



The Planets on the Big Screen

Oct. 21, 7:30 pm; Oct. 23, 2 pm

TSO Classical Concert

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Soul-stirring music paired with eye-catching visuals ... you normally only get that while you watch a movie.

But this month the TCC Music Hall opens the doors to the universe in a bright explosion of sight and sound. English composer Gustav Holst's popular turn-of-the-century suite *The Planets* has been played before with accompanying images, but never like what audiences will experience with the show created by Adrian Wyard. The film comparison is pretty accurate for what the Seattle-based visual artist has created.

"It's very much analogous, but really upside down to a film score, where an orchestra plays along to a supplied piece of film," Wyard explains. "I perform much like a musician in the orchestra. The phrase I like to use is 'visual accompaniment' because I like to think that what I've done is in harmony with what Holst intended with his composition. With each section, each bar, each note, I know exactly what I think he intended with tones, rhythms, melodies and moods, and I'm hoping to have read that correctly and emphasize it."

When Holst wrote *The Planets*, circa 1914-16, he wasn't interested in using music to depict the actual features, geology and geography of his subject. Rather, he consulted astrological interpretations of Mars ("the Bringer of War"); Venus ("The Bringer of Peace"); Mercury ("the Winged Messenger"); Jupiter ("the Bringer of Jollity"); Saturn ("the Bringer of Old Age"); Uranus ("the Magician"); and Neptune ("the Mystic").

One of the considerations for Wyard right from the get-go was whether to take the same path, or depict each heavenly body just as it actually is.

Though he utilizes photographs and images derived from some of the top facilities for astronomy in the world, science wasn't uppermost in his mind in creating the program.

"For example, other people have chosen to place images of some of the rovers, like the Mars Pathfinder, in a *Planets* presentation, but they don't really have a place in this project," he elaborates. "Rovers raise the question in an audience member's mind of human exploration, science and discovery. Those are fascinating things but they're

really not what Holst was about. There's a desire to make this a science lesson, but I've put that to the side. A really good example of that is 'Venus the Bringer of Peace.' If we wanted to be scientifically accurate, then I would use visible wavelength images of Venus, which are boring. Venus as it exists is a *hellscape*. It's not peaceful at all. It's got sulfuric acid rain, it's hot enough to melt lead at the surface, and it has runaway global warming. All of those things are interesting, but they've got nothing to do with the Bringer of Peace. For that I use an artist's depiction — my sense of what would be right on the screen given the music — but then everything that I use has scientific data as its origin. What I use for Venus is a combined image of visible wavelength clouds on top of surface topology, which was revealed by the Magellan spacecraft using radar to see underneath the clouds."

These colorful, haunting images have been animated in a way that matches the music, but they do not unfold on the screen automatically. Wyard actually controls the images to the music, as opposed to the other way around. "It frees up the conductor to do what they do, to ignore the visuals and focus on the orchestra. It preserves the musicality.

"It also allows me to add some expression, too. There are passages, because this is created live, where there is some latitude for improvisation. There are parts that seem a little chaotic, and I have a little palette of clips to choose from. There are nuances of timing and emphasis that do vary with my performance."

Although Wyard originally created the visuals for the Northwest Symphony Orchestra, at the behest of then-Music Director Anthony Spain, there will be a local component for the Tucson show. Some of the photos have been chosen in collaboration with Peter Smith, professor emeritus at the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory at the University of Arizona. "What I've been doing is going through Adrian's Mars section and adding pictures that are important to me from the Phoenix Mission, Pathfinder, Curiosity and that sort of thing. He would remove some of his images he's used in the past and add some of the ones I've suggested and we go back and forth on what the final product is going to look like."

UA has certainly loomed large on the international stage when it comes to exploring the "Bringer of War." "All the high-resolution images coming back from Mars go first to the University of Arizona," says Smith. "We are the central clearinghouse of these super-high-resolution images from orbit, and we've participated in many of the landed missions. I've been fortunate enough to have worked on quite a few of those. In fact, I'm going to be on another one that's going to launch in 2020. We really have a lot of participation in Tucson. We're on the map.

"With the Phoenix Mission, we actually operated a Mars Mission from Tucson and the operation center has been retrofitted to be the operation center for OSIRIS-REx that recently launched. There's a longevity to our participation in Mars that goes on."

Though he spends his days scanning the skies, so to speak, Smith is as excited as every other TSO audience member to see *The Planets* in the Music Hall.

"Adrian's very talented, and he has really done a spectacular job. He's been traveling all around with this program. We're lucky to have him." **TCC Music Hall. 882-8585. www.tucsonsymphony.org.**