

# Symphony of stars

## Articles and Blogs

By Greg Burliuk | The Kingston Whig Standard | 19 Sep 2009

The stars are coming out for the opening of the Kingston Symphony's season, and they're not the Hollywood kind, but of the celestial variety. But to use showbiz terms, the symphony is starting out with a blockbuster.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition* will be accompanied by animations and images created by astronomer Jose Francisco Salgado of the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. One of Canada's most accomplished pianists Andre Laplante will perform Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. And keeping with the astral theme, there will be a performance of Canadian composer John Estacio's *Borealis*, which was inspired by the first time he saw the Northern Lights.

"We always like to open the season with a bang," says Symphony conductor Glen Fast. "We like the challenge of a taxing piece for the orchestra and *Pictures at an Exhibition* is certainly that.

"This is a multimedia event and we also have a terrific guest soloist. We're presenting it on Saturday and Sunday so it's a high impact concert."

The Symphony has dabbled with the stars before, having performed Holst's *The Planets* with visual accompaniment provided by local astronomy writer Terrence Dickinson to great success.

Fast heard about the Adler presentation from Queen's University astronomy head David Hanes. "We got a sample of it and watched it in a big lecture hall at Queen's and were really impressed," says Fast.

Its creator, Salgado, had previously done a presentation of *The Planets* with the Chicago Sinfonietta. He began casting around for another project and hit upon *Pictures At An Exhibition*. Mussorgsky had written the piece after the death of his friend, artist Viktor Hartmann, and the 10-movement composition is supposed to be a musical tour of an art exhibition.

"I began to realize that so many of the astronomical images look like artwork," says Salgado. "They're almost like abstract paintings." So he began to build a series of pictures for each

movement. "And the finale is so powerful that I wanted it to end with a festival of images," he says.

The images were taken by ground-based telescopes, space telescopes, and space probes. And then there were visualizations, "like what it would be like to navigate through the universe or what it would look like if our galaxy collided with another," says Salgado. "We did that through our space visualization lab at the planetarium. That's part of my regular job there."

Salgado synchronized the images to a performance of Pictures At An Exhibition. Now Fast is studying how he will get the Symphony to be on cue with the images.

"I've spent hours and hours learning how to synchronize the music with the video," he says.

"Mussorgsky originally composed the piece on the piano and over 33 people have had a crack at arranging it. We're using the best arrangement, the one by Ravel.

"In this case, I'm the facilitator not the interpreter. Some of the tempos are wickedly fast."

Fast is also keen on the Canadian composition Borealis that will open the concert. "The Northern Lights are hauntingly beautiful, but this piece is also very dramatic," says Fast.

"The composer has also got some interesting techniques like dipping wind chimes in a bit of water to get wonderful sounds." Fast was delighted to get Laplante back especially to perform Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto.

"It's one of Andre's party pieces," says the conductor. "It's the ultimate romantic piano concerto."

This season will be another strong one, predicts Fast. "We're getting better at programming that has more meaning," he says. "Our concerts are very well constructed.

"Every concert rings true with great repertoire. We're doing Brahms Requiem, which is so good it's almost beyond belief as well as Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and Tchaikovsky's Sixth.

"And despite the recession our audience and supporters are stronger than ever."

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