

## SO by Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson

### An analysis

Anna Þórhildur Gunnarsdóttir

Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson (1938-2013) was one of Iceland's most influential and important composers, he composed hundreds of pieces over the course of his career, premiered and performed various new music as a pianist, and played an important role in the development of classical music in Iceland as a spokesperson for composers and music education in Icelandic society. In this article I will explore one of Sigurbjörnsson's solo piano pieces; *SO* (1973)<sup>1</sup>, and use these research questions as my guiding light:

1. How does the piece *SO* for solo piano reflect Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson's compositional style?
  - 1.1. How is his gravitation towards his alleged belief in the "less is more" principle represented in his compositional techniques in *SO*?
  - 1.2. How are the characteristics of his tonal and harmonic language represented in *SO*?

The methodology used was based on score analysis, with categorizations of each section with regards to different aspects of music theory. The categories of the analysis were the following: Tonal centre (where present) and harmony, layering, rhythm, structure, and pianistic techniques.

Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson studied piano performance and composition at Hamline University in Minnesota and later studied for a Masters degree at the University of Illinois where he took interest in serialism and electronic music.<sup>2</sup> After graduating in 1961 he moved to Iceland and started working at the Reykjavík College of Music, where he worked his entire career.<sup>3</sup> The year after Sigurbjörnsson took part in a summer course in Darmstadt where he listened to music and lectures from Karheinz Stockhausen and György Ligeti.<sup>4</sup> These different exposures had an impact on the young composer, as Sigurbjörnsson said that his early pieces were inspired by the music of Ligeti, Krzysztof Penderecki, Igor Stravinsky and Charles Ives, especially the work *Over the Pavement*, a piece with a thorough use of polyrhythm and controlled

---

<sup>1</sup> Kristín Jónína Taylor's recording of *SO* from the 2010 album 'Well Tempered Pianist' is available on Spotify.

<sup>2</sup> Anders Beyer. *The Voice of Music: Conversations with Composers of Our Time*. (London: Ashgate, 2000), 54-55.

<sup>3</sup> *Morgunblaðið*, "Andlát: Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson".

<sup>4</sup> Beyer. *The Voice of Music: Conversations with Composers of Our Time*, 54-55

aleatory. Yet another influence was the architect Buckminster Fuller and his ideas on creating a lot from little material was also a great influence on Sigurbjörnsson, as he wanted to make a bigger form from limited materials.<sup>5</sup>

In 1964, the composer Atli Heimir Sveinsson said that in the short history of Icelandic music, the works of Icelandic composers (except Jón Leifs) thus far were mainly imitations of 19<sup>th</sup> Century German music.<sup>6</sup> Due to the small size of the music scene in Iceland, compared to mainland Europe, the market for classical music was quite a difficult one. To make a living from their music, a composer had to be flexible and versatile, so Icelandic composers had to write diverse chamber music and choral music (professional and amateur).<sup>7</sup> In this musical environment, Sigurbjörnsson composed over 300 pieces<sup>8</sup>, many of which were written with a tight timeframe and for certain performers in mind, often friends and colleagues.<sup>9</sup> He aimed for efficient use of materials and focused on the original idea without repeating himself. Sigurbjörnsson frequently used the octatonic symmetrical scale and its subsets. Other characteristics of Sigurbjörnsson's music are the use of ostinatos as well as rhythmic variations with the text of his choral works.<sup>10</sup> Expression was very important to him, and every note had to serve its purpose. In the words of musicologist Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, Sigurbjörnsson plays around with the tones, which are usually rather few, with short motives that have many characteristics and are constantly shapeshifting as new chords or instruments are introduced.<sup>11</sup>

#### SO AT A GLANCE

*SO*, composed in 1973, is very pianistic, it has cluster chords and improvisation. There is a lot of contrasts present that challenge the responsivity of the pianist, as Sigurbjörnsson jumps from soft, melodic trills to harsh chords and strong physical and rhythmic movements. The tonal range is very expansive, and the pianist moves from the lowest to highest notes on the keyboard in a few jumps. Sigurbjörnsson also explores the release of sound and the resonance of both chords and individual notes. Sigurbjörnsson never settles on one idea or technique for long and is always changing the texture of the music. *SO* reflects Sigurbjörnsson's "less is more" ideology very well because it has very limited thematic material that is constantly changing and presented in a new structural context. All materials of the piece are presented in the first half, then developed as the materials are constantly varied. Opposites in the music are very important, and the processing and development of the ideas. The A-minor triad [0,3,7] is a fundamental element in the piece, as well as the chords [0,2,7] in section B. The set in the first line is A = [0,1,3,5,6,7,9,11] which is symmetric around the A, but there is also a strong notion of symmetry in the piece.

<sup>5</sup> Beyer. *The Voice of Music: Conversations with Composers of Our Time*, 58-59.

<sup>6</sup> Atli Heimir Sveinsson, „Sonorities eftir Magnús Blöndal Jóhannsson: Hugleiðingar um verkið og höfundinn,” 44.

<sup>7</sup> Göran Bergendal. *New Music in Iceland*. Peter Lyne translated. (Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre, 1991), 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> *Morgunblaðið*. “Andlát: Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson.”

<sup>9</sup> Bergendal, *New Music in Iceland*, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Beyer. *The Voice of Music: Conversations with Composers of Our Time*, 62-63.

<sup>11</sup> Árni Heimir Ingólfsson. “Að þykja vænt um tónana.” Liner notes for Sigurbjörnsson, Þorkell. *Leikar*. Kammersveit Reykjavíkur. (Reykjavík: Smekkleysa, 2006).

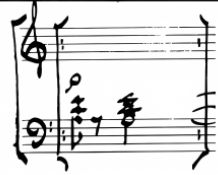
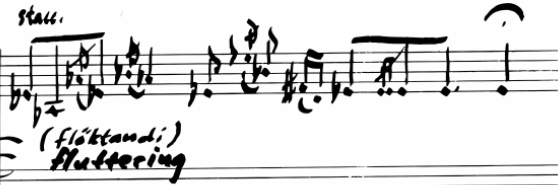
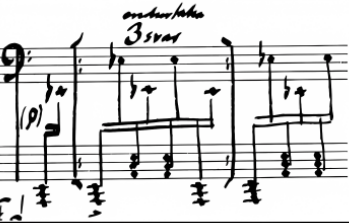



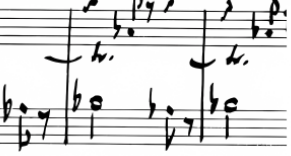
<i>Material</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example from score</i>
Element 1	Base triads	
Motif 2	Fluttering “theme”	
Element 3	Triad/octave	
Motif 4	057 or 027 chords.	
Element 5	Triad rhythm	
Element 6	Rhythm	
Motif 7	Trill melody	

Table 1: Overview of materials in SO

OUTER AND INNER STRUCTURE

One can clearly split *SO* into 6 sections, plus a cadenza and a coda. These sections are based on 3 main concepts A, B and C. There are 7 independent thematic materials that are introduced.

	Sections							
	A	B	A1	C	B1	A2	Cadanza	Coda
<b>Motivic materials</b>	Element 1 Motif 2 Element 3	Motif 4	Element 5 Motif 2 Element 6 Element 1 Element 3 Motif 4 (fragment) Motif 7	Motif 7 Element 6 Motif 2 (bridge)	Motif 4	Element 5 Motif 2 Motif 4 Element 6 Element 1	Element 1	Element 1 Motif 2

Figure 1: Large structure/sections: A - B - A1 - C - B1 - A2 - Cadanza - Coda

The large form is some hybrid of a rondo and/or arch form (ABACBA), where Sigurbjörnsson introduces the sections and treads the same steps back. The A-sections are the densest in terms of number of elements/motifs that are presented/developed, all in a quite compact manner where everything sticks together in an almost hurried manner. Below is an overview of all materials presented in *SO*.

Figure 2: Element 1 and motive 2

In **Section A** the first three elements are introduced, all connected to each other in one way or other. The elements are presented in an AABA format, A being element 1 and motif 2, and B being element 3. The terms elements and motives are used to categorize tonal material in this research. Elements are tonal materials that are merely presented and don't develop much. Motifs are materials that underwent development and change, and therefore had a more solid role in the music.

The A-minor chords form a sort of ostinato in the bass. If the piece has no meter and the bar lines serve only the purpose of making a clear division between thematic material, there are many areas where the piece suggests a 3/4 meter, especially where the piece has a stricter rhythm (element 1 vs. motif 2). In the three and a half lines that this section covers, many different pianistic approaches are applied as can be seen in these three elements or motives. The A-minor element requires a controlled soft and even touch, the motif 2 requires a sharp, playful touch and tone as well as sensitivity to the intervals and appoggiaturas. Element 3 is challenging in execution as the LH jumps between octaves while the RH lies directly on top of it playing the octaves. This tight manner of layering and playing reminds of the first part of Béla Bartók's Suite op. 16, where the hands play frequently directly on top of each other.

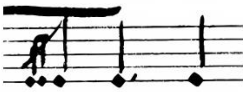


	<b>Element 1</b>	<b>Motif 2</b>	<b>Element 3</b>
Tonal centre & harmony	A (minor), [0,3,7].	Tonal centre is A-flat. Pentatonic harmony (A-flat, B-flat, D, E-flat, F-sharp(G-flat)).  The set in the first line is A=0,1,3,5,6,7,9,11, which is symmetrical around A.	A (b5), [0,3,7,8].
Layering	Polyphony, motif 2 is layered on top of element one which is a sort of ostinato.		Combines tonal colour from previous elements. <b>Two parts: Chords and octaves</b>
Rhythm	Eight note, rest, quarter note. This rhythmic pattern one of the main characteristics for element one and will later in the piece be used to reference the element.	Augmentation, augments by adding semiquavers, one can read the rhythm as 2 – 3 – 4.  <i>Figure 3 Example of augmented rhythm</i>	Very rhythmic, emphasized with accents. Repeated three times.  <i>Figure 4 Example of rhythmic passage</i>
Pianistic techniques	Precise control of each finger, with the correct weight and touch to clearly express what these triads say.	Trill with increasing speed:  <i>Figure 5 Example of accelerating trill</i>	Contrasting the fluttering motif 2 with the rhythmic and dysfluent element 3 is an important aspect in performance.
Structure	Element 1 appears as a small intermezzo between motif 2's appearances. It also appears as an accompaniment under motif 2 later in the section.	Motif 2's structure is akin to what has been termed 'period' in classic analysis, with an "antecedent" and a "consequent", as well as a basic idea and contrasting idea. Sigurbjörnsson was always very aware of the tradition so even though it's not a strict classical period.	The B in the ABAA form of section A. It serves as a kind of a bridge between the "antecedent" and "consequent" of motif 2. It's in contrast to motif 2, its texture is harsher and more rhythmical.

Table 2: Analysis of Section A

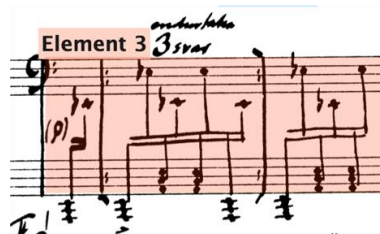


Figure 3: Element 3

Table 2 contains the analysis of section A, including element 1, motif 2 and element 3.

The B and C sections are devoted to the presentation and development of motif 4 and 7 respectively. Those sections are areas where the music has space to evolve around the same thematic material, to take changes.

**Section B** revolves around motif 4. This section is akin to what has been termed 'period' in classic analysis, as the same idea is presented twice with a different ending the second time, and an extension which connects straight into A1. This



Figure 4: First bars of Section B

element 1 and motif 2, the chords in RH and LH are often related with a diminished 5<sup>th</sup> (see fig. 6).

In motif 4 there is a passage with many accents that result in a strong rhythm. There is also hidden polyphony there since the primary voice is notated in the RH whereas the accompaniment (motif 4) is in the LH. This three-measure fragment breaks up motif 4 with its distinct build-up and powerful accents.



Figure 5: Example of rhythmic passage in Section B / Figure 6: Reduction of rhythmic pattern

Between section B and section C there is **section A1** which is based around the A-minor triad. The layering is very dense: All the thematic materials of the piece are presented in these five lines. In line 9, motif 2 (based on B) is presented on top of element 1 (A-minor chord), so the tonal centres of the two materials makes a major 2nd (A and B) (see fig. 9). This is different from the beginning of the piece (line 1 and 4) where the tonal centres of element 1 and motif 2 make a minor 2nd (A and A-flat) (see fig. 10).



Figure 7: Element 1 (A based) and motif 2 (B based) in line 9

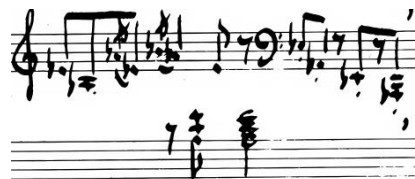


Figure 8: Element 1 (A based) and motif 2 (A-flat based) from line 4.

Rhythm plays a really important role in *SO*. In many important places in the piece, such as section breaks, transitions or where new material is introduced; the rhythm long – long – short appears. The values of this rhythmic pattern vary, but the ratio is the same (see rhythm section in Table 3).

Section A1 is very diverse in approaches and pianistic techniques with contrasts in terms of power, dynamics, and touch. All the materials introduced so far are brought back and some

new added: Element 1, motif 2, element 3, motif 4 (fragment), with the addition of element 5 and element 6, which function as an expansion of fragments or ideas from previous materials.

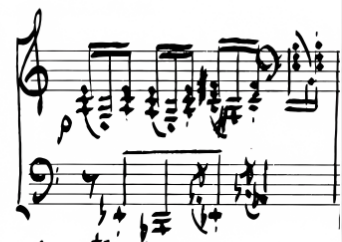

	Element 5	Element 6
Tonal centre & harmony	Combined the 3 minor chords (a - b and e) create an A-dorian, but also form [0,2,7] (relation to motif 4).	C-minor triad, inverted, akin to the inversion in line 26.
Layering	Element 5 on top of motif 2 in the LH. Here he has moved motif 2, two octaves lower, giving it a very different texture from section A. Element 5 serves as an accompaniment for motif 2	Strongly emphasizes C but shifts the chord so that it's stacked on top of each other, rather than having the C in the bass. The trills give the chords a stronger sense of the rhythm.
Rhythm	Metric modulation (semiquaver = semiquaver). Element 5 has a 4/4 metric which contrasts with the 3/4 metric of motif 2.  <i>Figure 11 Example of contrasting meters</i>	Diminution of the B-note cell from motif 2, seen here side by side. Element 6 was diminished by half (so the notes are twice as fast).  <i>Figure 12 Example of diminution</i>
Pianistic techniques	Balancing and keeping track of the polyrhythm is challenging and making sure to highlight each material in its own way independently, while also listening to how the materials play with each other.	Managing the trills and keeping them clear while sticking to the rhythm is important. It's not a melodic trill like in motif 7, but rather a rhythmic and emphasising trill.
Structure	Connected to motif 4, because the chord progression A-B-E, is [0,2,7].	Very contrasting, with a shocking element 6. These first 3 bars in line 9, show that Sigurbjörnsson thought carefully about contrasts, and these bars abruptly catch the attention of the listener. Instead of developing motif 2 to conclude with modulations or phasing the motif out, Sigurbjörnsson shocks with these chords. He doesn't lean into it, rather these chords function as a bridge into the more melodic motif 2 in line 10.

Table 3: Analysis of Section A1

Section C presents motif 7. In terms of pianistic techniques crossing of hands is prominent and maintaining the individuality of the voices while simultaneously making them interact and respond with each other. Once again contrasts play an important role. There's the melodic motif 7 slowly making its way over the circle of fifths, abruptly interrupted by element 6 and its explosive [0,5,7] chords (see fig. 13).

The main theme consists of A-flat, B-flat, and E-flat [0,5,7], akin to motif 4. The tonal centres move from E-flat to B-flat, C and then F. The soft manner of playing and the trills create a completely different tonal environment for this established pattern [0,5,7]. Which is then

abruptly interrupted by a C# chord in RH [0,5,7], based on element 6. The “chord progression” this section is: F (measure before) – C#/C – A.

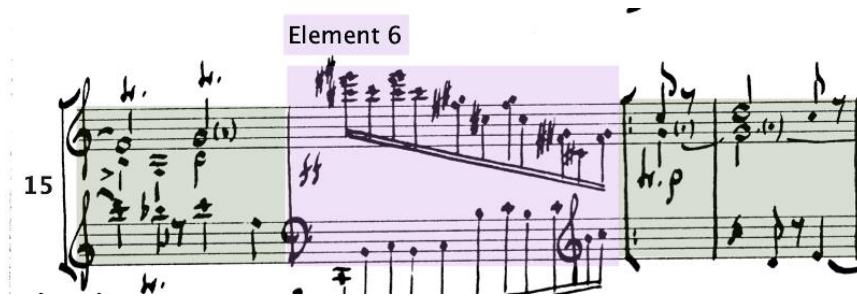


Figure 8: Line 15 with motif 7 and element 6



Figure 9: Example of C# chord [0,5,7]

In the last two measures before the return of the B-section, Section C and Section B connect with a momentary return of the A-minor/A-flat relations, that are very notable in section A. This section has a polyphonic layering with three individual voices: trill, LH-movement, and RH-movement. There is also a canon between the voices. This is not strictly throughout the entire section, but rather in certain places. Note that both staves in the picture below are in the G-clef.



Figure 10: Polyphonic layering, trill, LH movement and RH movement, note that both staves are in the G-clef

Figure 11: Example of polyphonic layering and canon, note that both staves are in the G-clef.

Motif 7 sticks to a 3/4 measure, an organization in the chaos and is very horizontal and melodic. Then element 6 bursts in with its totally different rhythm. In line 15, the broken C# [0,5,7] chord, forms the following pattern:

In line 16, element 6 made up this pattern. It’s like a diminished version of the pattern above, the crotchets become quavers and a semiquaver note value is removed.



Figure 12: Rhythmic pattern of C# chord [0,5,7]

Figure 13: If one simplifies it by groups of [0,5,7] chords.

Figure 14: Diminished rhythmic pattern from fig. 17-18.

In **section B1** motif 4 returns, but upside down or mirrored, what was in RH before is now in the LH and vice versa. The chords have also been flipped so that they are now ascending instead of descending, driving the piece to its climax in A2. There is a change in line 18, where B1 deviates from B, making the tonal centres go a different path than before. The ending of B1 is like an expansion of B, and the accents that are derived from the repeated strong rhythm fragment are enhanced.



Figure 15: Example from line 21.

Like in section B, in section B1 Sigurbjörnsson touches on all the 12 tones with the [0,2,7] chords, except much faster than before. In section B, the twelve tones are spread over the entire section and here the motif is given more space and goes through the twelve tones twice. The sequence is as follows (not counting repeated chords): E-flat, A, F, B, C, C-sharp, G, D, A-flat, G-flat, E. He finishes the sequence just as the “antecedent” of the section finishes. In the “consequent” the sequence is: D-flat, B, A, F-sharp, E, B-flat, A-flat, G, D, C, E-flat, again finishing neatly as this section ends. This isn’t strict serialism because these sequences aren’t developed any further and no special twelve-tone techniques are applied. Rather this is a means to enrich the harmonic palette. The chords of motif 4 are now made up of [0,2,7], instead of [0,5,7] like in section B (see fig. 21-22).



Figure 16: Example of [0,5,7] in section B.

The layering incorporates elements from motif 2 in the right hand with the appoggiaturas in the [0,2,7] chords.



Figure 17: Example of [0,2,7] in section B1.

Figure 18: Example of motif 2 at the end of the bar in the RH.

B1 is very similar to B when it comes to the rhythm. In motif 4 there is a passage with many accents that result in a strong rhythm. There is also hidden polyphony since the primary voice is notated in the RH whereas the accompaniment (motif 4) is in the LH. A percussive approach to the instrument with a straightforward touch. Sigurbjörnsson also plays with the percussive sound of different registers.

**Section A2** is very diverse in approaches and techniques. A lot of contrasts in terms of power and dynamics as well as touch. The texture and tonal centres are constantly changing in this section. Element 5 is centred and symmetrical around A. Motif 2 appears, layered on top of motif 4, creating a new texture to both of those materials. Motif 2 is based on B and motif 4 is arpeggiated [0,5,7] chord based on B. In the second bar of line 22, the tonal centres shift to E-flat (motif 2) and G (motif 4) and finally (in line 23) the motives arrive to the “home key” of the motifs, A-flat (motif 2) and A (motif 4 which is connected here to element 1, by serving as an accompaniment). The reappearance of element 1 in line 24 is symmetrical around A (1 and 11). In short, the harmonic progression from line 22 is B/B-flat - G/E-flat - A/A-flat. The layering is very dense as almost all the thematic materials in the piece are presented, in these 5 lines. In line 22, motif 4 is presented broken up and based on B with B-flat (motif 2) on top, minor 2nd relations like in the beginning (A and A-flat). Entire section is very rhythmically strong, from the *sf* in line 21, to the LH accents in lines 22 and 23, which shifts the beat in a way. It also has an interesting, seemingly “3 against 5” texture, if we look at how he notates. There however is no polyrhythm at play here, as it’s played note-against-note.

Base notes of chords in line 21 in element 5. Here you can see inversion and symmetry, the LH being a beat behind the RH. The chord progression in RH is: [0(A), 6, 4, 8, 9, 10]. The LH chord

progression is: [0(A), 6, 8, 4, 3, 2].



Figure 19: Example from line 22.



Figure 20: Base notes of chords in line 21 in element 5.

The cadenza builds up slowly and in a very steady crescendo. The up and down triad motion is repeated 7 times in total, getting faster, stronger, and wilder as the pianist improvises more and more, ending in furioso clusters in a full pedal that create a massive sound which is let hang in the air. Sigurbjörnsson jumps all over the keyboard, layering these accelerating triads, creating a very dense and massive soundscape. The cadenza has a very improvisational feel to it, as Sigurbjörnsson notes “irregular quarter notes”. The semiquavers are accentuated with a *sf* but keeping the crotchets piano. Line 26 is a passage that is repeated in an *accelerando* and eventually turns into improvisation which leads up to a cascade of cluster chords in line 27.



Figure 21: Line 26, base tones of every chord, also appoggiaturas (semiquavers)



Figure 22: Line 26, base notes of only quarter chords.

**The Coda** offers the music the space to breathe in a sense, as only first elements are used and the ideas are spread out, so that the music has an atmospheric and improvisational feeling to it. Element 1 is centred around A, and the other notes in this area are symmetrical around A (0): [1, 5, 6, 11]. In line 30 Sigurbjörnsson harmonises motif 2 and fragments the motif, placing the chords in different octaves. The harmonisation is quite simple since Sigurbjörnsson simply makes a triad up from each note. This is clearly inspired by the triads of element 1. This is how Sigurbjörnsson connects his thematic materials and reuses the materials without repeating himself.

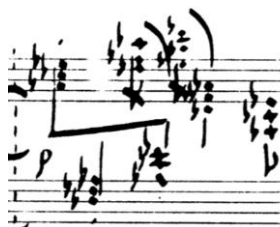


Figure 23: Harmonization of motif 2.

The layering is more horizontal than previously. Here element 1 is given the chance to spread out and developed in a way. Sigurbjörnsson also adds extra notes (1, 5, 6 and 11) that serve as ornamentation on the A-minor triad [0,3,7]. Very steady pulse throughout, as element 1 drones on. One might call it a “sound study”. Sigurbjörnsson lays the a-minor chords gently, whilst plucking the octaves in the RH. The pianist has to “open” their ears as much as they can, and delicately feel the keys under their fingers, for each note to blend well and flow into one another. Exploration of the sonorities of element 1 and motif 2. The movements of RH and LH in element 1 (line 28-29) are symmetrical, when the LH does down a P4 [1,6] the RH goes up a P4 [5, 11].

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning I mentioned the characteristics of Sigurbjörnsson’s compositional style. Those were in brief: Thorough use of thematic materials, ostinatos, and the symmetrical octatonic scale. I think it’s safe to say that Sigurbjörnsson used the 7 thematic materials presented very extensively and in a creative manner. Repetition was avoided and materials were rather transformed by shifting the tonal centre, isolating fragments, and expanding them, layering different materials on top of each other, changing the texture, moving materials between octaves, and inverting both in intervals as well as shifting hands. Element 1 acts as a clear accompanying *ostinato* in sections A and A1, as well as in the coda. Symmetry is notable in Sigurbjörnsson’s compositional style, e.g., motif 2 (one of the most repetitive and fundamental material in the piece) is symmetrical around A. Serialism colours his tonal language as well, though without following extensively strict patterns or certain rows. Rather all the 12 tones are trodden as means to enrich the tonal environment of certain motifs (motif 4 and 7). The main characteristics of SO are: Contrasts, chords and passages based on [0,5,7], limited but thoroughly used ideas, awareness of both tradition in form and structure, and awareness of the twelve-tone system, without being limited to either of those things. Sigurbjörnsson also approaches the piano both as a melodic and percussive instrument and creates a wide array of textures just by shifting the approach. These techniques all reflect Sigurbjörnsson’s style. For further research it would be interesting to dive deeper into the pitch classes Sigurbjörnsson uses, only briefly mentioned here, and map out the usage and compare the number of pitches used between sections. Another interesting aspect to inspect further would be to put this piece into context of other solo piano works of Sigurbjörnsson (e.g., *Der Wohltemperierte Pianist* (1971), *Hans Variations* (1979), *Sindur – Scintillation* (2000)), and see how the composer’s techniques and ideas changed over time.

## REFERENCES

“Andlát: Þorkell Sigurbjörnsson.” Morgunblaðið, January 31, 2013, accessed April 2, 2022. [http://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2013/01/31/andlat\\_thorkell\\_sigurbjorns...](http://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2013/01/31/andlat_thorkell_sigurbjorns...)

Atli Heimir Sveinsson, „Sonorities eftir Magnús Blöndal Jóhannsson: Hugleiðingar um verkið og höfundinn,” *Birtingur*, 10. árgangur, 1.–4. tölublað (1964): 44

Árni Heimir Ingólfsson. “Að þykja vænt um tónana.” Liner notes for Sigurbjörnsson, Þorkell. *Leikar*. Kammersveit Reykjavíkur. Reykjavík: Smekkleysa, 2006.

Bergendal, Göran. *New Music in Iceland*. Peter Lyne translated. Reykjavík: Iceland Music Information Centre, 1991.

Beyer, Anders. *The Voice of Music: Conversations with Composers of Our Time*. London: Ashgate, 2000.