

The background of the journal cover is a photograph of Niagara Falls. A vibrant rainbow is visible, arching from the base of the falls towards the top of the frame. The water of the falls is white and turbulent, creating a misty atmosphere. In the background, the rocky cliffs of the falls are visible, along with some greenery and a few buildings on the horizon under a blue sky with light clouds.

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HUGINN'S HOARD:

Reviews of Books, Music, and More!

Ashagal. *A Moonlit Path* (888295085670). Available as a direct download or CD at <https://ashagal.bandcamp.com>, or CD Baby (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/ashagal>).

reviewed by Garwald

So I am too old for Viking Metal, Black Metal, and related genres that younger heathens enjoy. Metal just came around too late for me, as did Neo-Folk. Fresh out of high school, I was exposed to English folk rock and English traditional folk, initially through recordings of Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span. Hearing 400-year-old songs played on electric instruments moved me to the core, and it was like coming home to where my family came from, a home that I had never seen. The music moved me so deeply that sometimes there would be tears in my eyes as I tried to sing along. I remain a solid fan with a large music collection.

Medieval and Neo-Medieval music is relatively new to me. It began as a slow seduction, listening to the National Public Radio early music show *Harmonia*, which was augmented with CD purchases of Elizabethan music. Although it was art music, the music of an elite rather than the folk music of the common people in which I was well steeped, I could appreciate and enjoy it, although I have not yet explored it very deeply. Many were introduced to this genre from the recordings of Blackmore's Night and the Mediaeval Baebes, and there are many fans of this music in the Ren Faire subculture. Enter Ashagal.

The band's name is a combination of two runes, Áss and Hagall. The night before they began recording this debut CD, the band drew three runes: Áss, Hagall, and Gebo: Áss and Hagall at the crossroads. The name Ashagal is memorable and suits the music well. They describe this CD as a journey through their vision of dark faerie tales and bright woodlands, and the band's music as tribal folk-fusion. I would say that is an apt description. This CD was professionally engineered, produced, and recorded at Redd Sound Studios, and it shows. Rather than a plastic jewel case, the CD is packaged in an earth-friendly Eco-Wallet, with stun-

ning artwork by Sarah Turpin on front and back cover, inside, and on the disk itself, which adds greatly to the overall impression of this CD.

This tapestry of sound is produced by three accomplished musicians. John Harford has been a heathen for ten years, and he is a member of the Troth. He contributes bagpipes, lyrics, lyrical arrangements, whistles, flutes, and electronics. He began exploring medieval music after visiting the tribal folk and neo-medieval music scenes in Germany and Holland. This is not your father's Scottish bagpipe music. This is medieval piping, an older style.

Sierra Fox contributes vocals, percussion, lyrical arrangement and lyrics. Her earthy voice is a perfect compliment to the music, and I think it works better than a voice in a higher register. Her drumming is not so much world beat percussion as it is tribal, and it never overwhelms. There are only enough beats to be the ideal accent to the music. Sierra has performed professionally as a mezzo-soprano in recitals and operas, and she is working on a Master's degree in Vocal Performance.

Lucas Mitsch contributes hurdy-gurdy and *Rauschpfeife*, a loud double-reed woodwind instrument historically played outdoors. He has also played the Great Highland bagpipes for ten years, and can play medieval German bagpipes. Lucas gives private piping lessons and also composes on the instrument.

Upon first listen, I could not distinguish the difference between the bagpipe and hurdy-gurdy, and thought the pipes might be drowning out the other instrument, but that was only due to my unfamiliarity with the hurdy-gurdy. During a phone conversation, John explained that Ashagal tunes the two instruments together perfectly. A visit to the Wikipedia page on the hurdy-gurdy also revealed that the two instruments have often been played together historically, and that the hurdy-gurdy drones compliment the pipes. After listening further, I was able to hear both instruments, and I realized that both played together produced a much richer and fuller sound than either instrument could produce played alone. There are two tracks on the CD where one can hear the instruments played alone.

A Moonlit Path contains eight tracks: "Herr Mannelig", "A Moonlit Path", "Season's Totems", "Runegate", "Lord of Leaves", "Mother Tree", "Incantations", and "The Raven And The Spiral". "Herr Mannelig" and "Incantations" are traditional. The remaining tracks are original compositions, which is a tribute to the talent of Ashagal. It takes great knowledge of any traditional music to pull off an original composition and make it sound hundreds of years old. The two traditional arrangements would be of special interest to heathens.

"Herr Mannelig" is a medieval Swedish ballad. Here is the English translation from the Swedish, by Sierra.

Early in the morning, before the sun arose,
Before the birds began to sing,
The Mountain Troll proposed to the fair young man;
She had a false tongue.

Refrain:

Sir Mannelig, Sir Mannelig, be betrothed to me,
For that which I offer so willingly
Ye may well answer only yes or no:
If ye will, or not.

To you will I give the twelve mills
That stand between Tillo and Terno.
The stones, they are of the reddest gold,
And the wheels of beaten silver.

To you will I give a gilded sword
That jingles from fifteen gold rings,
And fight however you want to fight,
On the battlefield ye shall well win.

Refrain

Such gifts would I gladly accept
If you were a Christian woman,
However, you are the worst of Mountain Trolls,
The spawn of necken [water spirits] and the Devil!

The Mountain Troll ran out the door,
She shook and moaned severely,
"Had I gotten the handsome young man,
So would I have been freed of my torment!"

Refrain

"Incantations" is a setting of one of the Old High German *Merseberger Zaubersprüche* (Merseberg Incantations). [Editor's note: See Idunna #51!]

Out into the woods
Rode Wotan and Phol,
Until, then, a fall
Sprained the foot of Baldr's foal.

So Sinthgunt, Sunna's sister,
And Frija, Volla's sister,
And Wotan, and Wotan,
Conjured thus this charm:

"Be it bone-sprain,
Be it blood-sprain,
Be it limb-sprain:
Bone to bone,
Blood to blood,
Limb to limb,
So may they be mended."

The other CD cuts are originals, but would still be of great interest to heathens. "A Moonlit Path" is a song about Odin, and was clearly the inspiration for Sarah Turpin's artwork. Although it is the second song, it is the title track, and it has a powerful opening with hurdy gurdy and percussion. "Season's Totems" seems to have a Gaelic-style instrumental opening that works very well, and the song weaves flute, pipes, vocals, and percussion together. "Runegate" opens with a deep drone and vocals before the percussion and pipes join, and the opening causes a spiritual feel that carries into the rest of the song. The innovative primitive piping evokes bonfires on a hilltop. The song dwells upon several runes in a musical journey, and in the end returns to the beginning. "Lord of Leaves" seems to be about the Green Man or a powerful land wight. "Mother Tree" reflects Sierra's love of trees and is also a great song. "The Raven And The Spiral" is a perfect last song for the CD. It opens with a flute and the croaking of a raven, and the song urges you to follow the raven to the center of the spiral to the place of ancestors. The end returns to the beginning with only the flute and the raven and lends a sense of completeness to the CD.

It should be noted that there is a second, newer incarnation of this band called Medhorn (<http://www.medhorn.com/>). Medhorn plays more traditional material, and Ashagal plays more originals, although there is some overlap of material between the two bands. Medhorn appears to perform at venues such as Ren Faires, and Ashagal seems to play at festivals featuring neo-medieval and neo-tribal music. Both bands are amazingly good, and both should be greatly enjoyed by heathens unless they cannot stand to listen to anything other than metal.

As both bands involve a heathen and a member of The Troth, I feel they are deserving of our support. All the songs of both debut CDs may be heard in their entirety on their respective websites. I really like both bands. Ashagal is working on new material, so we should hear good things from them in the future. A *Moonlit Path* is a very excellent professional debut, and yes, I am going to buy their t-shirt. If it sounds like I am really impressed by this CD, that is because I am.

Skálmöld. *Baldur*. Napalm Records, 2011. Available through Amazon.com, <http://shop.napalmrecords.com/>, <http://www.napalmrecordsamerica.com/>, or <http://www.skalmold.is/>

reviewed by Ben Waggoner

*Drumunnar Þór,
eitt sinn ég þér mína hollustu sór.
Þú ert mitt goð, styttu og stoð,
Heljar við styrjöldum hef ekki roð.
Gættu mín vel, hleyp ég mót Hel,
Þar leynast hættur í sérhverjum mel.
Allt getur gerst, Baldur nú berst,
verði það banamein, sáttur ég ferst.*

Thor of the thunder,
once I swore my devotion to you.
You are my god, my prop and support,
I'm no match for a war with Hel.
Ward me well, I charge against Hel,
there danger's hidden in every sandhill.
Anything can happen, Baldur now fights,
should that be deadly, I die satisfied.

When some 1990s black metal and death metal bands began trading in Satanism for Norse mythology and history as sources of inspiration, “Viking metal” was born. Today’s “Viking metal” is so musically diverse that it’s hard to define as a genre; some bands add folk instruments and melodies, others add symphonic elements, and still others stick to old-school death metal. But whatever you call it, many Heathens appreciate songs about ancient heroes, battles, legends, and warrior virtues. So who would be better at “Viking metal” than some actual Vikings? Or at least their direct descendants in Iceland?

Skálmöld means “sword-age”—as in the famous quote from *Völuspá*: *skeggöld, skálmöld, skildir ro klofnir*, “axe-age, sword-age, shields are cloven.” *Skálmöld* is also a seriously bad-ass metal band. *Baldur* is their debut album, and it’s well worth checking out—even though



the lyrics are entirely in Icelandic. (They’re available at <http://www.darklyrics.com/lyrics/sklmld/baldur.html>—even if you don’t read Icelandic, it’s interesting to try to follow along.)

I really liked the diversity of styles on this album. There are plenty of galloping power chords and double-kick drumming, and lead vocalist Björgvin Sigurðsson can rip out the larynx-shredding growls with the best of them. But there’s a lot more. *Baldur* draws on Icelandic folk music and poetry: bassist and lyricist Snæbjörn Ragnarsson writes all the lyrics in traditional Icelandic poetic forms that alliterate as well as rhyme. Some tracks include folk melodies and singing styles. Add metal touches ranging from soaring keyboard lines to thrash-metal breakdowns and screaming NWOBHM guitar solos, and you’ve got Skálmöld. Despite the language barrier, this is actually a pretty accessible album for people who might not care for more “pure” death metal.

Baldur is a concept album, telling the tale of Baldur Óðinsson—not the god Baldr as such, but a Viking who happens to share his name. (Snæbjörn has admitted that his story lines draw on as much D&D as Icelandic lore, so purists should note that his plots aren’t *exactly* like what you’d find in the Eddas. Still, the story of Baldur wouldn’t be out of place in a legendary saga.)

“Heima” (“At Home”) is in the style of a *ríma*—a traditional Icelandic ballad-like poem, sung to a single capella melodic line. The track ends with some rich choral harmonies. (See the music reviews in *Idunna* #67 and #89 for more on *rímur*.) The words set the stage: Baldur is a peaceful farmer with a wife and children, cutting hay and raising sheep. But “Árás” (“Attack”) brings the galloping drums, shredding guitars, and snarling vocals, depicting a brutal attack on Baldur’s farm by an army from Hel. Out on his fishing boat, Baldur can only watch helplessly as his farm is destroyed and his family is slaughtered.