Linus Orri Gunnarsson Cederborg: Well, I guess like the premise of all this is this question: why is there no... [*long pause*] music? [*laughs*] In the simplest terms! Like, why is there no instrumental music before the 1800s? And why is there only this very specific singing tradition?

[*Intro music starts*]

Colin Gioia Connors: Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I’m your host Colin Gioia Connors.

[*Intro music ends*]

Three years ago, Linus Orri Gunnarsson Cederborg—he goes by Linus—showed up at a pub in downtown Reykjavik, Iceland, with a new mandolin he was itching to play. A few other musicians had just started a weekly session for traditional Irish music. Linus didn’t come to the session as a fan of Irish music—he just wanted to play the mandolin—but the music quickly grew on him, as did the people he met through playing. The weekly session became a big part of his life, and while he enjoyed the Irish music they played, he wondered if they could mix in some traditional Icelandic music as well. There was only one problem. The oldest music with instruments Linus could find was church music for the pump organ, introduced to Iceland in the 1800s. Linus wanted folk music, something with a mandolin, a guitar, flutes, the accordion, drums, anything all at, but he found nothing. What he found instead was vocal folk music, something unique called kvæði.

Linus: kvæði is 85% about poetry, you know; it’s just 15% singing. It’s a way to mediate poetry and that’s why we have a special word for it. We don’t call it singing because it’s between singing and reciting. And that’s why it’s so incredibly repetitive. They always end in the same way because that is how you deliver the punchline of every. single. verse. There is a punchline and you have to, like, drag it out, like:

[*Linus sings*]

Lifnar hagur hýrnar brá
hefst nú braga gjörðin.

That—that's just kvæði.

Colin: *Within the kvæði tradition, there are also harmonies for two voices, called tvisöngur, and long-form ballads, called rímur, that can be as long as 800 stanzas. Some melodies lend themselves to multiple forms. The melody Linus just sang can either be sung solo as a kvæði, or it can be sung by a duo as a tvisöngsstemma, a form which begins in unison, like kvæði, and finishes in a harmony of fifths, like tvisöngur.*

Linus: So you only—the only thing that makes it tvisöngur and not kvæði is that you add the fifth above it. You sing it in unison and then you do the fifth, like:

[*Linus sings solo*]

Lifnar hagur hýrnar brá

[*Linus sings harmony in fifths with second voice*]

hefst nú braga gjörðin.

It's very satisfying! Which the other ones aren't, you know. Like, kvæði is never satisfying after two verses. You have to—There is something about the repetition, you know. But it's a really, really special tradition. It's so different. And I think tvisöngur is a certain time capsule—not from the Viking Age, you know, not sure when—like, maybe the 1300s or something. It's—yeah. It's such a special thing.

Colin: *These traditions have been preserved in large part by the kvæðamannafélag, or society for kvæði, which was formed in 1929. Linus has become an enthusiastic member of the society.*

Linus: I'm actually, like, a vice member of the board [*laughs*].

Colin: *But his membership hasn't given him the one thing he really wants: songs that he can take to the pub and play with his friends. Which is where our interview began: how could pre-modern Icelanders not have instrumental music?*

Linus: Where are the instruments? Where—like, why didn't Icelandic people play instruments? Why didn't they buy instruments from the people that they were trading with? Why didn't the people they were trading with—why didn't they learn how to make instruments from them? Or when they travelled abroad, why didn't they bring instruments back? Or if they did, why didn't they play them, why didn't they learn them? [5:00] Alþingi gathered annually, and it was this big festival, like it was five days or something, you know, where people took like seven weeks to travel from the East Fjords. And, you know, they built this city for five days out of tents, and everything went on. There must have been music there! You know, and if there was one person playing music, everybody must have gone crazy over it, you know? Like, this big gathering of the whole country and there's music and it's great, like, how can Alþingi not have been the thing that created the Icelandic music tradition? Just, just one guy playing, like, a bone flute, you know? Surely it would have been a legend, you know? It's such a mystery. Or even not just, you know, an Icelandic person but someone else, like someone from the Basque country or from Norway or something who could play an instrument and visit Alþingi, you know, and charm everyone in a way that they wanted to learn to play music themselves. It's really strange. And I cannot be fully convinced that there was no instrumental tradition before the 1800s. But also I cannot be convinced that there was, because there would be evidence. We have evidence of so much stuff, like archaeological evidence of so many things that went on in Iceland, so many beautiful
things that have been made throughout, you know, throughout Iceland’s history, and things that have been reported, and why—
where are the instruments? If there were any, why aren’t they— why aren’t they in the museum?

Colin: Yeah. I totally agree with you. If we accept that there was no instrumental music tradition in Iceland when people came here and settled the country, then someone from another country must have come at some point—

Linus: Yeah!

Colin: —and played a song. Once.

Linus: Besides, like, at least half of the population was Irish slaves who had music. Like, we know that, like, around that time there was lots of instrumental music in Ireland. So—

Colin: Where are flutes? Where are the harps?

Linus: Yeah! I mean some of those slaves became free, and they married and, you know, they would have known how to play them, some of them. Some of them knew probably how to make them, too, you know, and there were forests back then, you know, there were sheep bones, and there was skin to make drums out of. It’s— it’s a real mystery, it’s a real mystery. Iceland is like the Bermuda Triangle of music [*laughs*]. But at the same time, you know, like, Viking music is something instantly you recognize, something you can instantly picture, you know? But [*laughs*], but none of it is true! Like, all these Viking bands, these folk bands that try to play, like, Viking style, it’s just such bullshit. Like...yeah, oof... Yeah, like, I mean, it’s OK that it’s bullshit, but there’s the pretense that it’s real, you know, which, with Viking music, is really there, it’s like true, you know? It’s so, like, [*deep voice*] “We’re going back to our roots,” and like, this is, like, really connected with national identity, and they assert all these values to it, you know? It’s about [*deep voice*] strength and bravery and brotherhood, you know, and drinking. And it’s just like, be honest that those are your values. Those aren’t “Viking values” that you also have. Like, at the end of the day, it’s just myth. This is how any folk revival is. You have to figure out which historical falsification you want to include, you know? Like, all folk revivals are based on myths and on some very conscious decisions about, like, “What are we gonna— like, how are we gonna mediate this tradition?” and like, “What are we going to think is acceptable? What are other people gonna think is acceptable?” Like, an example of that I love to bring up is that Irish traditional music was revived in the 60s, and in the 80s all of a sudden the bouzouki was a traditional Irish instrument. The Greek bouzouki. Because one person brought a bouzouki to his band, started playing it, everybody thought it was crazy, everybody asked him to stop, and then, in a couple years, it just sounded familiar. And now the bouzouki is like, one of the main instruments. The same happened in Sweden. The same decade! In the 80s, one guy brought a bouzouki to Sweden, he was asked to stop playing, but, you know, he persevered, and now he is considered, like, the person who defined how to accompany Swedish folk music. You know, both of these have lots of myths attached to them, you know, but in Irish traditional music, you would be kicked out if you played the saxophone. That would not work. But in Swedish traditional music, that’s fine, it’s actually quite common. There’s plenty of albums of Swedish folk music that use the saxophone. I don’t know if there’s something inherent in the music that makes it that way, or if it just happened, if there was a really good saxophonist, like— saxOPHOnist? [*both laugh*]

Colin: I think that’s something that people don’t realize about traditions, is that— is that there is something that is passed down from the generation before, but that each generation is remaking it for themselves.

Linus: Yeah.

Colin: And they take in new influences—
Linus: Yeah.

Colin: —All the time.

Linus: So, if we had rímur in a café, we would have to decide: do people listen or do people talk, you know? Or do people look at their phones? Like, what's the, you know— because you're not just deciding what the person in the corner is doing, you have to kind of decide what the audience, what you expect from the audience. Or you can just see what happens, of course, as well, like... But at some point, one or the other gets normalized, you know? Again, in Ireland if somebody starts singing a ballad, everybody shuts up, you know, at the bar. But I've seen people try to shut people up in Iceland when somebody's singing a ballad and, ah, it's a, it's a hilarious encounter. [*laughs*] Yeah I really think that, I really think that for all of these traditions, there are ways to incorporate them, we just have to experiment with new ways of using them. I really wish, and I believe that it has a place in Icelandic society, that it has—that it can be a really important thing in Icelandic culture again. Because poetry has been this hugely important thing since Settlement, you know? So much so that in the descriptions of the Settlement, like, when a person is being described, you know, it's gonna be like, four descriptors at most, and one of them is gonna be if they're good at poetry. That's just—that's one of the ways that you judge another human by: if they're good at poetry. And Icelandic modern society hasn't found a way to, like, have the poetry tradition on the surface. Because, like, people do it. It's really normal, like, after a summerhouse trip, you know, somebody writes some poetry in the guestbook. They write in a formal way with alliteration and rhyme schemes that are very complicated, you know, something about their trip. People come up with them when they're driving and, like, you know, it's something that is going on, but you wouldn't think so if you watch TV or listen to the radio, listen to music, any of the mediums we have, like, none of them have found a way to have poetry, you know, the Icelandic poetry tradition, to be a part of that medium. And I think tvisöngur could be. Because it's something you can do together. If you learn a few, just a few of them that deal with different forms, then somebody does write that in the poetry book, in the guest book, you can all come together afterwards and sing what was written with these, like, epic harmonies. Yeah. I think almost nobody, if not nobody, has tried to make Icelandic folk music relevant to other people. Like, it's mostly academics or classical musicians who, on the side, are making arrangements of folk music. But they didn't grow up in it, they don't live in it, it's not their main thing, they're not passionate about bringing it anywhere. Maybe they're passionate about that particular piece of music that they're making or, you know, that they're arranging for, but they're making it for other people who are like-minded. And then there's, you know, people who grew up with it, and they're just— they're there just to keep the tradition in their lives. But nobody's tried to make any kind of Icelandic folk music relevant to anyone else, you know? To use kvæði to sing about current political issues. It's...never happened. I guess, like, Purssaflokkurinn [in their album] Hinn íslenzki Purssaflokkur, they did that in— what was it, 80s? 70s? But they did this, like, you know, art music take on it. And what they did is they made it their own. Which is cool, but it means it's not reproducible, and that's the key of folk music. You have to make it your own somehow, but not so much that other people feel like, if they are playing this folk song, they're playing your folk song. Like Augun mín og augun þín, Vísur Vatnsenda-Rósu, that's a really good example of a kind of successful— I mean, that's kvæði. That composer added, like, changed the rhythm of and added a part to, with a bit of a key change, so he made it musically very interesting. But it's based on this kvæði. And, you know, lots of singers— Björk has sung it, every other singer really has, too. But nobody feels—you know, nobody thinks it's Björk's song. You know, foreigners might, but... [*laughs*]

No one in Iceland thinks so, you know, everybody thinks of it as a common thing, you know? And most people, I mean, really, really, most people don't know that it's, you know, that it's a composer who took this and made this version and actually has sued people over using it and not crediting him, crediting it as “traditional.” [*chuckles*] But there's a lesson there! Like, that's how you do it. You take it, and you make it musically more interesting, and you know, you do it to words that are relevant in any age— it's a song, a poem, you know, about longing and missing and loss and... yeah, and then you— and you know, he didn't do it on purpose, but then you make everybody think that you didn't write it, that it was always like that [*laughs*].

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Linus: It took me about two years to be able to understand how this tradition works, after joining kvæðamannafélag, and up until this book was released, and, like, having something explained to me that I hadn't understood yet, like the difference between all these words that are used. So, this is kvæði... So, here:

[*recites*]

Mætum undi ég mér hjá höld

[*pauses*]

“Mætum undi ég mér hjá höld,” that’s a poem and a kvæði. This— it’s ferskeytla hringhend. That's the rules of the, like, what kind of poem it is. And this is the melody. The melody is called stemma. And if you’re gonna talk about, like, if you have a poem and you ask someone, like, “Oh which stemma should we sing this to?” you could just, you know, hum it, or you could refer to it by its lagaboði, which is “Mætum undi ég mér hjá höld.” So this is the kind of standard poem that this melody is known by. And this is a thing that’s known in music all over, like, church music does this, pop music does this, like, “We're gonna sing this text to this song,” like, if you look at these songbooks from like the 70s, like, socialist songbooks, they're all like, “Here is this radical text about workers’ rights sung to this popular song that we all know.” So, you know, I've been a part of this, and like, trying to understand this tradition for a couple years before that came together and I finally understood the difference between all these things and then I understood how to use it. So, this, the lagaboði, is

[*sings*]

Mætum undi ég mér hjá höld

marga stundu inni

Man ég fundi og kvæðakvöld

kærust lundu minni

But the other day I was hanging out with a friend of mine and we were, like, reminiscing about these days that he had gotten into trouble for a banner that he had made in a protest that said, “Let's drown Valgerður, the Minister of Industry, instead of the highlands.” And, you know, people thought it was very violent, and she said her children lost sleep over it, you know, and he went on TV to defend himself, and thus a poet wrote a poem about it, this long poem, in this same form. It's also ferskeytla. And it's also hringhend. So I could sing to him,

[*sings*]

Þó að ríkisstjórn og fleiri flón

Fljótt og læki stifli
Which says, you know, "even though the government is trying to dam all the rivers, you don't need a big lagoon to drown one fool." This is how *kvæði* should be used. When you know a relevant poem, you can recite it! You can just recite it like a poem. Or you can sing it. And if you know a different *kvæði*, a different *stemmur*—So like, on the next page, there's another one that's also *ferskeytla* hríninghend. So I could sing that same poem to this melody. And there's probably like a hundred melodies in here that would work for exactly that form. And if I had a poem in a different form, there's a, you know, a bunch of other ones that I could use instead. I would love to get to the point where people just know a few *stemmur* and they can, when appropriate, like, when they think of a poem or they write poetry, that they can just recite it, they can sing it. Because we need that, we need a new medium of oral tradition. Because, I mean, my— you know, I don't read music, I'm not classically trained, unlike the vast majority of people who are performing this. I mean, "vast majority," it's so easy to talk about the "vast majority" when it's like twenty people [*laughs*]. Like, you know, I know, like, three, four people who perform this kind of music who aren't classical musicians, you know? And they are people who are, like, *steeped* in tradition. [*laughs*] I'm gonna, I'm gonna find my own way through this, but the attitude that I meet all the time when I kind of start complaining that, you know, I'm thirsty for this music and for learning it, and I want to learn from people, the answer, the usual answer it, "But Linus, there's— it's all written down. You can just go learn it." And that's not folk music! That's classical music. You know? And of course it's classical musicians who are saying this, because that's their attitude. They're like, they play classical music, you know, that's their main thing, and they're like, "Oh, I'm gonna do some folk music on the side and I'm just gonna look at these notes and I'm gonna learn it and I'm just gonna make these cool arrangements for it and then I can perform it and it's gonna be great." But we need a medium for— a way to mediate this tradition in an oral way. And we have to find a form that works. Yeah, like, that's maybe the biggest reason I'm interested— I'm doing this at all, like, why I really want there to be [folk music] in the Icelandic music scene, you know? It's not just about— Like, I come from this, from having been as a kid a part of the hardcore punk scene. Which is really participatory, really DIY and underground, and it's not commercial, you know? And when that scene kind of died off, I was really kind of musically lost for a few years where I just didn't know where to, like, put my energy into, like… And I knew that I liked the philosophy of folk music. There was— It fit together in the same way, like, it's participatory, it's DIY, it's democratic, it's non-commercial. Or, you know, a big part of it is. But it took me a really long time, like, it took me a couple years to find the thing— I really tried to be really into, like, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and stuff like that, and it just didn't work, you know? It couldn't get through. And then I started showing up at the sessions and, and then I just found this thing that I could just, I could just *play* this music, you know? You just learn, and they just teach you, and then you're just a part of this thing and you can play and you can keep playing and you can keep learning and you can keep making connections over it, and *play with people*, which in my opinion is the main purpose of music. It's for musicians to socialize with each other and with others. And that's why, like, Jamie calls this "social music." There's these definitions, there's like "social music" and there's "anti-social music." Classical music is, like, anti-social, it's like, it's not about socializing, it's about elitism and [*laughs*] of course it's about beauty, you know, but… [*inhales*] There's thousands and thousands of Icelanders who learn to play instruments. You know we have a really high percentage of children that learn instruments. But adults who've learned to play instruments, when they meet, they can't play together. They can take out their instruments and they don't know what to play. Because they haven't learned how to play with other people, they don't have a common repertoire, and they might not know at all how their instrument works in relation to other instruments. It's just not a part of— and I mean they spent ten years learning how to play that instrument! And they can't. It's like, it's so ridiculous. And people can do that—they can play—they can start from scratch and play in a session after two, three years of practicing their first instrument. And then it's just, you know, once you're at that point, you just go forward. Like, you just learn more tunes and you get better. I find this completely unacceptable, that people who know how to play instruments don't know how to play them with other people. And all of that which they've learned, they cannot— they have no *way* of using, because they're not the first fiddle in the orchestra, you know? They're not playing the viola, like, accompanying— being a part of this huge orchestra or whatever. And they're not performing as a solo artist, you know, because they're not gonna practice for
five hours a day to get there. And that's not what music is for, you know? It's for— it has this social purpose. And so that's why it's important that there is a folk music scene, both for there to be, like, a music scene that has that participatory attitude, and also to try to build a common repertoire for a nation, basically [*laughs*]. That's what folk music is: it's like the common repertoire of a nation. Yeah. We just have to— I don't know, we have to start somewhere.

**Colin:** [*laughs*]

**Linus:** We have to make it, we have to create it somehow. Yeah. And that's my life's work. So, like, if I succeed, please write that on my tombstone. "Success."

**Colin:** "You successfully falsified a tradition."

**Linus:** [*laughs*] Yeah.

[*Linus plays mandolin*]

**Colin:** Linus has been busy since our interview last August. He and his fellow folk musicians have been adapting kvæði for instrumental performance, and Linus was kind enough to share the piece you are listening to now. Linus is also organizing a new folk music festival in Reykjavik, May 31 - June 2. If you are going to be in Iceland, you should definitely check it out. Details will be posted in English and Icelandic on vakafolk.is, that's v-a-k-a-f-o-l-k.i-s. If you want to hear more from Linus, links to his music are in the show notes for this episode and on our website, scandinavian.washington.edu. Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's intro music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music are also in the show notes for this episode and on our website. Once again, our website is scandinavian.washington.edu. Alright Linus, take it away.

[*mandolin music crescendos and then ends*]

**SHOW NOTES**

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This episode was written, edited, and produced by Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Kristian Næsby.

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