

Clara Haslop, classical piano

PROGRAM

GUSTAV HOLST

(1874–1934)

(Trans. Everard Sigal,
Andrew Wrangell,
David Rubinstein,
Clara Haslop)

The Planets, Op. 32

Mars, 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

Neptune, the Mystic

PROGRAM NOTES

Holst composed *The Planets* for large symphony orchestra during a two-year period, beginning in the summer of 1914 with Mars and continuing through the other movements in order, except for Mercury, which he wrote last. He drafted the work as a two-piano score during weekends in a soundproof room at St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith where he taught. With his health condition of neuritis, he relied on students to perform his sketches and write out the orchestral score under his supervision.

The Planets is comprised of seven movements, each devoted to a particular planet in our solar system (excluding the Earth and Pluto, which was discovered in 1930 after the piece was written). Gustav Holst's interest in astrology is central to his composition of *The Planets*. Holst's original plan was to start each performance with Mercury, because it is the first planet in the solar system, however his publisher recommended that he begin with Mars, since it is a very "disturbing," dramatic, emotional movement about someone trading their life to go to war. Therefore, the order of the movements do not follow from the innermost planet and closest to the Sun - Mercury, through to Neptune. Rather, the movements follow the order of astrological signs, each of whom have a "ruling" planet. Aries, the first sign, is ruled by Mars, Taurus by Venus, Gemini by Mercury. (Then follow five astrology signs ruled by the same three planets or the Sun and Moon which are not part of *The Planets*.) Thus, the next sign with a new planet is Sagittarius, ruled by Jupiter followed by Capricorn by Saturn, Aquarius by Uranus and Pisces by Neptune.

Mars, the Bringer of War, begins the work ready for battle. Mars' overall tone is militaristic in deep, dissonant, percussive ostinato 5/4 time. Conductor Sir Adrian Boult recalled: "I well remember (Holst) saying that he wanted the stupidity of war to stand out..." (Interview with Trevor Harvey in 1974) In this movement, Holst most likely was channeling the trauma of how war impacts soldiers, and how they often lose their lives, either physically or through emotional, physical and mental trauma.

Venus, Bringer of Peace, presents a striking contrast to Mars in its mesmerizing serenity. Astrologically Venus represents love, devotion, harmony, a refined nature, art and beauty. Yet the movement Venus is extremely deep and profound, blending tremendously pleasing moments with painful feelings, which all strangely embody peace as a whole.

Mercury, the Winged Messenger, represents an active mind, at times even a "monkey mind", and a childlike playful gentleness that comes to a climax and 'opens up the heart'. This movement paints a surreal, ethereal fairy tale land that reminds me of the strange dreams I had when I was a small child. For this solo piano transcription, the movement also has a watery aspect, showing an intriguing resemblance to Neptune, planet of water and dreams. If I was a child and heard this version of Mercury, it would remind me of the tooth fairy!

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity, expresses joy, enthusiasm, the celebration of life, gratitude, expansiveness and includes in the middle an anthem or hymn-like theme. However, since Jupiter governs the law, as well as being the ancient God of thunder, throughout the piece you will hear intense patriotism, and occasionally the clear sounds of thunder.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age, is a poignant movement that seeks to transcend physical age with a yearning for surrender. This movement is deeply profound, and some theorize that it begins with a person sitting by a clock, counting each moment of their life which will soon come to an end. Throughout the movement simple activities such as walking, standing, or moving one's body become excruciating for the main character throughout their last days, until the pain increases to such an extent that it builds into a feverish section where the character sees stars. This marks the last moments of their life - scared, lucid hallucinations, almost terrifying sounding and very desperate infuse the music. Yet then comes a peaceful, soothing meditation where the harmonies are heavenly and beyond moving. This movement, to me at least, clearly tells the story of the pain and heartbreak of losing your life, and then the relief and serenity that comes after all the pain dies away. Holst considered Saturn his favorite movement. He once commented, "Saturn not only brings physical decay but also a vision of fulfillment."

Uranus, the Magician, introduces turbulence and drama, expressing the astrological meaning of freedom and eccentricity. To the listener, the music goes beyond the world we know. Uranus' chords are galactic and universal, and invoke being in space or some different dimension. This movement comes to a brilliant climax followed by a sudden total immersion into silence – creating a sense of mystery that seamlessly bridges into Neptune's world.

For the final movement, *Neptune, the Mystic*, Holst returns to the 5/4 time signature (which he specifies as 3 beats followed by 2, the same way the Mars rhythm is felt) that launched his *Planets*, but now the listener is in the spiritual, otherworldly space of an underwater world, created by the chords and harmonies. Later the music transcends into a choir section (in the orchestra version) that moves from the underwater sound to being transported up into the rest of the universe, somewhere far away. There is no real melody or form, and that creates a transcendent sense of the unknown. *Neptune* dissipates and, with no arrival at a final ending chord, the music blends from a floating, dreamlike experience into a strange bliss.

Note: The piano solo transcriptions for each movement were created from various sources, first and foremost Everard Sigal, and also Andrew Wrangell, David Rubinstein and myself.

–Clara Haslop

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