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A symphonic guide to the solar system

By MIKE DUNHAM
Anchorage Daily News
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Image courtesy EVANS & SUTHERLAND
Breathtaking images of outer space amaze viewers at the Anchorage Museum's planetarium shows.

On clear nights earlier this month, Anchorage sky watchers marveled at the sight of Jupiter -- 300 times bigger than Earth and at least 300 million miles away, adorned by multicolored bands and blotches, accompanied by a retinue of bizarre moons.

STELLAR SHOWS

JOSE FRANCISCO SALGADO will join conductor Randall Craig Fleischer in a "Lunch and Learn" discussion of the upcoming program at noon Friday in the Public Conference Room at Loussac Library.

JANCHORAGE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA will perform Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony and Holst's "The Planets" with space images arranged by Jose Salgado at 8 p.m. Saturday, and 4 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 29 in Atwood Concert Hall.

MORE STELLAR SHOWS
The Thomas Planetarium at the Anchorage Museum, 625 C St., offers several related programs, including:
• "Guided Star Show," a narrated tour through the night sky based on seasonal occurrences, 6:10 p.m. on the first Friday of each month and 3 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.
• "New Horizons," simulating a journey through the solar system and travel to the surfaces of the planets, 1:15 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.
• "Wonders of the Universe," photos of deep space taken by the Hubble Space Telescope, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

All one could make out with the naked eye, however, was a bright dot wandering against the backdrop of stars.

Next weekend we can get a close-up look at the giant gas globe in a collaboration that features recent high-definition images from NASA and other sources projected above the stage of Atwood Concert Hall while the Anchorage Symphony plays Gustav Holst's orchestral suite "The Planets."

The visual projection -- more a movie than a slide show -- is the work of Jose Francisco Salgado of Chicago's Adler Planetarium. Salgado himself is the rare combination of scientist (Ph.D. in astronomy from the University of Michigan) and multimedia/visual artist (nominated for an Emmy).

"The Planets" project came together about six years ago, he said, when the Chicago Symphony approached the planetarium requesting a few pictures to go with Holst's music.

What they got was something much more spectacular.

Salgado got hooked on space in third grade. "I found this book about the first men on the moon," he said. "I instantly became fascinated with the science and the technology that got us there."

In seventh grade he became interested in photography. Music came along in high school when he picked up the electric guitar, eventually playing in rock bands and writing his own music.

"In graduate school, I became interested in graphic design," he said, using computer technology to "extend my photography creatively. Then I learned about education and public outreach. Communication is something important, explaining to people what we're doing in astronomy."

Eventually, all these interests came together. Starting in the 1990s, he gained attention for his educational leaflets and web design.

With the Chicago Symphony invitation, he saw new possibilities.

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"I wanted something that would convey the science and astronomy along with the music, something with a story behind it," he said. "I had been meaning to move into film-making and motion imagery. I wanted to create something that not only served as a backdrop, but correlated very closely with what was happening in the music in such a way that it did not compete, but enhanced the concert experience."

POPULAR 'PLANETS'

The choice of music sweetened the prospect.

"The first classical music CD I bought was 'The Planets,' for obvious reasons," Salgado said. "Not only had I heard it was a really good masterpiece, but of course it had that connection with astronomy."

English composer Gustav Holst wrote the piece between 1914 and 1916. Insofar as any extra-musical program was intended, it had less to do with science and more to do with astrology and mythological associations, as indicated by the titles of the seven movements:

- Mars, the Bringer of War
- Venus, the Bringer of Peace
- Mercury, the Winged Messenger
- Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity
- Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age
- Uranus, the Magician
- Neptune, the Mystic

The first five descriptions refer to attributes of the Olympian gods for whom the planets are named. The exceptions are Uranus and Neptune, the last known planet at the time the work was composed.

(Pluto was discovered in 1930 and its status as a planet remains a matter of controversy. Earth is absent because, for a terrestrial observer, it is not viewed in the sky and is not part of the same Olympian pantheon as Venus, Mercury, et al.)

Holst wrote a range of music, from pieces for band to operas. But only "The Planets" seems to have stuck. The pummelling rhythm of "Mars" is heard underscoring battle scenes in movies and is alluded to in the "Imperial March" from "Star Wars." The vaporous and enigmatic end of "Neptune" -- female voices drifting off into silence -- has become a stock soundtrack effect for sci-fi shows. The center theme from boisterous "Jupiter" was turned into an anthem during World War II and is still sung at patriotic functions, especially in England.

MATCHING THE MUSIC

Fitting the pictures to the sound has stirred Salgado's creative juices. "I try to match the tone and the tempo of the music as much as possible," he said.

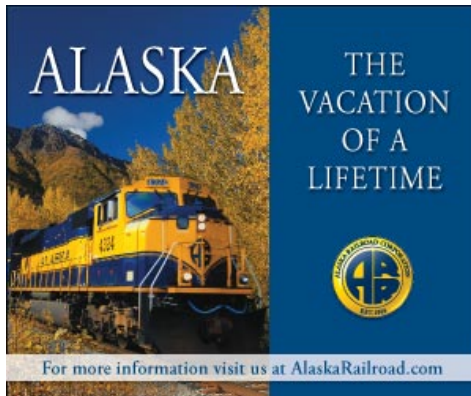
In the case of the skipping second theme from "Jupiter," for instance, he shows the circular motion of the four "Galilean" moons as seen from a camera positioned over the giant planet. "To me, it conveyed being on a carousel."

"Mars" includes images of the Mars Exploration Rovers, two robot units landed on the red planet by NASA about 10 years ago. It may seem incongruous with the bashing and blood sound of the score, Salgado admitted. "The Rovers look very friendly."

But later he shows time lapse Rover pictures of dust devils blowing across the Martian landscape. "That's more menacing," he said. "They're like marching soldiers."

In addition to time lapse imagery, Salgado's film uses infrared, fisheye, stereoscopic and high dynamic range imaging techniques to create an eye-popping spectacle.

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It's been a hit around the world, with performances by some 50 orchestras since its Chicago debut, including Paris, Madrid, Prague and Melbourne. Scientists have applauded its accuracy as much as music lovers have appreciated its aesthetics.

Salgado has created a nonprofit organization, KV 265, to continue the mission of communicating science through art.

(KV 265, by the way, is not the number of a comet or an astronomical coordinate; it's the catalog number of a set of keyboard variations by Mozart on the tune we know as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.")

The concerts and a free lunch talk on Friday will mark his first trip to Alaska, he said. "But I'm ready," he said. He spent nine days in Antarctica in November, filming the telescope at the South Pole.

"It's important for the conductor to be on board," Salgado said, to possibly surrender an artistic impulse to the pace of the film.

In fact orchestra managers seems to understand that this is a way to gain more audience. "It takes the whole experience to another level," Salgado said. "It's about combining different disciplines in the hopes of getting more people interested in something they weren't interested in before."

That means introducing skywatchers to classical music and rousing music lovers' curiosity about astronomy. "I want people to crave learning more," he said. And entertainment is a good way to do that.

The whole universe is a story, he suggested, "And the story really doesn't have an end."

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