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ASO's *The Planets* a spectacular concert experience

By Steve Siegel

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One small step up the podium, one giant leap into the cosmos. On Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon at Symphony Hall, the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, piloted by conductor Diane Wittry, blasted off into the solar system and beyond with an extraterrestrial program of music by Holst, Corigliano, Horner and Debussy. The main attraction was Holst's ever-popular orchestral suite "The Planets," with the orchestra



accompanied by a high definition film featuring awe-inspiring planetary images, computer-generated animations, and science visualizations by astronomer and video artist Jose Francisco Salgado. Even the most jaded classical music buff would have found the ASO's performance enthralling by itself, but the addition of Salgado's thrilling images projected onto a 30 foot-wide screen above the stage turned the sensational into the spectacular.

More than mere pretty pictures, Salgado's video is a science lesson cleverly disguised as entertainment. To watch a Mariner spacecraft being deployed into the red planet's upper atmosphere, descend, and then bravely rove its craggy surface - all in sync with brass and percussion pounding out harsh blocks of sound in a motor-like rhythmic tread, was brilliant. Equally fascinating was seeing images of Jupiter and its moons progress from crude sketches by Galileo to incredibly detailed videos taken by NASA interplanetary spacecraft, while simultaneously hearing the orchestra deploy robust tunes derived from English folk dances and a stately hymn-like theme of rejoicing. The ASO's particularly solid brass cast their spell in conjuring Uranus, the Magician, accompanied by images of newspaper clippings proclaiming that planet's discovery.

By the time we reach Neptune, we're leaving the solar system, watching galaxies and nebulae fly by as the ethereal voices of the Kutztown University Choir and Lafayette College Chamber singers float in from offstage, softly fading into silent infinity.

The two choruses also starred onstage in James Horner's theme from the 1995 film "Apollo 13," suitably solemn and dirge-like in evoking that nearly catastrophic mission. John Corigliano's "L'Invitation au Voyage" was a gentle, whisper-soft serenade for chorus, with string octet and double bass accompaniment. Both pieces were accompanied by still images -- the moon becoming increasingly nearer in "Apollo 13," and a stunning image of the Andromeda nebula in "Voyage."

A huge image of the full moon hung overhead during pianist Michael Toth's sweetly compelling solo in Debussy's "Claire de Lune," as the orchestra, bathed in deep blue lighting as if in moonlight, stood silently by. The ensuing serenity was abruptly broken by Corigliano's strikingly imaginative, fabulously boisterous "Mannheim Rocket." Corigliano named this quirky piece after an 18th century musical technique, in which a rising scale speeds up and grows louder as it rises higher. But the composer actually had an imaginary spaceship in mind, as we soon hear when the rumbling percussion and throbbing basses are touched off by a match (the amplified sound of sandpaper being scratched), and his creation is launched.

A team of four perform on every imaginable, and sometimes unimaginable, percussion instrument, including two musical saws, police whistles, an inverted cymbal filled with nuts and bolts, amplified cellophane, and smashing glass plates (that's the escape out of Earth's atmosphere). After serenely drifting among the stars, the ship starts its frightening descent, with symbols crashing and violins hissing as the ship's "engines" cool off -- all great fun, especially so with the accompanying stills of a retro-looking, Buck Rogers-style spaceship.

While Holst neglected Earth in his suite, the ASO paid special homage to our home orb before the Sunday afternoon concert with two compositions by winners of its 2012 Young Composer Competition. Kira Butz, an eighth grader from Trexler Middle School, won first place with her composition "Earth," a cute and clever pop/jazz/light classical piece performed by the Allentown City Orchestra, consisting mostly of elementary school kids. Evan Nygard, a home-schooled fifth grader, won second place with his own "Earth" scored for brass quintet, with a more traditional Renaissance brass formality to it.