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Musical Review

New York Scandia Symphony at Symphony Space

By Brad S. Ross

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Thursday evening was one of buried musical treasures at Manhattan's Symphony Space as music director Dorrit Matson led the New York Scandia Symphony in a program featuring the music of Hugo Alfvén, Emil Hermann, and Carl Nielsen. The concert was part of the ensemble's "Under Northern Lights" series—its part of their larger mission to showcase Scandinavian music for U.S. audiences. For many classical listeners, this offers a welcome chance to hear music that is seldom, if ever, performed by a major American orchestra.

The first piece of the night was *Helios Overture* by Denmark's most famous composer, Carl Nielsen. Written in 1903, the work was inspired by the composer's view of the sun rising and falling over the Aegean Sea while he and his wife stayed in Athens. It remains one of Nielsen's most-performed shorter works; after one hearing, it's not hard to understand why.

It opened on a sparse drone in the low strings. This was soon followed by distant horn calls and ascending and descending scale patterns in the violas—an effect not unlike the prelude of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. From there, a pulsing bell tone in the lower voices slowly propelled the music through vast, lushly orchestrated expanses until a grand trumpet fanfare heralded a liberated and lively shift in musical direction. This was followed by several stately tutti bursts of an almost ancient quality and an animated string fugue that drove the work toward a thoughtful and solemn diminuendo. The whole affair was bookended by a quiet drone in the low strings as our protagonist, the sun, symbolically sank into the western sky before disappearing beneath the horizon.

Next on the program was the Danish composer Emil Hartmann's Violin Concerto in G minor, written in 1879 during the Danish Golden Age—an era that also produced some of the finest works from such composers as Hans Christian Lumbye, Niels W. Gade, and Emil's own father, Johan Peter Emilius Hartmann. The soloist for the evening was the acclaimed American violinist Stephanie Chase, who navigated the work's complex writing with

breathtaking clarity and grace.

A restrained burst from the timpani and low brass immediately announced the somber tone of the opening Allegro. Chase's nimble bowing quickly entered the action, taking the music in expressive new directions that communicated a tremendous sense of place; indeed, the solo writing often seemed more akin to traditional Norwegian fiddle music than that of a Romantic-era violin concerto—so much the better. The movement closed on an expectably showy cadenza, giving Chase a pleasant chance to showcase her playing in full glory.

The second movement, an elegant Andante, prominently featured the woodwinds (especially a memorable clarinet solo) in a manner that harkened to the Classical era. A mid-movement tutti was followed by lively pizzicato, gentle swells in the lower voices, and a lyrical final melody before drawing the movement to a quiet close.

Without pause, Matson then launched into the final movement: Finale *L'istesso tempo*, Allegretto - Allegro vivace. Unlike the preceding movements, the finale was upbeat—dance-like, even. The musical drama built to another intricate cadenza for Chase to wrap her fingers around before coming to a grand, full-orchestra coda. It was a satisfying and audience-pleasing conclusion to the first half of the evening.

Following intermission was another work by Carl Nielsen: his *Symphonic Rhapsody* from 1888. Written shortly after concluding his violin studies at the Royal Danish Music Conservatory, this was in fact the composer's first completed orchestral work and, unfortunately, it shows.

In typical rhapsodic fashion, the musical ideas presented are fairly discursive—often feeling more like a tapestry of loosely connected, albeit pretty, Romantic colors than pieces of a unified

whole. And while a rousing violin ostinato or a pulsing bass line would occasionally catch one's ear, *Symphonic Rhapsody* ultimately came to an end that felt more boisterous and self-important than its preceding measures deserved. Altogether, this made for a competent, if not terribly memorable, piece of music.

Fortunately, the programmers seem to have saved the best for last with Hugo Alfvén's delightful Swedish Rhapsody No. 1: *Midsommervaka*. Composed in 1903, *Midsommervaka* is built upon popular Swedish folk melodies depicting the celebrations of an old Swedish midsummer vigil.

The music began on a bouncy dance-like Andante moderato, which quickly introduced a 10-note motif that would serve as the theme for the first movement. This deceptively simple motif afforded Alfvén ample opportunities to deftly play with the orchestration, employing dizzying pizzicato and intricate counterpoint with abandon. It was here that the orchestra was truly able to shine, navigating the surprisingly complex music with precision and verve; Matson, likewise, commanded the ensemble with exacting poise, mercifully free of the distracting theatrics sometimes employed by other members of her profession.

The second movement was a dream-like Andante that began as a brooding, introspective affair before swelling to dramatic heights that seemed to anticipate 20th-century film music.

The final Allegretto opened on another playful dance, once again employing colorful and dynamic counterpoint that would perk up the ears of even the most casual listener. Breakneck string runs then propelled the piece to an exhilarating finish of sforzando blasts, making for a triumphant conclusion to an evening of exquisite music before the audience departed the auditorium into the cool night air.