttar Jóhannsson. He has taught the art of building langspil to participants of the annual folk-music festival in Siglufjörður, which resulted in several new instruments being built. Marta Halldórsdóttir, singer, and the musician Örn Magnússon have been active in introducing the Icelandic instruments to young students at the public schools in Reykjavík. One of Reykjavík's biggest music school for children, Tónskóli Sigursveins D Kjartanssonar or TSDK, has recently started to offer langspil as a main subject. It was the musician and music teacher Sigrún V Gestsdóttir who started using stringed folk-instruments to teach folk-songs to the youngest students. She started using other instruments than langspil but later on she decided that it would be more interesting and more important to introduce the folk-music to the students through Iceland's very own instrument, langpil. Now she does not only teach the playing of langspil to a group of elementary school children, she has also gotten one very interested student who takes langpils as a main subject. This particular student started at the age of nine and is now 13 years old. Sigrún teaches voice and singing technique on the side, but according to her, singing along while playing is the best way to interpret the Icelandic folk-music. Although Sigrún has only gotten this one langspil student, she gets enquires every so often, so she holds on to the hope that in the future, many Icelandic music students will become interested in learning more about their own cultural heritage.

Learning to play the instrument Langspil

I have gotten very interested in the instrument langspil, after all the reading and searching I've been doing related to this candidate thesis. I decided to get one of my own and learn how to play it. I contacted the man named above in order to buy a brand new langspil. My idea of writing my thesis about the Icelandic instrument langspil can actually be traced back to Jón; I saw a TV program where he was interviewed about his sideline job as an instrument builder. In the TV program he showed his instruments and played a little bit on the langspil. Because of that program I decided the first thing to do about collecting sources for my thesis was to contact him. Jón was very helpful and told me where to find some information and said I was welcome to contact again if I needed more help. I ordered a

langspil from him and when I travelled home to Iceland in the Christmas it waited for me at my parent's place. Being a string player myself, I thought langspil might be similar to the cello, my main instrument. I found soon out that there are indeed some things in common but other things are very unlike. The hand position was the first thing I struggled with. Cello players use all five fingers on the left hand to press down the strings, and there are no frets to show the player where the note is. On langspil, the player only uses the left thumb to press down and the rest of the left fingers support the instrument so it does not move while playing. The first thing I had to do was to train my left hand and get used to the new position of it.

The other initial problem I faced was how to get sounds out of the instrument. The first days I practices langspil I only used the pizzicato style of playing. I used no tools, I just plucked the strings with my right hand like guitar players do. The only bows I have are cello bows and they aren't very similar to the bows meant for the langspil. The langspil can also be played by beating it with a stick. I tried several wooden sticks and found out that I really liked wooden chopsticks somebody from my family got from an Asian restaurant. The pin is rather thick and makes a nice ringing sound.

After using the chop sticks for a while in my playing, I tried to use my spare cello bow to play the instrument. That bow is unusually light and has little amount of horse hair, and is therefore not so good for cello playing but more convenient for the langspil. It was however difficult to control it, since it is longer than original langspil bows. I personally think the sound from the pin is more pleasant but I want to be able to play with more variety so I will focus on getting the right bow technique the next days. The bow grip is different from what a cellist is used to, since the direction to stroke in is not the same. A cellist strokes the bow to the left and the right but while playing langspil, one has to stroke forward and back. Therefore, the langspil player has to hold the bow in a hand position that reminds of how people hold pencils.

I have no sheet music to read from so I try to pick up some old folk melodies I have known all my life. The fingerboard on my langspil is diatonic (not chromatic like the keyboard of a piano) so some notes are not available. That makes it impossible to play some of the most popular melodies because they are in different church modes. Many of the songs are in the Lydian mode. Therefore I tried to tune my langspil in a different way, making it possible for me to play the Lydian melodies as well.

I have not become a fully trained langspil player yet. But soon before the deadline to deliver the thesis, I will have to record myself play so the reader can listen to some sound examples. The reader has the chance to hear the difference between the sound of a langspil played with a bow and a stick. There are also some typical Icelandic folk-songs and a little bit of improvisation.

Conclusion

When I asked Chris Foster what could be done in order to save the two Icelandic folk-instruments from extinction, this is what he had to say:

Well in one way they are kind of extinct already. We don't have any archive recordings from the time when people were playing them in a living, ongoing tradition. So all that repertoire and technique is lost. What we do have is some instruments, so it's up to us musicians to take them and find ways of using them in our contemporary situation. My personal opinion is that the langspil has a lot of potential as a musical instrument. I certainly feel that, so far, I have only been scratching the surface of what it could do. I think the fiðla is a bit different because it is much more limited, but it does make a nice earthy sound and it could certainly have a role to play in the future. We need to have the instruments heard in all sorts of recorded material but above all we need to have places for people to perform and have the instruments taken seriously.⁶

According to his wife Bára, people need to learn to have respect for the instruments and accept them and include them in our history. Iceland needs more instruments to be built and more musicians to play them. It is my hope that the people of Iceland will become more aware of this part of the cultural heritage. I hope that the teachers in the music schools all over the country will take the responsibility and teach the students about this subject.

At last, I would really like to thank all the people that helped me. Especially Chris Foster who volunteered to read my thesis through and correct me if I had made mistakes.

⁶ Interview with Chris Foster and Bára Grímsdóttir. 1st of March 2012

List of literature

Books:

Jónsson, Páll H. og Garðar Jakobsson. *Fiðlur og tónmannalíf í Suður-Þingeyjarsýslu*.

First version. Garðar Jakobsson og Heimir Pálsson, 1990.

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Þorsteinsson, Bjarni. *Íslensk þjóðlög*. First version. S.L. Møller, 1906

Articles:

Woods, David G (Njáll Sigurðsson translated from English to Icelandic): Íslenska langspilið – Saga þess, smíði og notagildi til náms og kennslu (original title: The Icelandic Langspil – History, Construction and Educational Implications).

I: *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags, 1993, pages 110-128.*

Sigurðsson, Njáll: Um íslenska langspilið. I: *Hugur og Hönd, 2004, pages 18-20*

Sigurðsson, Njáll: Um íslenska fiðlu. I: *Hugur og Hönd, 2003, pages 14-17*

Webpages:

Viðburðir í íslensku tónlistarlífi 1056 – 1839: Íslensk tónlist í 1000 ár.

Address: <http://musik.is/Saga/tsagaI.html>. Visited: 15. October 2011

Viðburðir í íslensku tónlistarlífi 1840 – 1929: Íslensk tónlist í 1000 ár.

Address: <http://musik.is/Saga/tsagaII.html>. Visited: 15. October 2011

Vísindavefurinn: Dr. Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson.

Address: <http://visindavefur.hi.is/svar.asp?id=1574> Visited: 23. November 2011

Ferlir: Ingólfur Arnarsson - hinn fyrsti landnámsmaður

Address: <http://www.ferlir.is/?id=3339> Visited: 19. November 2011

Other:

Interview with Chris Foster and Bára Grímsdóttir. 1st of March 2012

In my process of writing the thesis, I sent e-mails to many different people in order to ask about the subject. The answers were mostly used to write the chapter: The Icelandic instruments in our times.

Enclosures/Bilag

Project formula

Hildur Heimisdóttir

KA project 2011-2012

Det jyske Musikkonservatorium

Project Formula

The idea: The idea and the main subject of this thesis are to introduce the Icelandic folk instruments to readers who have never or almost never heard of the subject before. There are two original Icelandic folk instruments, one called *Icelandic fiddle* and the other *Langspil*.

My background: I choose to write about this subject because I'm an Icelandic musician, and a string player. These instruments are a little bit related to the cello, the instrument I play. I am already quite experienced on writing essays on historical subjects since my B.Mus essay from the Iceland Academy of the Arts was about the origin and development of the bow. I would like to use some of my writing technique from my previous essay this time, but some other things I would like to do totally differently

Why to choose that as my main subject? The music history of Iceland is neither rich nor diverse compared to other European countries. The country was very poor and undeveloped until in the late 19th century. There were no orchestras and no music education available in the country, and the only common instruments were small organs in the churches, and the instruments named above. The nation has only these two national instruments and they are not well known. Many Icelandic people have little or no knowledge of the subject and that may lead to the instruments disappearing at all. However, in the last years people have become more aware of the existence of these instruments. Researches have been made and musicians, classical and other, have learned to play it, especially the langspil, which was more common and a bit more developed. Last but not least, some music schools in Iceland have started to offer students to have langspil as their main instrument.

All above will help the nation to hold on to their cultural heritage, and that is important for me.

The subject-What is going to happen?

The main idea of mine is to write an essay that is easy to read. It should be educational and interesting for everybody. I am going to take many photos of my own langspil and use them in the essay to

demonstrate and illuminate for the reader so they can better understand what the written part of the essay means.

In order to write a good essay on this subject I have to:

- Get reliable literature
- Collect photos and knowledge on how to play the instruments
- Find out who (if anyone) is writing music for the langspil. If possible, I will contact them and ask about their work with langspil.
- Find out who is playing the langspil now-a-days. If possible, I will contact them to ask about their langspil-playing.
- Get an instrument to play on for myself, so that the essay can be more believable

Since the 'literature' used in this essay is mostly going to be interviews with musicians, music teachers, music historians, langspil-builders and possibly young students who have langspil as their main instruments, I hope my essay will be alive and fun to read. I will also use many photos and possibly some videos and recordings so I can demonstrate the looks and the sounds of the instruments for the readers.

After the essay is ready I will have a presentation of the instrument as the end point of the kandidat project. That presentation I would like to take further and show it in other institutions that might be interested.

Meeting references

Meeting I - Jan 19th 2012 (60 min)

Hildur, Michael, and I discussed how we have gotten our sources thus far and our general progress with the thesis. We also talked about how to formulate our bibliographies. Talked about what will be involved with each of our presentations. Hildur shared about how she bought the special Icelandic instrument and will write one chapter about how she is learning the instrument. Mike is also planning to play the baroque trumpet in his project presentation. Discussing what to do to help each other with in our projects. Hildur and Mike will possibly help with my presentation and Mike and Hildur will teach other their respective instruments.

Meeting II – March 18th 2012

Hildur Heimsdóttir, Sarah Bennett and Michael Wågsjö.

The second time the group met we discussed some practical things about the thesis. None of us are familiar with the writing rules here in Denmark, so we discussed how to make literature lists and other similar things. We have decided to search the web for information on that and send it further to each other.

Sarah and Michael both have English as a first language and Hildur speaks quite fluent Danish. In the process of writing, Hildur has assisted Michael and Sarah with things (f.ex. wbsites, e-mails and so on) that are written in Danish and they have helped her back when she has needed advice on English grammar or spelling. All three of them are writing the thesis in English

The individuals of the study group are otherwise doing very fine and therefore we have decided that no further meetings will be necessary. We will, however, meet again shortly before the KA presentation, in May. In that meeting, we will organize our presentations and decide who helps whom with what.

Working with this study group has been fun and helpful!

Question list sent to Chris Foster and Bára Grímsdóttir

When and why did you become interested in the two Icelandic folk instruments?

Do you think that people have become more interested in the folk instruments the last decades? Please explain:

After the program on your researches on the fiddle appeared in the TV program ‘‘Landinn’’, have you made any new discoveries?

Are there any artists that you believe have made the instruments more popular? Please name them and explain:

Do you think something has to be done in order to prevent the extinction of the two Icelandic folk instruments? If yes, then what: