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Review: The Planets

Posted by arts_reviews Anchorage Daily News Posted: January 28, 2012 - 11:18 pm By MIKE DUNHAM

A full house was on hand at Atwood Concert Hall for the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra's performance of Gustav Holst's "The Planets." The attraction seems to have been the visual accompaniment to the suite prepared by Jose Francisco Salgado of the Adler Planetarium using fascinating images of the solar system.

The animated projections ranged from historical documents to artist simulations to actual photos taken during recent space probes. Salgado often employed the technique that generally started with early illustrations of planets, progressed to drawings made after the invention of the telescope, then to photos taken from earth and finally close up digital pictures from space.

Prior to the performance, he told the audience that his intention was to create a visual counterpart that would enhance the music, matching it in mood and tempo, but also conveying some of what astronomers have been able to learn about our planetary neighbors. If Holst's suite was based on the Zodiac and mythology, Salgado's video intended to rouse curiosity about and enthusiasm for our accomplishments as space explorers.

It pretty much succeeded there. Text on the big screen (which would have been more impressive were it even bigger) was hard to read in the balcony. I knew something about the transit of Venus and it's importance in ascertaining a sense of the size of the solar system. And I guessed I was looking at a picture of Isaac Newton and the telescope with which he first spotted Uranus. But many of the charts and sights made me interested what they meant, or even what they were. I suppose they have books for that.

Several of the most dramatic moments came with depictions of the missions sent by human beings to these far away places, the heroic scope of getting something to Saturn that can send back pictures. The ingenuity involved in taking and analyzing a rock sample on Mars.

The visuals definitely enhanced the music, speeding things along and keeping interest peaked during Holst's sometime wandering slow sections.

The orchestra played well, perhaps staying on clip because conductor Randall Craig Fleisher had to keep them matched up with the images. The climax of "Uranus, the Magician" was delivered with rollicking power. Voices from the Anchorage Concert Chorus were featured in the finale.

The performance of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony that opened the program was, in the words of one listener, "Sloggy." I can't remember ever hearing any Mozart played more dully than the first movement was on Saturday night. It was like trying to start a car with an old battery and no block heater after a night below zero. The violins, often missing notes, seemed to be the biggest contributor to the fizzlessness of the pieces.

In the Andante, however, it seemed that a whole different set of performers had snuck in. The playing was elegant and songful. But that didn't continue to the end. The highly contrapuntal finale came off as something of a blur. A group of younger listeners in front of me made an exit midway through, and it was hard to blame them.

Happily, they were back for "The Planets" and joined in the standing ovation for that piece.

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