

CHAN 6633

Holst

The Planets

Royal Scottish National Orchestra
Sir Alexander Gibson

CHANDOS
COLLECT



Gustav Holst (1874–1934)

The Planets, Op. 32

Suite for large orchestra

1	1	Mars – The Bringer of War	7:23
2	2	Venus – The Bringer of Peace	8:58
3	3	Mercury – The Winged Messenger	4:11
4	4	Jupiter – The Bringer of Jollity	7:29
5	5	Saturn – The Bringer of Old Age	10:03
6	6	Uranus – The Magician	6:02
7	7	Neptune – The Mystic	8:07

with women's voices of the RSNO Chorus

TT 52:28

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Holst: The Planets

Although of Baltic extraction – Holst's great-grandfather had served at the Imperial Russian court and had come to England from the Latvian port of Riga early in the nineteenth century – Holst was born in Cheltenham so was as infused with the spirit of the West Country as were those other architects of the new English music: Parry, Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells. Yet for more than two thirds of his life Holst was known as 'Von Holst' (in letters Vaughan Williams called him 'Dear V') and only changed because of wartime anti-German sentiment.

Holst's first musical allegiances were to Grieg and to Wagner, and while his teacher Stanford may have approved of the former he was not always so enthusiastic about the latter. Holst himself recoiled from the limitations of his prentice works, putting them away and inventing the now celebrated phrase 'early horrors' to describe them. Times change, and now that Holst's mature music is known and this early music has been performed, we have discovered that much of it is surprisingly worthwhile, if atypical of the mature composer.

From the beginning Holst had a brilliant command of the orchestra. Coming from a comparatively poor family background he had

to make his own way and, at first, this meant playing the trombone – a sure way of gaining a practical understanding of the orchestra from the inside. He had to live, though, and once he had been appointed music master at the then new St Paul's Girls School in Hammersmith, in 1905, most of his life was spent teaching. He remained at St Paul's almost until his death.

With his early commitment to William Morris socialism and his interest in adult education and working men's music-making, it was always likely that Holst would take a special interest in folksong, and thus it proved. When his friend Vaughan Williams took down his first folksong in December 1903 it was Holst who was particularly interested in making arrangements for the concert hall, and within a year or two he was producing his own folksong rhapsodies, though he never collected folksongs himself.

By the time he was forty Holst had still only achieved very few performances. If it had not been for three works his friend Balfour Gardiner promoted in 1912 and 1913, he would have thought himself a complete failure. Gardiner programmed the first hearings of the suite *Beni Mora*, of the revised version

of his twenty-minute scena *The Mystic Trumpeter*, setting Walt Whitman's 'From Noon to Starry Night' for soprano and orchestra, and of *The Cloud Messenger*, a forty-minute choral setting of the Sanscrit poet Kalidasa. So when Holst set out to write what became *The Planets* he was a seasoned composer, but not a popular one. With little wider following, he was working in a private world, and with no enforced deadlines or promise of performance; Holst was writing for himself.

Between 1908 and the outbreak of the First World War, orchestral music in England changed. As the new music by Debussy and Ravel was first heard in London (*La Mer*, 1908; *Nocturnes*, 1909; and *Pélleas et Mélisande* 1909; and Ravel's *Ma Mère l'oye*, 1912) and as Diaghilev arrived with his Ballets Russes, adding Stravinsky (*The Firebird*, 1912; *Petrushka*, 1913 and *The Rite of Spring*, 1913), and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (1914), composers' orchestral palettes were vividly expanded and the grip of Teutonic musical apparatus dealt a significant blow. These influences are internalised by Holst in *The Planets*, composed between 1914 and 1916.

The Planets, and his next extended work *The Hymn of Jesus*, would bring Holst celebrity in the early 1920s. However, his new music continued to puzzle audiences. The main works were *The Perfect Fool*, an opera mocking romantic opera, his Choral Symphony,

of which even his friend Vaughan Williams could only manage 'cold admiration', the wonderful half-lit tone poem *Egdon Heath*, then thought austere, and a range of spare but vital later works, including *Hammersmith* for military band, the short opera *The Wandering Scholar*, the *Lyric Movement* for viola and orchestra and the *Scherzo* that is all he left of a promised orchestral symphony.

Holst was dead at fifty-nine, at the very peak of his powers, but most of his music was destined to be forgotten for decades. It was *The Planets* which kept his name alive, becoming one of the most popular British works in the orchestral repertoire and being heard throughout the world.

Holst was not the least significant composer to have had his horizons immeasurably expanded by the discoveries of the new music before the First World War. Yet where did *The Planets* come from? The manuscript is headed simply: 'Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra'. Apart from the works of Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky already referred to, the most notable London orchestral premiere before August 1914 was of the Five Orchestral Pieces of Schoenberg, first performed on 3 September 1912 conducted by Sir Henry Wood, and repeated in January 1914 under the baton of Schoenberg himself. Several recent commentators have suggested that Holst's starting point may well have been

the example of Schoenberg's revolutionary score. Whether Holst attended the first performance is not known, but a note in his appointments book suggests he was certainly at the second. Lowinger Maddison, director of the Holst Birthplace Museum, has pointed out that a miniature score of Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces was one of Holst's most valued possessions, which he kept near him when composing. That Holst referred to it is confirmed by his annotations and ticks by certain orchestral effects, and in 'Venus' there appears a celesta phrase similar to one in Schoenberg's score.

Holst gestated *The Planets* for two or three years, but it is interesting to note that with the exception of 'Mercury', which was written last, he wrote them in the sequence in which we now know them. (Before the First World War, the planet Pluto had yet to be discovered.) However, Holst does not present the inner planets in planetary order, which is, of course: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars. By working first inward and then out from Mars we arrive at Holst's sequence which, taking into account the characters of the planets, now resembles a 'seven ages of man' sequence, from youth to age. *The Planets* was actually composed over a period of nearly two years. Holst said it grew in his mind slowly, 'like a baby in a woman's womb... during those two years it seemed of itself more and more definitely to be taking

form'. First, in 1914, came the insistent rhythmic tread of 'Mars'. But it was far from being a reaction to the outbreak of war, for Holst had completed his sketch by July, before War had been declared. Later during the first autumn of the War came 'Venus' ('The Bringer of Peace') and then 'Jupiter' ('The Bringer of Jollity').

This was one of those large projects (like writing a big book) that stays with the writer over a long span of time. The summer and autumn of 1915 saw him complete 'Uranus' and 'Neptune', while 'Mercury' was not done until early in 1916. We should also remember that Holst worked very slowly and because of the neuritis in his right arm was helped by a varied team of devoted amanuenses, mainly his former students from St Paul's School. Thus the manuscript is in a variety of hands which his daughter Imogen, in the published facsimile, was largely able to identify.

Holst's orchestra in *The Planets* is very large, reflecting the examples he had heard in the works of Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel and Schoenberg. Particularly worth listening out for are the bass (or alto) flute, and the bass oboe, the latter an instrument also heard in colourful scores of this vintage by Delius and Bax.

In September 1918 Holst, now with the YMCA, was posted – in army uniform – to Salonica, and before he left London his friend

Balfour Gardiner made him a present of a private performance of *The Planets*, hiring Queen's Hall and the New Queen's Hall Orchestra. An army of students from St Paul's helped prepare the orchestral parts, and Holst asked the then unknown young conductor Adrian Boult to conduct. Subsequently, the first couple of public performances were of selections from the music before Albert Coates gave the first complete performance in November 1920. Later Holst recorded it twice, in 1923 and in 1926.

The Planets and his choral work *The Hymn of Jesus* made Holst famous in the years immediately after the war, though he did not relish the experience. He now entered on the shortlived phase of his mature composition and briefly seemed to anticipate the coming vogue for neo-classicism, finding himself in accord with the times though through independent exploration.

The Planets and Astrology

The first evidence we have of Holst's interest in astrology comes in Clifford Bax's memoirs *Inland Far*, published in 1925, in which he describes a holiday taken by himself with his brother Arnold, Balfour Gardiner and Gustav Holst in March 1913. Clifford wrote:

Holst informed me that he had just become interested in astrology, and on such a congenial topic I discoursed at length. A frown puckered

Gardiner's brow. We could almost hear him muttering, 'Really, really!' And there is no doubt our conversation grieved him.

In a later book Clifford remembered it differently, saying that it was he who had introduced Holst to astrology, adding:

having used up the inspiration which he derived from astrology, he almost entirely lost interest in the subject.

Balfour Gardiner's reaction is of interest when one realises that the astrological background to the music was not followed up by any commentator at the time. In fact it may well be that too close an interest in any detailed astrological significance of the work would have prejudiced the success of the music, astrology being generally viewed as suspect.

In her introduction to the facsimile edition of the manuscript of *The Planets*, Holst's daughter Imogen noted that one of the books her father had read was Alan Leo's *What is a Horoscope?*, published in London in 1913. In fact Alan Leo was the author of a string of popular books and pamphlets promoting astrology in the years before and during the First World War. Holst's copy had the subtitle 'and how to cast it', and Holst was a lifelong practitioner, though only casting the horoscopes of friends. It was Leo who alerted Holst to the character of the planets, giving each planet a thumbnail description such as

'Mars the Warlord', 'Saturn the Reaper'. Holst took his title of 'The Mystic' for 'Neptune' from Leo's description.

'Mars – The Bringer of War', with its insistent 5/4 rhythm and winding horn motion, is notable for the way its climaxes are built over wide spans, and for the power of those climaxes when they are reached. Leo characterised people born under the influence of Mars as 'headstrong, forceful and assertive'. We may well believe that Holst at times found them too forceful.

'Venus – The Bringer of Peace' establishes a contrast by dropping the brass and percussion and creating a mood of limpid calm, in the outer sections anticipating the infinities of 'Neptune'. Venus signalled someone of 'an even disposition' and a lover of 'all beautiful things', though Holst may not have been altogether successful in suggesting the warmth of the 'affectional and emotional side' of those born under its influence.

'Mercury – The Winged Messenger' is the scherzo following the slow movement, though doubtless Holst did not intend there to be any remnants of German symphonism in his scheme. Again the weight of the massed sound of 'Mars' is eschewed, the flickering contrasts between woodwind and muted strings creating a remarkably fleet-footed mood. Here Holst certainly succeeds in establishing the quickness of thought Mercury

gives those under its influence, as well as the 'adaptability' and 'fertility of resource' identified by Leo.

'Jupiter – The Bringer of Jollity' is notable for its good tunes and fulsome orchestration. We are certainly back to earth, celebrating the 'abundance of life and vitality' with music that is 'buoyant and hopeful'. Nobility and generosity are characteristics of those born under this planetary sign, though at the arrival of the familiar tune, later given the words 'I Vow to Thee My Country', Holst would doubtless have observed that the nobility could be overdone, as he demonstrated in his own recordings of the music.

'Saturn – The Bringer of Old Age' is remarkable for its inexorable tread (note the bass flute at several points). We have a presage of the infinite. Imogen Holst highlighted the 'patient' and 'enduring' characteristics identified by Leo, though elsewhere the latter noted that 'those born under its influence will be more plodding and persevering than brilliant and active'. The music recasts his *Dirge and Hymeneal*, written immediately before 'Saturn' and setting words by Thomas Lovell Beddoes:

Woe, woe, this is death's hour
Of spring; behold his flower,
Fair babe of life to whom
Death and the dreamy tomb
Was nothing yesterday, and now is all.

Holst goes well beyond his astrological starting point in underlining the transience of life, although surely at the end, in 'Neptune', he relents and offers the consolation of eternity to which 'Saturn' has led, though not before the fireworks of 'Uranus'.

'Uranus – The Magician': the influence of Uranus gives 'eccentric, abrupt' and 'unexpected' traits. By choosing the subtitle 'The Magician' Holst was doubtless referring to the more occult strands that might colour those under its influence. Malcolm MacDonald has pointed out that the arresting four-note figure is in fact a musical motif of Holst's name (GuStAv H). Is Holst himself the Magician? This might be interestingly explored

in the light of Michael Short's observation that this motif is also reminiscent of the appearance of Pan in Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*.

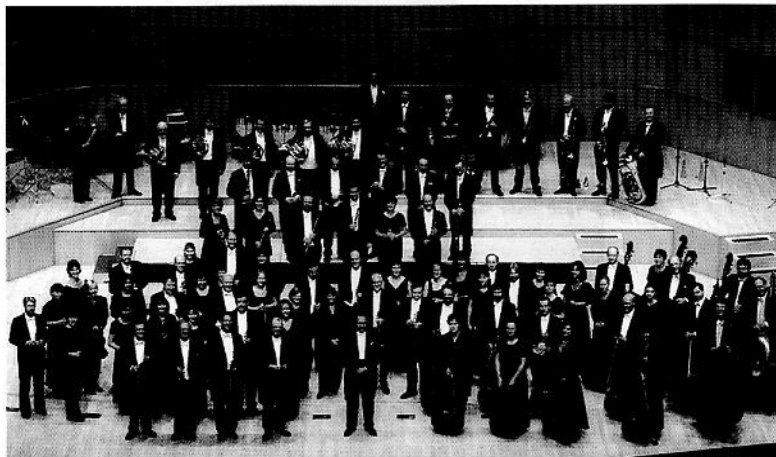
'Neptune – The Mystic' is the only title that Holst borrowed from Alan Leo's book, who characterised the sign as 'subtle' and 'mysterious'. The planet Neptune at the far edges of the solar system looks out to interstellar space, as man faces the evermore, 'to infinity', as Imogen Holst remarked. This study in *pianissimo* textures closes with the out-of-sight vocalising female choir slowly fading. Holst asks for them to be placed in an adjoining room, the door to be slowly and silently closed at the end.

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Sir Alexander Gibson

Hanya Chhala



Royal Scottish National Orchestra

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