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Naperville Sun

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Space and music come together with a "big bang" this weekend, as the New Philharmonic Orchestra teams with an Emmy-nominated astronomer to present "NPO: Heavenly Bodies of Holst."

The program will be at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday in the Belushi Auditorium in the McAninch Arts Center at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, and is directed by "Captain" Kirk Muspratt. A "Cookies with Kirk" reception follows.

Composer Gustav Holst wrote "The Planets" in 1914. It's an enduringly popular suite that names each movement after a planet in the solar system and its corresponding astrological character (For example, "Mercury, the Winged Messenger").

Earth and Pluto are not represented, as Pluto wasn't discovered until 1930. Of course, we all know how that worked out for Pluto (demoted to "dwarf planet" in 2006).

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Around 2006, Jose Francisco Salgado created a series of short films to match each movement of the suite. Salgado is a doctor of astronomy, visual artist, photographer and co-founder and executive director of KV265, a nonprofit science and arts education organization.

This weekend, the NPO will perform "The Planets" while Salgado's films are shown.

During the first half of the concert, it will just be Muspratt and a big screen on stage. He will talk to the

audience while a short film clip about each of the seven planets/seven movements plays. He'll talk about the music, giving the audience the composer's eye view of what's going on in the suite.

In the second half, Salgado will join the NPO and introduce each of the planets from an astronomer's point of view, while the orchestra performs "The Planets."

"I will be speaking a little bit about each planet preceding each movement," Salgado said. "I'll get to share a little about the visual, which is great because if you were to just show the visual without giving a little bit of an explanation ... I will say what is a real image or a science visualization, an animation based on scientific data."

Salgado regularly collaborates with orchestras, composers and musicians. His Science and Symphony films have been presented in 15 countries. The premiere of this project was in 2006 with the Chicago Sinfonietta, which he still works with closely.

"When you think about it, hundreds of years ago science and art went hand-in-hand," he said. "Leonardo da Vinci was an artist and a scientist and an inventor. Now unfortunately, we think only in one track. Part of the mission of KV265 is to promote that interdisciplinary thinking. Particularly when I visit schools to show the Science and Symphony films ... I try to instill in students if they are passionate about different disciplines, they don't have to pick one and abandon the rest. If they can find creative ways of combining what they are passionate about, that will make for better future citizens. I have blurred the lines between work and play, because I am working on what I absolutely love and what I'm passionate about."

Muspratt had friends who saw the KV265 production at Millennium Park, and told him he needed to see it and even set up a meeting with Salgado.

"They've done the show with the Boston Pops, the San Francisco Symphony — it's been very successful all over North America," he said. Very simply put, it's an evening of music and astronomy.

"I'm going to take the piece apart on the first half of the concert ... what makes up each piece musically, how Holst orchestrated it, how unusual it is, how many tympani are used ... it starts with two sets of tympani playing in 5/4. Where else do we have something like that in 1913? It's very unusual. The whole piece in the time of 5/4. It makes it all off-balance and edgy and warlike, menacing and dangerous-sounding," Muspratt said.

"It will be fun. Once people have gone through each of the planets with me, they'll hear things and see

things when we play it for them that they may not have otherwise. I think people like to learn. It's a great chance to go inside the depth of the piece and take it apart."

Although astronomy has never been a passion of Muspratt's, he recognizes that a lot of people love to study space and the heavens. People know more about space than at any other time in history because of the advances in science and astronomy, he said.

"These days ... we actually have the technical capacity to start understanding some of the things that human beings only dreamt about or postulated about," he said. "Since Dr. Salgado has ... created video that goes exactly with the music, that's pretty amazing. It's very difficult to do; I have a click track I have to watch in my monitor, and I have to be exactly with that click track or it doesn't work with the video. And the musicians have to be following me exactly. You have to pick just the right tempo so everything lines up."

The second part of the concert is a "big, 50-minute, gorgeous film, almost like the big, BBC 'Earth' ones while the orchestra plays," he said.

"It's very visual. I think it would be fun for young people to come to because the first part is very broken up and personal and one-on-one," he said. "The second part is very visual. It's also broken up so none of it is very long. Four minutes, five minutes each."

"My intention was to make something where the music and the film reinforce each other," Salgado said.

He was toying with the idea of using "The Planets" by Holst since he was a teenager ("The Planets" was the second classical CD he purchased, after Mozart), but it wasn't until 2005 when the Sinfonietta asked him to come up with a visual backdrop for concert.

"It was very pleasant to go to the concert hall and listen to Holst's music and see a slide show of very pretty pictures of the planets. That's a nice concept, but I went much further than that," he said. "I wanted to make a film. I took that as a challenge ... to make a film that would follow very closely the character of the music as well as the tempo. That was the beginning of the Science and Symphony film series." Muspratt hopes he gets a lot of questions at intermission — people fill out "Ask Kirk" cards so he can educate the audience about what's going on. He thinks this one will inspire a lot of questions.

"It's a very fun concert. The music is astonishing and powerful," Muspratt said.

"My aim is to make people intrigued or inspired enough to make people go home and look into this," Salgado said. "It's that moment of inspiration, what we're looking for. In the case of young audience members, it could be that eureka moment when they decide to follow a career in one of these disciplines presented. I would be so honored if years from now I encountered professionals who said, 'Wow, I attended one of your concerts and it was then I decided to pursue a career in the field that I'm in.' That would be such an honor."

Annie Alleman is a freelance writer.

'NPO: Heavenly Bodies of Holst'

When: Saturday and Sunday

Where: McAninch Arts Center at the College of DuPage, 425 Fawell Blvd., Glen Ellyn

Tickets: \$49

Information: 630-942-4000; www.atthemac.org

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