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*Review of New York Scandia Symphony's performance
from April 18, 2024 at Alice Tully Hall/Lincoln Center*

“Under Northern Lights”

By Verena Dobnik, Journalist, and Photo courtesy of Austin Donohue

Thousands of miles from the “Northern Lights” that illuminate Scandinavian skies near the Arctic Circle at night, this natural spectacle was celebrated on a Manhattan stage with music by composers from the Nordic nations.

On April 18 at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts’ Alice Tully Hall, “Finlandia,” a seminal work of the Scandinavian repertoire by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius opened the program “Under Northern Lights”, as it was titled. The Scandia Symphony of 52 top New York musicians was the featured orchestra. Scandia played under the baton of its founder Dorrit Matson, a Copenhagen native and one of a growing roster of female international conductors. She brought to life the Sibelius masterpiece and works by two Danish masters—Carl Nielsen and Emil Hartmann. Scandia performed on a luminous spring night like those that are the setting for viewing the “aurora borealis”- the scientific name of the phenomenon created when particles from the sun penetrate Earth’s atmosphere, producing an electromagnetic explosion of spectacular color blends in purple, green, yellow, red, and occasionally, blue.

Stephanie Chase was the soloist for Emil Hartmann’s violin concerto Opus 19. Her instrument emanated warmth and intimacy, delivered with a crystal clear, powerful tone. In the Hartmann work, her lyrical expressiveness blossomed into powerhouse virtuosity that shot up above the orchestra like the Northern Lights’ multicolored beams, then melted into tenderness resting on an undulating sound carpet in the string section that danced into a playful waltz rhythm.

Matson also led Nielsen’s Symphony No. 5. Its ear-piercing melodies and rhythms were as dramatic as the colors that play out in the night skies. Here especially, Scandia Symphony’s silken sounding, soulful strings and woodwinds were well rooted in the orchestra’s richly muscular brass.

The “Finlandia” symphonic poem was a fitting reminder of that country’s proximity to Russia, coinciding with some foreign policy pundits’ whispers that Russian leader Vladimir Putin may have his eye on Finland as a nuclear arms rival and possible conquest akin to that of Ukraine. Any such fear was allayed in the climax of “Finlandia” - a brassy anthem that sounded like a victorious declaration from the mouths of the trumpets and trombones - a musical ode to a free Scandinavian spirit.