

Michael Obst

## **Under the Glacier**

Music theater based on the novel *Kristnihald undir Jökli* by Halldór Laxness

Libretto by Hermann Schneider

After *Solaris* (S.Lem) and *Die andere Seite* (A.Kubin), I again chose a novel for a new music theater composition. Rather by chance I came across *Kristnihald undir Jökli* by the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness. During my university studies, I had the opportunity to travel around Iceland and visit remote parts of the country. This novel awakened my memories of this overwhelming landscape, its remoteness and solitude. Halldór Laxness' sets his story far from the capital city of Reykjavik and brings the 20th century crashing down on the supposed idyll of ancestral village life that is torn between religion and ancient mysticism. His narrative is spiced with his wonderful, sometimes cynical sense of humor.



Snaefells Glacier (Copyright Photo: Susan de Winter, [www.susandewinter.de](http://www.susandewinter.de))

### ***Storyline***

In a remote community in the northwest of Iceland, the Christian faith appears to be in danger. Rumor has it that no proper worship service has taken place for some time, and the small village church has been boarded up. The Bishop of Reykjavik sends a novice to the remote province. Upon his arrival, *Vebi*, derived from “*Vertreter des Bischofs*” or the *bishop's representative*, finds the rumors confirmed. The village priest, *Sira Jon Primus*, is out somewhere in the surrounding countryside, repairing *Primus* stoves or possibly shoeing horses. Church warden *Tumi Jonson* isn't worried at all about the state of the community. His stepdaughter *Fina* raves about a hero who

caught both the biggest salmon and the most mysterious woman in Iceland many years ago. At the vicarage, *Vebi* is welcomed by the housekeeper, *Stößeldora*, who intensely pursues her passion in baking cakes and brewing strong coffee. Her life-philosophy is marked less by Christian humility than by the sacrificial worship of mythical creatures.



At their first meeting, *Vebi* gives the village priest *Sira Jon* a letter from the bishop. The latter holds the distant bishop in high esteem, but never agrees with him. *Vebi* meets the farmer *Helgi*, who has arranged for two horses to fetch something important from the glacier the following day. There is to be a *revival* - preferably in the village church. However, this is boarded up, and the village priest *Sira Jon* points to the glacier, which is open to everyone and which is considered by many to be the center of the world. The modern bungalow next to the church belongs to *Godman Syngman*, a famous inventor and globally successful businessman. *Sira Jon* confirms the rumor of the simultaneous disappearance of his bride *Ua* and *Syngman* on their bridal night many years ago. *Ua*, he says, is one of the fairy-like creatures who possess magical powers and cast a spell over everyone. The village priest knows nothing about a *coffin* that is said to have been brought to the glacier many years ago.

A large truck stops in front of the bungalow. The trucker *Alfberg* has the order to prepare for the arrival of its owner. He tells *Vebi* that *Syngman the inventor* wants to carry out a *revival* at the glacier. *Alfberg* makes dubious insinuations about the contents of a *coffin* on the glacier, which might contain a corpse, possibly a woman's body. Three strange figures in Latin American shepherd's clothing emerge from the truck and begin to perform strange rituals. Their leader, *Saknussem the Second*, explains to *Vebi* that they worship *Shiva* and have come all the way from California to be *bio-inducers* who can revive to life.

*Vebi* decides to return to Reykjavik to report to the bishop. *Helgi*, *Tumi Jonsen* and *Alfberg* try to persuade him to open the church for the *revival*. As the *bishop's representative*, he is, after all, the village priest's superior. They are ardent followers of *Syngman*, who they believe can connect to the Spiral Nebulae through the glacier, which they claim is the site of the *Universe present in the elements*. *Vebi* decides to stay and wait to see whether the unfolding events are a matter of concern for the church. Late at night, a luxury limousine carrying the elegantly dressed *Godman Syngman* arrives at the village. The *three shepherds* worship the arrival by bowing to him in rapture.

Later, a debate ensues between the village priest *Sira Jon* and *Godman Syngman*. *Syngman's* dogma of the unlimited possibilities of the creative human mind and *Sira Jon's* philosophy of the embedding of all things in a great whole, in which everything happens in the flow of time and

individual will has no meaning, clash irreconcilably. Even their shared memories of *Ua* do not bring them closer. *Vebi* helplessly follows their conversation.

The next morning, *Syngman* is found dead in his bungalow. The body is laid out at the village square by the *three shepherds*. *Sira Jon* evades the request to say a prayer for the deceased. Later, an international mourning community arrives for the funeral service in the now re-opened village church.

At the village square, *Helgi*, *Tumi Jonsen*, *Alfberg*, the *three shepherds* and *Vebi* have gathered around an oblong wooden box that had been brought down from the glacier. The *three shepherds* ceremoniously open the box, and a small zinc container is revealed. Unnoticed, *Ua* enters the porch of the bungalow and greets those present. The men freeze as if struck by a blow. No sooner has *Ua* gone into the house than they euphorically celebrate the *revival*. *Ua* comes out of the house, points to the zinc container, and demands that those present open it. What emerges is a frozen salmon. The absurdity of the events reaches its climax when *Saknussem the Second* demands a receipt from *Ua* for the *revival*. *Ua* is only willing to acknowledge receipt of the fish.

*Ua* invites *Vebi* into the bungalow because it is now time to prepare the salmon. She pretends to be the wife of the village priest *Sira Jon* and tells increasingly confusing stories about her life as a prostitute and a nun. *Vebi* gradually becomes a victim of her seductive arts, to which he finally succumbs completely.



### ***Background of the novel***

In *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, Halldór Laxness vividly describes Iceland's present day, far away from Reykjavik. Icelandic society has been undergoing rapid change since the beginning of the 20th century, the effects of which reach even the remotest regions. There they encounter a centuries-old way of life and evoke a variety of reactions, a fundamental theme in many of Laxness' novels. At the age of twenty, Laxness converted to the Catholic faith (1923), in which, in contrast to the Protestant state church of Iceland, he believed to find true access to God and thus a spiritual home. In his autobiographical first novel, *The Weaver of Kashmir* (1927), he provides an impressive glimpse into the turmoil of a young man who has left Iceland and, after the First World War, finds himself in a chaotic European reality marked by political, economic, and cultural extremes.

Soon after, Laxness distanced himself from the Catholic Church and became a convinced communist and supporter of the Soviet Union. It was not until many years later that he had to realize that his idealized view of communism was far removed from the state regime of the Soviet Union and Stalinism. Criticism of external political, economic, and religious control is found throughout his literary work. Iceland has a long painful history of being under the yoke of the Danish royal family, both politically and economically, until the end of the 19th century. It was not until 1918 that Iceland became independent, at least politically. In his historical novel *The Iceland*

*Bell* (1943-46), Laxness shifts the action to a late 17th-century scenario in which a small, wealthy upper class lives alongside Danish merchants and profiteers at the expense of impoverished peasants and fishermen. In his powerful novel *Salka Valka* (1931-32), a strong woman in a fishing village in northern Iceland defends herself against the superior power of the fishing industry in faraway Reykjavik. The military presence of the USA after the Second World War and into the 21st century gave rise to decades of protest among the Icelandic population. The novel *Atomic Station* (1948), which won the 1955 Nobel Prize for Literature, has this as its theme: a traditionally educated young woman from the northern fjords of Iceland finds work in the home of an important politician in the capital city of Reykjavik. She experiences the debauchery and arrogance in political and military circles and joins the resistance against the establishment of an American military base.

In his literary work after 1950, Halldór Laxness was able to distance himself from the cultural and social trends of the time. With humor and irony, he increasingly takes aim at the Icelanders themselves. Already in his novel *Fish Concert* (1957), the supposed world career of an Icelandic singer celebrated in Iceland turns out to be a fraud. His last novel, *The Litany of God's Gifts* (1972), is also full of irony, linking his own biographical experiences with changes in Icelandic society towards the present, exemplified and, as it were, whimsically embedded in the scenario of Icelandic herring fishing. Halldór Laxness turned to Taoism in the 1950s at the latest. His countless journeys to almost all parts of the world, his intense preoccupation with religion and its claim to uniqueness, as well as his idealization of communism and deep disappointment over its political failure might have made him turn to this ancient Far Eastern philosophy. The incomprehensible uniqueness and greatness of Icelandic nature might also have contributed to this step. Geological time is incompatible with human time. In the sense of Taoism, why should one believe that human activity, no matter how serious or *world-changing* we consider it, could have any significance in the development of the cosmos?

### **Characters**

In *Kristnihald undir Jökli* very different people come together, who, in the seclusion around the glacier, have to make unusual decisions in the face of peculiar events. In *Syngman* and *Sira Jon*, opposing world views confront each other: boundless capitalism and belief in progress versus Far Eastern philosophy of timelessness. The *bishop's representative* is guided by Christian principles, but due to his youth and lack of experience he is increasingly unable to deal with the course of events. In their monotonous everyday life, *Stöðeldora* and *Fina* are influenced by mythical sagas or transfiguring legends. The church warden *Tumi Jonson*, the farmer *Helgi* and the trucker *Alfberg* are tradition-minded and worship *Syngman* as their master. In doing so, they blindly follow the widespread idea in Iceland that Icelanders who are successful abroad are the measure of all things. *Alfberg* is also the typical country gentleman with an oddball penchant for poetry. With the *three shepherds*, the cult of the hippie generation arrives at the glacier. They too worship *Syngman* as though he were an Indian guru. The leader *Saknussem the Second* returns to the place of origin of his name for the *revival at the glacier*, since Jules Verne, in his novel *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, mentions an Icelandic scientist named *Saknussem*, who is said to have undertaken an adventurous journey to the Snæfells Glacier. The real elemental forces of the plot are the glacier and, of course, *Ua*. In this female figure, Halldór Laxness celebrates the female elemental force that he is convinced has always existed in Iceland, even beyond the sagas and stories. *Ua* is surrounded by many mysteries: what is real about her, and what is mystical projection?

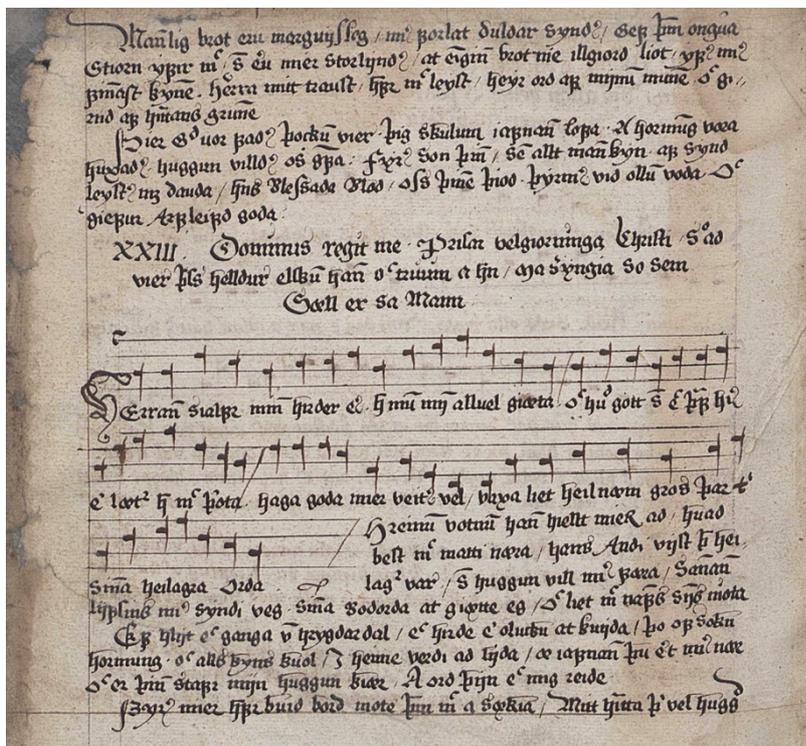
### **Music**

Halldór Laxness had a special fondness for music, played the piano himself, and was a great admirer of Igor Stravinsky. From the 1950s onwards, concerts were held regularly at his house near Reykjavik, to which internationally renowned musicians were also invited.

The novel *Kristnihald undir Jökli* is particularly suitable for music theater. The scenario is limited to a small village community, and the extraordinary plot takes place within a narrow time frame. A wide variety of characters meet in the process. The novel, which resembles a report, frequently uses dialogue, which allowed for a musical characterization of the characters along the libretto, which was written by Hermann Schneider following the novel closely. Their natures and biographical backgrounds were incorporated into the musical interpretation, as were their stories about other people or events they had experienced themselves or heard about. Given the humorous story and the libretto, which was often written in stanzas, the decision to write a number opera was almost inevitable. Following traditional forms, but a bit tongue-in-cheek, I have called the vocal pieces *recitative*, *aria* or *arietta*, *chorale* or *song*.

### **Folk songs, Chorales, Ballads, Children's songs**

The composition began with research into the extremely rich and very well-documented Icelandic song heritage. In the process, I came across old songs with which the legends and sagas (e.g. the *Völuspá* from *Edda*) were passed on from generation to generation in a kind of round chant (*rímur*). Late medieval ecclesiastical hymns and psalms, which then subsequently became folk songs with



secular texts, are still in use today. I came across songs that described nature, people and their everyday lives, as well as mocking and drinking songs, and ballads about heroes and legendary figures. An important additional source were children's songs. Twenty-six melodies served as models for the composition of large parts of the opera. The decisive factor for the selection was to establish a contextual connection to the characters, the plot, or the scenario in the opera. The *bishop's representative* is characterized by old church hymns, *Syngman* uses ballads about great heroes, and *Alfberg* uses a children's song (*Krummavisur – Raven verses*), which fits the musical

characterization very well, since this melody found its way into the rock music of *heavy metal*. Some melodies were adopted without changes, such as the very well-known spring song *Vorvindar Gladir* at the beginning of the opera, or *Þorabræll* in the final scene, a cheerful song for a family festival traditionally celebrated in January (*Þorablót*). The songs and their melodies served as source material: their motifs, rhythms or harmonies were incorporated in the development of new musical structures.

## Structure and content

Traditional song forms, including those of popular music (e.g. *Björk* or *Trent Reznor*), flowed structurally into the vocal numbers. The individual reference to people made it possible to borrow from or allude to various styles of music in a variety of compositional ways. The trio (no. 23) of the *three shepherds* is an example of this: I combined metrics (10/8 time) from Indian music with an Icelandic children's song (*Lömbin*), which then leads to a musical-like style copy in the refrain. The *shepherds* worship the Indian goddess *Shiva*, the children's song is about guilelessness in the face of hidden danger (sheep + wolf), while the refrain refers to California/Hollywood, the home of the *three shepherds*.

**Lömbin**

Íslenskir húsangar Íslensk kvædalög



The relationship of the characters to each other proved to be a stroke of luck, as it made it possible to form three ensembles with three parts each:

<i>The women:</i> Fina - soprano Pusheldora - soprano Mother Jonson - alto	<i>The men:</i> Helgi - tenor Alfberg - baritone Tumi Jonson - bass	<i>The shepherds:</i> The drop - tenor Epimenides - baritone Saknussem II - bass
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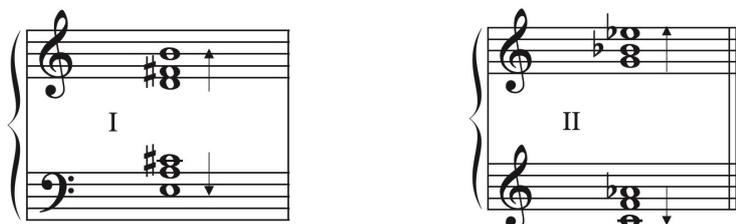
This ensemble could also be considered a *trio of opposites*:

<i>"Philosophical" opposites:</i> Vebi - mezzo-soprano Syngman - tenor Sira Jon - baritone
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*Ua*, the most mysterious person in the opera, is not part of an ensemble.

Some orchestral scenes are unusual: great ironic pathos in the final scene of the first part, where *Stöðfeldora* succumbs to her mystical sexual fantasies, or the bizarre finale of the fourth part: The *Marcia Funèbre* (Funeral March) is not at all solemn, but a joyous piece of music in which Porraprell (see above) is brought together in the sense of funeral celebration and *Krummavisur*, here as a chorale-like parody of the nursery rhyme. Seven *bird music pieces*, short chamber-music *intermezzi* based on original recordings of Icelandic bird species, mark small resting points in the course of the opera.

I underlay the vocal parts with a uniform harmony based on symmetrically arranged triads:



These four chords complement each other to form the twelve semitones of the octave. They are each spaced a minor second apart. In the first chord-combination (I) major thirds are combined with fourths, in the second (II) minor thirds with fourths. Of course, these are tonal sixth and fourth chords. Freely combinable, they complement each other to form the chromatic total, whereby the reference to the major-minor tonality is gradually lost. The chord in I has the base note "e". Throughout the opera, this runs through the circle of fourths downwards (E - B - F-sharp - C-sharp - ..... ), transposing the chord combinations (I + II) until the starting note "E" is reached again in the epilogue: A large harmonic arc from the beginning to the end of the work.

### Orchestra

In my works for music theater, instruments always have a content-related function. A standard orchestral instrumentation was never a sensible solution for me. Therefore, I assigned solo instruments to the characters in *Under the Glacier* that I found appropriate in terms of sound character, guided to some extent by a musical style represented by the instrument or an effect traditionally shaped by it.

<i>Vebi</i> - flute	<i>Helgi</i> - clarinet
<i>Fina</i> - oboe	<i>Alfberg</i> - trombone
<i>Stöfældora</i> - bassoon	<i>Tumi Jonson</i> - horn
<i>Ua</i> - tenor saxophone	<i>Sira Jon</i> - alto saxophone
<i>Saknussem II</i> - English horn	<i>Syngman</i> - trumpet

The special importance of the three-part vocal ensembles and the basic harmonic principle of the triad suggested that the instruments be arranged in *trios*:

Flute	Clarinet 1	Soprano	Horn 1	Trumpet 1 (+ 2)	Harp 1
Oboe	Clarinet 2	Saxophone	Horn 2	Trombone	Harp 2
Bassoon	Bass Clarinet	Alto Saxophone	Horn 3	Tenor Bass	Piano
		Tenor saxophone		Trombone	

A medium-sized string section, as well as percussion and timpani complete the instrumentation. A special feature is the use of a jazz double bass. The combination of saxophone, vibraphone, piano, jazz double bass and percussion add a sound flavor of jazz.

### "Opera buffa" or "Musical" - a Synthesis?

I understand each new composition as a new task from the outset. I always develop solutions based on fundamental questions of content and music. I certainly incorporate experiences from previous works, but I always pose these questions anew under the aspects of the new task. *Under the Glacier* is my first composition for music theater with humorous, sometimes ironic, or even whimsical content. The tradition of such stage works with music ranges from the early forms of *opera buffa* to *operetta* and *musical*. Therefore, during the development of the concept, the fundamental question arose as to how such a stage work could be realized in the exciting space between traditional and new musical theater. To do justice to the character of the subject, I decided on a synthesis of the two worlds. As a number opera, the structure of the work follows the opera tradition, whereby the music includes various styles, such as *opera*, *operetta*, *jazz*, *musical*, and even *new music*. In many scenes, corresponding stylistic approximations are composed into the score, both in the treatment of the voices - solo as well as in the ensemble - and in the orchestral sound. The complexity of the themes of the novel and the libretto thus finds an artistic equivalent in the composition.

*Under the Glacier* was commissioned by the Landestheater Linz. The premiere was planned for May 2020 at the Landestheater Linz. Due to the Corona pandemic, it was postponed to May 2022.

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Sources:

*Ísmús - Íslenskur Músík- & Menninggararfur*, <https://www.ismus.is>

(Documentation Centre on Icelandic Music, Arngrímögötu 3, 107 Reykjavík)

Halldór Laxness: *Kristnihald undir Jökli (At the Glacier)*, Reykjavík 1968

Halldór Laxness: *Brekkukotsannáll (The Fish Concert)*, Reykjavík 1968

Halldór Laxness: *Salka Valka*, Reykjavík 1931-32

Halldór Laxness: *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmir (The Great Weaver of Kashmir)*, Reykjavík 1927

Halldór Laxness: *Íslandslukkan (The Icelandic Bell)*, Reykjavík 1943-46

Halldór Laxness: *Atómstöðin (Atomic Station)*, Reykjavík 1948

Halldór Laxness: *Brekkukotsannáll (The Fish Concert)*, Reykjavík 1957

Halldór Laxness: *Guðsgjafabula (The Litany of God's Gifts)*, Reykjavík 1972

Halldór Guðmundsson: *Halldór Laxness - Ævisaga (Halldór Laxness. A Biography)*, Reykjavík 2004

Alva Gehrmann: *Alles ganz isi*, Munich 2011

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Psalm 23 (524 4to -A íslensk ný kristelek sálmabók, síða 150, Copyright: Ísmús - Íslenskur Músík- & Menninggararfur)

"Lömbin" (Copyright: Michael Obst)