

CCO Program Notes March 2, 2024

Johann Strauss Senior had no desire for any of his three sons Johann, Josef or Eduard to follow in his musical footsteps, though he saw to it that all would receive a strong musical education. Josef was slated for a military career but, owing to life-long headache and spinal cord issues, opted instead for a career in architecture and engineering. But when his brother Johann became seriously ill in 1853, his mother persuaded him to join the family business as an assistant conductor of the Strauss Orchestra.

Over the course of his life **Josef Strauss** (affectionately known as Pepi) would compose some 283 original dances and marches, as well as 500 unpublished arrangements of music by other composers. Josef came to compose *Sphärenklänge* (Music of the Spheres) in 1868 upon his appointment as the official director of the annual ball of the Medical Association of Vienna. In that position he was expected to compose a new waltz dedicated to the ball committee. Strauss used a reference to an ancient Greek philosophical concept articulated by Aristotle and Pythagoras regarding the proportional movement of the celestial bodies as a form of music. (The theme would also attract later composers, including Paul Hindemith and Paul McCartney.) Although local critics were put off by a work at a medical society ball that reminded audiences of the hereafter, over time the work has grown to be considered one of the most impressive tone poems in Viennese music.

John Williams was born in New York and raised in Los Angeles, where he ended up studying music at UCLA and studying composition with Arthur Olaf Andersen and Mario Castelnovo-Tedesco. Drafted into the Air Force after graduation, he conducted and orchestrated music for the military bands. After his discharge he returned to New York to study piano at Juilliard with Rosina Lhévinne and work in jazz clubs and recording studios. The studio connections led him back to Los Angeles, where he worked with the film composers Bernard Herrmann and Franz Waxman and picked up gigs as a studio pianist, composer and arranger for television. Eventually Columbia Pictures offered him a position and it was there that he started the work for which he is best known: composing monumental film scores, especially in collaboration with Steven Spielberg.

By 2016 Williams had been nominated 49 times for Oscar awards and won five times. Other awards include 4 Golden Globe,⁷ British Academy of Film, and 22 Grammy Awards. He was awarded a Kennedy Center Honor in 2004, and received an American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016. From 1990 to 1993 he served as the conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra, where he still appears frequently as a guest. The Boston Symphony Orchestra named him a permanent Artist in Residence at their summer home in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. Williams has composed 15 concerti for various instruments (including tuba and alto saxophone), 23 free-standing orchestra pieces, and eight chamber works. His successes have won him numerous awards and honors. In 2000 he was inducted into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame. This was followed in 2004 by a Kennedy Center Honor.

E.T. (Extra-Terrestrial) is the 57th of a total of 124 film scores composed by Williams. As you may recall, the film tells the story of Elliot, a boy who befriends an extra-terrestrial who was left behind on the Earth. Elliot, his siblings, and friends, find a way to help E.T. find a way home. The film's concept was based on an imaginary friend that Steven Spielberg invented after his parent's divorce, and a plot based on the unrealized 2007 project Night Skies. Melissa Mathison wrote a script, first titled E.T. and Me, that was rejected by Columbia Pictures. But Universal Films picked up the project and shot the film between September and December 1981. E.T. (Extra-Terrestrial) premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May, 1982, and was released in the United States three weeks later. An immediate blockbuster, it received nine Academy Awards nominations and won Best Original Score, Best Visual Effects, Best Sound, and Best Sound Editing categories. E.T. also won five Saturn Awards and two Golden Globe Awards. An IMAX version was re-released on August 12, 2022, to celebrate its 40th Anniversary.

By the time **Gustav Holst** began *The Planets* in 1914, he was an established organist, music educator, conductor, and composer. At the same time, however, he was not financially successful—probably, he felt, because he had not produced a popular, large-scale orchestral work. Neither was he inspired to do so until the summer of 1912, when his friend Clifford Bax gave him a copy of a recent best seller, Alan Leo's *What is a Horoscope and How is it Cast?* Holst was so impressed by the book that he became a skilled astrologer and writer of horoscopes for his friends—and he realized the potential of writing a major work based on the astrological characteristics of the planets.

Work on *The Planets* occupied Holst for three years, owing to his heavy teaching and conducting schedule, and the larger interruptions of World War I. Initial notation of his musical ideas was in the form of a two-piano score, but suffering from muscle strain in his arm, Holst left preparation of the orchestral score to his student Jane Joseph and to two colleagues at the St. Paul School, Nora Day and Vally Lasker. Sections of *The Planets* were premiered privately in September 1918, under the direction of Sir Adrian Boult, who led the first public performances in February 1919. The first complete performance took place in 1920 under the direction of Albert Coates.

Listeners will note that Holst's *Planets* are grounded in astrology, not astronomy (hence the idiosyncratic order of the movements). Not only is there no movement in the suite for our own planet (since it is considered by many to be astrologically irrelevant), there is also no movement for Pluto, since it was not discovered until 1930. In 2000 the Hallé Orchestra commissioned composer Colin Matthews to create a movement for Pluto. Now, however, the International Astronomers Union no longer considers Pluto to be a planet, so Holst's original work is once again astronomically correct. Once he completed *The Planets*, Holst abandoned his interest in astrology and horoscopes, just as he had abandoned his interest in Sanskrit and Hinduism after he completed an opera and song cycle based on the *Rig Veda*.

Holst's original title was *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*. Some critics referred to *The Planets* as the "English *Sacre du Printemps*," because Stravinsky's work also had many

movements. At one time Holst changed his working title to “Five Pieces for Orchestra,” which reminded critics of a similarly titled work by Schoenberg. Neither title should surprise: by his own admission, Holst was influenced and inspired by both Stravinsky and Schoenberg.

From its first performance, most critics were hostile to *The Planets*. They disapproved of an astrological framework for the order of movements, preferring the astronomic point of reference. There was scorn for programmatic music, a preference for music based on pure structure. Some blasted Holst’s titles and subtitles: if they had to endure a programmatic work, they wanted a complete written program—which Holst was not willing to provide. However, as audiences came to know and love the complete work, critics came around and praised it. They even compared it favorably to Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*, seeing the two works as firmly establishing Elgar and Holst as major composers. Musicians programmed band transcriptions (Mars and Jupiter remain concert band staples) and there is even a rock band arrangement. As the work became popular it appeared as background music in movies and television shows. And as the recording industry grew more technologically sophisticated, *The Planets* became one of the most recorded works; each new recording and playback innovation called for a new recording of *The Planets*.

Ironically, according to his daughter and biographer, Holst never considered *The Planets* to be one of his best works and was distressed that it became so popular. And although he himself conducted concerts that featured only selections from the suite, he resented it when others did so. He was especially chagrined when conductors chose to end the suite with Jupiter in order to give the suite “a happy ending.”

Please join us for the concluding concert of our 2023-24 season on May 4th. The program includes works by Korngold, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and John Williams.

Program notes by R.M.Selya