

The Arts

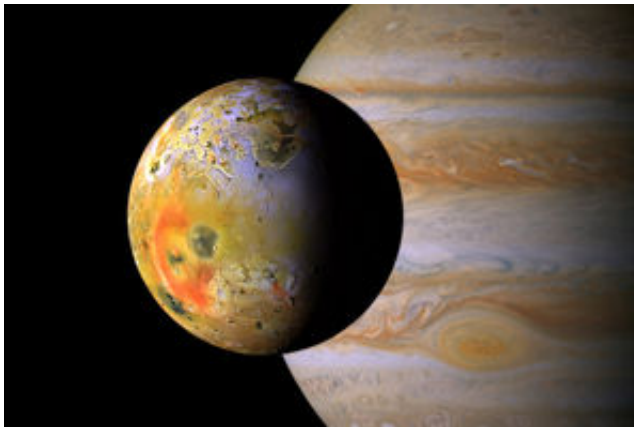
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NWSO season blasts off with 'Planets,' spaced-out images

Northwest Symphony Orchestra will perform Gustav Holst's "The Planets" on Oct. 25, with accompanying images on a big screen from NASA and local astrophotographer Andy Ermolli.

By Tom Keogh

Special to The Seattle Times



If Gustav Holst had known about the 1,800 or so exoplanets (planets outside our solar system) we know about today, would he have written music for each one?

As it is, the British composer's perennially popular seven-movement suite, "The Planets," did not include any music for Earth's distant neighbor, Pluto, which had not been discovered when the composer wrote the work between 1914-16. (Pluto has been demoted by scientists in recent years from planet to "icy dwarf," perhaps negating the need for its own theme.)

Earth didn't get a movement either, but that's no big deal: There's enough boldness and beauty in "The Planets" to build a satisfying concert around.

Northwest Symphony Orchestra will prove that on Saturday, Oct. 25, in its 2014-15 season opener: a special family program bringing spectacular visual accompaniment to "The Planets."

NWSO founder and music director Anthony Spain, who will conduct, has been working for months with Adrian Wyard, a former Microsoft program manager, on organizing images and video of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Neptune to project during the performance.

There will also be breathtaking, deep-space shots provided by local astrophotographer Andy Ermolli, who frequently travels outside city lights to take long exposures (up to 20 hours) of nebulae and galaxies.

"There will be a large screen over the orchestra," says Spain. "The audience will see incredible video and photography of the seven planets. When we get to Uranus and Neptune, we'll be looking beyond them."

"There is an array of fantastic images from telescopes, spacecraft from NASA, the European Space Agency and other organizations, and the Mars Rovers," says Wyard.

Wyard cites largely unseen images of Saturn's Earthlike moon, Titan — taken by the Huygens probe that descended to Titan's surface from the Cassini spacecraft — as an example of the wonders that await an audience.

Holst's intention with "The Planets" had less to do with astronomy than with astrological associations with each world.

"There's a temptation with this kind of project to make it a science class," Wyard says. "But we're not doing that. The music is driven by a mythological understanding of the planets, not a scientific one."

"Venus is a bringer of peace in 'The Planets,' but the real Venus is a hell with sulfuric acid rain. There's a certain amount of artistic license here."

"'The Planets' is a dynamic and exciting piece of music," Spain says.

"While the piece is British through-and-through, Wagner, Stravinsky and Debussy can all be felt in Holst's lavish and expert orchestration. Because of the vivid pictorial imagery and the captivating nature of the work, it is easy to see why 'The Planets' has had a lasting effect on listeners."

Also on the program is the Prelude to Act III of Wagner's "Lohengrin," and "The Holy City" by the late Alan Hovhaness, who spent the last three decades of his life in the Seattle area.

Spain hopes parents will bring their kids. Young people will certainly be a factor in the performance.

The NWSO orchestra will be joined by choirs from Kennedy and Mount Rainier High Schools. And "The Holy City" will feature 15-year-old trumpet prodigy Natalie Dungey, whose father, Philip Dungey, is principal trumpet.

"She's a sensation," says Spain. "She's won international competitions and been a member of the NWSO for several years. She's gradually working her dad out of his position."

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