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Chicago Sinfonietta gets blues for season finale

May 9, 2008 BY [DELIA O'HARA](#) dohara@suntimes.com

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Fans of the Chicago Sinfonietta have come to expect artistic adventures from the 21-year-old orchestra -- indeed, musical innovation is part of its mission. The last offering of the season, "Portraits of the Blues/Back into Space," which will be played Sunday at Dominican University in River Forest and Monday at Orchestra Hall, is not likely to disappoint.

"This is another opportunity to combine another style with the symphony orchestra," says Paul Freeman, the Sinfonietta's founder and music director, who will conduct the concerts.

This is, after all, the organization that last season premiered David Baker's "Concertina for Cell Phones and Orchestra," during which audience members activated their ringtones for part of the work.

This weekend's program will begin classically enough, with Beethoven's "Egmont Overture," a piece of incidental music the composer wrote in the early 19th century for a revival of one of Goethe's plays.

Then blues guitarist John Primer, a member of the late Muddy Waters' band, will trade musical phrases with the orchestra in the world-premiere performances of "Three Songs for Bluesman and Orchestra," written for the Sinfonietta by the Baltimore-based composer Larry Hoffman.

For part of the new piece, "the orchestra will play the notes the way I have written them, to the letter, and then John will improvise on them," Hoffman said. "I wanted [the orchestra] to be John's band up there. I couldn't be more excited about it."

That's not all. Pianist Leon Bates will solo with the orchestra on "Rhapsody in Blue," George Gershwin's stunning 1924 melange of jazz and classical music.

Jose Francisco Salgado, a digital artist and astronomer at the Adler Planetarium, will present his new visual re-imagining of Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." Salgado's pictures amount to portals to the heavens, where viewers -- and listeners -- will encounter planets, constellations and even a black hole.

"Dr. Salgado is very good at selecting celestial scenes and matching them to the music," says Freeman. "The classical works will buttress the two works influenced by jazz and blues."

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