



NJSO plays with color in first Winter Festival Program at NJPAC

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By



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**By Bradley Bamberger
For The Star-Ledger**

Fans of rock and pop music have been used to evocative multi-hued light effects in their events since the psychedelic '60s, so the plain bright institutional lighting common at classical concerts can seem pretty behind the times. Yet it was a classical composer, the Russian avant-gardist Alexander Scriabin, who had the inspired idea of pairing music with colored illumination at concerts way back in 1911, although the technology was lacking for him to ever see it fully realized.

On Friday, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra -- as part of the first program in its three-week winter festival -- performed Scriabin's "Prometheus: The Poem of Fire" in Newark complete with lighting that changed color according to the score's kaleidoscopic harmonies.

With the main hall of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center darkened for maximum effect, NJSO music director Jacques Lacombe conducted a strikingly sensuous realization of "The Poem of Fire" -- the first performance of the work in the orchestra's history. For his pioneering tone poem, Scriabin imagined a "color organ" that would saturate the stage with deep red for harmonies in F, say, or violet for D flat. The lighting effects for the NJSO were designed by Al Crawford (lighting director for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater). Following the score at his lighting controller, he illuminated five circular reflectors above the stage; like glowing orbs, they bathed the musicians in shifting color as Scriabin's futurist -- or as he dubbed them, "mystic" -- chords undulated in the air. The work also includes a key part for piano, which was played by Russian-born up-and-comer Yevgeny Sudbin.

"The Poem of Fire" is an ideal fit for the NJSO's annual winter festival this year, as the festival's overarching theme is the element of fire -- being the second of a multi-year "Man & Nature" concept,

following 2011's focus on works with water as a theme (such as Debussy's "La Mer," Tan Dun's "Water Concerto," etc). The other works on this weekend's program -- given a subtitle of "The Hero's Fire" -- are Wagner's "Wotan's Farewell"/"Magic Fire Music" (from his opera "Die Walküre") and the complete score to Stravinsky's ballet "The Firebird." The NJSO will repeat the program tonight at the State Theatre in New Brunswick and tomorrow afternoon at NJPAC. The Jan. 13-15 "Playing with Fire" concerts feature a potpourri of such pieces as Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld" Overture, while the Jan. 20-22 "Fire: Light and Legend" program includes Beethoven's "Creatures of Prometheus" ballet and Kaija Saariaho's cello concerto "Notes on Light."

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