

Dec. 1, 7:30 pm; Dec. 3, 2 pm

TSO Classic Concert

A New World in Pictures

TSO fans who attended the incredible performance last season of Holst's *The Planets*, conducted by Mei-Ann Chen with phenomenal accompanying visuals perfectly sequenced by Adrian Wyard, will be thrilled to hear that that team is back, taking on a project that is a lot closer to home.

Antonín Dvorak's *Symphony No. 9 "From the New World"* was influenced by the music that the great Czech composer heard while he was living and teaching in the U.S. "The Dvorak is a staple of the repertoire, but I have to say that if anybody asks me to do it, it's still a pleasure and an honor," says Chen. "It's great music, and not only for how it captures American music at a particular moment in time in 1893. If you picture its premiere at Carnegie Hall when Dvorak was living in New York, in classical music, there really wasn't something that sounded like American music at that point."

The piece is known for melding bits of African American spirituals and Native American songs into its melodies. And although it has no actual storyline, it cer-

tainly lends itself to visual interpretation. That's where Wyard comes in. A visual accompanist, he "plays" his video images almost as if they were another instrument in the orchestra. "Mei-Ann and I spoke about the question of how much narrative should be added by the visuals," he relates. "I'm in full agreement that with a masterpiece like the Dvorak *Nine*, we have to be very cautious that the visuals don't demand too much attention. I am being very strict about not overpowering anything that comes from the composition, which is about the continental United States. So what you'll see on the screen is a celebration of the full country, principally in terms of the landscape, the geology, as well as the wildlife and plants." Among his sources for images will be photos taken by landscape photographer Thomas Oord.

If that masterwork were the only piece on the program, it would be amazing enough, but concertgoers also will hear TSO premieres of two works by well-known composers, and one by an American artist they may never have heard of, but to whom Mei-Ann Chen has a connection. "*Noël* is actually the second movement from the four movement *Symphonic Sketches* by George Whitefield Chadwick, who was the president of the New England Conservatory, my alma mater, so that's quite an interesting history for me. When I won the Chadwick Medal as an undergrad,

I was like, 'Who is this person?' That's when I began to research him and found out that he not only had been a president of the conservatory, but a well-established composer in his time. *Noël* was his son's name. It was written for him, and it's this really beautiful piece that so many are not aware of."

Also being performed will be Dvorak's *Carnival Overture*, which is part of a trilogy of overtures that the composer wrote in 1891-92. Rounding out the program will be Poulenc's *Les biches Suite*, created from his ballet, based on paintings by Jean-Antoine Watteau. "This is music that people may say, 'I have no idea what it's about,' and you don't need to to enjoy it," Chen explains. "If you think of French composers, their focus is always pulling a lot of different colors out of the orchestra. It's reminiscent of Mozart, Franck, Tchaikovsky and even Stravinsky. It's really delightful from the beginning to the end."

This will be the fourth time that the charismatic Chen has conducted in Tucson. An award-winning musician and conductor, she grew up in Taiwan to parents who did not have a musical background. "They were naïve to think that the best way to have a free concert at home was to have their two daughters each pick up an instrument!" she says with a laugh. "I was given the piano, and my older sister had the violin."

Chen's older sister never took to the instrument, but Mei-Ann hung in there, studying both violin and piano. "My parents would find ways to keep me engaged in practicing, which is often challenging for young kids. I was seven when I started on piano, and six months later started the violin, too. They would turn off the lights and say, 'OK, can you play the piece in the dark?' Or they would put the piano cloth over the keyboard and ask me to try to play without seeing the keys."

But it was when she began performing in a youth orchestra that she discovered her ultimate passion. "I told my parents, 'The piano and the violin are fun, but I really want to play the largest instrument in the room, which is being the conductor!'" **TCC Music Hall. 882-8585. TucsonSymphony.org.**



Mei-Ann Chen.

Photo by Rosalie O'Connor