SOAS Musicology Series

Icelandic Men and Me

Sagas of Singing, Self and Everyday Life

ROBERT FAULKNER

An Ashgate Book

ICELANDIC MEN AND ME

To Baldur and all my dear Icelandic friends
who believe in the power of singing and songs,
with heartfelt thanks.

Icelandic Men and Me

Sagas of Singing, Self and Everyday Life

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Accompanists: Erlingur Bergvinsson, Aðalsteinn Ísfjörð, Þórarinn Reynir Illugason and Juliet Faulkner.
Recording: Sigurður Rúnar Jónsson, 1999.
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Recording: Sigurður Rúnar Jónsson, 1999. HR002.
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Recording: Sigurður Rúnar Jónsson, 2003. HR003.
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See p. 170.

[1] Ólafur Kjartan Sigurðarson has sung with male voice choir Hreimur as guest soloist on several occasions. Trained at the Royal Academy of Music in London and Royal Scottish Academy in Glasgow, Ólafur is presently principal baritone with the Staatstheater Saarbrücken. He has sung many operatic roles in Iceland and Europe including principal roles with Opera North, Holland Park Opera and Volksoper Wien.

Introduction

People regularly tell me stories that suggest they believe 'singing' is something special that special people do, rather than an everyday thing that everybody does. As I observe people with their personal music systems, singing in the car, and even at karaoke evenings, it is obvious to me that singing does very important things in most people's lives, even if somebody else's voice very often does the real vocal 'work' for them. This book is essentially a collection of stories about what singing does for a group of men who, through historical and cultural circumstance, find themselves singing a lot and aloud! Living in their community in north-east Iceland for 20 years, I became naturalized to the myriad ways in which singing configured everyday personal and social life. But now, as I reflect on my Icelandic experiences from the other side of the globe, where I have been writing this book for the past few years in Australia, I find, in 'retelling' and attempting to interpret these experiences, that they take on the same improbable guise in which they had first appeared to me. Annual visits have served to remind me of the reality of this particular songworld and the continuing transformations made by and to singing practices in the community there.

In speaking about experiences in general, Dewey[1] reminds us that 'things are had before they are cognized'. This is true of the phenomenon of singing too, of course, and there is a danger therefore that reflective processes, which the writing of this book is, petrify 'lived' experiences of song in ways far removed from the reality of singing experiences themselves.[2] I have no desire to set my interpretations in stone, not least, as the title of the book suggests, because I have cast a very long shadow in this Icelandic field. Such an admission recognizes my long-term entanglement with these men and their sagas, and identifies this book as a dialogue about dialogue. The reflexive situating of 'myself' is an essential element of the Interpretative Phenomenological Framework adopted in this study from recent rethinking of psychology. It hopefully enables readers to differentiate clearly between my own voice and my Icelandic story-tellers, and, better informed, to enter for themselves into dialogue about how all of our voices have come to sound as they do.

Ash and cash have suddenly increased Iceland's profile in world news: two volcanic eruptions caused major disruption to international air travel in 2011, following hard on the heels of an unprecedented national banking collapse at the outset of the Global Financial Crisis. Consequently, the reader is quite likely

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[1] John Dewey, *Experience and nature*, 2nd edition (New York, 1958), p. 21.

[2] Michael Jackson (ed.), *Things as they are: new directions in phenomenological anthropology* (Bloomington, IN, 1996).

to know more about Iceland than they would otherwise have done when I was planning this book. For the most part, the stories told here immediately pre-date those events but, nevertheless, these dramatic affairs form a compelling postlude to many of the themes about national life and identity discussed here.

Far more people than space allows me to name are owed a huge debt of gratitude for sharing songs and stories with me, or for encouraging and helping me to share these stories in the form of this book. The contributions of all of the men in the male voice choir Hreimur, their families and friends, the family at Rangá – especially Baldur, Jón and Baldvín– and of my own family – Juliet, James and Nanna – need very special recognition, as does that of Winthrop Professor Jane Davidson at the University of Western Australia. Some of the ideas in this book have appeared in previously published journal articles,[3, 4, 5] although they are significantly reworked here. I remain indebted to Jane Davidson for her inspiring mentorship and for permission to use the fruits of our earlier collaboration. Where material is reproduced from them, acknowledgments are made to respective publishers and journals. I am grateful to Lee Williams and Jonathan McIntosh for helping in the preparation of this manuscript, and to two Icelandic photographer friends, Hróbjartur Sigurðsson and Jón Ásgeir Hreinson, for permission to use their work in this book. Finally, thanks are expressed to those who kindly gave permission for the use of recorded music examples on the accompanying CD.

Sing yourself to where the singing comes from![6]

Robert Faulkner, Graduate School of Education,
The University of Western Australia

[3] Robert Faulkner, 'Men's ways of singing', in Ki Adams, Andrea Rose and Leon Chisholm (eds), *Sharing the voices: the phenomenon of singing IV: proceedings of the international symposium, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, June 26–29, 2003* (St. John's, NL, 2005), pp. 68–78.

[4] Robert Faulkner and Jane W. Davidson, 'Men's vocal behaviour and the construction of Self', *Musicae Scientiae: The Journal of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music*, 8/2 (2004): pp. 231–55.

[5] Robert Faulkner and Jane W. Davidson, 'Men in chorus: collaboration and competition in homo-social vocal behaviour', *Psychology of Music*, 34/2 (2006): pp. 219–37.

[6] Seamus Heaney, *Opened ground: poems, 1966–1996* (London, 1998), p. 439.

Chapter 1
Telling Tales and Setting the Scene

As both literature and historical document, the significance of the Icelandic sagas can hardly be over-estimated. From a historical perspective they provide meticulous records of events not just in the medieval Icelandic Commonwealth, but also in Scandinavia and the British Isles. They chronicle the earliest voyages by Europeans to the New World, Viking trade with Russia, the first crusades to Palestine and the capture of Jerusalem – even the suppression of uprisings in Bulgaria! As accounts of Viking mythology, the Icelandic *Edda* poems are undeniably the most important extant sources available. They continue to inspire artists in all kinds of media and provide a practical handbook for contemporary followers of the Viking religion or *heiðnitrú*. Their misappropriation in the pursuit of radical philosophical, political and social agendas contributed significantly to the rise of Nazism, barbaric pogroms and a World War. The Gods in *Edda* have even given their names to several days of the week in the modern English-speaking world, though not, interestingly, in contemporary Iceland itself.

However, Icelandic sagas are not concerned just with special events; as literature, they are valued above all for their richly detailed characterizations of everyday life, of family dramas, romances and tragedies. This large collection of literature has played an extensive and complex role in Icelandic identity, a central construct of which is the concept of individuality so prominent in the sagas themselves. Characters in Icelandic medieval literature – Gods and mortals, men and women alike – are often drawn with a keenness for physical and even psychological detail that might easily be mistaken for contemporary idiographic case-study. This kind of representation clearly resonates with a widely held view that every Icelander is a very 'special case' and that there is a particularly *Icelandic* emphasis on autonomous individuality as opposed to the social.[1] Given that little more than a quarter of a million people live on this island of some 100,000 square kilometres, it is easy to see how such a view has been sustainable.

The significance ascribed to the Icelandic sagas in the construction of modern Icelandic identity should thus be recognized from the outset in any ethnography of the descendants of these ninth-century Vikings. Even allowing for Irish monks' earlier presence, these Norwegian emigrants are considered the first permanent settlers, or *landnámsmenn*, of this remote and mostly uninhabitable island just south of the Arctic Circle precariously straddling the European and North American

[1] E. Paul Durrenberger, 'Every Icelander a special case', in Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (eds), *Images of contemporary Iceland: everyday lives and global contexts* (Iowa City, IA, 1996), pp. 171–90.

tectonic plates on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Against the life- and nation-threatening instability of both climate and geology, it is not surprising that the perceived intransient*ness* of the written word would lead to the sagas becoming the bedrock of modern Icelandic nationhood. In the face of some of the most devastating natural disasters anywhere in the world in the past millennium – notably the Láki volcanic eruptions in 1783 – of consequent famine, poverty, regular smallpox epidemics and often bitterly harsh weather conditions, little else could be pressed into service as a template for renewal and independence. The impact of the 1783 eruptions was felt all over Europe, North America and Africa in failing harvests, extreme weather conditions, a huge spike in mortality rates and even as a key catalyst to the French Revolution. Further large eruptions in the 1870s and extremely hard winters saw around 15,000 Icelanders set sail for a new life in North America. These eruptions make the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull that caused chaos to European and transatlantic air travel for several weeks seem almost insignificant by comparison. No wonder then, that the saga manuscripts themselves, kept safe during several hundred years of hardship and insecurity, became a kind of animist embodiment of 'authentic' Icelandic*ness*, as is evidenced by nationalist writings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and by the importance attached to returning original manuscripts to Iceland. Whilst independence from Denmark was secured in 1944, there is a sense in which Icelandic selfhood was only fully restored with the homecoming of these manuscripts nearly 30 years later. The sagas were one of the most important agents for establishing continuity with the past, a process that, as Hobsbawm and Ranger[2] observe, was central to the formulation of nationalistic values all over nineteenth-century Europe. Significantly, the sagas and Icelandic language were also being adopted in the nineteenth century by Scandinavian intellectuals, particularly in Denmark, as important elements in common Norse experience.[3]

Nevertheless, the word *saga* alludes to oral traditions too. It implies a *telling* or, more literally, a *saying*. Given that most sagas were actually written down from a significantly *post-hoc* position, even generations after the events they claim to report, it is clear that this oral tradition of *saying* was very largely responsible for their transmission before they were committed to calfskin by mostly unknown writers. Sigurdsson[4] has reminded us that a reassessment of the Icelandic sagas in the light of what we now know about oral, story-telling cultures is long overdue. Tonkin's[5] writings about oral histories might make a particularly useful contribution to any such reassessment in arguing that both literary and oral genres

[2] Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (eds), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

[3] Durrenberger, 'Every Icelander a special case', p. 179.

[4] Gísli Sigurðsson, *The medieval Icelandic saga and oral tradition: a discourse on method*, trans. N. Jones (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

[5] Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating our pasts: the social construction of oral history* (Cambridge and New York, 1992), p. 4.

are products of temporal and economic conditions and that the association of oral traditions with social processes and perspectives, and of written ones with historical perspectives, is a fundamentally unsatisfactory antithesis. Tonkin calls for a consistency of theoretical frameworks for both social cognition and historical production in pursuit of understanding situated human beings. Icelandic sagas ought perhaps to be reassessed not just as an oral tradition that was then formalized in a particular, written genre, but, as we shall see, as a collective consciousness that was manifest in extensive retellings, rewritings and singings for centuries after their 'original' transcription. Leaving that debate to one side for the moment, we need now only acknowledge that these written forms, centuries later, facilitated the illusion of purity and permanence that was key to their employment on the building site of modern national identity.

This privileging of written forms and romanticizing of universal Icelandic literacy was accompanied by an institutionalized rejection of oral traditions, especially, as we shall see, those musical vocal forms that had survived from pre-Reformation times into the early twentieth century. During the second half of the nineteenth century vocal traditions were adopted increasingly from mainland Europe, explicitly aiming to create a new, collective, national voice. This presents something of a contradiction to earlier claims about the importance of the individual, since older vocal forms like Epic singing or *kveðskapur*, which are discussed in this book in Chapter 3, would appear to provide a good deal more scope for individualism than notated four-part choral arrangements. Even here though, Icelandic singers found subversive ways to combine strong oral and aural traditions with prescriptive notation-based practice that will be examined later. Nevertheless, it is true that four-part choral singing was employed as a deliberately purposeful agent in this reconstruction of national identity. Firstly, this extreme musical identity 'make over' was to be achieved through the nationwide introduction, even imposition, of *new* vocal styles in churches and homesteads by missionary-musicians who travelled the length and breadth of this difficult terrain introducing these 'new songs'. Secondly, this was accompanied and facilitated by the publication of new song books and psalters, often prefaced with rhetoric about the symbolic value of 'singing' in building family, community and nation.[6,7] Thirdly, the songs, initially simply imported from Europe, were endued with texts, mainly by the Icelandic nationalist poets from the 1830s onward, which extolled desirable Icelandic values. They were particularly Icelandic because they were identified either in the sagas or in that other central theme of Icelandic national identity – landscape and nature. So, as these Icelandic sentiments were being expressed with a new and very foreign musical voice of European romanticism and four-part choral harmony in particular, the older and *more* indigenous vocal

[6] Jónas Helgason, *Söngvar og kvæði* (Hörpuheftin) (Reykjavík, 1875–88).

[7] Jónas Helgason, *Sálmalög með premur röddum [nótur]: ætluð til söngkennslu í skólum og á heimilum*, 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1878–80).

styles were being systematically repressed as symbols of Iceland's dark ages and its associated material and cultural poverty.

Telling Stories of Everyday Musical Lives

I am already in danger of misleading the reader: this book is not primarily concerned with musical forms in the musicological or analytical sense, neither does it focus on the Icelandic sagas themselves, but on the stories that contemporary Icelanders *tell* about singing – what they have to *say* about the songs they sing. More precisely, this book attempts to record Icelandic men's accounts of singing's agency in both everyday life and special events, and their thoughts about its meaning and function. I also undertake to interpret these stories in the light of my own observations and experiences, and theorize about how singing is used in the construction, representation and maintenance of personal and social identity. This highlights an important difference between how we identify others, and how people identify themselves. We might even question *if* people really engage in this reflexivity except that a researcher asks what particular behaviours *mean* to them and who individuals think they *are*. The possibility that any account of the behaviour of a group of Icelanders might lose sight of the special individuals in it is an almost impossible thought in traditional Icelandic society where individuals' unique identities, with all their contradictions, complexities, homo- and hetero-genies, are never far from centre stage.

Ethnomusicological studies like those, for example, by Titon,[8] Rice[9] and Bakan[10] have all focused on individuals' experiences in order to make claims about the general, and on the process of theory building as a progression from the idiographic to the universal. Titon[11] even sees the knowing of people making music as the ethnomusicology's new epistemology. Implicit in these enquiry methods is the 'special case' mentality so entrenched in Icelandic identity, so that whilst no claims are made for this book as an ethnomusicology, a range of recent European ethnomusicologies do resonate strongly with it. Apart from Rice's[12] work on music in Bulgaria with a special focus on the Varimezov family, Sugarman's[13]

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[8] Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: speech, chant and song in an Appalachian Baptist church* (Austin, TX, 1988).

[9] Timothy Rice, *May it fill your soul: experiencing Bulgarian music* (Chicago, IL, 1994).

[10] Michael B. Bakan, *Music of death and new creation: experiences in the world of Balinese Gamelan Beleganjur* (Chicago, IL, 1999).

[11] Jeff Todd Titon, 'Knowing people making music: toward a new epistemology for ethnomusicology', *Etnomusikologian vuoskirja* [Yearbook of the Finnish Society for Ethnomusicology], 6 (1994).

[12] Rice, *May it fill your soul: experiencing Bulgarian music*.

[13] Jane C. Sugarman, *Engendering song: singing and subjectivity at Prespa Albanian weddings* (Chicago, IL, 1997).

study of Albanian singing, Bithell's[14, 15] research into engendered song in Corsica, Finnegan's[16] seminal documentation of amateur music makers in Milton Keynes, England, Stokes and Bohlman's[17] edited volume on Celtic music and Stokes'[18] on the musical construction of place in general, all spring to mind. Other recent studies share the Nordic setting of this book, notably Ramnarine's[19] investigation into Finnish nationalism through new folk music practice and its practitioners, and Goertzen's[20] work on Norwegian fiddle music and its role in Norwegian revival and identity.

In placing individuals centre stage, concepts of local or national identity move to the inter-subjective realm of individual 'lived' experiences. The 'knowing' of music-makers and their conscious experience also moves the psychological into focus. Key informers' *perceptions* of *phenomena* become the lens through which we examine personal and collective identity. Such studies, like the present one, need unashamedly to emphasize the historical located*ness* of all individual experience and its *saying*, and to admit to partial and transient views of musical behaviours and their meaning. Similarly, they should acknowledge, as Jackson[21] reminds us, that narrative stories themselves are not lived before they are told, but are part of story-tellers' lives; it is our dialogue with them that is of central importance in both ethnography and in the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis[22] that framed my systematic investigation into Icelandic men's lived experiences. Such dialogue should help researchers and writers resist the temptation to reify individuals by implying a consistency that may not reflect the reality of the complex and often contradictory thoughts and behaviours that make up those lives.

Furthermore, unlike the written sagas, but like their interpretation, identity is always transient; it is always a work in progress. Nevertheless, for the sake of our psychological integrity we fulfil a need to recognize ourselves, and to be

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[14] Caroline Bithell, 'A man's game? Engendered song and the changing dynamics of musical activity in Corsica', in Tullia Magrini (ed.), *Music and gender: perspectives from the Mediterranean* (Chicago, IL and London, 2003), pp. 33–66.

[15] Caroline Bithell, *Transported by song: Corsican voices from oral tradition to world stage* (Lanham, MD, 2007).

[16] Ruth H. Finnegan, *The hidden musicians: music-making in an English town* (Middletown, CT, 2007).

[17] Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman (eds), *Celtic modern: music at the global fringe* (Lanham, MD, 2003).

[18] Martin Stokes (ed.), *Ethnicity, identity and music: the musical construction of place* (Oxford and New York, 1994).

[19] Tina K. Ramnarine, *Ilmatar's inspirations: nationalism, globalization, and the changing soundscapes of Finnish folk music* (Chicago, IL, 2003).

[20] Chris Goertzen, *Fiddling for Norway: revival and identity* (Chicago, IL, 1997).

[21] Jackson, *Things as they are: new directions in phenomenological anthropology*, p. 8.

[22] Jonathan A Smith and Mike Osborn, 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis', in Jonathan A. Smith (ed.), *Qualitative psychology* (London, 2003), pp. 51–80.

recognized by others, by tying our identity down somewhere and in particular ways, depending on situations and contexts. We associate ourselves with things, people, places, behaviours and values that facilitate a kind of objectification of the otherwise subjective Self. It is this reification of what passes in consciousness that shapes Self. Self, according to Csikszentmihalyi[23] is our 'hierarchy of goals' that define what we pay attention to and how we pay attention to it. We make goal hierarchies in which we can locate ourselves in the world and enable others to find us and associate with us. Singing songs is just one of the wide-ranging technologies we employ as *identifying* agents and as an agent for organizing and regulating Self. In listening carefully to the stories that people tell about singing and its role in everyday life, we gain insights into consciousness and awareness that reveal the extent to which individuals pay attention to singing, how they pay attention to it, its place in their hierarchy of goals and in Self.

Whilst our identity may take on various guises at different stages in our lives, according to the company we keep and the settings in which we find ourselves – so that we ought to more properly speak of *identities* – we appear to need some sense of permanence, a grounding, something that can be recognized as the heart of our matter or core. Depending on the individual, and in opposition to this need for security and permanence, we also have desires to explore novel possibilities of the changing Self – trying on new masks or new voices in both metaphorical and literal senses.[24] The balancing of these forces throughout the experience that is life is essential for mental wellbeing, and individuals adopt all kinds of strategies in order to manage the ever-changing Self. The arts play significant roles in both social and personal identity, and this book is concerned with one particularly *art*ful Self-management strategy or agent – the singing of songs.

In the context of this particular study about Icelandic men, gender and masculinities are inevitably thrown into the spotlight as one of the most important interpretative frameworks for exploring singing and Self. What does it mean to be a man who sings? What songs do men sing? What kind of man sings? And is he changed because he does, or when he does? How does singing configure men's relationships and impact their personal and social identity? What gender codes are constructed by these vocal performances? Because identity constructs do not actually exists in isolation – though they might appear to do so in narratives and their interpretations – we find ourselves thinking not just about gender, but about ethnicity, class and age as well.

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[23] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The evolving self: a psychology for the third millennium* (New York, 1993), pp. 216–19.

[24] Robert J. Weber, *The created self: reinventing body, persona and spirit* (New York and London, 2000).

Interpretative Phenomenology and Social Studies of Music

The stories Icelandic men tell about singing, like other stories people tell, are narrative reconstructions. Like other examples of symbolic interactionism, their telling, retelling and interpretation is mediated and always interim. Like the Icelandic sagas, the permanence and status they acquire by virtue of recording them in written form raises epistemological questions about knowledge and truth. This is not to doubt the validity of stories or texts, but simply to attempt to qualify it. Husserl's[25] thinking about the phenomenological as an adumbration of a thing, an experience, or point of view, is helpful here in attempting to understand the truthfulness of what Icelandic men have to say about singing. Their sagas are perspectival points of view about lived experiences, even about stories they themselves have heard, interpreted and passed on in turn. The most famous writer of the original medieval Icelandic sagas, Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241), reveals an intuitive grasp of epistemological and phenomenological problems when he admits in his Prologue to *King Harald's Saga* in *Heimskringla*, that 'although we do not know the truth of these [stories], we know, however, of occasions when wise old men have reckoned such things as true'.[26] I make no greater claims for the sagas told here: men reckoned them to be true *accounts* of their own experiences of singing and their perceptions of them. Even so, as both Husserl[27] and James[28, 29, 30] – whose psychological theories of Self will be central to my interpretation of the stories told here – insist, this should not be taken to imply that how we see the world in *post-hoc* story-telling is the same as the view we had of it in the experience itself.

My efforts to understand the vocal behaviour of Icelandic men by firmly grounding this discourse as much in the discipline of music psychology as in ethnomusicology may come as a surprise to those who believe music psychology is concerned only with psychometric and quasi-experimental paradigms that have dominated the discipline for a hundred years. Phenomenological frameworks that concentrate on psychological perceptions of lived experience are able

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[25] Edmund Husserl, *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: an introduction to phenomenological philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL, 1970).

[26] Snorri Sturluson, 'King Harald's Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway', in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (London, 2005), p. 11.

[27] Edmund Husserl, *Thing and space: lectures of 1907*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Dordrecht, 1997).

[28] William James, *Principles of psychology*, 2 vols (New York, 1890).

[29] William James, *Psychology*: *briefer course* (New York, 1892).

[30] William James, *The varieties of religious experience: a study of human nature; being the Gifford lectures on natural religion, delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902* (London and New York, 1902).

to formulate a psychology of individuality rather than the traditional one of individual difference,[31] they remind us of men and not just medians and means. In concentrating on a psychology of individuality, we prioritize individual case studies as the building bricks of psychological theory in the same kind of way that others, like Titon[32] and Rice,[33] have made a similar paradigm shift in ethnomusicology and anthropology. Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove[34] call for psychological theories not built on logical-positivist demands for analyses that extract quantifiable medians, distributions and variations about phenomena from large cohorts, but on idiographic research that aims to analyse how individuals perceive the phenomena in question. In so far as this has clearly been demonstrated to be a valid method of psychological enquiry in a wide range of areas including health and sexual identity, then it must also be a valid approach to musical identities and behaviour, however limited its application to date.

A failure to recognize the possibility of a psychology of individuality probably explains why researchers in ethnomusicological fields have often overlooked psychological theory as a framework for understanding musical experience and behaviour in real cultural settings. Phenomenological psychologists like Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove[35] criticize logical-positivist psychological paradigms for pursuing the quasi-scientific and reducing complicated human behaviours to levels of observable cause and effect in controlled experimental conditions. They argue that science ought to become more like the 'field' – naturalized, contextualized and individualized. It is my contention that a re-thought music psychology, in particular a soundly grounded re-conceptualization of phenomenological music psychology, alongside other music social sciences, might facilitate the reconstitution of the comprehensive study of the structure, content and meaning of musical behaviour.

Following Seeger[36] then, this present ethnography is primarily about the analysis of musical events and behaviours rather than of sounds. Icelandic men's auto-ethnographic construction of stories about vocal events, my analysis of them, and my own observations are all psychological processes because that is what reflective and reflexive processes inevitably are. The centrality of psychological perceptions of musical events also ties this present study to the sociology of

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[31] Jonathan Smith, Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *Rethinking psychology* (London, 1995).

[32] Jeff Todd Titon, 'Knowing fieldwork', in Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (eds), *Shadows in the field: new perspectives for fieldwork in ethnomusicology* (New York and Oxford, 1997), pp. 87–100.

[33] Rice, *May it fill your soul: experiencing Bulgarian music*.

[34] Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove, *Rethinking psychology*.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Anthony Seeger, 'Ethnography of music', in Helen Myers (ed.), *Ethnomusicology: an introduction* (London, 1992), pp. 81–109.

music. What I have in mind here is DeNora's[37] recent rethinking of that discipline, building upon Horkheimer and Adorno's[38] classic, if controversial, theory. Central to this reassessment is music's potential for dynamic agency in critical reflection, change and development – the antithesis, according to Adorno,[39] would be music produced by the culture industry and its role in pseudo-individualism and repetition. DeNora[40,41] sees the study of musical events as key to understanding music's function in everyday life as a technology of Self. Her ethnography of music's role in contemporary women's lives is, I suggest, another example of a music psychology of individuality. Whilst DeNora's work is concerned predominantly with listening events, rather than the more active *musiking*[42] that dominates Icelandic men's singing events studied here, her model resonates strongly with my own emergent theory. As a music psychologist entering, some might say stealthily, ethnomusicological and sociological domains, it struck me that phenomenological approaches to all depend far more heavily on psychological perceptions than their practitioners may have been willing explicitly to admit. Doing so would inevitably blur the boundaries between the various humanities and social science music disciplines that are often so carefully defended.

I hesitate, therefore, to attach any single discipline tag to the present study; readers may be confused already as to whether they have opened an ethnography, anthropology, ethnomusicology, historical musicology, sociology or psychology of Icelandic men singing. Individually, none of these paradigms reflect the reality of my experience in the field. My own firsthand knowledge of Icelandic singing traditions, my knowing of its practitioners, and my understandings about cultural and historical contexts, were not initially acquired from an academic researcher's perspective – let alone as an ethnomusicologist, music sociologist or even music psychologist! Unlike most field researchers, my extended residency in Iceland was not motivated by research questions or proposals. Like many *bona fide* researchers, however, my initial curiosity for this particular 'field' was aroused by a happenstance encounter. This encounter with Icelanders singing, though not specifically with Icelandic men singing, was the first time I had witnessed the importance that some Icelanders ascribe to singing as everyday action. It was

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37 Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: rethinking music sociology* (Cambridge, 2003).

38 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA, 2002).

39 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN, 1997).

40 Tia DeNora, *Music in everyday life* (Cambridge, 2000).

41 DeNora, *After Adorno: rethinking music sociology*.

42 Christopher Small, *Musicking: the meanings of performing and listening* (Hanover, NH, 1998).

a *musical event*, like Seeger's[43,44] and DeNora's,[45,46] that proves insightful into understanding the kind of work music is capable of doing.

Some Seminal Musical Events

Shortly after completing a course of professional vocal training at the Royal Academy of Music in London, including two years in the Academy's Opera Class, I was invited to a house in a London suburb, on a Saturday morning early in December 1983, to visit a family newly arrived from Iceland. My partner had begun recently teaching piano to Jón and Margrét's two children and we were going to take part in an old Icelandic ritual of making Christmas 'leaf-bread'. We joined the family seated around a large candle-lit kitchen table. They cut and folded incredibly thin circles of dough, already rolled out, to create intricate, lace-like, symmetrical patterns. They reminded me of paper or lace doilies. Sometimes, instead of these patterns, the same techniques were used to produce someone's initials or some symbol linked to *Jól*, a Christmas tree or a star – there is certainly scope for individual expression! After brief immersion in boiling tallow they resembled an Indian *papadum*; but each and every one was a unique, edible work of art. This ritual, I now know, is part and parcel of Advent preparations in the vast majority of homes in the north-east of Iceland. Extended kinship groups put aside whole days to produce hundreds of these *laufabrauð* – the 'unmissable' accompaniment to the traditional Christmas fare of smoked lamb or *hangikjöt*. It seems like a remarkable amount of trouble to go to for something that will be eaten in several minutes in a few weeks' time, but such a pragmatic view of things misses the point. It is the kind of task, it seems to me on reflection, that Csikszentmihalyi[47,48] might have theorized about as having great potential for 'flow' – that state of wellbeing that comes when an individual is totally *in* task. The Icelandic family in London, however, were 'double dipping' on 'flow': making *laufabrauð* was interspersed with, and sometimes accompanied by singing in Icelandic. This may not appear particularly noteworthy except that the mother, father and two daughters, aged around 11 and 13, sang mostly in three-part harmony. None of the tunes, all performed by memory, were recognizable to me. Some resembled Lutheran chorale traditions, others were modal, including,

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[43] Anthony Seeger, 'Do we need to remodel ethnomusicology?', *Ethnomusicology*, 31/3 (1987): pp. 491–5.

[44] Seeger, 'Ethnography of music'.

[45] DeNora, *Music in everyday life*.

[46] DeNora, *After Adorno: rethinking music sociology*.

[47] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience* (New York, 1990).

[48] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding flow: the psychology of engagement with everyday life* (New York, 1997).

I was told, several indigenous tunes from early Icelandic sources. One welcome exception was a version of the three boys' song *Bald prangt, den Morgen zu verkünden* from the finale to Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, which I now know as *Í dag er glatt í döprum hjörtum* (Today sad hearts are happy!) a popular Icelandic carol that enjoys folk song status and is sung at just about every Christmas Day church service. I have since learnt that its arrival in Iceland is attributable to a 1912 appendix to an earlier 1903 edition of the *Íslenzka sálmasöngsbók* or hymnal. Interestingly, its compiler, Bjarni Þórsteinsson was dedicated – pretty uniquely in the prevailing climate – not just to the introduction of new music, but the preservation of the old. Þórsteinsson attempted to collect Icelandic folk tunes, in spite of vociferous opposition, at the same time as he was travelling around the country teaching new songs. It is not in any way an exaggeration to equate Þórsteinsson's ethnomusicological work in Iceland with Cecil Sharpe's in England or Bela Bartók's in Hungary, and an international appraisal of his extraordinary achievements are long overdue.

Many tunes Þórsteinsson brought to Iceland, including the *Magic Flute* arrangement I heard that Saturday in London, became part of my everyday life as a musician in Iceland, I have sung them, conducted choirs singing them, and even taught them to children. And every year in December, I find myself being reminded both of Mozart's opera, and of Jón and Margrét, and their two children, Sigrún and Rósa, singing their domestic version of this excerpt from it, all those years ago.

This was a seminal musical event for me; the realization that this family were all singers and, more importantly, that a mother and father and their two daughters could sing an extensive song repertoire in harmony in a manner no more daunting to them than the making of Christmas leaf-bread. The 'socialness' of this kind of musical performance as a corporate, democratic and domestic activity, shared in a very specific social context outside what I had assumed to be singing's natural setting in the concert or recital hall, opera-house or church, caused me to question very seriously what it was that I had always thought a singer to be. As an aspiring 'functional' singer, it struck me that the rest of the populace might not simply be dismissed as dysfunctional ones. Along with other meetings with this particular Icelandic family, the musical event recalled above proved to be life changing for my partner Juliet and me in ways we could never have imagined. We developed a very close relationship with this Icelandic couple that continues to this day. A holiday in Iceland with Jón and Margrét several years later included more memorable musical events with other family members and friends.

There was a large family clan gathering in what seemed like an extraordinarily large community hall, considering what I estimated as being the likely local population. It was equipped with a large stage and new Petrof grand piano. The building was even named after one of the Viking god's halls – Ýdalir. Jón's brothers had been engaged to perform Icelandic art and folk songs and Juliet had been asked to accompany them at very short notice – a quick rehearsal at Jón's parents' farm Rangá an hour before (nearly every home we visited seemed to have either

a piano or an old, foot-pumped harmonium!). Jón's brothers, Baldur and Baldvin, both possessed beautiful voices. They were easily produced, highly expressive and their exceptional ensemble betrayed a long-standing vocal connection. An almost theatrical performance of a humorous Norwegian folk song, *Siggi var úti*, about a farmer's son, Siggi, and a fox, brought the house down with an impeccable sense of timing. I was very impressed. We listened to other guests entertaining themselves in a hearty display of collective singing that was lead by a piano accordian player.

On another evening we attended a dance in Akureyri, the 'capital' town of North Iceland, with the Icelandic rock band Stuðmenn. On display was a tremendous level and range of musical accomplishment, an equally tremendous level of alcohol consumption, and motley, multi-aged revellers who all seemed to dance, and remarkably well at that, from dusk until dawn. Actually, unless my own slight stupor deceived me, the only darkness to be found between dusk and dawn in this land of the midnight sun was in the dance hall. Before the ball we had eaten dinner at a restaurant where live music was provided with great facility and invention by a pianist introduced to us as Ingimar. He played a large and eclectic range of pop and jazz standards and lots of Icelandic popular song tunes, mostly unknown to me at the time. Ingimar, now sadly deceased, is something of a legend in Iceland because of a remarkable musical memory, aural and keyboard facility, and a warm genial nature. Legend, and my own personal experience, suggest that it was pretty much impossible to name any popular, folk or jazz tune, or for that matter any tune from standard classical music repertoire, that Ingimar could not spontaneously and convincingly play at the piano. He knew Jón and Margrét, of course, and was pleased to see them back home, if only on holiday, from London. This sentiment was expressed by dozens of revellers of all ages at the dance that night. Jón and Margrét were obviously special people.

A few days later we met a headmaster of a small community school, apparently in the middle of nowhere, who expounded for us music education's importance, both singing and playing an instrument, for all children. I had followed my studies at the Royal Academy of Music with a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and I had been teaching music in a school in London's East End. I was enjoying my work there and establishing a minor reputation for innovative classroom music practice, especially composing in the classroom. Nevertheless, I suspected that neither my headmaster there, nor many colleagues, would have shared Sigmar's educational priorities. Finally, there was an evening spent at Rangá Farm with Jón's family – singing. That, as we shall see, is what this family did; it was an important way for them to remind themselves who they were.

A year later Juliet and I left London and moved to Iceland to work in the rural community music school in the 'middle of nowhere' with the headmaster Sigmar. It was reasonably close to Rangá Farm where Jón himself had grown up, and his parents had promised us an always-open door. It would be an adventure for a few years we thought.

Migrating Musicians, a Researcher, and the 'Field'

The employment of foreign nationals – most, like my partner and I, initially with no Icelandic language skills to speak of – to facilitate music education in large areas of this country is still widespread, as it has been since the remarkable expansion of the community music school system in the 1960s. In northern Iceland alone, musicians from Hungary, Estonia, Ukraine, Norway, USA, Canada, Scotland, England, Germany, Poland and Russia are working presently in community music schools and churches. Astonishingly, the tradition goes right back to the early twelfth century when the Bishop at Hólar, Jón Ógmundarsson, returning from a trip to Europe, employed a French musician and verse-maker by the name of Ríkini to teach singing at the cathedral in Hólar, just south of the Arctic Circle, in northern Iceland. In a quirky coincidence the Jón that we met in London more than two decades ago, and who was responsible for our Icelandic relocation, has now returned to Iceland to become the present Bishop of Hólar, almost 800 years after Jón Ógmundarsson.

Whilst I cannot speak for the French priest and musician Ríkini, for me, the struggle to acquire basic skills in this very difficult language and to communicate with students about music, singing and playing musical instruments meant that this was always going to be a reciprocal learning process if it was to be a learning process for anybody at all. The dynamics of these interactions will be considered later when I look specifically at 'myself' and my entanglement with the subjects, objects and themes of this discourse. What ought to be clear though is that those early encounters were not configured in any sense by the typical researcher – subject relationship, but by a different, if potentially even more unequal power relationship – that of teacher and learner. Furthermore, my status as a musician employed to teach music here obviously has very significant implications for musical and vocal behaviour in this community, the stories told about it that are recorded here, and my interpretation of them. A year or so after moving to Iceland I was approached to direct the local men's choir, Hreimur. Many of the men whose stories are told in this book were already members and others joined in later years. My own saga needs to be told in some detail then, and a later chapter attempts just that.

There are two important theoretical issues worth flagging here for discussion later: the first relates precisely to notions of what the 'field' actually is, and when I can be said to have *entered* or been truly in *it*. The other related issue concerns relationships in the 'field', a theme whose implications have been discussed, though certainly not exhaustively, by researchers like Titon[49,50] and Hellier-

[49] Titon, 'Knowing fieldwork'.

[50] Jeff Todd Titon, 'A conversation with Jeff Todd Titon: interview John Fenn', *Folklore Forum*, 34/1–2 (2003): pp. 119–31.