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Pictured at the Scandia Strings performance on June 14th, 2025 at the Good Shepherd-Faith Presbyterian Church are, left to right, Dorrit Matson (conductor), Nikolaj Hess (composer), Josefine Opsahl (composer), and Frank Foerster (composer and first viola). (Photo by Aliza Holtz)

New York Scandia Symphony strings at the Good Shepherd-Faith Presbyterian Church on Saturday, June 14, 2025

By Brad S. Ross

The New York Scandia Symphony's string section shined Saturday evening, June 14, 2025 at a concert as part of the ensemble's 20th Scandinavian Music Festival at the Good Shepherd-Faith Presbyterian Church on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Running a little over two hours, it was an evening jam-packed with music; in addition to a smattering of classics from the Scandinavian string repertoire, the audience was also treated to three new pieces by composers who are not only very much alive, but were also present to introduce each of their works. The performance was led by the Scandia Symphony's founder and music director Dorrit Matson, who crafted one of the most fun and unique programs of recent memory.

The evening began with the Violin Concerto in D minor written by the Swedish composer Johan Helmich Roman. This was a good place to start—Roman, a contemporary of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel, is often referred to as the “father of Swedish music” and predated every other composer on the program by at least a century and a half. Written sometime in the 1730s, the concerto is cast in three movements: a stately and mysterious allegro, a brief and aptly named andante tranquillo, and an animated and charming allegro finale. Concertmaster Mayuki Fukuhara played beautifully as soloist and together with the rest of the ensemble brought this dusty old piece vibrantly back to life. Its pleasantly Baroque sonorities perfectly illuminated the acoustics of the venue and served as a short and sweet appetizer for things to come.

Fukuhara again served as soloist for the Danish composer Nikolaj Hess's *Pastoral Impressions* for violin and strings, which had been commissioned and given its U.S. premiere by the Scandia Symphony in the summer of 2023. Hess, who briefly introduced the work, said he was inspired by the natural beauty of the Scandinavian landscapes where he grew up and that the piece "fell out of his hands" when he first sketched it on the piano. That sense of romance was very much present in *Pastoral Impressions*, which is written in three movements: "Choral & Allegretto," "Black & White," and "Melody & Full Choral." These movements were themselves divided into seven distinct smaller tableaux, which alternated between a bookended hymn-like choral, a richly tonicized allegretto, a pulsing andante made of subtle chromatic shifts, a melodic allegro that rapidly traded phrases between the soloist and ensemble, and two dance-like prestos that ended with the full ensemble playing in powerful parallel octaves.

Next up was the world premiere of *Concertino Festivo* by the Scandia Symphony's principal violist and composer-in-residence Frank Foerster. Completed earlier this year, it chronicles and celebrates the history of New York City from its 17th-century Dutch settlers to 20th-century horse races in Upper Manhattan. It began with a prelude titled "Beat the Drums," which was based on a 1581 Dutch folk tune. This was followed by three eventful movements—the first, "Traditional Folk Dances from Scandinavia," featured a bouquet of lively Scandinavian polkas and waltzes. The second, "At the Cloisters," began in the style of a Gregorian chant that almost rang of Antonín Dvořák, but soon shifted to a series of alternating reflective and upbeat episodes before a full-ensemble upward glissando signaled a great leap forward in time. The final movement "A Visit to Cornelius Billings' Tryon Hall in 1907" began on a sultry tango followed by Scott Joplin-esque ragtime before a bugle call played on the viola launched the piece into a rollicking finale. It was all great fun and at times genuinely funny—a quality often sorely missing from much of the classical repertoire.

After intermission came Carl Nielsen's brief *Little Suite* for string orchestra, which felt almost like a vacation piece after Foerster's eventful romp. Nielsen, who remains Denmark's preeminent composer (and possibly the most under-sung composer of the entire Romantic era), wrote the suite in 1888 when he was just 22 years old and fresh out of the Royal Danish Academy of Music. It consists of a short, somber Prelude; a gentle, waltzing Intermezzo; and a meaty, energetic Finale written in traditional sonata form. While not as polished as, say, the three concertante and six symphonies for which he'd later be known, the suite clearly demonstrates a spark of the same brilliance that would define his later works.

The third and final new piece of the evening was the world premiere of the Danish cellist and composer Josefine Opsahl's *All We Know Is That it Radiates*. Also written this year on a commission from the Scandia Symphony, this was the most fiercely contemporary work of the program and certainly a high point of the evening. In her brief pre-performance remarks, Opsahl spoke about the great mysteries of nature and that which is ungraspable to the human consciousness as inspirations for the piece. The result of her meditations was a textural, shimmering tone poem, replete with numerous tremolo lines and densely layered ostinati. From this texture soon emerged a haunting melody that would occasionally disappear and reappear from the sea of vibrating strings underneath. The ensuing music, which reminded me at times of Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia* or more recently the works of Anna Thorvaldsdóttir, was truly quite radiant.

Last up was a partial performance of the great Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg's *Holberg Suite* from 1884. This was intended to be the complete suite, but was reduced to just the prelude in a last-minute alteration of the program (this was a wise call—at about 20 minutes, the full suite would have pushed the concert to about two-and-a-half hours). Composed in a deliberately anachronistic, neoclassical fashion, the suite was written to commemorate the 200th birthday of the Scandinavian playwright Ludvig Holberg. The prelude itself was a short, jovial affair—so short, in fact, that the audience didn't seem to register that the concert was over. Admittedly, as pleasant as this last little after-dinner mint was, it did feel a bit superfluous given the five sumptuous musical courses that preceded it.

Nevertheless, the evening was another stunning success by the New York Scandia Symphony, whose concerts have become a highlight of each season. As much as I've enjoyed their steady rotation of Scandinavian classics in the past, it was also a special delight to hear so much new music in one sitting. I hope to hear even more of this adventurous programming in future concerts, which, based on the last few seasons alone, should be a real treat.