



Iceland Symphony Orchestra  
Eva Ollikainen



Anna Thorvaldsdottir  
**ARCHORA / AIÓN**

# ARCHORA / AIŌN

ARCHORA (2022) 20:52

AIŌN (2018)

I. Morphosis 13:16

II. Transcension 16:47

III. Entropia 10:50

Total Time: 61:48

The core inspiration behind **ARCHORA** centres around the notion of a primordial energy and the idea of an omnipresent parallel realm - a world both familiar and strange, static and transforming, nowhere and everywhere at the same time. The piece revolves around the extremes on the spectrum between the Primordia and its resulting afterglow - and the conflict between these elements that are nevertheless fundamentally one and the same. The halo emerges from the Primordia but they have both lost perspective and the connection to one another, experiencing themselves individually as opposing forces rather than one and the same.

**ARCHORA** (2022) was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 for the BBC Proms, Iceland Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic, Orchestre de Paris, and Klangspuren Schwaz Festival.

**AIŌN** is inspired by the abstract metaphor of being able to move freely in time, of being able to explore time as a space that you inhabit rather than experiencing it as a one-directional journey through a single dimension. Disorienting at first, you realize that time extends simultaneously in all directions and whenever you feel like it, you can access any moment. As you learn to control the journey, you find that the experience becomes different by taking different perspectives - you can see every moment at once, focus on just some of them, or go there to experience them. You are constantly zooming in and out, both in dimension and perspective. Some moments you want to visit more than others, noticing as you revisit the same moment, how your perception of it changes. This metaphor is connected to a

number of broader background ideas in relation to the work: How we relate to our lives, to the ecosystem, and to our place in the broader scheme of things, and how at any given moment we are connected both to the past and to the future, not just of our own lives but across - and beyond - generations.

**AIÖN** (2018) was commissioned by Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and Iceland Symphony Orchestra.

As with my music generally, the inspiration behind **ARCHORA** and **AIÖN** is not something I am trying to describe through the music or what the music is “about”, as such. Inspiration is a way to intuitively tap into parts of the core energy, structure, atmosphere and material of the music I am writing each time. It is a fuel for the musical ideas to come into existence, a tool to approach and work with the fundamental materials, the ideas and sensations, that provide and generate the initial spark to the music - the various sources of inspiration are ultimately effective because I perceive qualities in them that I find musically captivating. I do often spend quite a bit of time finding ways to articulate some of the important elements of the musical ideas or thoughts that play certain key roles in the origin of each piece but the music itself does not emerge from a verbal place, it emerges as a stream of consciousness that flows, is felt, sensed, shaped and then crafted. So inspiration is a part of the origin story of a piece, but in the end the music stands on its own.

*- Anna Thorvaldsdottir*



# ANNA THORVALDSDOTTIR

Anna Thorvaldsdottir's "seemingly boundless textural imagination" (NY Times) and striking sound world has made her "one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary music" (NPR). Her music is composed as much by sounds and nuances as by harmonies and lyrical material - it is written as an ecosystem of sounds, where materials continuously grow in and out of each other. Anna's "detailed and powerful" (Guardian) orchestral writing has garnered her awards from the New York Philharmonic, Lincoln Center, the Nordic Council, and the UK's Ivors Academy.

Anna's music is widely performed internationally and has been commissioned by many of the world's leading orchestras, ensembles, and arts organizations - such as the Berlin Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Orchestre de Paris, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic, Danish String Quartet, International Contemporary Ensemble, Ensemble Intercontemporain, BBC Proms, and Carnegie Hall. Among the many other orchestras and ensembles that have performed her music include the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, London's Philharmonia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, Bang on a Can All-Stars, Quatuor Bozzini, BBC Singers, The Crossing, the Bavarian Radio Choir,

Münchener Kammerorchester, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Helsinki Philharmonic, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra.

Concerts focusing on Anna's music have been featured at several major venues and music festivals, including Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival in NYC, London's Spitalfields Music Festival, Münchener Kammerorchester's Nachtmusic der Moderne series, the Composer Portraits Series at NYC's Miller Theatre, the Leading International Composers series at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC, Knoxville's Big Ears Festival, Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, Brooklyn's National Sawdust, and Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra's Point Festival. Other prominent venues and festivals include the BBC Proms, Aldeburgh Festival, London's Royal Opera House, Southbank Centre, Lucerne Festival, ISCM World Music Days, Nordic Music Days, Ultima Festival, Beijing Modern Music Festival, Reykjavik Arts Festival, Tectonics, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Helsinki's Musica Nova Festival, and the Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

Anna holds a PhD (2011) from the University of California in San Diego and is based in the London area.



# ARCHORA / AIŌN

Within my own tight menagerie of favorites - the albums lovingly bejeweled with fingerprints and dog-eared booklets - Anna Thorvaldsdottir's name appears on more CD spines than any other living composer. I'm not being hyperbolic when I admit that I need to hear her music no less often than I need to revel in the night sky. This music unlocks something about human-ness on a more visceral, fundamental level than even the Thich Nhat Hanh passage that once redirected my life, or that Terrence Malick scene tattooed inside my skull. Maybe this is resonating with you, too, and fellow Thorvaldsdottir acolytes, I tell you without reservation that Anna has reached a true inflection point with the scores and performances represented on this record.

I've been invited to write these liner notes due to some expectation of expertise: I've advocated in print for Anna's music for over a decade, breathed the same rehearsal room air with her while working on her first string quartet, and have similarly witnessed, first-hand, Sono Luminus sound engineer Daniel Shores cajoling microphones and mixes to mystically make "it" sound like "it" sounds in my head.

And yet, when I'm deep in the trance of Anna's oeuvre, the question of "What does it mean?" is noticeably (and mercifully) absent. When Spektral Quartet presented our Thorvaldsdottir commission *Enigma* to audiences, we were uncharacteristically brief in contextualizing what everyone was about to experience, leaving it to something along the lines of, *This music is simultaneously colossal and microscopic - the scale is both universal and sub-atomic*. You've no doubt noticed that Anna herself avoids fertilizing proscriptive notions of how one should consider what they hear, gently insisting that this is our world to explore. And yet, these sounds awaken a rare species of curiosity, don't they? There's a (hopefully) forgivable compulsion to ascribe environmental reference points or even an attempt at obliging the composer to unpack why we seem to be vibrating at some alien frequency when we listen.

*So where does that leave us, here?*

What I will hazard is that Anna's music presents dualities, and more importantly, the liminal space between them. This is going to sound a bit

grand, but I don't care because it's true: these arrangements of sound don't create a universe, they are the universe. What I offer you now are words revolving around a question - one essential to these pieces and all of the composer's catalogue - the answer for which I am still in quixotic pursuit:

*How is this music so gargantuan?*

It's the sterling capture of the performance, of course, and yes, orchestration/voicing/pacing are key. But there is an intangible at work here. Nothing I've ever confronted in the orchestral realm is quite this staggering, or precipitates such an immediate, exquisite vertigo.

**ARCHORA**

ARCHORA is ushered into existence by a plangent Db summoned by the bass clarinet, contrabassoon, bass trombone, tenor and bass tubas, cellos, double basses, and rattling chains. There is no transitioning into this immense space...you are just here now. This harmonic cornerstone evaporates in less than a minute, and yet, somehow it hovers in the ears throughout till the midpoint of the piece, when it is replaced by a magnetic C-natural - again amongst deep, stygian voices - that sounds somehow more agitated, or more activating, by this point in the score.

One remarkable feature of this piece is the responsibility, as well as the trust, it places on the individual performers. The reason that low Db is so potent, so magnificent, is that the players are imperceptibly ducking out for air asynchronously, giving it the effect of something mythical, or at least superhuman. This technique is not novel or new, but the collaboration between the composer, requesting that the musicians embody serenity as they negotiate these precarious hand-offs, and the Iceland Symphony performers, without whose belief in this process the entire enterprise would quickly disintegrate, is spellbinding.

Is it beginning to resonate, why I refer to the pieces on this album as an "inflection point?" Many composers can make an orchestra sound voluminous. What you are hearing on this track, though, is a composer not simply engaging an orchestra, but synthesizing with it to become an organism of improbable magnitude.

*But how does ARCHORA manage to bridge such heady expanses?*

It's the strings unleashing a battery of *col legno battuto* that whips my focus back to terra firma. They are not shocking gestures, but grounding ones that recalibrate the point-of-view back to that of the listener. It's the circular cascade of descending lines, like some perverse Shepard's tone

that loosens my grasp on which end is up. It's the whole organism, bending back toward whatever drone prevails in a given section that makes escaping some central truth or eternal nature of this primordia impossible. And each time the scene approaches overwhelm, we're met with a gleaming chordal or timbral pyramid, offering a reprieve.

I have the sense of experiencing a concept I understand only at the... feline...level: that of the "observer effect" in physics. ARCHORA, through its absence of perceptible passage of time - a regular beat - exists outside of my influence, and yet listening to it, I have the sense that I am creating the next tonal area, the next vista, simply by changing the position of my gaze.

ARCHORA is extra-human and human, simultaneously. With the arrival of the viola Bb-A cadence (16:42) and with a now discernible sense of time provided by the bass drum appears what to me is one of the most generous moments in all of Anna's music. It enters not as deliverance from - or suspension of - struggle, but a reminder that having reckoned with all the titanic forces within this universe, we've emerged together. Or as Anna puts it to the orchestra in the performance notes, regarding the impossibly long sustains throughout, we have traversed "the distance on a thin rope" while carrying a delicate flower "without dropping it or falling."

## AIÖN

ARCHORA plays like a solo adventure, or a single-camera shoot. AIÖN, by contrast, implies to my ears a more communal endeavor. A construction of the universe more so than a rendezvous with it. Here again, my brain keeps tilting toward cosmic metaphors when attempting to provide a sense of scale.

Intriguingly, Db is the first of our north star pitches in this second score as well, breathed into being with wisps of air from the winds and non-pitched circular bowing in the strings. Unlike ARCHORA, though, with its three interior movement titles a secret shared only with the performers, in AIÖN we are offered three explicit movement headings, beginning with "Morphosis." Wriggling amoebas of semi-chromatic flourishes cross and recross the ensemble before coalescing around an E-natural, and by extension creating a cathartic major 3rd with the A-flat that provided a perfect 5th with the curtain-raising D-flat. These are familiar, foundational intervals, and they unfold before us in quintessentially Thorvalds-dottir fashion: by a series of descending suspensions. I'd suggest that no composer employs this device more persuasively, with each alternation of tension and release palpable in one's body.



We are returned to the breath, literally, by the end of the movement but as something more akin to a memory than a closing of symmetry. Movement two, "Transcension" is the point at which allusions to humankind become frequent. The reverberant snaps of Bartók pizzicati and more specifically the incantations issuing from the low strings suggest evidence of the earth we inhabit. Is this our earth, though, or some allegory for our planet?

What most captivates me in this middle movement, though, is the scraping effected by the percussionists. Building something new, irrespective of scale, is never a linear process and I can't help but imagine some empyrean Etch-a-Sketch eraser at work here. Wiping the slate clean, so to speak, allows for a new approach to our mutual endeavor, but it also affords the listener's ears a recalibration - an effective device for making sonic space in advance of The Next Big Thing.

Nowhere is a sense of engineering - or maybe continual re-engineering - more tightly focused than the 3:22 mark of movement three, "Entropia," when the contrabassoon, double basses, and XL bass drum begin provocatively cycling a hocket to demarcate each bar line. This is coordinated rail spike-driving...just at the scale of Cronus, Hyperion, and Rhea. The rhythmicity of it is startling because of its scarcity. Not only here, but across this entire album.

Remnants or apparitions of material from elsewhere in the piece find their way into this final movement, but never looking quite the same as when we last crossed paths. The air is truly remade, though, with only two minutes remaining and immediately preceding a resolute brass chant before all forces assemble to parade in an ecstatic, roll-the-credits Db major triad. A moment just as revelatory as the finale of a certain late-19th-century German tone poem frequently associated with space.

### *So what makes ARCHORA and AIŌN so huge?*

The answer is, and I'm not being coy, *everything*. It's the transcendence of bar lines, the exploitation (the good kind!) of the range of the orchestral "instrument," the perfectly-timed exits of any section of the music, the unequivocal conviction of the Iceland Symphony musicians, the immediacy and detail of the recording capture, and the crystalline mix.

It is the uncommon intuition of the composer herself - a trait not miraculously bestowed, but uncovered only through persistent, perpetual excavation.

*- Doyle Armbrust*



# EVA OLLIKAINEN

Eva Ollikainen is since 2020 the Artistic Leader and Chief Conductor of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra.

Her recent guest appearances include concerts and performances with Staatskapelle Dresden, Wiener Symphoniker, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Royal Danish Orchestra and Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra. She served as Chief Conductor for Nordic Chamber Orchestra in 2018-2021.

One of the highlights this season is her debut at the PROMS with the BBC Philharmonic, featuring the world premiere of Anna Thorvaldsdottir's ARCHORA. She will also make her debut with Los Angeles Philharmonic both at Walt Disney Hall and Hollywood Bowl, and perform with BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Festival Printemps des Arts in Monte Carlo.

Other contemporary guest engagements include Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, National Arts Centre Orchestra in Canada, Orchestre National de Belgique and Helsinki Philharmonic. In addition to an extensive tour in UK with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra she will also conduct the centen-

ary celebration concert of the BBC Philharmonic.

Eva Ollikainen is a frequent guest teacher at the Sibelius Academy Conducting Class, and in her first season as Artistic Leader for the Iceland Symphony Orchestra she founded the Conducting Academy for young musicians in Iceland. This season she is also invited to give a masterclass at Peabody Institute of the John Hopkins University and the Royal Danish Academy of Music.





## ICELAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Since its inaugural concert in 1950, the **Iceland Symphony Orchestra** has expanded from a part-time ensemble of forty players to an internationally renowned orchestra of ninety full-time musicians. As Iceland's national orchestra, resident at Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavík, it gives around one hundred concerts each season, its repertoire ranging from traditional classical works to contemporary and film music. It has worked with such renowned musicians as Daniel Barenboim, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Joshua Bell, Hilary Hahn, Jonas Kaufmann, Isabelle Faust, Evelyn Glennie, Barbara Hannigan, and Víkingur Ólafsson.

Coinciding with the Orchestra's 70th anniversary concert in 2020, Eva Ollikainen assumed the position of Chief Conductor and Artistic Director. Vladimir Ashkenazy is Conductor Laureate and has conducted the Orchestra regularly since the early 1970s. Rumon Gamba was Chief Conductor and Music Director from 2002-2010, succeeded by Ilan Volkov and then, in 2016, by Yan Pascal Tortelier. Osmo Vänskä, currently Honorary Conductor, has worked closely with the Orchestra since his tenure as Chief Conductor

in the 1990s, and acclaimed Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdóttir is Composer-in-Residence.

The Iceland Symphony Orchestra has appeared widely throughout Europe, performing at the BBC Proms in Royal Albert Hall, Usher Hall in Edinburgh, and Wiener Musikverein, among other venues. In 2018, under the baton of Vladimir Ashkenazy, the Orchestra took a highly successful three-week tour of Japan. It has also appeared twice in New York's Carnegie Hall.

The Iceland Symphony Orchestra records regularly for leading music labels and has received many international awards, as well as two Grammy nominations for Best Orchestral Performance.



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## ARCHORA / AIÖN ICELAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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