

Gustav Holst: The Planets Suite

by Bryan Trussler



Music derived from astrology is surprisingly rare. The ancient Greek philosophers, whatever their intellectual attitudes towards astrology may have been, were certainly not ignorant of astrological teachings and ideas. It was they, after all, who put forward the idea of the "Music of the Spheres", the idea that these vast objects, twirling and whirling about through space, must have hummed a tone as they went along their courses, much as a ball spun on a string will whistle. They knew of seven planets: Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Not surprisingly, Western music evolved with seven-tone scales. Music and astrology come together again in this suite devoted to the seven planets, though the luminaries of Sun and Moon are displaced by Uranus and Neptune. Gustav Holst (1874--1934) was well-acquainted with astrology and mythology, as well as the Greek idea of the Music of the Spheres, and he drew heavily on this knowledge in his composition of the *Planets Suite*. It was first performed in the autumn of 1918.

Here we present excerpts of Holst's famous *Planets Suite* as MIDI files (in *.mid format), available for downloading, together with brief summaries of their qualities. Their traditional order in performance is: Mars, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. There is no piece for Pluto because this planet was not discovered until 1930, whereas Holst was busy composing this suite almost twenty years before.

New and improved versions of many of these midi offerings are welcome. Additions to our notes and observations on each movement are also welcome.

Mercury: The Winged Messenger: Fleet-footed Mercury flits about through this piece sounding not unlike a cosmic butterfly. He belongs very much in the Garden of Venus that precedes him in the performance.

Venus: The Bringer of Peace: The very picture of beauty and refinement in taste, this is the Venus of ancient Rome: a sprite of gardens and flowers, feminine yet tame and without guile or wiles. This provides the counterpoint to the unshackled violence of Mars.

Mars: The Bringer of War: The full horror of mechanised warfare confronts us face to face in this bleakest of all tone poems. Its face is unrepentant, unrelenting and merciless and it offers us no hope of redemption. Thousands of pairs of jackbooted feet parade across the landscape, scurrying to their graves. Tanks pound cities into rubble. Bullets fly and bombs fall. Airplanes swoop low overhead. How surprising it is, then, to learn that Holst completed this piece long before the opening of the First World War, before the invention of the tank, before any plane had ever been fitted out to carry bombs, before the slaughter in the trenches, before the use of poison gas.

Jupiter: The Bringer of Jollity: The spirit of this music is very much in keeping with the astrological significance of Jupiter as the planet of benevolence and generosity. This Jupiter has no thunderbolts to hurtle down on us, but only knowing smiles and a wink or two. He has come down from Olympus to flirt with beauties in the mortal realm and, if flirtation leads to something more, so much the better. We hear him chasing but not catching the ladies. He invites all to dance, then seems not to favour any one of them any more than the others --- one of those men who loves all women because they are women and for no other reason.

The music emerges from its cavorting, twirling and gambolling out onto a central plateau of graceful dance music, then sinks back into the carefree patterns of before. A very famous poem, near and dear to British hearts, was later set to this music and the two have been inseparable ever since. The first verse was played at the Royal Wedding of Charles and Diana, while its second verse was sung at Diana's funeral:

*And there's another Country
I've heard of long ago,
Most Dear to them that Love her,
most Great to them that Know.
We may not count her Armies.
We may not see her King.
Her Fortress is a faithful Heart;
her Pride is Suffering.
And Soul by Soul and silently,
her shining Bounds increase
And her ways are ways of Gentleness
and all her paths are Peace!
We may not count her Armies.
We may not see her King.
Her Fortress is a faithful Heart;
her Pride is Suffering.
And Soul by Soul and silently,
her shining Bounds increase
And her ways are ways of Gentleness
and all her paths are Peace!*

Saturn: The Bringer of Old Age: Serene and deliberate are the words best describing the tone of this piece. We can hear Saturn coming in from a long ways off, with a steady yet plodding gait and with a steady yet plodding gait he comes, as surely as the frost and winter follow upon the summer, as surely as the evening follows the afternoon, as inevitable as death and taxes. Yet, when he arrives, we find him not nearly so dreadful as his heavy steps led us to believe. The deliberation is still there, the uncompromising observance of structures and the law, yet what he creates for us is not without its beauty, crystalline like the snowflakes, serene in the stoic acceptance of his own mortality and finitude, content with the meaning he finds there.

Uranus: The Magician: This is not the god Uranus of mythology we meet here -- not Ouranos of the Sky who fathered the Titans on Gaia and whom even Saturn (Kronos) found so odious as to be worthy of overthrow -- but Uranus as the ruler of astrological Aquarius. As such, he has more in common with the Titan Prometheus than with any other figure. Prometheus was damned by the gods for sharing their knowledge (of fire) with mortal humans -- a Magician who cannot keep his secrets -- and thus keeps company with the Serpent of Eden coiled about the Tree of Knowledge. This magician is bumbling and accident prone, yes, but also a born performer who cannot resist just one more try, one more kick at the cat, before the men in white suits come to take him away ... But this veil of eccentricity cloaks deep wisdom and a knowledge of the infinite. So what is he -- an adept or just inept? On the last try, he gets it right and we hear the opening of the doorway into eternity.

Neptune: The Mystic: And this is the eternity that Uranus has revealed to us. The chasm opens and we step out into the void. We have a sense of a floating cascade through empty space, through Neptune's watery depths. Celestial harmonies surround us and we hear choirs of angels receding into the distance.