

Ólafur Arnalds – Island Songs (2016)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Árbakkinn* 2 *1995* 3 *So Close* 4 *Raddir* 5 *Öldurót* 6 *Dalur* 7 *Particles* 8 *Doria*
Ólafur Arnalds - Arranger, Composer, Piano, Synthesizer Hilmar Örn Agnarsson - Conductor Dagný Arnalds - Harmonium Victor Orri Árnason - Violin Bjarni Frímann Bjarnason - Composer, Violin South Iceland Chamber Choir Einar Georg Einarsson - Poetry Solveig Vaka Eyporsdóttir - Violin Emil Friofinsson - French Horn Ása Guðjónsdóttir - Violin Nanna Bryndís Hilmarsdóttir - Composer, Vocals Laufey Jensdóttir - Violin Hallgrímur Jónas Jensson - Cello Þorkell Jóelsson - French Horn Unnur Jónsdóttir - Cello Atli Örvarsson - Arranger, Conductor Karl Pestka - Viola Ásta Kristín Pjetursdóttir - Viola Sinfonianord - Orchestra Bergur Þórisson - Trombone

Icelandic composer Ólafur Arnalds took on a fantastic project earlier this year that I've only just been able to purchase and fully sink myself into. "Island Songs" saw Arnalds pair up with other Icelandic artists to create a song a week for seven weeks. Not only is that a creative explosion, the artists were local to the towns he visited and each had a visual piece to go alongside it. "Island Songs" therefore is a creative paintbox that tells much of the beauty and culture of Iceland alongside Ólafur's thoughts and feelings in the different parts of the country.

Opening with the spoken dialogue of Einar Georg in "Árbakkinn", the piano, which is central to the album, creates a backbone for a narrated tale as strings ebb and flow with painful beauty around it. I love that you can hear the creaks and noises quietly in the background as they recorded on the fly as it adds a homely warmth to the track. "1995" features Dagný Arnalds features organ in a slow motion Philip Glass like crawl. It's an understated piece. It isn't chorale, but it has a heavenly quality to it like falling into audio pillows. The chorale effect is saved for "Raddir" which features the South Iceland Chamber Choir. The vocal arrangement is an ever progressing layered sound that revolves around a riff that the organs and strings rotate around too. It's cyclic methods create a meditative state that's hypnotic and alluring whilst having that Icelandic dark tone hiding somewhere behind it. It refuses to be rushed and captivates you from beginning to end.

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“Oldurot” features Atli Orvarsson and SinfoniaNord in a track that plays more with bent strings over a simple electric piano styled synth. As the track evolves we hear familiar themes and the circulating theme that has popped up a few times briefly appears before being swamped with lush melancholy strings and washed away. “Dalur” features Brasstrío Mosfellsdals and plays with a prepared piano. You can hear its inner workings as the hammers creak and mutely hit each note. I personally get warmth and comfort from feeling so close to the piano in that way and the whole album has this sense of longing for home – it’s here where I feel like we are home in many ways. Gentle brass arrangements compliment the piano but the creaks and moans of the old instrument are the central force behind this song and the brass underscores it beautifully. “Particles” is the sole track that plays as a traditional song as Nanna Bryndis sings in English over a simple and sparse piano and string arrangement. Again the circular theme is present and Nanna’s voice sounds timeless and vulnerable as she carries you home again. “Doria” is Olafur himself creating a gramophone like experience for the piano as cute piano loops warp and play around your head in a haze. It reminds me of the band Amiina and that is only a great thing. A bonus track “Study for Player Piano (ii)” is included which plays with the prepared piano again as it flicks from ear to ear like snowflakes hitting a flame. It has that coldness and elemental feel of Iceland but the intrigue to let you get lost inside its sounds.

It would be remiss of me to mention two additional things. Firstly, getting the full audio-visual experience adds a lovely layer. The album itself is utterly beautiful but when paired with the music videos, it really feels like each track creates a space for you to exist in solace in. Baldvin Z shoots each music video in a single take. Some of them take on this circular theme rotating around a set piece, but all of them are striking in the fact that it feels like you are looking into a moment of time. Secondly, the experience live is also something to enjoy as the whole thing comes together in a quietly moving audio visual piece.

What is great though is that “Island Songs” can exist on its own two feet. The album has quickly become my go to for solace in 2016. This is the place for mindfulness and solemn warmth in a world that has not been kind this year. ---Simon Smith, higherplainmusic.com

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