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Classical Music | Entertainment

Family-friendly 'Pictures at an Exhibition' to feature visual treats

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Artist Adrian Wyard (Adrian Wyard)

Northwest Symphony Orchestra makes season-opener a family affair.

By **Tom Keogh**
Special to The Seattle Times

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The next time you have a half-hour to kill, go on YouTube and listen to any performance of the opening “Promenade” from the original piano score for Modest Mussorgsky’s 1874 suite “Pictures at an Exhibition.” Then cycle through numerous orchestral variations of that stately, yet sad, piece (which is less than two minutes long) in arrangements by Maurice Ravel, Sir Henry Wood, Lucien Cailliet, Leopold Stokowski, Sergey Gorchakov, Lawrence Leonard, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Jukka-Pekka Saraste.

(Just for fun, don’t forget the 1970s version by progressive-rock group Emerson, Lake & Palmer.)

It’s a cool activity to do with kids, comparing the sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious differences between each of those takes. That’s fitting, given that Northwest Symphony Orchestra’s (NWSO) season opener of “Pictures” is a family affair.

NWSO founder and Music Director Anthony Spain is actively encouraging audience members to bring youngsters to a special performance of “Pictures,” one with spectacular visual accompaniment by artist Adrian Wyard.

“It doesn’t matter what age you are,” says Spain. “You’re going to enjoy this concert. The music is so great, and there are so many vivid and contrasting sections in ‘Pictures at an Exhibition.’ It makes for a great platform for many visual concepts.”

Spain and Wyard collaborated on a similar, memorable music-plus-images event in 2014, when the orchestra played Gustav Holst’s “The Planets.” While Spain waved his baton, Wyard projected dazzling pictures of our solar system and deep space onto a large screen.

For “Pictures,” Wyard is taking more artistic license, imaginatively riffing on the short, discrete movements in Mussorgsky’s work. That brings things full circle: Mussorgsky freely developed his ideas for those movements while viewing sketches and watercolors by his late friend, Viktor Hartmann, at a memorial exhibition.

The brass, strings, winds and more in the full orchestral versions of Mussorgsky’s composition represent similar flights of discovery launched from a piano work.

NWSO will play the most historically popular arrangement, the one by Ravel. Wyard’s display, including images by Picasso and Monet as well as original videos, will complement Ravel’s feathery, chirping take on Mussorgsky’s “Ballet of Chicks in Their Shells” and the epic grandeur of “The Great Gate of Kiev,” both part of the suite. (Here’s a [preview](#).)

Most of Hartmann’s art has been lost, causing uncertainty today about which of his works inspired the music. So Wyard is turning to an eclectic group of other famous painters and his own video shorts to express the spirit, not the origins, of “Pictures.”

“‘Pictures at an Exhibition’ comes with a much more prescriptive history and goal than ‘The Planets,’ ” Wyard says. “There’s a narrative. The music brings to life Mussorgsky’s visit to a gallery to see works of his late friend, and captures what he sees and feels. My goal is to bring the music to life through images, trying to pull out what’s in the composition.”

Young children should especially enjoy Wyard’s lightly animated video (illustrated by Ken Priebe) shown with “Pictures”’ first movement, “The Gnome,” in which a fiendish creature has robbery on his mind. Likewise the dancing eggs of “Ballet of Chicks in Their Shells,” made with design help from University of Washington alum Anna Czoski.

Since that 2014 “The Planets” extravaganza, Wyard, a native of Reading, England, and a former program manager at Microsoft, has been in constant demand in the U.S. and overseas by other orchestras as well as galleries, schools, music festivals and PBS. He has participated in 30 concerts, mostly “The Planets” but also “Pictures” and a recently commissioned show paired with Dvorak’s Symphony No. 9.

The rest of the NWSO program includes Sibelius’ “Finlandia” and Holst’s finale (“The Dargason”) from “Saint Paul’s Suite.” Known for promoting original works by Northwest composers, Spain will also conduct “Sound Track” by Brent Irwin, who has taught in the Federal Way School District for 40 years.

Always happy to enlist talented students to perform with the orchestra, Spain has invited string students and choirs from several area high schools: Kennedy, Mount Rainier, Todd Beamer, West Seattle and Seattle Christian School.

The rest of NWSO’s season includes a “Valentine’s Concert” (Feb. 9); “Music for the Soul” (March 17); and the season finale (May 12). Details at northwestsymphonyorchestra.org.

Tom Keogh: tomwkeogh@gmail.com. Tom Keogh is a longtime arts writer for Seattle and national publications. He has been a weekly contributor to The Seattle Times since 2001, helping cover film, theater, classical and pop music. He teaches creative writing to high school students in Edmonds, and lives in Shoreline.

Concert Preview Northwest Symphony Orchestra Family Concert

7:30 p.m. Oct. 27, Highline Performance Arts Center, 401 S. 152nd St., Burien; \$15-\$20 (800-838-3006 or brownpapertickets.com).

3 p.m. Oct. 29, Federal Way Performing Arts and Events Center, 31510 Pete von Reichbauer Way S., Federal Way. (253-835-7010 or fwpaec.org).

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