Masterworks #7:
The Planets: Different Worlds  April 7-9, 2017

Question: Was The Planets inspired by astronomy or astrology?
Answer: Astrology

The Planets is not about astronomy. A lifelong vegetarian and fascinated by Hindu philosophy, Holst was drawn to astrology. Long after the success of The Planets, he would cast horoscopes for friends, referring to his love of astrology as “my pet vice.”

With this insight, Holst’s music has everything to do with astrology: Mars as the bringer of war, Venus the bringer of peace, Mercury the winged messenger, Jupiter the bringer of jollity, Saturn the bringer of old age, Uranus the magician and Neptune the mystic.

Holst, who died at the age of 59, was a prolific composer, but of all his works, The Planets is arguably the most well-known, likely thanks to his daughter, Imogen (Benjamin Britten’s assistant as well as a composer, teacher and scholar), who worked to promote the wider dissemination of her father’s music. High school band students are likely familiar with his First and Second Suites for Military Band.

Gustav Holst was born in England on September 21, 1874. His father, Adolph, was an accomplished pianist and teacher, and Clara, Gustav’s mother, was one of Adolph’s pupils. Clara died when Gustav was eight, leaving Gustav and his infant sibling in the care of a father who preferred to spend his days practicing rather than caring for his children. Although Clara’s sister, Nina, came to care for the children, she was more interested in piano than children (she was rumored to have thrown petals in Liszt’s path) so she similarly ignored them.

Motherless in a neglectful household, Gustav, a sickly child, never received appropriate treatment for severe asthma or poor eyesight. Sadly, no one noticed he was too weak to climb stairs or his need for glasses. While he adored the piano, which he began as soon as his could reach a keyboard, a debilitating neuritis in his hands made practicing exceedingly painful. Despite his efforts, Gustav could not secure a scholarship to the Royal College of Music or any of the other prestigious London colleges.

Adolph was not moved to assist his son until Gustav’s composition talents earned recognition. At age 18, inspired by the music of Arthur Sullivan, Gustav began composing. His two-act opera Landsdown Castle, gained so much positive attention from critics that Adolph was finally prompted to borrow funds to send his son to the Royal College of Music under a regular admission.

The Gustav Holst Memorial Fountain stands in Cheltenham, UK.
When Holst’s painful hand problems impaired his work as a pianist and church organist, he switched to trombone, logically believing he would be able to play in orchestras to earn a living. He was correct: for years after leaving college, Gustav made his living as a trombone player in the Carl Rosa Opera Company and various other orchestras.

Holst was excited by the cultural innovations of the time: a year before enrolling in the Royal College of Music, hearing Wagner’s Götterdämmerung at Covenant Garden made him an ardent admirer of Wagner’s music. He joined the Hammersmith Socialist Club and listened to lectures by Bernard Shaw. His lifelong friendship with Ralph Vaughan Williams began with their meeting in 1895: the two would frequently play their compositions for one another, and discuss the poetry of Walt Whitman.

Holst’s fascination with Hindu philosophy and Sanskrit literature was all-consuming; not content with English translations of Hindu scripture, he learned Sanskrit to write his own translations. In 1899, at the age of 24, Holst began composing an opera, Sita, based on the Hindu epic Ramayana. The opera, which he worked on until 1906, was never performed in his lifetime, but taught him valuable lessons about composition. In all, Holst composed 13 operas including At the Boar’s Head (based on Falstaff scenes from Shakespeare’s Henry IV).

In 1901, Holst married Isobel Harrison, a young soprano he met at the Hammersmith Socialist Choir. As a young couple, they faced considerable financial challenges; Isobel copied his music and made clothing for friends just to make ends meet. Luckily, Vaughan Williams recommended Holst as the music teacher for the James Allen School and through that, Holst found his calling: he was a gifted teacher. In 1905, Holst was appointed Director of Music at St. Paul’s Girls School in Hammersmith. A few years later, Holst was also appointed Music Director at the Morley College for Working Men and Women. His career as a teacher and successful composer was underway. A prodigious walker (it is believed he walked across most of the counties of England in all seasons and all weathers), Holst made three trips to the United States: on his second trip he lectured at Yale and his third visit involved a lecture on conducting at Harvard as well as a grueling lecture and conducting tour including a lecture at the Library of Congress in Washington. After the tour, he suffered a painful attack of gastritis caused by a duodenal ulcer requiring surgery. When given the choice of a minor operation and restricted life – or a major operation with the freedom to remain active – Holst opted for the latter. Holst died two days later on May 25th, 1934.

It is almost certain that John Williams’ Star Wars drew upon Holst’s music: in the Imperial March, you can clearly hear the influence of the snare and percussive sounds from Holst’s movement, Mars. In fact, we are
confident you will recognize Holst’s music, which has been used in countless film scores. Don’t believe us? Check out IMDB: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0392304/

We eagerly invite you to hear the Hartford Symphony Orchestra perform Holst’s iconic piece, The Planets, on April 7 – 9, 2017, and who knows? Perhaps you will be able to pick out the compelling sounds and rhythms that influenced John Williams.

The Seven Planets of Gustav Holst

Venus, The Bringer of Peace
Mercury, The Winged Messenger
Mars, The Bringer of War
Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity
Uranus, The Magician
Neptune, The Mystic
Saturn, The Bringer of Old Age

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Recommended recordings for your listening pleasure!

Want the best recordings of the pieces you’ll experience on the concert program?

Coleman Casey, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Ingram Marshall’s Kingdom Come may be found on a WARNER recording, and Mason Bates’ Liquid Interface is only on an MP-3 download, both available on Amazon.

Holst’s tuneful and fabulously orchestrated The Planets is fantastically recorded and performed by Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (DECCA). Every strand of this astrologically informed music is set forth with stunning clarity, particularly the organ pedal notes.

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Wondering How the Music Will Sound?
Please try HSO’S LISTENING GUIDE below, with links to the pieces you’ll hear on our concert stage!

Be transported back in time to 1914, and listen to a wonderfully informative and educational broadcast about The Planets from BBC Radio’s “Discovering Music”: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01yx1zw

Find clips from The Planets in movies, commercials and even video games! http://swerveevents.com/2013/05/where-have-you-heard-the-planets/

The Planets, without interruption: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtphY-4xjQw

To hear Ingram Marshall, discussing his music: http://www.wqxr.org/#/story/listen-ingram-marshall-pop-stream/

Hear Mason Bates discussing his fascinating music which includes the digital sounds of today’s world: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRM7Go8O1PE

In this link, Mason Bates explains Liquid Interface: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlzB-N43Xj4

Listen to the Scherzo movement from Liquid Interface: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMuU-jqH4sE

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