


# EDDA II - THE LIVES OF THE GODS

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Library of Iceland



Jón Leifs at Thingvellir in 1945.  
Photo: Sigurhans Vignir.  
Reykjavík Museum of  
Photography.

Composer Jón Leifs was born at Sólheimar farm in northern Iceland on May 1, 1899, but he moved a year later with his family to Reykjavík. There he took piano lessons as a teenager, and despite the modest musical life in the capital, Leifs soon found that he had no choice but to dedicate his life to the music.

In the fall of 1916, Leifs went to Leipzig together with his two compatriots, Páll Ísólfsson and Sigurður Þórðarson. There he enrolled at the Conservatory, studying piano with Robert Teichmüller, conducting with Hermann Scherchen and Otto Lohse, and composition with Paul Graener. During his student years in Leipzig, Jón met a pianist, Annie Riethof, a Jewish woman who also attended Teichmüller's lessons. They fell in love and were married in June 1921, a few days after Leifs graduated from the Conservatory.

During these years, Leifs pursued a career as a conductor and pianist, and apparently did not intend to concentrate on music. It was not until shortly after he graduated, after he realized that the style of Icelandic folk music could be used as a basis for artistic creation, that Leifs began devoting more time to composition. The native Icelandic musical heritage had until that time not been given much attention. In the hands of Leifs, the parallel fifths of the native *tvísöngur* and the frequently shifting meters of *rímur* singing became material for larger compositions, including symphonic works, and this had not happened before in the history of Icelandic music.

## EDDA – ORATORIO

Icelandic composers had not shown the ancient Eddic poems much interest until Jón Leifs came to the scene. There are no known examples of a composition based on the Eddic poems until Leifs wrote his Three verses from Hávamál op. 4 in 1924. On the other hand, Richard Wagner researched Icelandic literature, both the Eddic poems and the family sagas, when he composed his operatic tetralogy, the Ring of the Nibelung. But Wagner's approach was too Romantic to suit Leifs's taste; Leifs remarked that many of his works, including the Edda oratorio, were intended "as a protest against Wagner, who misunderstood so terribly the Nordic character and Nordic artistic heritage."

The first indication that Leifs was preparing a major work based on Eddic poems is a letter written in 1928 to the renowned Icelandic scholar Sigurður Nordal, asking for help with questions relating to creating a libretto for such a work. At this point, the work was only supposed to be a piece based on a single poem, the famous Völuspá, but it eventually became much larger, with Leifs assembling a vast collage from the Poetic as well as Prose Eddas. When he completed the libretto in May 1933, it ran to 86 typewritten pages, and was divided into four parts: The Creation of the World, The Lives of the Gods, Twilight of the Gods (Ragnarökr) and Rebirth. At the time when Leifs began assembling the libretto, he also finished a smaller vocal piece based on the Eddic poems, Love Poems from Edda for vocal and piano (1931-32).

## IN GERMANY AND BACK HOME

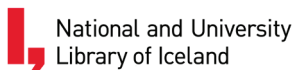
Leifs's compositions enjoyed growing popularity in Germany at the beginning of the 1930s. His simple compositions based on folk songs were particularly popular and the Icelandic Dances op. 11 were his first work released on record. In 1933, Kistner & Siegel in Leipzig published all of Leifs's scores, which were generally well received in the early years of the Third Reich. During these years, the idea was also born of Leifs's magnum opus, the Edda Oratorio, and he completed the first part (The Creation of the World) in 1939. Leifs saw his music as an attempt to revitalize Nordic culture on the basis of the Icelandic medieval heritage, and in his book, Islands künstlerische Anregung, he explains his ideas about the characteristics and uniqueness of Nordic culture.

Leifs continued to live in Germany after the Nazis came to power, but his music was poorly received there after 1937. The main reason was

Jón Leifs office as he left it  
in July 1968.  
Photo: Kristján Magnússon.  
From Þorbjörg Leifs.



probably the unusual style of his works, but another cause for concern was that Annie, his wife, was of Jewish origin. Leifs, along with his wife and two daughters, were able to travel from Germany to Sweden in February 1944. In the summer of 1945 he returned to Iceland and began working on social matters for Icelandic artists. He had previously participated in the creation of the Foundation of Icelandic Artists, but now he initiated the creation of the Icelandic Composers' Association as well as STEF, the Society of Composers and Owners of Performing Rights. The decade from 1945-55 was characterized by tragedies in Leifs's personal life; two marriages broke up and his 17-year old daughter drowned in 1947. His works, particularly the Saga Symphony and two movements of Edda I, were also poorly received, and this led to a 10-year hiatus in composing Edda II. After Jón married for the third time in 1956, to Þorbjörg Möller, he again became more active as a composer, including four important works describing Icelandic natural phenomena: Geysir, Hekla, Dettifoss and Hafís. In the final years of his life, Leifs also continued working on the Edda Oratorio, but he did not manage to complete the third work, Edda III – Twilight of the Gods. Leifs passed away at the National Hospital in Reykjavik on July 30, 1968.



Text: Árni Heimir Ingólfsson  
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