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REVIEW: Violinist, orchestra fling themselves into the universe with abandon

By Gayle Williams

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The Sarasota Orchestra seems to be heading to the universe and beyond with a brilliant program of music and imagery that captured the imagination. The pairing of Gustav Holst's The Planets with Antonio Vivaldi's four concerto cycle, The Four Seasons, is not an obvious choice, but for conductor Leif Bjaland, there is genius in his madness.

MUSIC REVIEW

"Seasons and Planets," Sarasota Orchestra. Leif Bjaland, conductor. Lara St. John, violin. Reviewed Feb. 21 at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall.

After enduring a seeming bombardment of Four Seasons recordings over a lifetime, it was refreshing to hear the innovative take of violin soloist Lara St. John who has a reputation for a highly imaginative and idiosyncratic flair. She made the most of the

graphically programmatic musical language of these concertos.

Vivaldi painted vivid images of each season corresponding with a set of four poems. One literally hears cuckoos and turtle doves, buzzing flies, a summer storm, drunken peasants, chattering teeth and breaking ice. With the poetry projected onto a screen above the orchestra one could follow along, but with St. John musically channeling the narrative, one didn't need the words. There was great attention and inventive use of intonation, technique and rubato making the line not necessarily pretty or perfect, but highly effective and sometimes savage.

Playing with such abandon she was a virtuosic force, but she was not alone. The pared down orchestra — only 25 strings and harpsichord — were a team of virtuosi playing precisely with both vigor and delicacy as required.

Leaping light years into the future, the full orchestra and then some took on The Planets with gusto and a spark of magic. This time animation and images of each of the seven planets featured in the work were projected onto the screen. While Holst's intention when he composed this set in the first decades of the 20th century was to evoke the astrological significance corresponding with each planet, for example Mars with aggression, what we hear

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could be the first of a genre, the granddaddy of soundtracks for “Star Wars,” “Star Trek” and the like.

Reinforced by the imagery on the screen, the orchestra tore into the frenetic and fearsome Mars where the brass and percussion – central to this most famous of the movements – showed off their macho power. Other planetary movements provided diversity of sound, color and mood highlighting the many strengths of this orchestra as it boldly goes where only the best deserve to be. Captain’s Log: The Sarasota Orchestra does it again.

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