

A Children's Guide to 'The Planets'

by Jo Franklin

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Gustav Holst (1874-1934) was a British composer, musician and teacher who lived and worked in London. In addition to his passion for music, he was also interested in astronomy, astrology, alternative faiths and meditation. His most famous composition is the orchestral suite 'The Planets', which guides us through the planets of our solar system. Using music, Holst imagines the planets' moods and characters rather than their scientific properties.

Mars, the Bringer of War

In ancient Roman religion, Mars was the god of war. Holst wrote this movement before the outbreak of World War One. He uses pulsing drumbeats to give the music a military feel. Normally, a march has four beats in a bar because the soldiers can say 'left, right, left right' in their heads as they march together, but Mars has five beats in every bar. This movement was the inspiration for the original Star Wars music by John Williams.

Venus, the Bringer of Peace

After the moody and ominous tone of Mars, the second movement is Venus. Holst calls her the Bringer of Peace although in Roman mythology Venus was the goddess of love. Holst uses harps, flutes and shimmering strings in a slower, more relaxing tempo to evoke peacetime.

Mercury, the Winged Messenger

A messenger has to be quick and a winged messenger is the quickest of them all. The music is flighty and fast, with high-pitched instruments like the harp, flute and glockenspiel which hop, skip and jump through this four-minute movement.

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

Jupiter is the king of the gods. Music for a king should be impressive and majestic. The brass section sounds like a fanfare announcing the arrival of the king, while other instruments echo the scurrying footsteps of the people eager to please him. Part of this movement provides the music for the hymn 'I Vow to Thee my Country'.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

After the positive pomp of Jupiter, Saturn is slower and uncertain. Two chords alternate backwards and forwards like plodding footsteps. This movement was Holst's favourite.

Uranus, the Magician

The power of the music ebbs and flows as the magician casts his spells. There are heavy timpani blows followed by the fast, galloping orchestra. Finally, the music slows to a devastating silence as if the magician has unleashed his power.

Neptune, the Mystic

Neptune is the god of the sea in Roman mythology. Holst uses the harp to create watery, shimmering music in this movement. It is both mysterious and spooky. The piece ends with a choir singing with no words. We are in another world.