

# Heavenly video lights up premiere at Grant Park

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**I**t's been interesting to compare the ways in which Chicago's two major classical music festivals are combining video and film with live symphonic music this summer.

While Ravinia went the commercial route by screening a couple of Hollywood blockbusters, "West Side Story" and "The Lord of the Rings – the Return of the King," accompanied by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Grant Park Music Festival, with its premiere over the weekend of "The Legend of the Northern Lights," won points for artistic initiative by premiering an original work that combined live music, narration and big-screen video display in the service of storytelling.

Presented under the direction of principal conductor Carlos Kalmar Friday evening at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, "Northern Lights" regaled an audience of some 15,000 (according to official estimate) with a half-hour of spectacular video footage of the aurora borealis, supported by Christopher Theofanidis' lush symphonic score. If "Northern Lights" is no deathless masterpiece, its seamless fusion of science and fantasy, stunning visuals and accessible music, could not have wanted a more appropriate setting than the festival's futuristic outdoor concert hall under the stars at Millennium Park.

A co-commission by Grant Park and KV 265, an organization co-founded by visual artist Jose Francisco Salgado and dedicated to communicating science through original works of art, "Northern Lights" incorporates footage filmed by the visual artist amid the rugged landscape of Canada's Northwest Territories, along with satellite views of Earth provided by the Canadian Space Agency.

Salgado, an astronomer at the Adler Planetarium, has produced other multimedia works of this sort, including cosmic visuals to accompany a CSO performance of Holst's "The Planets" at Ravinia two summers ago. But this is the first Salgado project to be driven by a specific narrative – in this case, an adaptation of a mythic children's story by Canadian author Walt Terry about the origin of the northern lights.

There's not much to the tale: The aurora borealis, in this gently whimsical version, sprang from a violin case presented by a mysterious traveler to a kindly couple who had welcomed him into their northwoods cabin on a snowy winter's

night. Nor is Theofanidis' soundtrack, beautifully crafted and skillfully orchestrated though it is, of sufficient musical substance to stand on its own as a concert piece.

Kalmar and his orchestra threw themselves into the score's sweet and brassy surges of Cinemascope sound, carefully synchronizing their contribution with the video projected onto the Pritzker's giant LED screen and the brief spoken portions involving Lyric Opera Orchestra violist Frank Babbitt as the storyteller and young Nicholas Black as his grandchild.

That said, it was Salgado's magnificent film imagery that made the show. Not to be forgotten were sequences displaying the rainbow-colored northern lights swirling and dancing in ever-shifting patterns across the heavens: They resembled nothing so much as luminous, translucent, otherworldly sea anemones gliding among the stars.

Friday's program paired the Theofanidis premiere with the ever-popular Second Symphony of Sergei Rachmaninov, a Russian master who, had he lived longer, surely would have been amused to learn how much of his music would wind up on movie soundtracks.

Presented complete – devoid of the disfiguring cuts that once passed for tradition in performances of this Russian romantic masterpiece – the performance achieved moments of honest, blazing excitement through the conductor's sensitive application of sonic and emotional intensity.

This wasn't the most idiomatically Russian reading imaginable, and Kalmar sometimes allowed the long line to slacken in his pursuit of fervent lyrical expansion. Except for a few minor bloopers in the brass, however, the orchestra musicians came through for him like the dedicated ensemble of hardworking professionals Grant Park audiences have come to expect.

Too bad the audio engineers appeared to be taking the night off, at least during the opening movement. The sonorities emerging from the loudspeakers struck me as curiously thick and muddled, with the violins swimming in a viscous stew of low and midrange sound energy. Later movements fortunately brought adjustments in clarity and balance.

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