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SMSO takes journey to the outer limits



Robin Fountain is the music director of the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra. Photo provided

until after he earned his bachelor's degree in English. For his senior thesis in Ann Arbor, he wrote a musical piece based on a short story by Charles Dickens while taking a composition course for non-majors in the music department.

“When I went to people's homes where there was a piano, I would go up to the piano and play, but I had no formal training,” he says. “My parents weren't concertgoers at the time. I can probably count on both hands the number of concerts I attended before college.”

And he believes Gustav Holst's “The Planets” was on one of those concert programs he attended either at Grant Park or on a school field trip to see the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

By ANDREW S. HUGHES
Tribune Staff Writer

Every contemporary composer must feel good when an orchestra plays one of his or her works.

But for Howard Frazin, Saturday's concert by the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra will have added meaning when it performs



his “In the Forests of the Night.” A native of Chicago, the Boston-based composer spent much of his childhood summer vacations in St. Joseph, where his father now lives.

“It's the first time I've had my music performed in the Midwest since I've been an adult,” Frazin says by telephone from Boston. “The last time I had something performed in the Midwest was my senior thesis at Michigan, when I couldn't read music, so this is a real homecoming for me.”

As a child and college student at the University of Michigan, Frazin says, he played piano by ear, but he didn't study music

In concert

The Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra performs at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor. Tickets are \$36-\$8; children 16 and younger admitted free. For more information, call 269-927-1221 or visit the website smso.org.

"I think Holst is a very, very good example of a great 20th-century composer, somebody who was able to connect with a large audience while at the same time speaking in a language that was new and different," he says. "I also think a lot of the accessibility of somebody like Holst has to do not just with the surface sound but also the thoughtful expressiveness of the music. You can tell he's talking about something. It's not programmatic music in that there isn't a story but there's something abstractly narrative."

The same can be said for Frazin's "In the Forests of the Night," an orchestral arrangement of a song he wrote using William Blake's "The Tyger" as the words.

"To me, the Blake poem is about, 'Did God create good and evil?' " he says. "The tiger is, essentially, evil. The poem asks if God created good and evil, and essentially answers it, yes. During Blake's time, there was the idea that for free will to have any meaning, we would have to make a choice between good and evil." In the poem's fifth verse, Blake asks if God smiled when he saw his work and if the same being that made the lamb also made the tiger.



Astronomer, science communicator and visual artist Jose Francisco Salgado of Chicago's Adler Planetarium will present a suite of seven high-definition short films accompanied by images, historical illustrations from the Adler Collection of Works on Paper, NASA and European Space Agency animations as part of the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra's performance of Gustav Holst's "The Planets" on Saturday. Photos provided

"It's saying, was he happy when he made the tiger?" Frazin says. "It's kind of regretful in a way because there is the tension between good and evil, and if we know both, there is the potential we'll chose badly sometimes."

SMSO music director Robin Fountain describes Frazin's "In the Forests of the Night" as tonal.

"It's very lovely," he says by telephone from Pennsylvania. "It's beautiful moods, and (it) proceeds very beautifully and logically from one thing to another. You get a beautiful sense of the topography of one person's journey."

Fountain says he chose "In the Forests of the Night" to open Saturday's concert because he believes the orchestra should play contemporary music, and because the orchestra requested a Classical symphony and it contrasts well with the second selection on the program, Franz Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G, "Surprise," which is "comparatively bouncy."

"I think Haydn is wonderful for an orchestra to play," he says. "It's a specific style and a wonderful orchestra builder. It requires incredible precision and unity among the orchestra in a way that the bigger Romantic pieces can hide. It's something very demanding, not in the

athletic way of the Strauss tone poems we played earlier in the season but in a chamber music way."

The concert's major work and focus, however, is Holst's "The Planets," which will feature a suite of films designed to accompany it.

An astronomer at Chicago's Adler Planetarium, Jose Francisco Salgado, created the films in 2005 for the Chicago Sinfonietta using images from NASA and the European Space Agency, films shot

by crews in space, telescopes, the Adler's history of astronomy collection and original animations.

“A slide show of beautiful images would work, but I wanted to be more ambitious and create a film that would follow the tone of the music,” he says by phone from Quad Cities, Iowa, before a performance. “In many ways, the film is my visual interpretation of the music using astronomy visuals. ... Hopefully, they'll come out of the concert hall in awe of these worlds and with the determination to learn more and read a book or visit a science center.”

Holst, however, wrote “The Planets” with astrology, not astronomy, in mind, but Fountain says even with that knowledge, Salgado's films fit with the music and its themes.

“We have to think about the basis of these astrological and mythological elements,” Fountain says. “They are man's first attempts to understand his components. It is being paired with an essay of what the universe is made of.”

As an example, he says, the first photograph from the Hubble telescope struck him with wonder.

“For me, it wasn't about the scientific implications about this but about the philosophical implications,” Fountain says. “I think stargazing for centuries has been a philosophical quest.”

When he created the films, Salgado says, he didn't rely on Holst's astrological interpretation of each planet, but he also didn't put science ahead of art with his choices.

“What I am concerned about is the music,” he says. “Let's say, for example, Venus is the goddess of love and peace, so he wrote a beautiful, slow movement that conveys that serenity. On the other hand, we now know the conditions on Venus are hellish. Because of greenhouse effects on Venus, temperatures are higher than on Mercury, which is the closest to the sun. I want to show things that are accurate, but to actually follow what we know about the planet would have clashed with the music.”

In the case of Venus, Salgado says, he created a compromise between the planet's harsh conditions and Holst's serene music without being inaccurate with either.

“On ‘Venus,’ you see a visualization, an animation based on scientific data,” he says. “What you see, you see the camera hovering over the planet, and you see the planet's topography. Although you see lava flows, it's done in a way that the camera turns are slow. It's done in the way that it is, but not in a chaotic way.”

The first and last planets in the solar system, Mercury and Neptune — Pluto hadn't been discovered when Holst wrote “The Planets” in 1916 and has since been demoted to dwarf planet status, anyway — presented Salgado with different challenges than the other planets did: Neither planet had been explored extensively in 2005, so he used Mercury's movement to focus on the sun and Neptune's movement to step outside the solar system to show the Orion and ring nebulae and the Andromeda galaxy.

As for the music, Fountain describes it as “kinetic.”

“It's the usual alchemy of melody and harmony and rhythm, but one of the ways to think about it is that each of the pieces has a different kind of motion, and that motion is used to characterize the

astrological significance, so 'The Winged Messenger' (Mercury) sounds like something flying around and 'The Bringer of Old Age' (Saturn) moves with the appropriate gravity," he says. "I'm not sure if I could conceive of a more perfect kinetic embodiment of war than can be found in 'Mars' with its insistent, repetitive, unrelenting rhythm."

Each movement, Fountain says, is its own mood piece, but together, they form something bigger.

"It's one of those pieces that while each movement is interesting in its own right, in the whole, there's a journey," he says, "and I don't mean in the astronomical sense but in the emotional and metaphysical sense."
