

Madison Symphony deftly navigates 'The Planets'

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Sometimes the conventions of symphonic attendance can be frustrating. On Friday night, Gustav Holst's first movement of "The Planets," an ode to the red planet, was so militant, so colorful, we wanted nothing more than to clap. But that wouldn't be appropriate. Dutifully waiting the 50 minutes, the Madison Symphony Orchestra audience held its fire in Overture Hall until an enthusiastic round of applause at the close of the night.

The entire evening seemed to revolve around harnessing and controlling energy, from Alban Gerhardt's passionate rendition of the Elgar Cello Concerto to the precisely expressive and energetic baton of Chosei Komatsu.

Komatsu, artistic director of the Orquesta Sinfonica Nacional de Costa Rica and the music director of Central Aichi Symphony Orchestra in Japan, filled in for maestro John DeMain while he was away conducting in Orange County.

He did a fine job, too, starting with Copland's eight-minute "An Outdoor Overture." Composed to inspire American youth, the lively 1938 piece felt singularly comforting. Familiar or not (this is the first time the MSO has performed this overture), the style of Copland's bright, often lyrical piece feels like a perfect choice for the midst of election season. It's just so—well, American.

German cellist Alban Gerhardt joined the symphony again for the Elgar, having last played in Madison nine years ago. Opening with an intense, dramatic solo passage and moving deftly between light and darker themes, Gerhardt shone especially in the final movement. His performance of the melancholy concerto ranged from tightly wound and angry to smooth as dark, bitter chocolate.

If you did not know that the English composer wrote this toward the end of his life after a lengthy struggle with depression, this piece would give you a strong clue. The sense of melancholy is tempered with a mature depth of emotion.

After intermission, the symphony swelled to 102 players plus an offstage women's choir, conducted by Beverly Taylor.

A perennial favorite, the 1917 "Planets" suite evoked a range of colors and moods, from choppy seas and marauding armies in "Mars, the Bringer of War" to a cool, mellow breeze that moved from violin to oboe to clarinet in "Venus, Bringer of Peace."

Mercury's light-footed movement recalled Puck, Shakespeare's clever fairy, as he flitted "over hill, over dale, thorough bush, through brier." Jupiter's "Bringer of Jollity" movement again brought out the power, its hymnlike passages recalling an old man in deep purple robes.

Part of the fun of "The Planets" is the variety in tone, and Komatsu leads the symphony in maximizing every last moment. Saturn recalls an endless ocean, Uranus, "the Magician," is vividly dynamic and Neptune returns to the wind section in the most celestial of the movements. Taylor's chorus ably assists here, with breezy, wordless tones from behind the players.

Incidentally, Holst only wrote about seven planets, excluding Earth and the not-yet-discovered, not-yet-ousted Pluto. He was inspired by them as astrological entities, their "personalities."

All told, the symphony was in fine form Friday night, with precise playing, expressive dynamics and visual treats. (Watch for a brave percussionist standing atop a ladder during "The Planets"). With three entertaining works, the program is accessible and thoroughly enjoyable.