

Seeing, hearing 'The Planets' under the stars

REVIEW | Sinfonietta's striking visuals give extra gravity to Holst suite

August 25, 2008 **BY BRYANT MANNING**

A rambunctious round of applause greeted Chicago Sinfonietta Executive Director Jim Hirsch's request that the thousands before him in Millennium Park "clap sheepishly" if they were hearing this orchestra for the first time.

As regular subscribers of the Sinfonietta noticed on this humid Friday night, the boundless new audience assembled before the Pritzker Pavilion was ripe for recruitment to the orchestra's season series, which begins in September. Tailor-made for a more general audience than say, Music of the Baroque, the Sinfonietta thrives on cross-genre collaborations like the ones it cultivated with bluesman John Primer, rock act Poi Dog Pondering and even the Chicago Jazz Ensemble. Playing with technology is fast becoming a part of the Sinfonietta mojo as well.

For Friday night's free hi-fi, multimedia presentation of Gustav Holst's astral tribute "The Planets," the 21-year-old orchestra's first impression before the summering masses was bolstered with the help of the Adler Planetarium's astronomer and visual artist Dr. Jose Francisco Salgado, whose memorable accompanying video couldn't have been a more striking complement to Holst's score. With a 45-foot-by-26-foot movie screen broadly draped in front of the orchestra, each planet got its own mini-movie that had the crowd as absorbed in a production than any other classical multimedia show in recent memory.

Leslie Dunner, music director of the Joffrey Ballet, conducted "The Planets" in the second half of the program while founding member Paul Freeman took the first. Dunner provoked a biting blast from the brass in the opening "Mars" that showed a new side to the Sinfonietta's usually modest horn section. "Saturn," on the other hand, spun along with ageless serenity. And Anima, formerly the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus, tight-roped the stratospheric choral lines that hypnotically dissolve in the mysterious final movement, "Neptune."

Freeman opened the night with a tempered cruise through Ulysses Kay's boisterous little work "Theater Set for Orchestra" but then kicked it into high gear for Alberto Ginastera's propulsive "Estancia: Four Dances." Bravos to concertmaster Carol Lahti and flutist Janice MacDonald for their poignant solos in the work's "Wheat Dance" movement. The whole shebang easily made one of the outdoor summer season's most lasting impressions.

Free-lancer Bryant Manning also writes for Time Out Chicago.