

New York Scandia Symphony Presents Pleasing Program of Works by Carl Nielsen and Bernhard Crusell

By Lisa Jo Sagolla

Don't let the black orthopedic sandals and comfy pants she wears on the podium fool you, the Copenhagen-born Dorrit Matson is a sharp, authoritative conductor of Scandinavian orchestral music. She is now in her 31st season as music director of the New York Scandia Symphony, an orchestra she established in 1988 to present the works of significant Northern European classical composers. Under her acute baton, at New York's Symphony Space on April 11, Matson's group performed "Under Northern Lights," a pleasing three-piece program bookending a clarinet concerto by 17th-century Swedish-Finnish clarinetist and composer Bernhard Henrik Crusell with two works -- an overture and a symphony -- by Carl August Nielsen, often tagged the national composer of Denmark.

Opening the program with the frothy overture from Nielsen's 1906 opera *Maskarade* was a sage move on Matson's part. The playful piece's bright tempi and dancey rhythms -- introducing the orchestra's invigorating brass section and warm body of strings -- set an inviting tone for the evening and some of the darker music to come.

The evening's centerpiece -- the second of three clarinet concertos Crusell composed in the early 1800s to showcase his own prowess as a performer -- featured clarinet soloist Steven D. Hartman, who got the job done with sensitivity and skill. While his delicate approach to the high notes and complicated passages made for nuanced expressiveness, he lacked the fire, flash, and showy confidence one expects from solo artists, perhaps reflective of the hours he clocks in the pit working his "day jobs" as Principal Clarinet in the New York City Ballet Orchestra and Acting Principal Clarinet of the New York City Opera. Rather than igniting the orchestra, Hartman remained in easy conversation with them.

The concerto's opening Allegro movement launches with stormy majesty that eventually lightens up through short phrases of tight back and forth dialogue between the solo clarinet and the string section. The bouncy interplay is well-balanced, blended, and enhanced by concertmaster Mayuki Fukuhara who leads the string-players with joyous gusto. Ornamented by delightful pizzicato triplets from the cellos, the concerto's sublime second movement -- the Andante Pastorale -- is fueled by a gorgeous melody that grabs the listener like an amorous hug. Hartman renders the melodic lines with care and, again, his exchanges with the string sections feel closely knit, as if he's getting advice from them each time before striking out on his own journeys. It was only the concerto's third movement, the Rondo, that proved at all disappointing. The ethnic, folksy feel of the music -- particularly this late in the work -- seemed to call for a bit more speed than the leisurely pace at which it was played. It almost appeared as though Matson was setting a brisker tempo than Hartman maintained.

A complete contrast from the evening's opener, Nielsen's moody Symphony No. 5 closed the program with a fabulously diversified exploration of orchestral colors. A real departure stylistically from his previous symphonies, this one is formed in only two movements, and, according to program notes, has been described by Nielsen as "the division of dark and light, the battle between evil and good." Yet the notes also tell us that Nielsen claimed his composing of this work, which premiered in 1922, was not consciously influenced by World War I, though he stated, "not one of us is the same as we were before the war."

A showpiece for the orchestra's percussion section, the first movement contains passages that range from deliciously shimmering to exactly militaristic. With repeated phrases of three quick up-bows, the violins proffer piercing punctuation to haunting melodies from the brass. At one point the proceedings wind down to silence before violas emerge with a deep, enticing melody. The movement ends thrillingly with a sharp use of side drums, beating irregularly and insistently over long wailing brass notes. The second movement starts with a full sound of booming percussion, singing violins, and descending cellos, then grows decidedly celebratory before turning biting and hectic. It's not as consistently interesting as the first movement -- the middle section feels somewhat drawn out -- and it ends a bit abruptly. Throughout, the symphony's inherent interest lies in its dramatically changing moods, accomplished through Nielsen's imaginative toyings with differing instrumental timbres. Matson proved masterful at bringing out these experimentations, underlining the emotional contrasts, while managing the work's overall complexities. A tall, commanding figure with an enormous wingspan, when she spreads her long swan-like arms and broad hands to signal the orchestral sounds you get a sense that the music is well taken care of, secure under her devoted guidance.

This concert marked the opening of the New York Scandia Symphony's 2019 season of live performances which continues with June concerts in New York's Fort Tryon Park. For more info, visit www.nyscandia.org.