

For openers, Chicago Philharmonic offers Danish novelties

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The Evanston-based Chicago Philharmonic, which began its 25th anniversary season Sunday evening in Pick-Staiger Concert Hall at Northwestern University, does things differently from other suburban professional orchestras.

This self-styled "community of musicians and community members" assigns more or less equal importance to player governance and board leadership, makes chamber music an integral part of its services and generally seeks to put classical music within reach of ordinary pocketbooks without dumbing down the product.

Of course, all this wouldn't mean very much if the technical and artistic proficiency weren't on par with the mission. Fortunately the orchestra is in excellent shape, strong and well-balanced in all departments. It has vigorous leadership from Scott Speck, its artistic director since 2013, and its ranks include some of the area's best freelance musicians. Speck has revitalized the music-making and brings fresh ideas to the programming, as Sunday's concert proved.

A season devoted to a celebration of the five senses began, somewhat incongruously, with an intriguing program of rarities by Danish composers and works related to Denmark. Far from being box-office poison, the concert drew a sizable, enthusiastic public. The philharmonic hopes to make itself a national model for orchestras at this level; concerts such as this are a step in the right direction.

Anchoring the program were works by the two most influential figures in 19th and 20th century Danish music – Niels Gade and Carl Nielsen, respectively.

Gade's Violin Concerto (1880) makes no secret of its musical debt to the composer's mentor and colleague, Felix Mendelssohn, although this melodic, well-made piece also breathes the robust romanticism of Max Bruch. The soloist plays virtually nonstop, and the gifted Danish violinist Christina Astrand addressed its lyrical bravura with full-blooded dedication and sensitivity.

Speck and the orchestra also were fully inside Nielsen's First Symphony, an appealing, beautifully crafted, harmonically ingenious work that has inexplicably slipped from the Chicago Symphony's radar since the Georg Solti era.

Two other pieces of esoterica completed the program – Tchaikovsky's "Hamlet" Fantasy-Overture and Arvo Part's "Had Bach Raised Bees" (1976).

The Tchaikovsky is not be among the Russian composer's top-drawer inspirations, although Speck and the orchestra wrung maximum excitement and sweep from its pages of *Sturm und Drang*.

The Estonian Part's little slice of buzzing minimalism (a serene Bach quote at the end only adds to its enigmatic whimsy) had nothing to do with the concert's Danish theme but gave the audience a novelty both bracing and harmless.

Remaining concerts in the Chicago Philharmonic season are Nov. 16, Feb. 15, April 19 and June 7; chicagophilharmonic.org.



Violinist Christina Astrand was guest soloist with the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra.