

Adrian Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

The Planets

Gustav Holst (1874 - 1934)

Gustav Holst was a frail child, both physically and mentally. He inherited a nervous condition from his mother, who died young, and was at various times in his life near nervous collapse. He was extremely nearsighted and could not, even with glasses, see beyond about six yards. As an adult he developed neuritis so severe that he had to give up violin and piano, and was almost unable to write. His musical education was at the Royal College of Music in London, where he concentrated on composition and teaching. His teaching career was long and distinguished, and included a time at Harvard.

In his twenties he became very interested in Indian philosophy and religion and taught himself Sanskrit in order to read original texts. In his thirties he changed his interest to astrology, even casting horoscopes for his friends. He once wrote, "As a rule I only study things that suggest music to me, and recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me."

Composed between 1914 and 1916, *The Planets* is a suite of seven movements. Holst said that the work has no connection with the deities of classical mythology. His focus was more on the astrological and psychological association each planet presents. The Earth is not included, nor is Pluto, which was not discovered until 1930. Holst originally scored *The Planets* for piano duet, adding an organ for "Neptune." It was orchestrated later by the composer, whose instrumentation has been considered truly brilliant.

"Mars, the Bringer of War" is characterized by power and menace, using the brass to describe the destruction that war brings. These violent images are then contrasted with those of "Venus, the Bringer of Peace". The instrumentation calls for harp, woodwinds and strings and suggests serenity throughout. "Mercury, the Winged Messenger" is the shortest in duration and darts from instrument to instrument in a mercurial scherzo. This is followed by probably the most popular of the movements, "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity" and is meant to convey benevolence and generosity, and symbolizes fortune and opportunity. "Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age" was reportedly Holst's favorite and gives a moving description of aging, mortality and death, with all the disappointments and frustrations along the way. His instrumentation includes a tolling bell but resolves into calm and peace. Holst uses brass and timpani to convey a sense of the grotesque in "Uranus, the Magician," ultimately resolving in a kind of mystical quiet. For "Neptune, the Mystic" the composer gives us fragments of melody and tones, and a chorus of women's voices which fades away to a silent finale.

Interestingly, Holst did not consider this his best work, and complained for his entire life that its popularity overshadowed his much better compositions. Indeed, this is almost the only one that is consistently performed now.

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