## **Concert Review**

## Pacific Symphony plays memorable extraterrestrial program

By Truman Wang October 20, 2011

## Pacific Symphony

Hovhaness: Prayer of St. Gregory

Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 21

R. Strauss: Also Sprach Zarathustra

J. Strauss Jr: Blue Danube waltz

Giancarlo Guerrero, conductor Jeremy Denk, piano Barry Perkins, trumpet Jose Francisco Salgado, video choreographer

Thursday, Oct 20, 2011 at Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, Costa Mesa, Calif.

ast Thursday night's Pacific Symphony foray into the extra-terrestrial was a delightful and surprising treat. Billed as "2011: A Space Odyssey", but instead of using clips from Stanley Kubrick's film, the Symphony used NASA space footage designed by astronomer **Jose Francisco Salgado** to accompany the playing of "Also Sprach Zarathustra" and the "Blue Danube" waltz. Overall, it was a successful presentation and brought the music closer to our own times.

In Richard Strauss' epic tone poem, Zarathustra's preaching of man's evolution from "Backwoodsmen" to "Men of Science and Learning" is vividly realized in often stunning orchestral colors. Guest conductor **Giancarlo Guerrero** directed a searing yet sensitive account of the score, marking the opening 'sunrise' with tremendous majestic grandeur (UCLA organist **Christopher Bull** earned his paycheck with an apocalyptic two-bar fermata in the climax), and treating the "Backwoodsmen" section that immediately followed like a string chamber orchestra that the composer had intended (Strauss was to do the same trick of turning a full-size orchestra into an intimate chamber ensemble, even a string sextet, in his later operas.) In the "Dance Song", the solo violin launched into its impassioned waltz and nearly got drowned out by the orchestra, but quickly

regained its footing and delivered a lilting and beguiling interlude that anticipated the "Blue Danube" waltz. The video screen showed still images of the Earth and space, with simple headline captions for each of the tone poem's ten sections.

Strauss' tone poem led without a break into the "Blue Danube" waltz. Amid the shimmering tremolo of the high strings, the video screen unfurled footage of the Space Shuttle gliding through Space and the ISS astronauts floating and somersaulting in zero gravity. The background images of the Earth's atmosphere, the cloud bursts and the city lights below were often so breathtaking that the music seemed all but forgotten. That's always the danger of mixing pure music with extra-musical materials in performance, but in this case it's so well-executed that no one should complain.

In other parts of the program that were not space- or Kubrick-related, Alan Hovhaness's "Prayer of St. Gregory" evoked a great calm in which space and time seemed to stand still. Pacific Symphony's principal trumpet **Barry Perkins** played the solo with great devotional fervor.

Mozart's well-known and much-loved Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major went over like a whiff of perfumed air dissipating into the ethers of Space, so light-footed was its execution and so congenial was its spirit. In the first Allegro, pianist **Jeremy Denk** romped through the notes with great speed, often leaving the orchestra in the dust. The celebrated Andante ('famously' featured in a Swedish film called "Elivra Madigan" that nobody I know seems to have ever seen, or want to see) sounded much more 'together' and maestro Guerrero should be commended for the refreshingly flowing tempo. The final Allegro was wonderfully played by Mr. Denk with his direct, conversational style (and a few grimaces that he could do without). Overall -- a delightful performance that left one walking on air afterwards.

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