

Clair de lune Claude Debussy, arr. A. Luck

While others, notably Franz Liszt, were on the forefront of stylistic change during the nineteenth century, it is surely Claude Debussy who forever established entirely new ways of thinking about the fundamental ways of defining and composing music in Western culture. More than anyone, he truly was the father of much of the philosophical basis for the complete turnover in musical art that defined the twentieth century. And along the way, he composed some of the most original, creative, and dare we say, beautiful music in the repertoire. His name, of course, is indelibly linked with what is popularly called "musical impressionism," but that doesn't really specifically tell you much. What you may say is that he largely worked within a musical style that made little use of so many of the characteristics of a musical tradition that really dominated the concert halls of the 18th and 19th centuries. Most of us are familiar with concepts such as sonata form; development; key relationships; major and minor tonalities, with their respective scales, counterpoint, fugues, and especially "developing" musical ideas in an ongoing linear fashion. As dominant as these procedures were, Debussy saw other ways of creating and working with musical ideas. His specifically French way of looking at things was quite a contrast to the ideas and methods of the German-speaking composers (all names we know so well!) that had dominated concert halls for a couple of centuries. There was opera, to be sure, and Italians had always held sway there, but in abstract music (no words) the Germans were generally king. Along comes Debussy with a refreshing alternative aesthetic.

In a nutshell, Debussy was not much interested in systems of musical composition, wherein each part—large or small—had a rational, expected, and traditional relationships to every other part. Rather, he focused upon listening to musical sounds in new ways—considering them just for their intrinsic sound and not how they might fit into a hierarchy as a mere building block. He opened up new ways of composing and listening, and the musical world was changed forever.

The universally loved "Clair de lune" is the third movement of a suite for solo piano entitled, *Suite bergamasque*, which Debussy began composing in 1890 when he was twenty-eight years old. So, it's a relatively early work, giving us some insight into his development as a composer. When the suite was published in 1905, Debussy had revised it somewhat. Its four movements—after their titles (or original titles)—allude to dances of the distant past, but the more relevant association is with the work of the symbolist poet, Paul Verlaine. Debussy left no doubt that his creative life was heavily influenced by both literature and painting— even expressing some regret for not having become a painter rather than a musician. And while the "impressionism" of painting is clear as a metaphor for much of his musical work, it is basic to understanding his musical psyche to appreciate the influence that the "symbolist" poets—Verlaine, Mallarmé, and others—had in his style. Beginning during his student years, Debussy had composed a series of *melodies* (songs), many of which were set to texts by Verlaine, whose poetry Debussy later used for many of his major compositions.

Suite bergamasque takes its name from an allusion in Verlaine's poem, *Clair de lune*. Of course, the title of the poem is also the title of the evergreen third movement of Debussy's suite. The movement has no other meaning than that of a delicate evocation of the idea in the title. Fundamental to the "sound" of French music of the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century is the delicate blend of orchestra colors that unequivocally suggests Debussy and Ravel to concert audiences. Arthur Luck a former member and librarian of the Philadelphia Orchestra has masterfully recreated that sound in this artful arrangement of the familiar piano work.

Nocturnes Debussy

The three movements of Debussy's *Nocturnes* for orchestra were composed during 1897-99. Their early reception was not wholly enthusiastic by any means, and they continued to receive mixed reviews for most of the next decade. It took quite a while before they gained their position as a respected part of the standard orchestral repertoire. He had composed earlier works for orchestra as a developing composer, but of them, only his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (published in 1895) is widely familiar to concert audiences today.

Debussy's choice of words, "nocturnes," as the title of the three-movement suite largely reflects his new outlook. What he clearly did not wish to convey is any connection with traditional Germanic concepts of sonata, symphony, or the like. He sought a new, flexible title that was basically neutral in that regard. So, he used the term that goes back in musical history to compositions that originally evoked the night, but later came to refer to groups of movements for an ensemble intended to be played outdoors as a kind of serenade. Later, the Irish pianist, John Field, innovated the term for his brief piano studies in one mood, as did others, notably Chopin, after him. The point is that generally a single mood is the sole focus for a nocturne, and Debussy admirably explored three quite different ones in his three for orchestra. But, perhaps the single most influential factor in his choice is associated with the great American painter, James McNeil Whistler, who lived, studied, and worked in Paris in the nineteenth century. Whistler appropriated the musical term for a series of paintings (interesting enough, originally called "moonlights") that evoke maritime scenes at night, using washes of delicate colors. Debussy definitively acknowledged the inspiration for his composition in Whistler's paintings.

Debussy's three movements are entitled *Nuages*, *Fêtes*, and *Sirènes*. He left us specific comments about them, so we understand rather well what he had in mind in each. *Nuages* (clouds) depicts the serene immutable floating of clouds in the sky, a delicate study in the infinite varieties of grays and white. The exploration of such relationships was fundamental to the work of Whistler: Remember that the real title of "Whistler's Mother," of course, is "Arrangement in Grey and Black," and that the title of another significant work of his was "Symphony in White, No. 1."

The second movement, *Fêtes* (*festival*), depicts just that, but not one that should evoke a specific place and time, rather the idea of a universal one with dancing rhythms and splashes of comet-like light. A sonorous procession (listen for the muted trumpets) interrupts in the middle, but the splashy, vivacious mood of the beginning returns.

The last movement, *Sirènes*, is a seascape, replete with a wordless women's chorus that depict the Sirens, the alluring bird-women, who seduce unwary sailors to death and destruction. Debussy frequently treated the human voice as a unique addition to the palette of orchestral colors, and this is yet again more evidence of the supreme imagination by which French composers exploited and enlarged the resources of the

orchestra. The undulating rhythms of the sea familiar to us in Debussy's great *La Mer* here combine with the shimmering sound of the Sirens' song to complete the trilogy.

The Planets, Op. 32 Gustav Holst

Gustav Holst is one of England's most revered composers, creator of musical works in great variety: choral music, songs, band music, orchestral works, ballet, and more. His musical purview was remarkably diverse, and his compositions are frequently performed and appreciated in Great Britain. His popularity there bears comparison with his good friend and fellow composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams. In this country the matter is somewhat different. His reputation rests largely, and solidly, upon his two immortal works for band, *Suites No. 1* and *No. 2 for Military Band*. It is hard, indeed, to participate in American public school music band programs without having performed one or both of these classics. They simply stand at the top of the repertoire for band, and almost every American band student knows them well. On the other hand, however, those who frequent professional orchestra concerts in this country largely know Holst through his most popular orchestral work, *The Planets*.

Born of Scandinavian descent in rural England to a musical, middle-class family, Holst received a musical education early, playing the violin and piano, and later taking up the trombone, the mastery of which his father thought would help his asthma. Holst worked for a while as village organist and choirmaster before attending the Royal College of Music where he met his life-long friend Vaughan Williams. He eventually focused on the trombone, and earned a modest living early on as a member of various orchestras. He soon gave that life up, however, and spent the rest of his life teaching music in private girls' schools.

The musical life of Great Britain in those days was strongly influenced by a new appreciation and re-examination of the native musical treasures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as a fascination with traditional English folk tunes—these influences were significant in the lives of both composers. Of course, he was well aware of the major compositions of contemporary composers like Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Ravel, and Richard Strauss, and these figured in his artistic development, as well. Two rather unusual but important influences in his life and works were Hindu religion and philosophy, and astrology. His abiding interest in Hindu texts began early in the century, leading him to engage in the formal study of Sanskrit—translating the texts for himself—and to compose several of his important works on those texts, including two operas. His association with astrology began during a trip to Spain in 1912 when a friend of his inspired the interest, and Holst maintained an interest in the subject—reading fortunes along the way—for the rest of his life.

It is that interest in astrology—not astronomy—that is central to his composition of *The Planets*. Holst began the work about 1913, gradually completing it by 1917. The first performance was given privately in 1918, and word of mouth raised public expectations for the first public performance in 1920. Originally entitled *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*, the suite suggests to many his familiarity with Schoenberg's similar use of the phrase. Others see inspiration derived from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* or Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. Holst's pictorialism is less specific than these antecedents but spectacularly vivid, nonetheless. Indeed, composed for a large

orchestra—remember, large—and perhaps more importantly—varied orchestras were all the rage in the late romantic era, with the orchestras of Richard Strauss, Mahler, and Stravinsky, among others, as models. In addition to the usual full orchestra, Holst's score calls for woodwinds in fours—including at times, alto flute, two piccolos, and the (really) rare bass oboe. The brass section features six horns, four trumpets, and in addition to the standard bass tuba, a smaller tenor tuba. There's an organ and a celesta, and for the final movement, a wordless women's chorus—à la Debussy.

The order and number of the seven movements has generated much discussion with regard to the actual planets and their number and position. It's all really irrelevant, for Holst's work has to do with the astrological signs—of which there are seven—and not with how we define what the planets are, or their respective positions with relation to the sun, even what conditions may or may not be on them. So the order of movements, beginning with Mars, stems from the astrological succession.

Holst chose the relatively unusual time signature of five four time for this ominous evocation of war, beginning with a hypnotic rhythm, repeated over and over, as chords constantly grow and threaten, until they are practically howling. Following a reiteration of the driving, repeated rhythm in the strings, the rarely used small, or tenor tuba, is featured along the trumpets in punchy fanfares. This is the original Darth Vader and the Death Star music! The dreary, desolate landscape of destruction in war is admirably depicted in a bleak, slower middle section before a repeat of the opening hammering material. This gripping—no glory here!—evocation of war ends with dramatic, blunt hammer strokes, separated by pauses that leave no doubt of the utter destruction and obliteration of war.

Venus, bringer of peace, answers a call from the solo horn, and we are ushered into a tranquil world aptly evocative of the Roman goddess of love and beauty, astrologically associated with harmony and balance. A gentle succession of woodwind passages and lush string sonorities, enhanced by the exotic sound of the celesta, create a marvelous respite from Mars. Holst's familiarity and obvious respect for the music of Debussy seems clear here in this floating serenity. Although it must be said, the solo cello sounds suspiciously like some passages in compositions of Holst's best friend, Vaughan Williams.

Mercury zips by next in a quicksilver movement befitting the winged messenger of the gods. In astrology, Mercury also is the symbol of rationality and mentality. Cascades of scales and twittering rhythms carry thought along like lightening. The magic celesta part is reminiscent of Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, and our ubiquitous cell phone beeps, as well.

Another quick movement follows, this time a tribute to Jupiter, the bringer of jollity. Jupiter was considered the ruler of the gods, and the planet, Jupiter, ruler of all the other planets. Merrymaking and gambling play a part in his personality as well, and the latter aspect comes into play in the jaunty opening tunes, one zippy and syncopated, and the other a rather thumping waltz. But in the middle, we are treated to a noble and exalting tune as only the Edwardians can compose—definitely fit for a king (of some kind). It's a glorious melody that came to be adapted later by Holst as a church hymn to the text, "I Vow to My Country," and is sung and revered in Great Britain. The raffish tunes return and the movement ends.

Saturn, the ðBringer of Old Ageö is ushered slowly in by two cold, cold static woodwind chords, endlessly repeated. After some ominous string comments, the brass intone a stately procession. In astrology, Saturn is the founder of social order and civilizations, charged with duty, responsibility, and discipline. The brass evidently carry this duty heavily as they plod to a climax, gradually subsiding into a dissolution borne by the strings and oscillating woodwinds that floats timelessly and without emotion into an apparent infinity.

Four imposing notes slowly and loudly announced by the brass are the motif of ðUranus the Magician.ö They return throughout the movement in a remarkable variety of guises. But the movement proper is a stomping, tramping march dedicated to the guardian of genius and discovery and associated with sudden and unexpected changes. The march is somewhat redolent of any number of French antecedentsö those of Delibes and Dukas, and even Berlioz may come to mind. The bassoon trio sets us off on this little rollicking affairö interrupted from time to time by those four identifying notes. The orchestra builds the march almost out of control, only to subside. The four-note motto is heard again in soft, pizzicato notes in the harp. The bassoons make a half-hearted attempt to resume the march but fail. The brass loudly play the motto again, and finally harp and strings end this enigmatic paean to the clever ðMagician.ö

The remarkable fact of the last movement, ðNeptune the Mystic,ö is simply that it was composed almost one hundred years ago. In it Holst dispenses with so many of the rational and organizing principles of music and wonderfully creates an atmosphere of not only the mystic, but also of the traditional characteristics associated with the planet Neptune: illusion, confusion, and deception. Meter (yes, it is the same five four of the first movementö but can you easily hear it, really?), chord ðprogressions,ö melodies, form, shapeö all play minimal to non-existent roles here at the end. Rather, the composer uses exotic successions of harmonies and fragments of non-traditional scales to create the floating sound that envelops us. Imaginative orchestration in the great tradition of Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky, and Debussy clearly affirms Holst's mastery. This is truly ðspace musicö long before the advent of the clichés with which we are all familiar. As the orchestra gradually fades into nothingness, only the wordless women's chorus (he had used it in an earlier work) is left, gradually vanishing from our hearing. It is the only truly human element that stays with us as the composer's exploration of our humanity writ in the heavens fades. The conceit is that perhapsö they don't end.

--William E. Runyan

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