



Scandinavian Music Festival 2023 held in Uptown Manhattan

By John Autehrs - Picture the scene: Baroque music in the shade of a spreading tree, with the George Washington Bridge, the Palisades cliffs and the Hudson river as the backdrop, while a few hundred people lie back on the lawn and listen. The 2023 Fort Tryon Park Scandinavian Music Festival, held each year in Uptown Manhattan, since 2006, reached its conclusion June 10 with a sublime afternoon concert given by the Scandia String Orchestra. The composer of the opening piece, Johan Helmich Roman, is known as the Scandinavian Bach. He lived at the same time as the great German musician, and is now far less famous. However, his melodic and serene Sinfonia did indeed sound a lot like Bach. That was followed



by a Romance for solo violin (played by the orchestra's leader Mayuki Fukuhara) and strings by Valdemar Fini Henriques, a Danish composer and violinist who lived in the late 19th and early 20th century. The piece shimmered almost like music from a movie, with the solo violin singing over the lilting strings of the rest of the orchestra. It ends on a very high note and was very popularly received by the crowd on the lawn. Possibly the highlight was the premiere of Pastoral Impressions by the Danish composer Nikolaj Hess (who was in attendance having flown in from a concert in Los Angeles the night before) specially commissioned for the occasion and adapted from an earlier hymn. It will be performed again, perhaps with some adaptations, later this year at Copenhagen's Black Diamond, the spectacular glass building on the waterfront that also houses Denmark's national library. On the garden above the Hudson, the Pastoral Impressions sounded glorious - a series of variations with rich harmonies proceeded through different moods, with even a sense of menace at what point, and an idyllic ending that sounded like something from Appalachian Spring. It very much involved the audience.

After the Little Suite by Carl Nielsen, Denmark's most famous composer, the concert concluded with the remarkable Summer in Fort Tryon Park by Frank Foerster, who is also the orchestra's principal violist. Obviously written with the venue in mind, it took the audience on a musical tour of the park where they were sitting. It involves a series of solos by different members of the orchestra, varying from "Caribbean Breezes" (a tribute to the area's big Dominican population), through to a section in the style of the Klezmer music beloved of Washington Heights' Jewish community, and even including a variation on the theme of the irritating "ear-worm" tune played by ice cream vans.

Dorrit Matson conducted the orchestra with great panache. When the audience left, it was with a grasp that Scandinavia has fostered a wide range of beautiful music. The region's culture in these best days perhaps best known for Scandinavian "noir". This sunny afternoon of dancing melodies was about as far from noir as it's possible to imagine.