

NSO, Adler Planetarium team up for 'The Planets' at Wolf Trap

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By Emily Cary | Washington Examiner | 30 July 2010

When Jose Francisco Salgado was growing up in Puerto Rico and deciding on a career, he was torn between astronomy, music and photography. Today he pursues all three in his role as astronomer with Chicago's Adler Planetarium and his worldwide travels to communicate science through the arts incorporating visual artistry and music.

This week, Salgado appears with the National Symphony Orchestra's performance of Gustav Holst's "The Planets" in HD to talk about the accompanying film he created from NASA images and other visual resources. The program opens with themes from space-related films to whet appetites for the visual treat accompanying Holst's orchestral suite.

"For the past 10 years, I've been combining science and art by using art as a hook to get attention, then adding science through astronomical images and photographs I take of the night sky when visiting places around the world," he said. "I'm passionate about astronomy and the idea of presenting it with classical music, so when I was first asked to produce a backdrop for 'The Planets,' I decided to create a film to closely follow the music, rather than merely having a slide show."

"To begin, I collected images by space probes, from telescopes on Earth and animations based on scientific explorations," he continued. "Then I listened closely to the music to tell a visual story line in a logical order to match visually what was happening in the music. While I was working on the first movement, I was researching the second and teaching myself video editing."

Following that initial project, Salgado prepared an astronomical version of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" by creating a virtual gallery and using the paintings as portals into space. He has presented both programs since then with major symphony orchestras in more than 50 concert halls in 13 countries. Last year, the 400th anniversary of the birth of Galileo, his Science and Symphony orchestral films were named by the International Astronomical Union as a special project of the International Year of Astronomy.

Not long ago, Salgado was inspired to view time-lapsed images of the night sky while listening to

"Spirit," a song by musician-composer Tom Bailey, formerly of the British pop group Thompson Twins. Bailey was so pleased to learn how well his music suited Salgado's project that he now is composing a work of four movements to accompany a film about the night sky photographed from Earth.

"The biggest thrill is starting with a blank page and interpreting what I am feeling and how the music conveys the visual," Salgado said. "For instance, Holst's Jupiter movement is very jolly and reminds me of being on a carousel with a circular motions, so I used photographs from a camera placed above Jupiter to show its satellites in orbit. Then I show one hemisphere rotating, followed by the other hemisphere.

"It's exciting to hear people coming out of the concerts saying they didn't know Jupiter had so many moons. Once the seed is planted it's up to you to get an astronomy book, visit a planetarium and watch TV documentaries."