

# 'Planets' visuals enhance sounds at Chautauqua

By Kelly Dean Hansen  
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The Colorado Music Festival orchestra has already presented ambitious programs and monumental works this season, but Thursday evening's Week 5 concert at Chautauqua Auditorium in Boulder was the most grandiose display of instrumental power yet. The works on the program made the venue as loud as it has been all summer.

There was no guest soloist, and music director Jean-Marie Zeitouni expanded the full festival orchestra to its capacity. When the central work on the program is Gustav Holst's beloved 1916 orchestral suite "The Planets," a massive orchestra is inevitable. The CMF even brought in an impressive console organ, placed in front of the stage to the right.

"The Planets" has often been performed with visual images of the solar system. The projected presentation Thursday night, however, went well beyond the usual "film behind the orchestra." Visual artist Adrian Wyard has created a choreographed presentation, where an operator can synchronize the images (from NASA and other sources) and animations to the live music, such that they actually seem to follow the score in a logical way.

The visuals are truly amazing, a work of performance art in their own right. The effect of the synchronization — where Zeitouni can conduct his own interpretation without worry, knowing

the pictures will follow him — is undeniable.

Wyard's animations — with symbolic elements, such as Mercury moving rapidly — are highly imaginative and obviously created with Holst's music in mind. They go beyond the planets themselves to explore important moons — Jupiter's four large satellites, Saturn's Titan, Neptune's Triton — as well as brilliant deep space images from the Hubble Space Telescope, placed in the "Uranus" and "Neptune" movements.

Zeitouni and the orchestra gave a performance to match the stunning imagery. Gerald Scholl's fine work on timpani and snare drum was just one example of the artistry in the interpretation.

As popular and familiar as the work is, it takes an inspired rendition to make it genuinely effective. Without that, even Wyard's visuals would have fallen flat.

A women's choir from the St. Martin's Festival Singers sang offstage under a tent right outside the auditorium during the final "Neptune" movement. The choral writing is dissonant and not easy, especially from a distance, and the singers were precise in pitch and clearly audible from the auditorium. They walked away at the end, effectively rendering the most famous "fade-out" in classical music.

Before intermission, the orchestra presented two fur-



Wachner

## If you go

**Today:** 6:30 p.m.: "Fresh Friday" reprise of "The Planets," \$12-\$35

**Saturday:** Chamber music with clarinetist Boris Allakhverdyan, \$12-\$45

**Sunday:** "Classically Jazz" with Boris Allakhverdyan and the CMF Chamber Orchestra, \$12-\$54

*Concerts are at Chautauqua Auditorium, 900 Baseline Road, Boulder, and (except Friday) begin at 7:30 p.m.*

**Info:** 303-440-7666 or [coloradomusicfestival.org](http://coloradomusicfestival.org)

ther large orchestral pieces. The first was this year's commissioned piece by Click! competition winning composer Julian Wachner. Knowing he was free to write for a huge ensemble, Wachner took advantage of this in his overture-length "Gaudé" (Latin for "joy," the 2017 CMF theme). Wachner's piece reflects its title in its ample brass and percussion scoring, although he gives the big string section plenty to do. Bright chorale-like chords contrast with more exuberant string figures, and Wachner did not neglect to inject melody into his score — an important aspect of "joyous" music.

The Click! Commission — established by former CMF music director Michael Christie — has generated many memorable CMF moments over the years. The audience determines the winner after listening to existing music from four candidates and paying into the commission fund to cast votes. Thus, it is

already almost a given that the crowd will like the resulting piece. Wachner exuded joy himself when taking his curtain call, and the large audience rang with appreciation.

The other major work on the program was yet another expression of similar emotions, the wild and esoteric 1908 "Poem of Ecstasy" by the mystically-minded Russian composer Alexander Scriabin. A fine composer for piano, Scriabin's orchestral works are few, but they are full of color. In the "Poem of Ecstasy" (often better known by the French title "Le Poème de l'extase," under which Scriabin published it), the composer asks for eight horns and greatly expanded woodwind. While his percussion section isn't enormous, he does include resounding low bells toward the end.

Scriabin also asks the organ at the end, which makes the "Poème" a felicitous piece to combine with "The Planets" (where it is prominent in "Mars" and "Uranus," and the pedals are used in "Saturn" and "Neptune"). The 20-minute work has a couple of massive climaxes and it does have structure, but the overall effect is of being bathed in Scriabin's consciousness, reflected through the orchestra.

The start of the concert was delayed 20 minutes due to security issues that slowed entry to the auditorium.

"The Planets" alone will be reprised tonight at 6:30 p.m. in the final installment of the new "Fresh Friday" encore performance series.