

Northern Lights

The financial crisis of 2008 nearly quashed Iceland's vision for its first ever concert hall. But two years on, the builders are back and the programming is in full flow

Words Claire Jackson



A city's cultural identity is linked to its concert hall. Think of classical music in Sydney, Australia, and you immediately see an image of the white, fan-shaped building that is the Sydney Opera House. Consider Manchester, England, and you are quickly transported to the glassy edifice of the Bridgewater Hall. New York has Carnegie, Berlin the Philharmonic and Lucerne the KKL. London, of course, is spoilt for choice: the Royal Albert Hall, Wigmore Hall, the Barbican – the list of iconic venues goes on.

Most of these buildings have already enjoyed an illustrious history. The Royal Albert Hall was created for Victorian cultural pursuits in 1871; Carnegie was built in 1891 and, more recently, the Bridgewater Hall opened in 1996. So it may come as a surprise to discover that Iceland's capital city Reykjavík – though the country is well known for its thriving arts scene and experimental classical music – has never had a dedicated concert hall.

But with fellow Nordic countries attracting international attention for their newly erected and exquisite halls – such as Norway's iceberg-inspired Konserthus in Oslo, where the Menuhin Violin Competition was held back in April – Iceland is playing catch-up. Harpa, a stunning contemporary concert hall-come-conference centre, is nearing completion and will open its doors to the public in May 2011.

Given the disparate population of the city – and of the country in general – perhaps it should come as less of a shock that Reykjavík hasn't yet developed a space of this kind. The total number of people living in Iceland is roughly equal to

the population of Bristol, and Reykjavík is home to just over 120,000 inhabitants. Nonetheless, the country is a cultural archipelago: it has its own orchestra, the Iceland Symphony Orchestra (ISO), and its own operatic company, the Icelandic Opera (IO). The country is purported to have more musicians per capita than any other in the world. This nation of 290,000 people boasts 90 music schools, about 400 choirs, 400 orchestras and marching bands and a vast, unknown number of rock-pop groups and DJs.

Reykjavík is the epicentre of Iceland's burgeoning music scene. It is largely supported by independent record shops, including the famous 12 Tónar (Icelandic for 'twelve tones') into which I happily stumbled while en route to the Harpa site. A delicious aroma of strong coffee and the sound of the shimmering *And in the Endless Pause There Came the Sound of Bees* by Jóhann Jóhannsson mingled as I thumbed through the output of some of Iceland's great musical alumni; Björk, Sigur Rós and Múm. Many of these acts straddle pop and classical composition.

'The generation of Sigur Rós has created an atmosphere where there is an interest in traditional Icelandic music,' explains the nattily dressed cashier. I ask what defines Iceland's musical heritage. 'The instrument that was most used was voice,' he tells me. 'We have traditional rhymes and inside this form is a lot of variety. The rhymes were first [formally] collected in 1930, but we can't really tell how old they are. The oldest known is from the 14th century. There are probably older ones but we can't prove it.' He plays me an example; a haunting, hypnotic

and monophonic melody fills the shop. 'It's an acquired taste,' he says.

Continuing on my journey towards the harbour I pass an intriguing collection of shops: a fur emporium (that boasts a jacket made of fish scales in its window), various arts and crafts stores and a tourist shop with an obese [fake] stuffed puffin at its doors. The Harpa site sits at the outskirts of the city. Today, for an unofficial unveiling, members of the international press join a bustling hub of builders and architects.

The symbolism of the new concert hall is all-pervasive

Winter sunlight dances on the enormous panels of coloured glass that are being carefully hoisted to form the building's façade, designed by visual artist Olafur Eliasson. Sporadic rain showers act as intermittent prisms, and a huge rainbow arcs over the unfinished concert hall. It is as though the publicity department had meteorological control. As Harpa's representatives speak about the development as a symbol of Iceland's renewed dynamism and



© Neil Jones



© Claire Jackson

hope for the future, the weather seems to express its approval.

As a country, Iceland has had a tricky ride of late. Previously one of the wealthiest nations in the West, with a per-capita income, education system and health-expectancy that turned most European countries green with envy, the place was regularly portrayed as a modern utopia. However, the recent financial tsunami demolished the easy-come, easy-go nature of banking and pushed the country to the brink of meltdown as the markets freewheeled into a state of emergency. Then, just as the króna was stabilising, Iceland was propelled back into international consciousness due to the volcanic eruption of Eyjafjallajökull and the air traffic turmoil that its far-reaching ash cloud caused.

Iceland has worked tirelessly to raise its profile in the business world and to eliminate parochial preconceptions that it is a nation of fishermen. The credit crisis dealt a striking blow to its reputation, but the country is taking it on the chin. The symbolism of the new concert hall is all-pervasive. For a time it seemed as though Harpa might not be finished – building a lavish conference centre is hardly essential in a time of economic frugality. But the Icelandic government persevered and, run by the holding company Portus, the centre is quickly taking shape.

Sigurður Nordal, director of the ISO, explains why the country's professional orchestra is so excited about Harpa's completion: 'We have been playing in a cinema for about half a century. The acoustic is far from being considered

acceptable, especially given the progress the orchestra has made. [Harpa] is something that the orchestra – and everyone interested in music – has been waiting for for decades. The project of building a concert hall in Reykjavík has a long history. Finally this dream has come true; it's hard to believe.'

The move from a disused cinema to a world-class concert hall will bring new challenges for the ISO. The orchestra currently fills 950 seats, but will have the capacity to reach considerably larger audiences at Harpa. Nordal seems nonplussed by the upgrade: 'The interest in the orchestra has been growing; we increased ticket sales by more than a third last year,' he says. 'It's up to us to offer an attractive programme. We have the opportunity to break the traditional form of concerts in this hall – we will offer late-night concerts and make all kinds of experiments!'

Nordal's colleagues over at the IO face a similar challenge. Earlier on my trip I had visited the opera's current home – also an old cinema. The theatre, though charming and cosy, has relatively basic facilities and the move to Harpa will open up the possibility of holding more fully staged productions. However, as Stéfan Baldursson, IO's director, explains, Harpa wasn't initially intended to house opera.

'When the bank crash came two years ago,' he says, 'many people said, "Stop this". But [the planners] claimed it was more expensive to stop than to carry on. Then they realised that the ISO would be giving, say, 60 concerts a year and they had to fill the hall year-round.

'So the minister of culture invited us to move.' This invitation was generous, but the centre had been designed as a concert hall, not an opera house. 'I was concerned,' Baldursson admits. 'How would we hold operas in a place without any stage equipment? We said, if we were to move there, which we thought was very exciting, we needed a special rehearsal room, a sewing room for the costumes and a place for hair and make-up. The most difficult thing has been the lighting as it has been designed for orchestra, but with opera you need lights from the side, the back and so on.'

The architects, Henning Larsen and Batteríð, together with the venue's acousticians Artec Consultants, are overcoming these issues. Long-term plans include hosting musical theatre, too, with a production of *Chess* scheduled for next summer. Harpa's custodians are to be commended for their pragmatism. While some purists may shudder at the prospect of merging a concert hall with a conference centre, we need only look at the success of London's Barbican to see that the formula can work. Who knows, perhaps delegates at the 41st annual European Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Therapies conference may attend the ISO's Beethoven symphony cycle. Or maybe the European Orthodontic Society could offer free check ups to the IO singers. Whatever the scenario, it doesn't look like the buzz in and surrounding Harpa is going to be dying down anytime soon, and hurrah for that: Iceland finally has its iconic cultural venue.