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Tucson Symphony goes out of this world

Dr. Donald J. Behnke Special to the Green Valley News 4 hrs ago

There may be no pipe organ at the Music Hall of the Tucson Convention Center, but that did not prevent Tucson Symphony Orchestra visiting conductor Mei-Ann Chen from pulling out all the stops at the recent Classic Concert, "The Planets on the Big Screen."

The concert, which had been two years in the making according to TSO President and CEO Mark A. Blakeman, featured Gustav Holst's "The Planets." Inspired by the lifelong work of Dr. Peter Smith, professor emeritus of planetary sciences at the University of Arizona, the music was combined with and greatly enhanced by a new large screen video and graphics presentation by Seattle-based Adrian Wyard.

Wyard is an exceptionally talented visual artist whose timing, technical and artistic skills are incredible. Just when it seemed he had plumbed every possible sweep, spin and zoom from the software, a surprise would appear on the screen – fiery meteorites, unusual views of the planet and surprising shapes and colors. It was truly a tour de force by this former Microsoft designer and program manager.

As for the huge orchestra collected for this extravaganza, Chen applied her typically energetic, enthusiastic style and produced not only very loud fortissimos but also beautifully soft legatos. She may not have extracted quite the pianissimo she seemed to be calling for, but as for the fff passages, the musicians held nothing back. The large, appreciative audience was ecstatic.

The concert opened with a most interesting modern piece by Michael Gandolfi, “The Universe Cascade” from “The Garden of Cosmic Speculation.” The work was suggested by American architect Charles Jencks’ design of a somewhat surrealistic park in Scotland – a park without the usual plants and trees but rather aluminum flower beds and fountains with unusual shapes including the stair-step-like Universe Cascade.

The piece, already containing 16 parts, is still a work in progress which the composer suggests not programming it in its entirety. The “Universe Cascade” stood alone very adequately. Again, Wyard’s big-screen images flowed with the music, punctuating with precise timing the crescendos and painting the legatos with pastels of quietude. In her pre-concert remarks, conductor Chen called Wyard “another voice in the orchestra,” and it produced an obvious sympatico between the podium and the screen.

Technology has edged into the opera and concert hall with varying successes over recent decades. Projected scenery at the opera is tempting because of the high costs of grand productions.

Smaller regional companies have long resorted to projection as a cost-saver, but it is also now a staple even at the Metropolitan. The results range from cheesy to startlingly moody and one assumes future audiences, raised on YouTube and flashy, fast-moving video games will respond to the best of the visual artists’ talents. The younger-than-usual audience certainly did last weekend in Tucson.

The third piece on the program was William Walton’s “Wise Virgins Suite,” a TSO premier of a reworking of music by J.S. Bach for the ballet. It provided some mostly quiet contrasts to the bombastic Gandolfi and Holst, with beautiful and familiar melodies, but it didn’t seem to have a whole lot to do with the rest of the program.

The TSO Classic season continues Nov. 11 & 13 with Andrew Grams conducting. The program has Liszt and Latoslawski. plus the Brahms Piano Concert No. 2, William Wolfram soloist. Details and tickets at 520-882-8585 and www.tucsonsymphony.org.

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