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*Review of the
Scandinavian Music
Festival 2021 by
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Joyful Reopening for Scandinavian Music Festival

Back to normal was not enough for Scandia Symphony and Director Dorrit Matson at the 16th annual Scandinavian Music Festival. After a one-year rupture with tradition, the outdoor concert series resumed with a mission to remind audiences of what extraordinary concert experiences felt like. They played three shows to full houses in the natural amphitheater at Billings Lawn in Fort Tryon Park in New York City's Washington Heights, the home of the festival since 2005. It was a venue transformed by the scarcity of live entertainment in the long months of the pandemic: the peaceful neighborhood event now one of the only show tickets in town.

The Scandia Symphony goals for the program remained the same: to showcase the music of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden in different styles and in different eras while building an ensemble with collective experience and heart. Two classical concerts featured strings in four sections, one show supplemented by harp and wind instruments. In a third concert, Scandia's brass quintet played folk songs, polkas, and five national anthems.

Despite this internationalism, the concert on June 13th at 2 p.m. projected a distinctly hometown feel as a special event offered at a historic moment "in the Heights." Even children were quiet as the players took their seats and last-minute arrivals drew near. Taking the (grassy) podium, Matson launched the New York premiere of Gunnar De Frumerie's "Pastoral Suite for Flute, Strings, and Harp," a work written in Sweden in the 20th century. Soloist Lisa Hansen led five movements of varied sound, ranging from dreamy and pacific interludes to imitations of birdsong, echoed, in a happy coincidence, by actual birdsong. Steven Hartman played solo selections from the clarinet concertos of the Swedish-Finnish composer Bernhard Crusell.

A Lars-Erik Larsson "Pastoral" and a harp and flute duet from Danish icon Carl Nielsen made the most of the enlarged company. The concert reached a high with the solo performance of Elizabeth Miller, Scandia's principal second violin, of Christian Sinding's "Suite in Old Style." The matchless warmth and projection of the instrument filled the space, inspiring big cheers for the violinist, a neighborhood resident. A venue-specific composition closed the show on an appropriate note, "Summer in Fort Tryon Park," by Scandia Symphony principal viola Frank Foerster. Foerster's piece evoked specifics of the setting and the crowd, including musical quotations of airs from Latino, Jewish, and Revolutionary War songs and even the familiar jingle of the ice cream truck.