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Concert Review: Philharmonic's 'Planets' shines

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Guest conductor Michael Christie opened the Rhode Island Philharmonic's outing Saturday with a polite performance of Robert Schumann's seldom heard cello concerto. But that was eclipsed after intermission by a stunning rendition of Gustav Holst's hour-long salute to the solar system, "The Planets."

Christie, who became the first-ever music director of the Minnesota Opera last season, seemed like two different conductors at times -- the first, cautious with a piece that doesn't offer a lot of excitement in the first place; the second, a dynamic force on the podium who was able to get the best out of the players.

That sweeping English anthem picked up by the strings in the Jupiter section of "The Planets" was gorgeous, sounding as fine as any orchestra I've heard. And the opening portrait of Mars, The Bringer of War, was shattering.

By contrast the Schumann seemed rather flat, even though cellist Colin Carr sounded great and did some nice things in the slow movement. He doesn't have a big sound, but it is warm.

It's true there was a sense of longing in the opening theme, but the first movement was kind of hard to connect with.

Christie should be complemented, though, for keeping balances in focus in the Schumann, so that Carr was always at the fore.

Of course, it's not easy to compete with a piece like "The Planets," which pulls out all the stops. The orchestra, which usually numbers around 70 players, logged in at 90 for the weekend concert at Veterans Memorial Auditorium. And that made for lush sounds from instruments you don't often hear, such as the bass oboe.

Holst's reputation pretty much rests on "The Planets," and it's easy to see why. It's an enormously inventive piece that's brilliantly orchestrated. In Holst's driving depiction of Uranus, the composer builds to a towering climax that drops back to the shimmering whisper of strings and a duet between two harps. Then he follows that up with the eerie conclusion, a dreamy take on "Neptune" that fades into the distance with the hushed pulsing of an off-stage women's choir. The women of the Providence Singers did the honors.

Word has it that "The Planets" is a Christie specialty. It certainly sounded that way, for there wasn't a moment that didn't hang together and hold your attention.