

Holst's 'Planets' a beautiful show; now one suggestion...

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Just as a thought: Gustave Holst might have realigned "The Planets" for better musical effect.

The Madison Symphony Orchestra played the Holst seven-part suite, surely a masterpiece, Friday night in Overture Hall under the direction of a dynamic guest conductor, Chosei Komatsu, and played it very well indeed.

The excellent full concert included a sensitive interpretation of the Elgar Cello Concerto by Alban Gerhardt.

Komatsu, with firm baton and an energetic but not extreme physical approach, brought out the best in the 90-plus musicians and the colorful instrumentation, with a huge percussion battery, in "The Planets." The sound at its most boisterous was almost deafening but was still powerful music, not noise, and the tempos, from the most aggressive to the slowly lyrical, were spot-on. A riveting performance of tuneful, dramatic, and brilliantly scored music.

Yet, I would mildly suggest that, from a purely musical impact, the sections might be rearranged. This may be heresy. But consider: This orchestra played a rearranged Grieg Peer Gynt Suite a few years ago, for excellent musical effect, and nobody was scandalized.

The most popular (and familiar) part of "The Planets" is "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity," and rightly so. Full orchestral scoring with dazzling contrapuntal work, powerful, bright, brisk, tuneful, building to an appropriately abrupt climax...It should be the finale to the work; instead, it is directly in the center, the fourth section.

The final part, "Neptune, the Mystic," with its delicate opening, its gossamer abstraction, its otherworldly off-stage women's wordless chorus (nicely done by 33 members of the Madison Symphony Chorus), and its dying fall to a whisper, would be an ideal beginning, and a perfect lead into "Mars, the Bringer of War," with its martial, insistent, even brutal rhythms and its enormous instrumentation scale. Switching the fanfare-led brightness of "Uranus" to fifth position and the mostly slower and quieter "Saturn" to six would be a better contrast, too.

And really, no Holst references to astrology or mythology need be considered. Just appreciate the wonderful music. The few orchestral miscues were so insignificant it would be churlish to specify. The Elgar concerto is smoothly melodious and intimate in feel. Gerhardt displayed a plangent tone, with energy and bite to keep the concerto from being excessively rhapsodic. Especially impressive was the Mendelssohn-like airy fleetness of the second movement. The opener, Copland's "An Outdoor Overture," had trademark, easily recognizable Copland touches. Enjoyable, and, of course, well-played.

The concert will be repeated at 8 tonight and 2:30 p.m. Sunday.