

Nordic Accord

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18th-century Scandinavian music resounds with Early Music New York



Early Music New York and director Frederick Renz concert of Haydn in Esterházy presented by Early Music Foundation at the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in New York on March 3, 2018. (Benjamin Chasteen/The Epoch Times)

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It is not often that one encounters classical Scandinavian music beyond Grieg, Sibelius, Nielsen, and a few others. So, it was with much enthusiasm that I entered the sanctuary of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, at 68th Street and Central Park West on Oct. 26, to experience Nordic Accord, a program of 18th-century Scandinavian music.

The performance was part of a Nordic chamber music series organized by Early Music New York (EMNY) called "Ex Borealis." The series also included performances by Copenhagen Camerata Chamber Choir from Denmark, Scandinavian fiddle duo Lydia & Andrea, and Danish recorder virtuoso Bolette Roed. Performances took place at both First Church of Christ, Scientist and the

Church of Sweden. The series provided a breadth quality Scandinavian music rarely heard, or even known, outside of Scandinavia.

Nordic Accord was conceived by EMNY director, Frederick Renz. I asked him what the impetus was behind this year's Nordic series. He explained, "Having come across and consequently having programmed the symphonic music of Joseph Martin Kraus (dubbed the 'Swedish Mozart') in a prior season, I was inspired to reacquaint myself with the 'father of Swedish music,' Johan Helmich Roman, which then led me to explore other 18th-century Scandinavian musicians and composers."

Charmingly, the program was marked with flags from each composer and guest performer's country of origin. The concert began with three movements from Roman's "Overture (BeRi 43)," a rich melodic start. The use of two oboes and bassoon was a rare treat, and by the end I felt like dancing.

The "father of Swedish music" was followed by a host of 18th-century European and Nordic composers: Georg Philipp Telemann, the German great, included for his musical representation of ancient and modern Swedes, Johan Joachim Agrell from Sweden, Johan Daniel Berlin from Norway (born in formerly German Lithuania), Johann Adolph Scheibe of Denmark, and Joseph Martin Kraus, "the Swedish Mozart" and Kapellmästare for King Gustav III of Sweden.

Among the highlights of the evening was hearing Norwegian cornetto soloist Alexandra Opsdahl in Berlin's "Sinfonia No. 2 in D major." The piece opened with a flourishing allegro movement before transitioning to a deep, rich largo, with dark sounds resounding throughout the hall. The cornetto, curving like a snake in Opsdahl's hands, looks like a woodwind but sounds like a brass instrument. Despite its small size, the sound swelled to every corner of the room.

Another highlight was Johann Adolph Scheibe's "Concerto for flauto dolce." Danish recorder player Bolette Roed guest conducted the piece while she played the recorder, feeling the piece through her movements. She was more than a conductor and performer; she became an interpretive dancer. When this piece was written, the recorder had almost gone extinct in classical music, yet Schiebe chose to include it—and I am so grateful that he did. Under Roed's direction, the adagio movement was enchanting and otherworldly, ending so gently. Roed took command in the pro allegro, with a stirring wake-up on the recorder.

The finale of the program was a rousing performance of Kraus's 1791 overture to the pasticcio opera, "Äfventyraren." It began with a dramatic note held out while other instruments joined in, creating a soft, anticipatory tension, before transitioning to a quick, lighter tempo, with punches of strings and horns, at one point interrupted with a quick break and the sound of a lone instrument. Then, once again, it built up momentum and volume, creating joy and prompting lively applause, and, of course, an encore!

As a novice in early music, let alone early Scandinavian music, I was especially grateful to see and hear the unusual instruments embraced in the evening's performance, especially the recorder, cornetto, and theorbo, a long necked lute.

I also heard other concertgoers speaking about the instruments, curious to know if they were historical or contemporary. After the concert, I contacted Padraic Costello to learn more. He explained, “All of the instruments, including orchestral strings, winds, and the solo recorder/cornetto instruments, were ‘period instruments’—so, [they were] designed or restored with the exact specifications used in the 17th and 18th centuries.” He added that since instruments have changed so much over the centuries, using period-appropriate instruments “allows the EMNY orchestra to more accurately perform music from the 18th century (and earlier) as it was originally heard at the time.”

One can only wonder why not more of this music is heard in our concert halls. During intermission, I had a brief conversation with Costello, public relations officer for EMNY, who was also impressed by what he heard. He, too, wondered why he and others were not familiar with these Nordic greats. I responded, “Politics. Why do we know more about Columbus than Leif Erikson?” In spite—or perhaps because—of such politics, it was wonderful to have this stellar ensemble enlighten us that evening.

Even Renz learned a lot in preparing the performance. “Encountering composers who wrote and performed at the courts of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, the quality of riches among these Scandinavian countries was edifying,” he said. He was pleased to introduce U.S. audiences to these lesser-known pieces whose works are “equally creative as compared to those by the more usual Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi.”

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the skill and artistry of each musician and their conductor, combining to make the EMNY ensemble a symbiotic whole. Director Renz is a delight to watch, with his passion and his nuanced knowledge of each piece, articulated through his gestures.

But ultimately, perhaps the best judge of the program was the positive reaction of the audience with multiple rounds of applause. One concertgoer, Sherman Silverman, said, “I always come to their concerts. It surprised me. Much better than I expected.” Another who identified himself as the “Ambassador,” enthusiastically summed everything up in a single word: “Fabulous!”

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