

Akron Symphony traverses the cosmos in “The Planets” (Oct. 19)



by Stephanie Manning

Just before the Akron Symphony began their October 19 concert with Charles Ives’ *The Unanswered Question*, the audience was suddenly presented with a question of their own. Why were the musicians leaving the stage right after tuning?

Although bemused clapping and laughter followed, this conundrum luckily had an easy answer. Ives specifies that the string orchestra be hidden, which left only the four flute players and conductor Christopher Wilkins visible. So E.J. Thomas Hall darkened even further, leaving only the music stand

lights and the haze diffused from backstage. In other words, it was an auspicious start to a concert with some deep ideas about the cosmos.

“Welcome to the Twilight Zone,” Wilkins intoned post-Ives. Indeed, *The Unanswered Question* had created a perfectly eerie backdrop. Suffused by the muted strings, trumpet soloist Jay Villella posed plaintive questions from his position on the balcony, while the flute quartet provided ever-changing and elusive answers.

Gity Razaz’s *Methuselah (In Chains of Time)* proved similarly impenetrable in the Akron premiere of this co-commissioned work, with different textures, motifs, and time signatures drifting by and slipping through the fingers. The piece conjured the deep roots of the ancient tree before the shimmering, stratospheric solo from concertmaster Hadar Zaidel pushed it out of the earth.

If the first two pieces posed more questions than they did answers, then the latter two were chock full of recognizable material. Even if the name *Les Préludes* doesn’t ring a bell, you’ve likely heard a melody or two from this Franz Liszt work, which straddles the line between “popular” and “serious” repertoire. This was a light, comfortable choice for the group, topped off with some nicely-phrased oboe solos from Cynthia Warren.

Another crowd-pleaser, Gustav Holst's *The Planets*, boasts some of the most recognizable moments in classical repertoire. The energy was buzzing even from the opening "Mars, the Bringer of War," and the famous "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity" was flush with both driving momentum and heartfelt renditions of well-known melodies.

The performance of the full 50-minute work also allowed for an appreciation of the lesser-known movements. Some, like "Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age," could feel a bit unmoored, but there was plenty of fun to be had with movements like "Uranus, the Magician" and its playful bassoon section.

The Symphony's soloists consistently stepped up to meet Holst's demands. Principal horn Matthew Mauro contributed a rich solo to "Venus, the Bringer of Peace," capping off a strong evening for the brass section all around. "Venus" and "Mercury, the Winged Messenger" both received sparkles of celesta from Mio Arai, while Alyson Rzeszotarski made an impression in the later movements as a consistently accurate presence at the pitched percussion.

In the final "Neptune, the Mystic," chorus director Chris Albanese led the treble choir from offstage, their wordless humming perhaps symbolizing a glimpse of humanity out there in the stars. Their slowly fading voices carried us in the audiences gently into the distance — or, as Wilkins so eloquently put it, out into the E.J. Thomas parking lot.

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