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## Gershwin tops off Sinfonietta season

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Paul Freeman, Chicago Sinfonietta  
 Conductor/Founder

Mother's Day was a family affair at the season's closing concert of Chicago's "other" professional orchestra: Chicago Sinfonietta. Before revving up his symphonic machine at Dominican University's Lund Auditorium, conductor and founder Paul Freeman congratulated the whole orchestral family-musicians, board, staff, and patrons for 21 years of music-making.

### Spaced out

Look for Salgado's highly recommended video collaboration with the Sinfonietta in Gustav Holst's *The Planets* at Millennium Park on Aug. 22 and thinking ahead to fall (who's doing that?), there are subscriptions on sale now for the Sinfonietta's 22nd season. For more information, go to [www.chicagosinfonietta.org](http://www.chicagosinfonietta.org)

Then he modestly mentioned that his 8-month-old granddaughter was in the crowd, along with all of the moms out there, who incidentally sported beribboned carnations, compliments of the Sinfonietta.

Diversions such as flowers and accolades are de rigeur at Sinfonietta concerts, where the atmosphere is decidedly down-to-earth. It's the only classical act in town where, in the audience, you can see a man in a Cubs jacket and a teen in a plaid coat with a dog-eared copy of *On the Road*.

But lest I be diverted, on to the music. Consistent with Freeman's clever *modus operandi*, this concert had a catchy theme: "Portraits of the Blues/Back Into Space." The blues were provided by guitarist John Primer of Muddy Waters and Magic Slim fame. Primer turned the hall into a blues club, with three new pieces by Larry Hoffman, commissioned by the Sinfonietta. Maestro Freeman alerted us that in usual blues style, Primer would improvise much of his music.

As he played on steel guitar, he sang along in a throaty, expressive tone, lamenting the woes of life and lost love, but holding out hope in "Keep on Lovin' the Blues." The orchestra filled in bit parts that might have been covered by a small combo in a more conventional setting. Although Primer has had an illustrious career, in these works he seemed to shy

away from flashy riffs and dwelled instead on simpler decoration of the melodies.

George Gershwin's venerable Rhapsody in Blue was a far more successful pairing of popular idiom with a classical orchestra. The soloist, Leon Bates, has frequently collaborated with Freeman, and his appearances in the Chicago area, past and future, are always welcome. Bates has probably played this work to death in his 20-odd years as a concert soloist, but no tarnish was evident. His assertive approach to the music was riveting; his mastery of the keyboard was everywhere evident. He struck just the right balance of light-hearted teasing versus ponderous intensity with no hesitations. This piece has nearly been destroyed thanks to commercial exploitation by United Airlines, but Bates gave it a fresh and glossy sheen that stood out as the best offering of the afternoon.

The popular "Pictures at an Exhibition" appeared at the close of concert. Originally scored for pianos by Russian Modest Mussorgsky, this music was first tweaked by Frenchman Maurice Ravel in 1922 into the standard orchestral version that is most performed today. This year's recent tweaking was the addition of "Astronomical Pictures," conceived by video artist Dr. José Francisco Salgado of Adler Planetarium.

For those who enjoy imagery with music, this presentation offered intriguing shots from space, carefully sequenced by Salgado in an ever-changing array of colors and dimensions. Some scenes included captions, distinguishing for example, terrain on Mars from an unknown desert, or a Hubble shot from a nameless galaxy. Salgado provided gilt frames for opening scenes of planets and stars, often giving the impression of wandering through a gallery or sailing through space. The speed of the camera closely mimicked the rhythms of the music, although for many of the 11 movements, the video outran the performance and finished to a background of silence.

Salgado's talents as a video artist are quite admirable, and he uses footage that most artists could never access. But it's hard in any medium to keep pace with Mussorgsky's fascinating musical language and Ravel's resplendent orchestration. With the musicians behind a scrim, seeing stars on a screen instead of strings on a stage was another diversion. Taking the broad view, one must congratulate the ever-widening Sinfonietta family for their long history of breaking out of the mold. Whether or not you want to divide your attention at their concerts is your choice.

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