

WSO takes musical tour of the galaxy

Contributed by Gwenda Nemerofsky
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Concert Review The Planets

Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra
Centennial Concert Hall, Nov. 1
Attendance 1,653

Audience members didn't need to peer through the telescopes in the lobby of Centennial Concert Hall Saturday night to get a real feel for the solar system. They just had to take their seats and listen to an out-of-this-world performance of *The Planets* by Gustav Holst, played by the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra.

Conductor Alexander Mickelthwate led the ensemble in a stirring reading of the British composer's most famous work, too rarely performed in its entirety.

Mars offered up ominous brass, pounding rhythms, and huge sweeps of sound from the strings. Mickelthwate built up the drama, his stabbing baton reaping swirling swells that conjured up a galaxy of wonder. The trumpets could have articulated some of their entries more succinctly, though. Their almost lackadaisical approach needed tightening.

A lone French horn heralded the opening of Venus with soothing woodwinds and burbling harp, creating a restful effect. The violin section phrased the bittersweet melody beautifully and solos by concertmaster Gwen Hoebig and principal cello Yuri Hooker were wonderfully serene.

Humorous scurrying was played with seamless precision in Mercury and superb orchestration produced colourful and effective images in Saturn. Duo harps provided a balm after the raucous passages of the brass, timpani and tubular bells.

Jupiter, one of the best-known movements, raised goosebumps on many an arm, as Mickelthwate brought great majesty to this interpretation. Despite occasional synchronization glitches, the anthem-like melody in the *maestoso* section made you want to hold your head a little higher, in awe of the music's great power. Solid work by the double basses and low brass created special texture.

Prairie Voices Women's Chorus, under the direction of Kristel Peters, lent a lovely ethereal quality to Neptune, singing offstage and providing the final shimmering notes of this moving performance.

Earlier, young Canadian violinist Nikki Chooi showed himself to be a true rising star, with a passionate presentation of John Corigliano's *The Red Violin: Chaconne*, from the score of the 1998 film.

Chooi produces a lovely tone and showed great patience, allowing the melody to carry him through numerous moods and expressions. His performance was earnest and honest; demonstrating versatility - from fiery intensity and bow-shredding passion to lovingly rendered, mellow phrases. This is a young man to watch.

The premiere of composer-in-residence Vincent Ho's *Red Zen* was the opening work. While slow to get going, it eventually erupted into a rather jazzy and cacophonous interweaving of instruments, with strings used as much as percussion instruments as melodic ones. More focused on effects, without the urge to provide much melody, the sizzingly frantic and often nightmarish 15-minute work held the audience's attention for about the first 10, after which they began to noticeably fidget and cough.

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