

**Concert delivers heavenly music**  
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Is there anything more wondrous and awe-inspiring than the planets? Those heavenly bodies that hang over us by night mystify and remind us of our diminutive size in the expansive grandeur that is our universe. This last weekend, the planets were a lot closer than astrologists may have predicted — thanks to the Madison Symphony Orchestra and guest conductor Chosei Komatsu. Performing a three-part concert at the Overture Center for the Arts, the MSO highlighted the night with “The Planets,” the timeless seven-piece orchestral suite written by Gustav Holst nearly a century ago. Just as the heavenly bodies themselves, the musical milieu of the MSO was as mesmerizing as it was beautiful.

The show opened with a short overture — a light, jocular piece that perked the audience’s attention — by modern American composer Aaron Copeland. Almost as if to introduce each section of the symphony orchestra, “An Outdoor Overture” seemed very conversational at times, with the strings, winds and brasses exchanging short melodies. Although well performed, the piece almost seemed a bit too lighthearted and a little silly even. But, considering it was merely the opener and relatively short, its impact was minimal.

As the anticipation for “The Planets” built up, guest cellist Alban Gerhardt played a somber yet intense concerto by Edward Elgar, inspired by the aftermath of World War I. The talented young musician imbued the 30-minute concerto with heartfelt poignancy, delivering the four chilling movements with morose intensity and pained passion. The abrupt close left the audience jarred and moved by its sadness. The intermission followed and seemed an eternity as the wait for “The Planets” slowly drew to an end. The lights dimmed as the audience grew silent, eagerness filling the air. Then it began as the sinister march of “Mars, the Bringer of War” broke the silence, ushering in the beginning of “The Planets.” Inspired by the celestial bodies themselves, each movement is named after one of the planets, followed by description based on the Roman deities. Written in 1914 after Holst had taken a fancy to astrology, he had commented that “there is nothing in ‘The Planets’ that can be expressed in words.”

To this day, the seven-piece movement retains that inexplicable quality that simply must be experienced and felt. Progressing in order from each planet’s distance from Earth (which is not one of the movements, along with Pluto which was not yet discovered), the ominous red planet ended in an explosive conclusion, giving way to its counterpart, “Venus, the Bringer of Peace,” a quieter, tranquil melody showcasing the strings and two harps. Amidst the remaining planets, “Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity” shined for its unrivaled upbeat and repeated melody, as well as “Neptune, the Mystic” for its eerie overtone and use of a women’s chorus described in the program notes as “an unearthly hymn that fades gradually into space.” For lack of more descriptive words, the MSO’s performance was simply celestially moving, truly doing justice to Holst and his planets.

Although classical musical may not appeal to many youths, and common knowledge of “The Planets” may not extend beyond the Facebook group “I’m Glad Pluto’s No Longer a Planet; It Makes Gustav Holst’s Suite Complete,” the symphony is a truly moving experience, and the University of Wisconsin campus is graced to have our very own, very talented symphony here in Madison. Beyond the genre, simply synchronization of the musicians and the swift movement of the conductor’s hands as they slice through the air alone are mesmerizing and impressive.

Our generation often forgets that such beautiful sounds can exist outside of speakers and headphones and movie soundtracks. You’d be doing yourself a favor to attend an MSO performance and remember.