

The New Criterion

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Spaced out in the nation's capital

by Paul du Quenoy

In our tense and increasingly paranoid capital, finding subjects of unity and agreement is an almost impossible task. Now revitalized under the direction of the dynamic Italian conductor Gianandrea Noseda, the National Symphony Orchestra settled on the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing as its seasonal theme. The actual anniversary will come well into the summer of 2019, but with the Kavanaugh confirmation controversy raging just a short ride away from the Kennedy Center, few topics other than outer space could sustain any bipartisan consensus.

A kind of soft opening came in the form of the nso Pops playing John Williams's iconic score to the first film in the *Star Wars* franchise, "A New Hope" (confusingly enumerated "Episode 4"). The screen was not as big as one might hope—the city's historic Uptown Theater boasts an enormous curved screen and hosted the *Star Wars* digital re-releases in the 1990s—but the live performance in the Kennedy Center's Concert Hall added a dynamic touch to a viewing of the familiar film. The Pops director Steven Reineke's reading of the score was more serious, and to a degree more somber, than Williams's original, but this approach brought out some worthy elements, especially in the motivic fragments of evil. Reineke made them more percussive and confrontational than one might recall from viewing the film in a more innocent time. A comparative analysis of *Star Wars* and Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* remains to be written, but the commonality of dark themes resounded in great relief. Apart from a spirited tooting of the introductory Twentieth Century Fox fanfare, not much room was left for levity. But it would be a worthy exercise to follow the Pops's progress with several subsequent *Star Wars* films as the season progresses.



Gianandrea Noseda conducts the National Symphony Orchestra. Photo: Scott Suchman.

The main event—the nso’s official opening on September 22—was a light affair, featuring an undemanding program focused on a corpus of classical music that follows the space theme. In an abbreviated concert of ninety minutes following a lengthy and generous cocktail reception bedecked with uniformed *Star Wars* Storm Troopers, Maestro Noseda, now in his second full season as music director, took the podium to navigate around four selections from Gustav Holst’s well-known orchestral suite *The Planets*, opening

with the warlike strains of “Mars,” though the tuxed and botoxed socialites in attendance did not seem to grasp any unsettling allusion to the town’s combative political life. The milder “Venus” and “Mercury” turned up later, with the grand “Jupiter” majestically ending the official program. These are familiar pieces, to be sure, but Noseda’s eye for nuance brought an uncommon freshness to an ensemble that had become a bit stale under his predecessors.

The same energy and cohesive direction emerged in the concert’s other short selections, which included Claude Debussy’s *Clair de Lune* and the contemporary American composer Michael Giacchino’s more filmic *Voyage*. The nimble violinist Joshua Bell joined for a stirring instrumental rendition of “Song to the Moon” from Antonín Dvořák’s opera *Rusalka* and indulged in some showier playing of Manuel Ponce’s *Estrellita* and two selections by Pablo de Sarasate: “Habanera”

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from *Carmen Fantasy* and the gypsy étude *Zigeunerweisen*. In case Holst's "Mars" was lost on anyone, Maestro Nosedá gave an encore of a muscular selection from Williams's *Star Wars* suite showcasing Darth Vader's music. It got a good laugh, but many in the crowd eagerly rushed off to a splendid gala dinner of lobster tail and short ribs, where one symphony supporter bid \$61,000 to guest-conduct the Symphony at a later date in a short patriotic piece after some personal coaching from Maestro Nosedá. The cavernous tent hosting the affair did not exactly allow for dancing under the stars—at this party, unusually for Washington, people actually did dance to DJed hits—but projected images brought the galaxy inside, while a large lunar projection against the Kennedy Center's massive white walls allowed for romantic photo ops.

Vocal music was missing from the occasion, and the Symphony's counterpart, the Washington National Opera, does not open its truncated season until October. Nevertheless, the venerable Vocal Arts Society filled the lacuna with a moving concert by the promising baritone Brian Mulligan, accompanied elegantly by the pianist Timothy Long. Much anticipated after its cancellation late last season, the program featured the world premiere of Gregory Spears's song cycle *Walden*, based on Henry David Thoreau's reflections on his bucolic isolation near the eponymous pond. Enamored of the literary work, Spears, who was in attendance, selected five excerpts that spoke to him personally and arranged them in four sections and a coda. Mulligan delivered them with an aching sensitivity that made Thoreau's prose far more interesting than one might remember from an ordinary school read.

The second part of the program looked back to the American composer Dominick Argento's song cycle adapted from entries in Virginia Woolf's posthumously published diaries. The songs become progressively sadder, culminating in "Last Entry," which was written less than three weeks before the author's suicide. But their rumbling insecurity and heartbreaking, matter-of-fact approach to life and death won the cycle the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1975. Once again, Mulligan's gentle voice lent itself well to music that he personally champions in the face of unjust obscurity.



Gianandrea Noseda and the National Symphony Orchestra. Photo: Scott Suchman.

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