

The Planets

Written in 2004 for a vinyl release (including Pluto)
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Where did *The Planets* come from? For those who know little else of Holst's music, it's easy to assume that he is a 'one-work' composer, since *The Planets* is so much more frequently performed (and, above all, recorded) than any other of his works. And even to those with more than a passing acquaintance with his music *The Planets* does give something of an impression of a work that emerged from nowhere, since it has few antecedents either in Holst's own output or in orchestral music generally.

Holst was nearly forty when he began thinking about *The Planets* in 1913. He had achieved a fair amount of recognition as a composer, but had not yet found a truly individual voice. Never one to follow convention, he had chosen an unlikely assortment of influences : the visionary poetry of Walt Whitman (*The Mystic Trumpeter* of 1904 is Holst's first major work), the idealism of William Morris (Holst conducted the Hammersmith Socialist Choir in the 1890s) and a fascination with Hindu literature & philosophy (he studied Sanskrit in order to translate texts for vocal setting) were coupled with an obsession with Wagner, which only began to recede when, with his close friend Vaughan Williams, he discovered English folk music in the mid 1900s.

Such disparate strands are not easy to unify, and the most important works leading up to *The Planets* - *A Somerset Rhapsody* (1906), the opera *Savitri* (1908), *Beni Mora* (1908), the two *Suites for Military Band* (1909 and 1911) and the *St Paul's Suite* (1913) - reveal a composer experimenting with ever greater confidence. Most of these works (the exception is *Savitri*) are on a small scale, or built out of small units; in *The Planets*, this mastery of the small-scale is turned to huge advantage. The ability to write succinctly and inventively without outstaying the natural development of his material, and to sustain this invention over nearly fifty minutes is a large part of what makes the work a masterpiece.

There are barely any precedents for a seven-movement orchestral work on such a scale. The character studies of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* or Elgar's *Enigma Variations* are individually much smaller; closer in concept as abstract pictures in sound are the movements of Debussy's *La Mer* or *Nocturnes*. Holst was certainly influenced by the form, though only marginally by the content, of Schönberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces*, which he heard the composer conduct in 1914 and of which he acquired a score - the title on the manuscript of *The Planets* is 'Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra'. In 1912 he had encountered Stravinsky's music for the first time, and although the influence may not seem direct, he himself admitted its importance for him. The work is often referred to as a 'symphonic suite', but this is not really appropriate : the music's originality doesn't lie in a symphonic treatment of its subject matter, but in the diversity of form and spontaneity of invention which Holst employs in each movement.

Holst's initial ideas came from his interest in astrology - a by-product of the study of Sanskrit literature which had influenced so much of his earlier music. It was not an obsessive interest - Holst wrote only that astrology had 'suggested' the characters of the planets - but it gave him a convenient hook on which to hang the musical structure, and appropriate titles for the movements, expressing a mood rather than painting a picture. It is worth pointing out that, while we are now so familiar with remarkable photographic images of the planets, they were far more mysterious and remote to Holst's generation, and that the pictures that come readily to our minds are quite different from the characteristics that Holst intended to portray.

Recent performances of *The Planets* in Holst's arrangement for piano duet have sometimes called this the 'original version', but this isn't the case. He turned his sketches into piano duet arrangements, fully

annotated with instrumentation, so that his assistants at St Paul's Girls' School (where he taught for many years, and had a sound-proofed studio) could both play through the work and help him in preparing the full score (neuritis in his right arm made writing difficult). Another misconception is that *Mars* was influenced by the outbreak of the First World War. In fact Holst had composed it earlier in 1914; in a lecture given in 1926 he was at pains to point out that the movement he was working on later in the year was *Venus* - 'the bringer of peace'. *Jupiter* was also written in 1914; *Saturn*, *Uranus* and *Neptune* followed in 1915; *Mercury* - which at one stage Holst had planned to be the first - was not completed until 1916.

The first performance was a private one, a gift to the composer from his friend Henry Balfour Gardiner, and took place in the Queen's Hall on September 29 1918 with the New Queen's Hall Orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult. Boult conducted a performance of five movements in the order *Mars*, *Mercury*, *Saturn*, *Uranus*, *Jupiter* early in 1919, while Holst conducted *Venus*, *Mercury* and *Jupiter* later in the year (he subsequently came to hate the frequent selection of movements that always ended with *Jupiter*). The first complete public performance was given by the London Symphony Orchestra under Albert Coates on November 15 1920. Holst recorded the work (with the London Symphony Orchestra) twice, for the Columbia Gramophone Company : a pre-electric recording in 1922-3, and again in 1926. He was not particularly satisfied with either recording (he was not a natural conductor) but his daughter Imogen recalled that the 1926 *Mars* and *Uranus* in particular were very close to his live performances in the 1920s.

The pounding 5/4 rhythms and forceful dissonances of *Mars, the Bringer of War* (Holst uses bitonality - two different keys simultaneously - to great effect) have become so familiar (not least because of the frequency with which they have been plagiarised by film composers) that the originality of this opening movement is easily overlooked. Its ferocity is unique in Holst's output, and has few precedents in music.

Venus, the Bringer of Peace shows Holst at his most relaxed and lyrical - another mood that he did not easily achieve in later life. This is the longest and gentlest of the seven pieces, with no moments of unease or any point of climax. In this it resembles *Neptune*, but *Venus* is full of warmth, *Neptune* cold and dispassionate.

The elusive, quicksilver character of *Mercury, the Winged Messenger* is achieved by the use of bitonality once again, here effortless and flowing, whereas in *Mars* it had produced grinding dissonance and in *Neptune* will evoke distance and mystery. *Mercury* has more bars than any movement of *The Planets* except for *Jupiter*, but is by far the shortest in duration.

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity is full of vitality, wit and memorable tunes. The most expansive of these, appropriated for the words of Cecil Spring-Rice's 'I vow to thee, my country' (at a time when, according to Imogen Holst, her father was too tired and over-worked to write an original setting) has imbued the movement with a solemnity that it was never intended to have. Holst merely wished to portray the more sober side of good humour.

Holst's own favourite movement was *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age* (he was disconcerted that early reviews found it the least impressive). Its sad processional music is wholly characteristic of its composer, although no other of his processions moves towards such a fearsome climax. The lapping waves of sound that follow are like a serene echo, receding gradually as if into some form of nirvana.

Uranus, the Magician is also characteristic of Holst, whose sense of humour was somewhat clumsy and heavy-handed. The music is a clod-hopping dance, which gets ever more frenetic until a climax sweeps all away into the remote distance. As Imogen Holst once wrote of his tendency to be laconic, 'as soon as he had made his point, he stopped'.

Neptune, the Mystic takes up the otherworldliness that has ended the previous two movements, and sustains it throughout, distant, mysterious, and free of all emotion. As if from the void the remote, ethereal sound of women's voices is heard; they are engulfed in vast swirling chords, and then end the movement, returning to the emptiness from which they came.

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The music fades away to nothingness. Why should anyone want to bring it back to life? When I was asked to add a movement to *The Planets* (by Kent Nagano and the Hallé Orchestra in 1999) my initial reaction was to say that it was not possible. But my arm was twisted, and finally I decided that it would be a challenge worth undertaking, and might amount to a small tribute to Holst, with whose music I have been much involved (I have run the Holst Estate and the associated Holst Foundation for many years, and worked with Imogen Holst from 1972 until her death in 1984). I thought of it not as a continuation, but as an 'appendix', which, of course, does not have to be played: I would not be harming the original.

However, since the music of *Neptune* quite literally disappears, I would have to begin *Pluto* before it has ended, and I did this by extending the high violin B, which is the last orchestral sound of *Neptune*, over the fading women's voices and into the beginning of *Pluto*. I could hardly make the music sound more remote than *Neptune* (unless the orchestra were to join the chorus offstage) nor could it realistically be a slow movement. So I chose to make *Pluto* faster even than *Mercury*, thinking of solar winds, with perhaps an occasional comet appearing from even deeper reaches of the solar system. I let the music take its head, and, although I had no intention of writing pastiche Holst, found to my surprise that Holstian elements inevitably crept in. Finally, as if Holst's music was still present in the background, all suddenly fades to reveal the final chord of *Neptune* sustained in the distance.

Two further points. I had to take into account the astrological significance of Pluto, and, although a firm sceptic myself, I tried to find out what influence Pluto is supposed to possess. One remarkably elaborate and long-winded volume (which failed to mention that Pluto was only discovered in 1930 and so had been unknown to astrologers for several thousand years) left me little the wiser; but I obtained the general impression that Pluto might stand for change and renewal, and so, needing a subtitle to match Holst's, I chose *Pluto, the Renewer*.

And I have been asked why Holst did not add *Pluto* himself. Although the planet was discovered several years before Holst's death in 1934, there isn't the least evidence that he ever considered adding an extra movement - it would have been highly uncharacteristic of him to want to do so. (The discovery in 2004 of the planetoid provisionally named Sedna led to enquiries as to whether I would be adding yet another movement! One is quite enough.) I was aware in any case that I was treading on somewhat dubious ground, since Pluto and its satellite Charon are so small that they barely qualify as planets, and may at some future date be downgraded. Furthermore, Pluto's orbit is elliptical, so that some of the time it is closer to us than Neptune. By the strangest of coincidences, the first performance of *The Planets with Pluto*, in May 2000, took place at exactly the same time that Pluto itself was moving out beyond Neptune for the first time in more than twenty years.