

## THE PLANETS

March 18 & 19, 2017

### *The Planets*, Op. 32

### Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Composer, educator and conductor Gustav Holst is known outside his native England essentially as a one-work composer. *The Planets*, composed between 1914 and 1916, gained him international fame, but he detested its popularity. As if to validate the composer's feelings, snippets of its opulent music with its broad orchestral palette have also been favorite fodder for television commercials.

Holst came from a musical family and was taught the piano by his father. He was a precocious, but not a particularly healthy, child who started composing while in grammar school. As a teenager he developed neuritis in his right arm, forcing him to give up the piano, but he picked up the trombone as a cure for his asthma. At the Royal College of Music, which he entered in 1893, he continued with the trombone in addition to composition, and from 1897 to 1903 performed as a freelance trombonist, mostly with opera companies. The experience inspired him to write numerous works for brass band, including two Suites for Military Band and *Hammersmith*, the latter written for the BBC Military Band.

Holst was influenced by mysticism and developed his own individual blend of Indian music and English folksong. His early works were inspired by the *Vedas*, Sanskrit holy verses that he modified and adapted for his own compositions. In 1908 he wrote a chamber opera, *Savitri*, based on a story from the great Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*.

A quiet, introverted person, for most of his life Holst devoted his musical efforts to teaching. From 1905 until his death he taught music at St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, where many of his compositions were written for the school's orchestra and chorus. In 1906, on his doctor's advice, he went on vacation to Algeria and bicycled in the desert. The experience was the inspiration for the orchestral work *Beni Mora*. When it was first performed in England, one critic complained, "We do not ask for Biskra dancing girls in Langham Place." Composer Ralph Vaughan Williams once noted that had the piece been premiered in Paris instead of England, it would have made Holst a household name some ten years earlier than his success with *The Planets*. In 1932 Holst was visiting lecturer in composition at Harvard; among his students was composer Elliott Carter.

The inspiration for *The Planets* was not astronomy, but astrology and alchemy, to which Holst was introduced in 1913, when he began studying the writing of the aptly named astrologer, Alan Leo. He attempted to depict in music the traditional astrological "personalities" and influences on the human body of the seven planets (Pluto was not discovered until 1930 and has now been demoted anyway.) His musical language was strongly influenced by the new developments in music at the time, especially by Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky and Edward Elgar.

Holst arranged the seven movements according to musical, not astronomical, criteria. Thus their arrangement does not correspond to their orbital distance from the sun:

1. "Mars, The Bringer of War:" This martial movement with its brutally percussive ostinato rhythm was indeed prescient, written a few months before the outbreak of World War I. According to Holst's directions, it is to be played slightly faster than a regular march, to give it a mechanized and inhuman character.

2. "Venus, The Bringer of Peace." This astrological portrait is typical of the *andante* movement in a four-movement symphony.
3. "Mercury, The Winged Messenger." A scherzo with a perpetual motion rhythm and sparkling orchestration conforms to the popular image of Mercury in the F.T.D. Florist logo.
4. "Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity." With its broad British folk-like melodies, this movement is strongly influenced by the music of Elgar. It bears, however, little relationship to the Greco-Roman king of the gods.
5. "Saturn, The Bringer of Old Age:" Holst considered the serene and subtle orchestration as the best of the movements.
6. "Uranus, The Magician." This movement appears to owe its ostinato rhythm the march of the brooms in Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, but there is a question whether Holst was familiar with Dukas' tone poem.
7. "Neptune, The Mystic:" In this movement, Holst added wordless female voices, recalling Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* and Debussy's "Sirènes" from *Nocturnes*.

## **Stars**

### **Mary Howe (1882-1964)**

American composer and pianist Mary Howe studied at the Peabody School of Music in Baltimore and later with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. She spent most of her adult life in Washington DC, composing prodigiously, including numerous patriotic works during World War II.

Howe composed *Stars* in 1927, describing it as "...a miniature tone poem inspired by the gradually overwhelming effect of the dome of a starry night – its peace, beauty, and space. The sonorous ensemble of the strings opens the work with the suggestion of the spreading immensity of the starry vault. As the music progresses, one's imagination is carried into the contemplation of the awesome depths of space and the sense of mystery to which man compares his insignificance with infinity."

Howe's musical vocabulary is decidedly neo-romantic – both melodically and harmonically, as well as in her treatment of the orchestra. There can be no heaven without harps.

## **Pluto**

### **Margaret Brouwer (b.1940)**

Pluto has had a hard time gaining respect. Discovered and declared our ninth planet in 1930, it was demoted in 2005 to the dwarf planet category. Poor Pluto also missed the boat musically, discovered a mere 16 years after Gustav Holst had composed *The Planets*.

In attempting to fill out the solar system, Margaret Brouwer struck out as well, composing *Pluto* in 1997 for a commission by the Roanoke Symphony as an added movement to *The Planets* – before Pluto's demotion. That being said, Brouwer's addition should make conductors feel better about having to hire a women's chorus only for the final few bars of Holst's "Neptune."

In her program notes for the work, Brouwer maintains Holst's astrological, as well as its astronomical associations, unintentionally letting us in on how star readers can adjust their predictions to account for an expanded – or contracted(?) – solar system:

"The astrological Pluto is about power, intense needs, destruction – re-creation by violent means if necessary. Like the astrological sign, Pluto, Roman god of the underworld, was aggressive, passionate, violent, intense, favoring war and extremes, inexorable but just. When I was composing *Pluto*, images filled my mind of an intense being, inexorable, violent, intense, powerful and destructive, but anguished.

Sometimes Pluto's orbit around the sun causes it to come closer to the sun than Neptune. A middle section in the music changes mood completely suggesting the time in Pluto's orbit when it comes close to the restoring warmth of the sun, to the song of the sun spirit, to the astrological Pluto's need for re-creation. Then as the orbit continues, the darkness and despair gradually close in again and the earlier music returns."

Composers of Margaret Brouwer's generation have experienced a sea change in contemporary music. During the mid twentieth century, the academic establishment shunned any composer who strayed beyond the strictures of serialism, but audiences voted with their feet and pocketbooks and stayed away in droves. Brouwer, it seems, bucked the system fairly early and develop her own more lyrical voice. After finishing Oberlin College, she began her musical career as a violinist with the Dallas Symphony and Fort Worth Symphony. She later returned to school at Indiana University for her doctorate in composition. She was professor of composition and head of the Composition Department at the Cleveland Institute of Music from 1996 to 2008.

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