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Scandinavian Music Festival held in Fort Tryon Park in Northern Manhattan 2022

Review by LeeAnna Keith

The Scandia Brass Quintet opened the 17th annual Scandinavian Music Festival in Fort Tryon Park with folk and contemporary music and a stirring review of national anthems. Their performance kicked off a Sunday afternoon series that also features the Scandinavian String Quartet and the New York Scandia Symphony conducted by Dorrit Matson, music director and organizer of the events. Since 2006, the festival has made use of Billings Lawn, a grassy amphitheater crowned with a flower garden designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and very close to the 190th Street Station of the A-Train. Perfect weather and inspiring music on June 5 set the festivities in motion.

Leader and French horn player Peter Reit presented the program by nationality, beginning with Norway and including Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, and featuring arrangements of folk tunes, original brass quintets, and one or more national anthems for each.

While the repertoires of Scandinavian string and symphony ensembles are dominated by great Scandinavian classical composers, the brass program offered only shorter pieces by a pair of the musical icons of the North: an ode to fallen soldiers by Edvard Grieg, "Sons of Norway," and Jean Sibelius's beautiful and patriotic "Finlandia Hymn," described as the unofficial people's anthem of Finland.

The ensemble played a generous selection of music by contemporary composers such as Danish rock star Anders Koppel, Axel Ingi Amason, a young Icelandic composer, and a contemporary arrangement of Carl Bellman's traditional Swedish ballads with racy names such as "Oola, Do You Want to Dance," and "Father in the Corner Watched the Women Dance."

In his extended and often wry introductions, bandleader Reit explained the great popularity of brass-band music in the 19th century, when Scandinavian towns, companies, schools, and military companies sponsored bands and engaged in songwriting and performance competitions. In selections originally written for brass, the Scandia Quintet sampled the fun and bombast of that era and showcased the talents of Michael Powell on trombone, Marcus Rojas on tuba, and a pair of trumpets, Brad Siroky and Hugh Ash. "The Norwegian Lion," a march by a champion of the genre, Oscar Borg, closed the ceremonies with lots of toe-tapping and applause.

Though the official program and commentary stuck closely to the subject of music, some in the crowd of 300 or so New Yorkers had other matters on their minds. Picnics, dogs, passing bicycles, and cool breezes testified throughout the performance that summer had arrived. For many in attendance, moreover, hearing the richness of Scandinavian cultures and the majesty of their national anthems drew attention to the politics of the moment. A festival conceived in peacetime plays differently at a time when Scandinavian peoples confront the perils of geography and the weight of European History as they have since the invasion of Ukraine. Considered in this light, our Sunday afternoon with the Scandia Brass was a celebration of human achievements and the security to express and enjoy them.