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The Icelandic Langspil

by Betsy Salt
Westerville, Ohio



Thórdur Tómasson playing the langspil in Skógar, Iceland.

Iceland was settled by Viking voyagers from Norway in the year 874 A.D. Other Norse immigrants rapidly joined them, and by 930 A.D., 60,000 people were living in Iceland. It is not known with any certainty what musical traditions these people brought to Iceland with them, but the earliest form of music in Iceland seems to have been the unaccompanied chant. Icelandic poets used this form in reciting traditional stories and sagas. This type of changed narrative is known as rimur and is an exclusively Icelandic musical form. Rimur songs are made up of an indefinite number of poetic passages with different sections having different metrical patterns. Rimur singing is still done in modern Iceland.

Iceland came under the influence of Christianity in the year 1000 A.D., and new musical traditions from Europe were introduced as a result. During the Middle Ages, both hymns and secular folk songs in medieval style were sung throughout Iceland. A characteristic medieval song form which survives today in Iceland is Tvisöngur, a form of duet in which singing is

done in consecutive parallel fifths.

It is uncertain when musical instruments were introduced to Iceland. Harps are mentioned in some of the Icelandic sagas, which were written down in the thirteenth century. These record events purported to have taken place several centuries earlier. However, a tradition of instrumental accompaniment of folk songs did not develop until about the eighteenth century, when two stringed instruments, the fidla (a box-shaped fiddle with two to four strings) and the langspil, became popular in Iceland.

The antecedents of the langspil can probably be seen in similar European instruments such as the Norwegian langeleik and the German scheitholt. The knowledge of these instruments and their use probably came to Iceland as a result of trade contacts with other Scandinavian countries. As with the case of the Appalachian dulcimer, the people modified the form of the European instruments to suit their own purposes, and the langspil came into being. It is known that langspils were being made and used in Iceland in the eighteenth century.

The traditional langspil had one to six strings and a fretted fingerboard with a diatonic scale. The instrument was generally placed on a table or on the lap for playing. It was occasionally plucked but was more commonly played with a small horsehair bow.

The langspil was used to accompany singing rather than being solely for instrumental playing. It reached the peak of its popularity during the mid-nineteenth century, and its use gradually declined during the early twentieth century as other types of instruments and musical forms reached Iceland as a result of greater contact with Europe than in previous centuries. The langspil is still played in Iceland by a small number of folk music enthusiasts. Many modern langspils have modified fretboards with half-frets inserted between the traditional frets to make the instrument chromatic rather than diatonic. Anna Thorhallsdóttir has been particularly influential in reviving interest in playing the langspil. She became well known in Iceland in the 1960's as a singer and folk musician and produced a recording of Icelandic folk songs with langspil accompaniment.

Icelandic folk music still retains many of its medieval characteristics due to the island's isolation and only sporadic contact with mainland Europe prior to the twentieth century. Rimur and tvisöngur are still well known in Iceland today, and new interest is being generated in performing traditional songs with langspil accompaniment.

Betsy Salt visited Iceland where she learned quite a bit about Icelandic traditional music. Here in the United States she is an active participant in festivals and with the Columbus, Ohio Dulcimer Club.