



**Inaugural speech**  
**by**  
**the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**Nordischer Klang Festival**  
**Greifswald**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> May 2003**

Deputy Prime Minister of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern,  
Mayor of Greifswald,  
Chancellor,  
Organisers of Nordischer Klang,  
Artists,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Once again a splendid feast of culture is spread before us here in Greifswald, one of the most extensive Nordic cultural festival held outside the Nordic countries. Greifswald is a very apt choice of venue for fostering and strengthening the centuries-old links between the Nordic countries and Germany; it reminds us of the strong bonds that tie together our history and heritage, language and culture.

For as long as records go back, relations with Germany have been vital for the Nordic countries: the beginning of Christianity and the evolution of the church, the Reformation and development of religious culture, arts and crafts, trade and commerce – in all fields there are rich signs of reciprocal influences. German poets and philosophers sought inspiration from Nordic sagas, stories and ancient poetry. German music, literature, philosophy and scientific thought have left a deep imprint on culture and life in the Nordic countries.

Apart from the Nordic countries themselves, Germany is the nation that has most closely devoted itself to the study of the ancient Nordic cultural heritage; quality editions of the Sagas of Icelanders, Sagas of Kings, Edda Poems and Sagas of Legendary Heroes were published here. German scholars were pioneers in the collection of folkloristic material in Iceland and the first anthology of Icelandic folktales, Jón Árnason's two-volume collection, was published in Leipzig in 1862-64.

We Icelanders are indebted to Germany in this respect and many others. The Icelandic church has its roots in Germany and this link was strengthened even further in the development of a new religious faith, literature and music after the Reformation. At a difficult time in the history of Iceland the merchants of the Hanseatic League served as a lifeline in our trade with the rest of the world, and also built the first Lutheran church in Iceland, in Hafnarfjörður, in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

When Iceland was taking its first steps in its campaign towards independence in the nineteenth century, the leaders of this movement sought ideas and inspiration from the writings of German philosophers and not least from German poetry. Musical pioneers in the first half of the twentieth century – composer Jón Leifs, organist Páll Ísólfsson, pianist Árni Kristjánsson and others – went to Germany to study. Our leading writers Gunnar Gunnarsson and Halldór Laxness were familiar visitors and maintained close contact with German writers and leading cultural figures. Icelandic students also attended German universities to study and train, and returned to Iceland to pioneer progress for their country and people. And young Icelanders students continue to visit Germany on a large scale for their education, and will hopefully do so for a long time to come.

At the start of the new century we are still reminded of how important it is to have reciprocal contact between nations, cultural relations, broad-mindedness, tolerance and understanding. It is in this spirit that young artists and the bridging of national boundaries are central themes in the banquet of culture that will be held in Greifswald over the next ten days. Events of all kinds will be staged here, presenting an impressive cross-section of the diversity of culture from the high north – visual art and photography, new films, music, scholarship and science; new Nordic literature and the German premiere of the much-discussed play *The Sea* by one of Iceland's most respected dramatists, Ólafur Haukur Símonarson, which has also recently been adapted into a film by Baltasar Kormákur that will be screened in many countries this year. Another welcome feature of this festival is that part of it will be specially devoted to the culture of children and young people, showing a good understanding of the major pedagogical role that culture can play when it is diverse and distinctive rather than uniform and mass-produced.

The University of Greifswald deserves to be thanked for its initiative and support for the Nordischer Klang cultural festival and the dedication it has long shown towards Nordic culture and languages. For many years I have written and spoken of the need for the nations of

northern Europe to present a collective profile. The transformation of Europe and the Atlantic relationship in the post-Cold War period has given new value to the northern regions, and the Nordic countries and north Germany need to make their presence felt. In this respect the University of Greifswald could prove to be an influential driving force, the forum for dialogue and research, a point of contact with educational establishments all the way from Russia in the east, via the Baltic and Nordic countries, to the United States and Canada in the west.

On behalf of the five Nordic countries I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in the preparations for this impressive cultural festival here in Greifswald and I wish you all pleasant experiences in the days to come.