Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a Festkonzert im Kammermusiksaal des
Beethoven Hauses
Bonn
2 December 2002

Lord Mayor Bärbel Dieckmann
Professor Dr. Eckhardt, director of the Beethoven House,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen

Although we are celebrating the half-centenary of diplomatic relations between Germany and Iceland, contact between our nations stretches back for centuries. The Edda poems, which were written down on calfskin in Iceland early in the thirteenth century, and Das Niebelungenlied, which can be called the cornerstone of early German literature, recorded accounts of the same events. The heroes of these works also featured in the Icelandic Völsungasaga or Saga of the Volsungs, which provided Richard Wagner with support and inspiration while he was composing his Ring des Niebelungen. And in the Middle Ages, Icelanders were so fascinated by these ancient continental heroes that, early in the 13th century, instead of letting the poems and Völsungasaga suffice, they also translated from Low German The Saga of Theodoric of Bern, or Þiðrekr as he became known in Icelandic.

It is not only in ancient literature that we have followed a shared course: almost one thousand years ago Ísleifur Gissurarson, the first bishop of Iceland, was consecrated in Bremen – and the ecclesiastical history written by the renowned scholar from that city, Adam, is one of the earliest sources to mention people who inhabited Iceland. Those religious and repentant men and women from Iceland who journeyed on foot to see the Pope in Rome all passed through Germany on their way and doubtless acquired books and learned songs and verses that they took home with them after being granted absolution in the Vatican.

Early in the 16th century, merchants from Hamburg built the first Lutheran church in Iceland; Hanseatic merchants featured prominently in Iceland's foreign trade in that century and they imported not only material goods to Iceland but also a wealth of cultural influences from here which can still be discerned, for example, in the Icelandic language.

When Icelanders were stirring to campaign for national independence in the 19th century, the influence of German thought and learning was crucial; Romantic poets translated Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Tieck, German philologist Konrad Maurer assisted folklorist Jón Árnason in collecting Icelandic folktales which were later published in Germany. Yet another of the numerous cultural influences from Germany while the modern Icelandic nation was taking shape in the 19th century was the remarkable contribution to medieval Icelandic studies by German scholars, whose meticulous editions of the sagas and poems are in some cases still the best ever made.

Thus it was logical for Icelandic musicians to go to Germany to train themselves in their art and vocation in the first decades of the 20th century, and as it happens German musicians played a major part in the first steps that were taken towards establishing a music scene in Iceland in that century. In 1916 a 17-year-old Icelander set off for Germany to study music. This was Jón Leifs, whom providence decreed would stay in this country for three decades almost without interruption, and it was here that he composed many works and first heard them performed – not always to the unqualified admiration of his audiences, but that is another story. Jón Leifs was a remarkable pioneer in Icelandic music and sometimes so far ahead of the mainstream in his musical thinking that his chief works only first found an audience decades after his death. Today, however, the works of Jón Leifs enjoy growing popularity, both at concert performances and in recorded form.

We are gathered here to pay tribute to the close musical relations between Iceland and Germany and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizers of this concert and wish you all a pleasant evening.