

Marin Symphony on a journey to planet Vasks

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It's the kind of coincidence only fate could devise.

When music director Alasdair Neale planned this week's Marin Symphony program, he invited pianist Orion Weiss to play Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto - a formidable piece, the supernova in the piano repertoire. Neale also programmed a then-untitled new work by Latvian composer Peteris Vasks, commissioned especially for Bay Area audiences. But then fate stepped in, in the form of the Committee for Small Body Nomenclature. This organization, charged with baptizing heavenly real estate, officially renamed planet 16513 to Planet Vasks, in honor of the composer. Celestial references between Orion - the rising young star who shares his name with a constellation - and Vasks - the cosmic composer who shares his name with a planet - were inevitable.

Marin music lovers will benefit from the astronomical light this week when the Marin Symphony performs at 7:30 p.m. Sunday and Tuesday in Veterans Memorial Auditorium in San Rafael.

Vasks was as yet unaware of his cosmic significance early this month when he spoke of his new composition from his home in Latvia.

"The most important task of music is to bring (the audience) to another reality, to bring them to this other world," he said in words more apt than he realized.

At the time, he was referring to a metaphoric "other place." In his composition, called "Sala," (which means "island" in Latvian), Vasks invites Marin audiences to join him in a special musical journey.

"Every symphonic piece is actually a story about love, joy and the emotions we have," he explained. "In 'Sala,' the story told is about my island. It is a spiritual world where you can be in solitude, be free and happy." (Freedom is particularly important to Vasks, whose nation until recently had been ruled by foreigners for 700 years.)

But "Sala" is not a piece of Romantic-era programme music. Vasks does not insist the audience hear his music in a particular way. Instead, he hopes to transport listeners to their own island of solitude.

"If they come with me on this journey, I am happy," he said. In fact, he explained that successful audience reception is integral to the birthing of a piece, which requires a trilogy of factors. First, of course, the composer must write the piece. Second, the musicians must learn it. And third, the music must be performed in a hall full of listeners.

"When all three factors meet," said Vasks, "only then is the real birth of a piece."

"Sala" began as a protostar some months ago when Vasks received the request for a new piece from Magnum Opus, a commissioning initiative for orchestral work founded by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Kathryn Gould in 2002. Having just completed a long symphonic composition, the award-winning composer was eager to take on

the challenge of a shorter form.

But the piece proved more challenging than he expected.

"This piece didn't move as smoothly as I might have wished," he said.

"Somewhere in the middle, I realized it was not going to be a 15-minute piece. I realized it was going to be more."

Sitting down for a second try, Vasks took the musical material he had already written, material that demanded too much development for a shorter piece, and turned it upside down, finding another theme. The new theme led him in a different direction and this time the piece felt right.

That was also when the title "Sala" made itself known.

"The title is never the first," Vasks explained, "because when you start writing, there is a certain point when the music starts leading you, and this is also the moment when the title is born."

In this case, the title is not just a clue as to how to listen but an invitation to an island - perhaps one on Planet Vasks.

IF YOU GO

Who: Alasdair Neale conducts the Marin Symphony, with pianist Orion Weiss

What: World premiere of "Sala," a symphonic elegy for orchestra by Peteris Vasks

When: 7:30 p.m. Jan. 28 and 30; pre-concert conversation with the conductor at 6:30 p.m.

Where: Marin Veterans Memorial Auditorium at 10 Avenue of the Flags in San Rafael

Tickets: \$27 to \$65

Information: 499-6800, 479-8100; www.marinsymphony.org, www.ticketmaster.com

Meet the artists: Vasks, Weiss, Neale and members of the orchestra will attend a pre-concert reception from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Jan. 28 in the Green Room (reservations required) and at a post-concert party from 9:45 to 11 p.m. Tuesday at the Four Points Sheraton, 1010 Northgate Drive, San Rafael.