

The Planets

Gustav Holst

Born: September 21, 1874 – Cheltenham, United Kingdom

Died: May 25, 1934 – London, United Kingdom

Piece Length: Approximately 50 minutes.

The genesis of *The Planets* occurred during a trip Holst took to Spain with a few friends in March 1913. On this trip, a discussion about astrology piqued his interest on the subject. Holst became interested in the work of Alan Leo, an astrologer known as the “father of modern astrology.” This work became the starting point for the moods of each movement in *The Planets* with Holst confirming that the inspiration of the movements “...were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets and not by classical mythology.” That being said, not all of Holst’s musical pictures match Leo’s description of the astrological signs, for example, Mars has a very optimistic description in Leo’s book, while Holst leans towards the aggressive nature one would expect with a “Bringer of War”.

In general, each movement in *The Planets* centers on a single musical character, as one writer explains: “Holst spoke of the movements as being a series of mood pictures, each acting as a foil to the others.” Indeed, while there are multiple themes in each movement as one would expect with larger orchestral works, they generally focus on one mood, and the contrasts really are exposed from movement to movement. For example, the brutality portrayed in the “Mars, the Bringer of War” movement is balanced and contrasted by the gentle music in the following movement, “Venus, the Bringer of Peace”. These contrasts also create an overall structure that many have noted move the music gradually from the physical to the metaphysical final movement “Neptune, The Mystic”.

Contrasts also create a logical balance for the overall suite of seven movements. These contrasts can be seen if looking at the suite as an arch structure with contrasts across the arch. The first movement, “Mars” is in an asymmetric meter of 5/4 (five beats in a measure as opposed to a more traditional division of three or four beats), a meter that it shares with the final movement, “Neptune”. Yet despite sharing this element they are contrasting with “Mars” feeling earthbound, heavy, and aggressive; in comparison to , “Neptune”, with its mystical, impressionistic colors and gentle musical contours. Similarly, the brightness and gentleness of the second movement, “Venus, the Bringer of Peace” is contrasted by the wild dancelike music found in the penultimate movement, “Uranus, the Magician”. The scherzo-like writing found in the third movement, “Mercury, the Winged Messenger”, is contrasted with the slow, heavy plodding music found in “Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age”. At the center of all this is the magnificent fourth movement, “Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity”, the only movement that truly has contrasting moods within it.

“Mars, the Bringer of War” opens the piece with an ominous rhythmic ostinato (a repeated musical passage) created by the strings (playing *col legno*, or with the wood on the back of the

bow), low harps, and the timpani (playing with wooden sticks as opposed to timpani mallets). Against this, the bassoons and low horns introduce the first theme that highlights a tritone, the most unstable interval in Western classical music (think of the first two notes of the song “Maria” from *West Side Story* or *The Simpsons* theme). From the depths of the orchestra, the music builds to the first dramatic tutti. Immediately after, the second theme is introduced in the trombones and horns: a melody that slides by half steps in a long-short-long-short pattern. After another tutti, a third musical idea is introduced by the tenor tuba: a fanfare-like melody. Once again, the music builds until it crashes down on a low and dramatic chord. The second melody seems to slither back from the lowest part of the orchestra before arriving at the climax, a tutti restatement of the rhythmic ostinato and the opening theme. The other two themes are restated before reaching the closing section of the movement: a highly dissonant chord (played at an extraordinarily loud *ffff*!) before the ostinato rhythm breaks down, ending the work in violence.

“Venus, the Bringer of Peace”, the second movement, opens with a rising four note motif played by a solo horn and answered with a descending idea in the flutes and oboes. After a second statement of these ideas, the music starts to gain gentle momentum with oscillating chords that are played by the harps, horns, and flutes while the oboes and celeste restates fragments of the descending idea. Later, the music’s tempo speeds up as a solo violin plays a beautiful melody against off-beat chords, the effect of which helps push the music along. The tempos fluctuate throughout this section, giving the music a sense of breath before the oscillating chords idea returns, interrupted briefly by the opening solo horn’s music. After an elegant cello solo, the faster music returns. This return is also brief as soon the music transforms into a gentle section that perhaps foreshadows the mystical world of “Neptune”. The colorful conclusion of this work is comparable to Debussy’s orchestral music (particularly his *Nocturnes*) in terms of exquisite color.

The mood shifts for the shortest movement of the suite, “Mercury, the Winged Messenger”. This movement again showcases Holst’s extraordinary orchestrational imagination as the music seems to rapidly run throughout the entire orchestra. The movement is essentially a scherzo in ternary form (A-B-A). The A section features rapid sixteenth-note passages that playfully dashes around the various instruments. The B section is a little more rhythmically stable with consistent eighth-notes played in the accompaniment. The melody incorporates a heavy use of a technique called “Hemiola” in which a composer alternates between splitting the measure between two groups of 3 eighth notes and three groups of 2 eighth notes (think “America” from *West Side Story*).

The central (and fourth) movement, “Jupiter”, is episodic in nature and packed with extraordinarily memorable melodies. The movement bursts out of the gate with a rapid three note ostinato that sets up an syncopated melody in the horns which adds to the musical energy. After the full orchestra presents the syncopated melody, the horns present a fanfare-like motif that is made up of rising intervals in fourths (as opposed to the interval of the third which is the foundation of harmony in Western classical music up to the Twentieth century). This also

provides momentum as the music drives forward. Shortly after, yet another melody is played by the strings and horns that rhythmically grounds the music for a moment by strongly accenting each quarter note beat, giving the music the feel of a fast dance in two. This seems to set up the next section, which takes this idea of a dance and switches the meter to three, heavily accenting the downbeats of the measure while the melody (once again introduced by the horns) is almost in consistent quarter notes, giving this melody the feel of a rustic country dance. This melody is repeated five times as the energy and orchestration grows to a climatic arrival. From there, the music calms down creating the one moment in the entire suite where the mood is shifted within a movement-the noble, beautiful central melody. This melody is repeated three times as once again the theme eventually builds to a majestic tutti before an unresolved chord brings us back to the opening mood of the movement. From there, each of the musical ideas are restated, including one more statement of the central melody set against sweeping gestures in the orchestra that sound like waves, before a fast coda brings the movement to a powerful close.

Next, we arrive at “Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age”, the longest of the seven movements, and Holst’s favorite. This movement beautifully captures the description found in Leo’s work: “The planet Saturn as lord and ruler makes the progress through life slow and steady. Those under its influence will be more plodding and persevering than brilliant and active.” Indeed, this perfectly sums up mood of the movement, in which the melodic material gradually rises from the lowest instrument (the double bass) to high flutes, harps, and strings. The movement opens with a two chord ostinato that harkens back to the two chord ostinato found in “Venus”. This slow ostinato gives the music a sense of timelessness, against which a very slow melody, reminiscent of the opening melody found in “Mars” is first heard. The melody rises to about the middle range of the orchestra before a new idea is presented at a slightly quicker tempo: a melody that features some dotted rhythms that helps the music move along in three trombones against a descending line in steady quarter notes from the pizzicato cellos and basses. The original tempo and mood returns as a chorale in the flutes that sound off in the distance is presented against accompaniment that sounds almost heavy-footed. This music gradually gets louder as the chorale moves from the winds to the brass, giving the effect of something overwhelming moving towards the listener. Right at the moment that sounds like it will arrive at a climax, the music suddenly breaks with a fast, animated version of the opening two chord ostinato, before another sudden change shifts back to the heavy-footed music. Once again the music seems to be attempting to arrive at a large climax, only to be interrupted again and taken over by the animated two chord ostinato, now with the original bass melody in the lower winds, brass, and strings. The music eventually calms down as the movement once again returns to the original tempo. A calmer, fragmented statement of the opening melody is quickly followed by the second theme with the accompaniment now in the harps. The music gradually works its way to the higher registers of the orchestra as it seems to float away.

In Leo’s work, part of his description of Uranus reads that for those born under Uranus “....Sudden and unexpected events will enter into their lives....They will be very independent and unique characters, possessing a nervously organized temperament quick out of the common.” Indeed, the general mood of this sixth movement seems to be one of wild energy. After a bold

opening statement that presents the four pitches that will be the main motif throughout the movement, the bassoons start with a long-short-long-short sort of rhythmic pattern that can remind one of Paul Dukas' masterwork *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (in fact, commentators have made connections between the similar musical structures between the two). The opening music builds into a second section that might remind one of a Scottish jig. The music builds to a lively, rustic climax before it seems to come crashing down, combining the original four note motif with the jig rhythms, before another loud statement of the opening motif launches the music into a new section in which the music sounds like a march that gradually loses control, resulting in a wild climactic final statement of the march before the music arrives at loud, tutti C major, bringing the energy to a halt. What remains after is a hazy chord in the strings with the opening four note motif played mysteriously by the harp. The movement seems to have come to another quiet, floating end like the previous movement, but the movement has one last burst of energy, resulting in one last loud statement of the four note motif, now ending with a dissonant chord. This chord eventually fades into the background as the harp quietly plays the four note motif one last time, bringing the music to the lower range of the instrument.

The final movement, "Neptune, the Mystic" is the perfect conclusion to this suite. The movement can be looked at as being in two sections: the first continuing the two chord ostinato idea, applying remarkable orchestration and color to the two harmonies giving the work a metaphysical atmosphere, and the second half that features gradually rising scales. The addition of a wordless off-stage female choir a little over halfway through is a brilliant touch, adding to the otherworldly nature of this movement. The scales eventually transform into a two note ostinato that the choir sings as Holst instructs "repeated until the sound is lost in the distance."