

Notebook

SYMPHONY NOTES

Symphony's performance of 'The Planets' is stellar

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As if intending to bulwark against the post-parade littering of discarded beads and broken bangles on Palafox Street, the Pensacola Symphony Orchestra filled the Saenger Theatre on Saturday night with a performance that was exceptionally precise and clear.

Audiences expect polished musicianship under the baton of Maestro Peter Rubardt, but this was mono-vocality drawn from an oversized cast of instruments, unusually large in kind and number — an unusual cut above, befitting a program replete with surprises and changes on a singular Mardi Gras night.

Symphony No. 8 in B Minor, D. 759, by Franz Schubert (1797-1828), famous as "The Unfinished," and "The Planets," Op. 32, by Gustav Holst (1874-1934) — only two pieces, no guest soloist — was the uncommon selection for the program. The unannounced replacement of the absent Leonid Yanovskiy by Jenny Gregoire as concertmaster and first violin was another surprise, and the addition of the University of West Florida Women's Chorus, although anticipated in the score of "The Planets," was a fresh touch, as well.

Unusual too — though less happily — was the pairing of Schubert's Symphony No. 8 with "The Planets." Rubardt regularly combines pieces with an unerring logic, ever enlightening and complementary, but this conjunction remained inexplicable throughout.

The Schubert is an "Allegro moderato" and an "Andante con moto" in search of direction, and (judging from an extant piano scherzo sketched and itself incomplete) what would have been another two movements. Heavily emulative of Beethoven, whom Schubert idolized, "The Unfinished" is famous for being just that — a biographical mystery of sound, fury and occasional beauty, but feckless and muddy as musical composition, an homage of borrowed gestures, as perhaps Schubert realized himself.

"The Planets," however, is one of the stand-outs of early 20th-century music, and more than made up for the splendidly performed — if unsatisfying — Schubert. Its seven sections are impressionistic, lyrical portraits of (in order of performance) Mars, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune — the planets important in astrology, in which study Holst was assiduous. One hears in it not Beethoven, but ballets of Stravinsky, tonal colors of Schonberg, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" of Dukas — as did Holst himself — and unavoidably nowadays ("The Planets" being much imitated), "The Imperial March" from "Star Wars," music from various Disney films and themes from certain episodes of "Star Trek." This is rich, ranging music that is demanding to play well, and complexly moving. Yet when the audience rose to its feet after the last, ethereal voices of the UWF Women's Chorus faded to silence to find Rubardt and the Pensacola Symphony Orchestra up to the challenge on a night of many surprises, that wasn't unusual at all.