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"A summer afternoon with the Scandia String Ensemble"

By Kassi Dougherty

It's June 16, and a lovely warm Sunday afternoon in Upper Manhattan. The Billings Lawn of Fort Tryon Park is a sea of wild flowers against a backdrop of a dozen different shades of green. Fans of the Scandia String Ensemble are spreading out blankets and setting up lawn chairs, even though the sky is threatening rain. Family, friends and neighbors with picnic baskets in tow, are here to enjoy the great civic tradition of an outdoor concert. It's nice to get there early and have a stroll through the heather garden, which is now in the full bloom of late Spring. It's also one of my personal favourite ways to honor the longest days of the year - the couple of weeks on either side of the summer solstice.

This is the 15th year of the Scandia Symphony's concerts in Fort Tryon Park, and it has become a tradition for the people of Washington Heights and Inwood that no one wants to miss. Thankfully, the clouds blow over, and the concert can begin. It opens with a selection from the Baroque era - an excerpt from a sinfonia by Johan Helmich Roman. A contemporary of Handel and Bach, his work is little known outside of Sweden. This is something I've come to expect from the Scandia Symphony and conductor Dorrit Matson - being introduced to Scandinavian composers that I would otherwise never get to hear. I'm also reminded of the connection to the past that classical music is, especially when played live as originally intended. How many human beings have enjoyed this sinfonia in the 250 years since it was written?

Next we move on to a contemporary piece - the Suite of Scandinavian Folk Melodies for Viola and String Orchestra, by Frank Foerster, principal violist of the New York Scandia Symphony, and the 2014 recipient of the ASCAP Composers' Award. Another tradition of the Scandia Symphony - introducing new works, by contemporary Scandinavian composers. It begins with the introduction of a traditional melody - the "Song of the Sea," reminiscent of a sea-shanty sung by sailors in a 19th century tavern. We will hear this theme, again and again, as we move from one country to another, connecting our journey like a boat sailing the North Atlantic. From here, we proceed to Norway, in the playful, dance-like second section. Then we visit Sweden, represented with an energetic waltz. In the fourth section, we visit Denmark, with a lyrical melody that reminds one of nature, family, and home, and then to Finland, in the fifth section - beginning joyfully, but swelling to a melody line that feels deeper, and more serious. We end our journey in Iceland, with a driving bass section that adds warmth and excitement to the finale.

In the day's last selection, Ms. Matson once again introduces us to a lesser known Scandinavian gem - the Sinfonie Spirituelle of Asger Hamerik. This symphony for string orchestra was written in 1883, and is rarely performed. It really has that sense of passion and longing that you hope to hear in a piece from the Romantic era, and it left me with a wish to experience a simpler time.

You forget how powerful it can be - the act of listening and being present to musicians who are equally present, and expressing themselves in real time, right in front of you. Living in this world of dizzying change, distracted by our phones, live music is something that demands you to be fully present. You can't hit pause, or add it to a playlist, or go back and listen again when you have the time. It can only be enjoyed in real time. You must sit and listen. The New York Scandia Symphony's A Musical Journey Through Scandinavia Fort Tryon Park Summer concert series, is an opportunity for the whole community - all ages and walks of life - to enjoy something together. As our lives become more and more insular, it's a chance to join with our neighbors in a friendly sense of communion - face to face, and picnic basket to picnic basket.