



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 4 – Holst's *The Planets*

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***Mothership*—Mason Bates**

Mason Bates is a young American composer known for his adroit blending of electronic resources into the traditional symphony orchestra medium. His highly acclaimed compositions for orchestra and “electronica” bear evocative titles such as *Omnivorous Furniture*, *Rusty Air in Carolina*, *Desert Transport*, and *Music from Underground Spaces*. Bates was graduated from both the Juilliard School and the University of California at Berkeley, and has served as the Composer in Residence for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Imaginative and innovative artists in all media can draw upon the most diverse—even banal and commonplace—sources to serve as fodder for their creations. The result, and usually the intent, is an artwork that far transcends the commonality of the original inspiration. A great French chef can create masterpiece from a string bean and an eggshell—or something like that. And borrowing in musical composition seems to have been essential to the art from the beginning. Bach purportedly said that borrowing is fine, as long as you pay it back with interest! Which, of course, he manifestly did.

In *Mothership*, Mason Bates follows his deep interest in various aspects of electronic sound production and manipulation to the world of EDM (that’s “electronic dance music” for you folks over a “certain age”). Nightclubs, dance, and party venues the world over are filled with this throbbing, pulsing, almost hypnotic, dance music—usually at ear-splitting sound volumes. The genre first was wildly popular in Europe and American large cities; it subsequently has enjoyed wider popularity. To its aficionados their numerous subtypes and variants: techno, house, dance-pop, drum and bass, and more. To those not young, hip, or dance enthusiasts, it can all sound much the same—just an electronic throwback to the “disco” of their youths. But it doesn’t matter, basic musical elements are just that, basic, and lend themselves to an infinitude of musical styles. It would be hard to ignore EDM, anyway, with the way it has swept the popular world. Given Bates’ musical interests (he moonlights as a DJ), it’s hard to see how he could have resisted mining EDM to compose a work to challenge a symphony orchestra to “boogie down.”

The work has an interesting genesis, having been commissioned by the YouTube Symphony Orchestra, the world’s first online collaborative orchestra, established in 2008. Most of its organization was done online. *Mothership* was given its world première in a live broadcast from the Sydney, Australia Opera House.

While the piece is essentially a concert opener in the traditional manner, there is also an element of the concerto in it, as well. Mason relates that in riding the New York City subway he observed the passage of people entering and exiting the train and that it suggested the way that soloists could play alternatively and intermittently with the orchestra. So, the large orchestra would serve rather like a “mothership” to the soloists who would “dock” on and off, playing “virtuosic riffs.”

Bates gives further guidance in his own notes:

The piece follows the form of a scherzo with double trio (as found in, for example, the Schumann Symphony No. 2). Symphonic scherzos historically play with dance rhythms in a high-energy and appealing manner, with the ‘trio’ sections temporarily exploring new rhythmic areas. *Mothership* shares a formal connection with the symphonic scherzo but is brought to life by thrilling sounds of the 21st Century — the rhythms of modern-day techno in place of waltz rhythms, for example.

So, you’ll hear an active, thumping opening, replete with electric drum machine, followed by two traditional contrasting changes of mood. Bates takes these opportunities to feature a pair of soloists in each section. You won’t leave the concert humming any main themes, for the composer creates textures of constantly changing aphoristic ideas that weave around each other in a succession of imaginative episodes. It’s all good fun and gives all the opportunity to hear the unique coupling of a symphony orchestra with an electronic drum machine. Now, that’s something you don’t hear every day.

***The Planets*—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 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 leaves 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 lightning. The magic celesta part is reminiscent of Richard Strauss' *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 “Bringer of Old Age” 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 “Uranus the Magician.” 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 antecedents—those of Delibes and Dukas, or even Berlioz may come to mind. The bassoon trio sets us off on this little rollicking affair—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 “Magician.”

The remarkable fact of the last movement, “Neptune the Mystic” 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 movement—but can you easily hear it, really?), chord “progressions,” melodies, form, shape—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 “space music” 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 perhaps--they don't end.

“Ain't it a pretty night” from *Susannah*—Carlisle Floyd

Ever since the inception of opera as an important genre in Western music, the subjects or “stories” that inform musical drama have largely focused on the exotic, the nobility, historical events, fantasy worlds, and in general, upon mysteries far removed from ordinary lives. That began to change more or less after WWI with the advent of more “realistic” librettos—in keeping with various contemporary trends toward accessibility in art. We've only to think of Kurt Weill's “The Threepenny Opera” to confirm the shift in focus. Of course, this was almost exclusively a European phenomenon. But, by the 1930s a few steps were taken in the development of a “true” American opera tradition. Virgil Thompson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928) and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935) were seminal works that led to the establishment of an American opera tradition. The simplicity of Copland's populist musical style was part and parcel of that movement.

By the end of the century there was an efflorescent of operas by American composers—most conceived with various kinds of accessible elements that appealed to American audiences. The composer's names are all familiar: Bernstein, Adams, Glass, Barber, and a host of others. And while not quite as much of a household name as some of them, that of Carlisle Floyd stands central in the development of American popular operas composed in a mainstream musical style with everyday characters--a musical package that had immense and broad appeal to American audiences.

Floyd's roots lay deep in South Carolina, where his family had lived for centuries, in a rural, Southern milieu. His father was a Protestant minister, and he spent his youth in various small Southern towns—an upbringing that informed the style and content of his life's work in opera. Initially trained as a pianist, he soon began to devote his efforts to composition. He spent the majority of his career as a beloved teacher of composition at Florida State University. His first opera—or musical play—was *Slow Dusk* (1949)—a rustic, tragic little affair that has long been performed in college opera workshops. While he went on to compose about a dozen works for the stage, including the highly acclaimed *Of Mice and Men* (1969), it was with *Susannah* (1955) that he hit the big time. After its première in Tallahassee it was taken up by the New York City Opera, and garnered widespread approbation, winning prestigious awards.

Susannah is based upon the familiar story from the biblical apocrypha of the beautiful Susannah, spied upon while nude bathing by church elders, and then blackmailed by them for sexual favors. After being falsely accused of adultery by the church and community, she ultimately proves her innocence and gains her revenge. It's been a favorite tale of morality and innocence triumphant for centuries and museums are full of paintings that depict it.

Floyd's opera moves the tale to a village in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee, in the rural American South that he knew so well. The musical style is simple, infused with Appalachian folk-like tunes and hymns. The opera opens at a square dance, where Susannah's beauty generates a web of vicious, jealous gossip from the church women.

Soon, the infamous bathing scene occurs, which torpedoed her already shaky reputation. Universal condemnation and demands for public “confession” ensue.

“Ain’t it a pretty night” is a signature aria from this intense example of what might be called American *verismo* opera—replete with tragedy, deep emotion, and very human characters. In the aria Susannah naïvely, and yet beautifully poetic, admires the beauty of the Appalachian forest in the luminous night. For the moment, she buries her deep pain and instead, is entranced by the firmament. She knows there are other worlds beyond the Tennessee mountains, worlds with entrancements about which she knows little, and longs to escape the physical and moral confines of her village. But, then she knows she could always return. Perhaps inevitably so.

“Ain’t it a pretty night” is an evergreen aria of American opera. Its passion, beauty, and reflection of universal human aspirations have made it an operatic favorite. Its appeal is just as resilient as a choral arrangement.

“Claire de Lune” from *Suite Bergamasque*—Claude Debussy

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 others 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 “Claire 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, “Claire de lune,” and, 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.

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