

San Bernardino Symphony - Beyond Gravity

The Press-Enterprise, by Sherli Leonard, Filed September 30, 2013

Almost literally, the San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra took its audience out of this world for a season-opening concert on Saturday night at the California Theater for the Performing Arts. Titled "Beyond Gravity," the program featured works of universe-sized dimensions, and the orchestra showed off its immense capacity to fill a hall with a glorious sound.

"The Planets" by Gustav Holst is a long work, and the composer seemed to spend more time than necessary developing each of the seven movements, but it was marvelously performed for this concert. While images of the planets projected on the screen above the orchestra did not distract, they were probably superfluous as simply watching the musicians was visual stimulation enough, especially the timpanists, Bruce Anderson and Gary Long who smoothly managed eight drums and defined the driving rhythm.

Two timpanists, five double bass players, two harpists, and double players on all the wind instruments gave the orchestra the huge sound required for the program. "The Planets" is not dinner music, demanding listener concentration throughout to appreciate the brilliant orchestral colors and subtleties of both the serene moments and the powerful sections, all grandly delivered by this orchestra.

The good audience refrained from between-movement applause except for a can't-help-yourself, genuinely appreciative hand-clapping at the end of the fourth movement, "Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity," with the orchestra capturing the movement's wonderful exuberance. The movement swirled with marvelous moments, including the unison strings with horns creating the grand theme, grand enough to speak of the universe. Fetta, usually spare with his direction, showed more animation than I've ever seen.

In the fifth movement, dedicated to Saturn, The Bringer of Old Age, the orchestra showed its capacity to be as small as big, with a fine balance of strings to brass, flutes sublimely subdued, and horns and brass maintaining a difficult and high ostinato.

Throughout the work, the spot-on horns, always exposed, securely delivered difficult entrances and challenging leaps.

In a magnificently directed moment, the seventh movement dissolved away into an ethereal chorus of high, sustained off-stage voices that slowly floated away, the orchestra and Fetta long finished. The members of the California State University, San Bernardino Singers came on stage for their well-deserved applause.

In the audience, composer Craig Safan listened to the audience appreciate his composition, "The Last Starfighter Overture," as the orchestra's wonderful trumpet section, lead by principal David Scott showed why they can always be trusted with the tough stuff.

After a program of big and bigger music, including John Williams' "E.T. Adventures on Earth" and "Star Wars Medley," I found myself actually craving a little Mozart for a break from the evening's almost overwhelmingly huge sounds. Alas, I'll have to wait until the spring for that. In the meanwhile, the orchestra will tackle Sibelius and Dvorak in the November concert, and we can count on them delivering yet more fine symphonic music.