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New York Scandia Symphony

Reviewed by Lisa Jo Sagolla April 18, 2024

One of the great pleasures of living in New York is that the city's rich cultural diversity can support a niche organization such as the New York Scandia Symphony. Founded in 1988 by its lauded music director, Copenhagen native Dorrit Matson, the 52-member orchestra specializes in playing Classical, Romantic, and contemporary music by Scandinavian composers. Fueled by Matson's authoritative knowledge of this musical literature and her long-standing commitment to presenting it to American audiences, the Scandia Symphony's thrice-yearly concert series are treasured events.

The group's most recent performance, at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall on April 18, proffered a passion-filled triple bill comprising iconic Finnish composer Jean Sibelius's ravishing tone poem *Finlandia*, a Romantic Era violin concerto by the Dane Emil Hartmann, and *Symphony No. 5*, a twentieth-century work by Carl Nielsen, Denmark's most influential composer.

With its foreboding opening phrases of low brass sounds and timpani rolls, played at a boldly high volume under Matson's baton, *Finlandia* launched the program with terrific urgency. The work wastes no time "warming up," as groups of flutes, strings, and horns soon join in the action, each saying a friendly but not quiet "hello," until gradually coalescing into unhurried, thick-as-syrup sonic statements. Originally composed for a covert 1899 Finnish press protest against Russian censorship, the brazen work is rousing driven, but here not dominated, by the percussion, thanks to the well-balanced dynamics Matson maintains. Sadly, during the work's serene middle portion, the jerk sitting behind me decided to unwrap his plastic candy wrapper, so I could not fully luxuriate in the gorgeous singing quality Matson draws from the strings in the familiar "*Finlandia Hymn*" segment, followed by her keenly calibrated build to the work's stirring final chords.

A pretty, sometimes-folksy showpiece, the Hartmann concerto made for a carefree change of pace after the charged *Finlandia*. It spotlighted guest violinist Stephanie Chase, who was also the featured soloist when Scandia Symphony performed the concerto's New York premiere, in 2021. Chase is what I might call "a composer's violinist," in that her consistently legato approach prioritizes the overall shape of the

melodic lines over fancy displays of technical virtuosity. Even when dazzling us with her fast-fingering and rapid nuanced bowing in allegro passages, when other performers might accent particularly stunning pitches or take rhythmic liberties, Chase never upstages the composer's melodic intentions with personal showboating. In the concerto's first movement, she elicits a warmth from her lower strings that suits the attractive simplicity of the music's folk-like tunes. And though she seemed to run out of steam during that movement's long concluding solo passage, she re-gained command of the proceedings in the second movement as her sweet, skipping melodies were delightfully echoed by winds and pizzicato-ing strings. The interplay between Chase and the orchestra proved absorbing, yet by the third movement, the sugary music grew tiresome. I wanted a change in mood, a stylistic shift, a penetrating surprise of some sort, or perhaps just a bit more bite from the exposed violin's extended solos.

The program closed with Nielsen's fifth symphony, a monumental two-part work purporting to depict the opposition of evil and good. The last time I heard Scandia Symphony perform it, in 2019, I was struck by how brilliantly Matson supported Nielsen's expressive use of tone colors as she elicited the wide array of deep and intriguingly dissimilar emotions that varied instrumental timbres can evoke. This time around, I was impressed by how much passion, fun, and interest she generates from this elongated, often unpleasant sounding piece. Its first movement introduces an irritating, two-note "evil" motif that could easily grow annoying. But tracing its travels from one part of the orchestra to another, under Matson's clarifying leadership, becomes downright fun. And in the second movement, which can seem interminable, amid the relentless repetition of choppy motifs are bursts of beauty that Matson conducts as screams of passion. At one point, with remarkable cohesiveness, the violin section "wails" with a series of sliding notes that start way up high and cascade down like magnificent waterfalls of sound. It's for priceless moments like this that we truly appreciate Matson's dedication to sharing the sounds of Scandinavia.