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Science-meets-symphony in 'Northern Lights'

BY WYNNE DELACOMA For Sun-Times Media August 7, 2014 10:52PM

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Summer in Chicago is an odd time to see the northern lights. We're thousands of miles from the frigid northern lands where those dazzling, color-filled displays, also known as the aurora borealis, periodically light up the skies.

This weekend the Grant Park Music Festival brings images of the northern lights to the warmth of a late summer night in Chicago. On Friday and Saturday the Grant Park Orchestra will give the world premiere of "The Legend of the Northern Lights," a piece by composer Christopher Theofanidis for narrator, orchestra and accompanying video. Carlos Kalmar, the festival's artistic director and principal conductor, will be on the podium.

The video was created by Jose Francisco Salgado, an astronomer and visual artist at the Adler Planetarium, combining images from NASA, the Canadian Space Agency, an international space station and ones he shot himself a few months ago near Yellowknife in Canada's Northwest Territories. Music lovers who follow the Chicago Sinfonietta might remember Salgado's sumptuous visuals for a performance of Holst's "The Planets" in 2006.

"My films follow very closely the tone and the tempo of the music," said Salgado, who also has created films to accompany Johann Strauss' "The Blue Danube," a suite from Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe," and Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." "In the previous work I just needed to follow the music, but in this work I need to follow the music as well as the narration. The music doesn't alternate with the words; it's there throughout the narration. It's supporting the words being told."

The story line involves a child and his grandfather talking about the lights and the legends that have grown up around them over the ages. Salgado's video opens with NASA footage of the sun (the star that sets the phenomenon in motion), moves on to winter scenes in Canada and closes with some of the photos Salgado took of the aurora borealis over seven nights near Yellowknife.

"The show was so spectacular," he said, "I kept extending my stay."

A native of Texas, Theofanidis is a busy composer whose music is performed by major ensembles in the U. S. and Europe. His "Rainbow Body," a short, atmospheric work based on a chant by the medieval mystic, Hildegard von Bingen, has been performed by more than 100 orchestras.

In a sense, "Rainbow Body," with musical evocation of a human being transformed into sheer energy, led to "The Legend of the Northern Lights." Salgado and an associate, Anne Barlow, were hoping to adapt a children's story that had come down through Barlow's family for the stage. Barlow and Theofanidis connected through mutual friends, and he agreed to write the score.

"Because we had this children's story," said Theofanidis, "we had a template for the way this thing would unfold. My role was to musically figure out the places in the story that would breathe enough for longer stretches of [pure] music and video. The last six or seven minutes of the piece are just music and video."

Salgado is a passionate music lover and has long been devoted to the idea of using the arts—particularly music—to get people more interested in the earth and the universe. He set up an organization titled KV 265 (the official catalogue number for Mozart's variations on "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star") to expand the idea beyond live orchestral performances and into chamber music and dance, classrooms and museums.

"The goal of every film" he said, "is to inspire people to learn more about what they're seeing on the screen. The hope is that people will get interested in something they may not have been interested in before."

In addition to "The Legend of the Northern Lights," the concerts will open with Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2.

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AURORA BOREALIS FILM FOLLOW LEGEND LIGHTS MUSIC NORTHERN SALGADO VIDEO

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