

JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON

Jóhann Jóhannsson is a Berlin-based composer originally from Iceland. His varied and eclectic output includes commissioned works for Bang on A Can, Theatre of Voices and the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra as well as a collaboration with the New York-based experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison on the film *The Miners' Hymns*. His debut album "Englabörn" appeared in 2002 and he has since released 5 solo albums on the labels Touch and 4AD. He has composed music for the theatre and contemporary dance and was the founder of the Reykjavik based art collective Kitchen Motors.

Jóhannsson received Oscar®, BAFTA, and Critics' Choice nominations for his work on Denis Villeneuve's most recent film *Sicario*, starring Emily Blunt, Josh Brolin and Benicio Del Toro. In January 2015, he was awarded a Golden Globe for Best Film Score for *The Theory of Everything*, directed by James Marsh. His music for the film also earned Jóhannsson an Oscar nomination as well as a BAFTA, Grammy and Critics Choice Award nomination for best original score. *Theory of Everything* focuses on the life of famed physicist Stephen Hawking and stars Eddie Redmayne, who won an Oscar for his leading role as Stephen Hawking, and Felicity Jones. Jóhannsson's other recent film scores include Denis Villeneuve's *Prisoners*, Lou Ye's *Blind Massage* and So Yong Kim's *For Ellen*.

After a period spent mostly concentrating on film scores, this year will see the release of several new music projects, some of which have been a long time in the making. Jóhannsson is working on his first studio album in four years since his last release *Miner's Hymns* in 2011. A new piece from Jóhannsson, *Drone Mass*, was also premiered in March 2015 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in collaboration with 2014 Grammy-Award winning vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth and American Contemporary Music Ensemble. *Drone Mass* will be recorded in Denmark in June, 2016 and released through the Sonos Luminous record label. More live dates will be performed in late 2017. *Last and First Men*, a new audiovisual piece, is also in the making and was performed as a work-in-progress at the Kortrijk festival in Belgium in May 2015 with live music performed by the Spectra Ensemble. This piece combines film footage Jóhannsson shot with cinematographer Sturla Brandth Grovlen on various locations in the republics of the former Yugoslavia with new music composed by Jóhannsson. The title is inspired by the science fiction novel of the same name written by Olaf Stapledon which was published in 1930.

"People seem to need labels, but they can be needlessly reductive," says Icelandic composer and musician Jóhann Jóhannsson. Ever since he was 18, when he started performing in rock bands in Reykjavik, he's been looking for ways to break out of rigid categories. The music he's written for contemporary dance and theater productions, films, pop musicians and his own albums, has always explored the boundary between natural acoustic sounds and electronics, with the goal of exploring and unifying these opposites. "Music is important to me, but it's not how I define what I do," he says. "I'm obsessed with the texture of sound and interested in minimal forms, with how to say things as simply as possible, how to distill things into their

primal form. The simpler the expression, the easier it is to communicate ideas.”

Jóhannsson started studying piano and trombone when he was 11, but stopped formal musical studies in high school, feeling hampered by the constraints of academic music. After studying literature and languages at university, he spent 10 years playing his music in indie rock bands, concentrating on feedback drenched compositions using layers of guitars to sculpt interesting multi-layered soundscapes. “When I discovered the albums on Eno's Obscure Records label from the 70's, my interest moved into creating minimal, ambient structures with classical instruments. I set the guitar aside and started writing music for strings, woodwinds and chamber ensembles, combining acoustic and electronic sounds.” By manipulating the resonances of acoustic instruments with digital processing, Jóhannsson created music that integrated acoustic and electronic sounds into something unique and new. “My ideal is music where the electronic and the acoustic sounds blend seamlessly.”

Reykjavik's fertile creative community was small and collaborations between musicians, artists, actors and dancers were common. In 1999, Jóhannsson was a founder member of Kitchen Motors, an art organization/think tank/record label that encouraged interdisciplinary collaborations. “We tried to amplify the opportunities that already existed, pulling together people from the worlds of jazz, classical, electronic music, punk and metal to encourage new hybrids. My own music grew out of those experiments.”

Jóhannsson's first solo album, *Englabörn* (Touch, 2002), was a suite based on the music written for the theater piece of the same name, a meeting of classical strings and electronics. “I recorded the strings, then processed them through digital filters to take apart the sounds and reassemble them. I like going to the microscopic core of the music to extract the essence, then use that to build up layers of sound.”

Writing music for plays, dance and theatrical performances led to work on film soundtracks. Jóhannsson scored more than a dozen movies, including *The Good Life* (Eva Mulvad, DK 2010), *Varmints* (Marc Craste, UK 2008) and *For Ellen* (So Yong Kim, US 2012) before his recent work with director Denis Villeneuve on *Prisoners* and Josh C. Waller on *McCanick*. His music has also found a home in art house films across the globe, from Lou Ye's *Mystery* (CN 2011) to Janos Szasz' recent prize winning drama, *Le Grand Cahier* (HU 2013).

Jóhannsson and Villeneuve decided to try something radical for the soundtrack for *Prisoners*, a gripping drama about kidnapping and revenge. “Denis wanted the music to be a poetic voice that worked in counterpoint to the action of the film,” Jóhannsson says. ³Even though the film is a thriller, the music is lyrical and beautiful, in stark contrast to the horror, ugliness and atrocities that the film depicts.” Jóhannsson composed the score watching an early cut of the film, reacting to the disturbing images on screen. He scored the music for an orchestra with large string and woodwind sections and featured the sounds of two little known instruments. The *Cristal Baschet* is an instrument similar to a glass harmonica, with huge metallic resonators, while the *Ondes Martenot* is an early electronic instrument similar to a

theremin, but with a softer sound. By blending those unfamiliar sounds with string instruments, Jóhannsson created music with a delicate, glassy surface. His tranquil music actually heightens the tension of the film, despite its ambient sound.

Jóhannsson says his approach to film music is informed by influences as diverse as Kraftwerk, Steve Reich, Einstürzende Neubauten, Swans, Arvo Part, Ennio Morricone, Morton Feldman, and Bernard Herrmann, but a list of his influences doesn't do justice to the journey he took to arrive at his singular vision.

Jóhannsson grew up in the suburbs of Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland. His father was the chief maintenance engineer for IBM and one of Iceland's first computer programmers. ³In his downtime, at work, he'd compose melodies and sounds on the IBM 1401, a prehistoric computer, Jóhannsson says. "The music he programmed inspired my composition IBM 1401- A User's Manual. I incorporated some of the sounds he created when I composed the piece."

Jóhannsson's interest in modular synthesizers and ancient electronic instruments found an outlet in his all-analogue side project Apparat Organ Quartet, a band he formed in 1999 with 3 fellow synth and keyboard enthusiasts. After two albums, he left the band in 2012 to concentrate on his solo work.

His varied discography includes *Virthulegu Forsetar* (Touch 2004), a drone heavy hour-long fanfare for pipe organ and brass; *Fordlandia* (4AD 2008), a cinematic ode to the city Henry Ford tried to build in the Amazon jungle and *Copenhagen Dreams* (NTOV 2010), a visual and musical tribute to his current hometown and its people. His soundtrack for *Free the Mind*, a film that shows how meditation helps people suffering from PTSD and ADHD, is now available on iTunes. The soundtrack album will be available on July DATE and the film will soon be released on DVD.

The Miners' Hymns, a melancholy tribute to the coal-mining culture in Durham, England, features Morrison's heartrending collage of archival footage and Jóhannsson's brooding music, full of low sustained notes played by brass instruments that pay homage to the brass bands the coal miners once played in. Jóhannsson performed *The Miners' Hymns* with the American Contemporary Music Ensemble at selected venues in the United States in 2014, bringing in local brass bands to play the score.

Jóhannsson has collaborated with pop artists like Marc Almond; Barry Adamson; Finnish electro band Pan Sonic, The Hafler Trio, the nom de musique of English avant garde composer Andrew M. McKenzie; CAN drummer Jaki Liebezeit; Stephen O'Malley of the dark metal band Sunn O))) and many others. "I like to get out of my own studio and work with other people. Being in a room with someone who has a different approach inspires me. Feeding off of each other's musicality always produces interesting results."