



BILLINGS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA & CHORALE

Concert Notes The Heavens & The Planets March 13, 2010

By Chris Morrison

Introduction from *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Op. 30 (Theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey*) Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Richard Strauss is remembered nowadays for his ambitious, large-scale orchestral works like *Don Quixote* (1896-1897) and *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life, 1897-8), as well as for forceful operas like *Salomé* (1903-5) and *Elektra* (1906-8). But his most famous music is certainly the opening two minutes of his thirty-plus minute symphonic poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1896), an adaptation of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical prose poem of the same name. Strauss's work starts with a sustained very low C on the double basses, contrabassoon and organ. The famous ascending brass fanfare, the notes C-G-C, evokes "Dawn" and the rising sun, resplendent and building to a mighty climax for the full orchestra. This theme served as the central musical idea in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (and as the introduction to every Elvis Presley concert from the late 1960s on).

Gloria Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Francis Poulenc, one of the most important French composers of the twentieth century, is also regarded as one of that century's major composers of religious music. After years of relative neglect of his faith, in 1935 Poulenc returned to the Roman Catholic Church after a close friend, composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud, was killed in a car accident. From that point forward he wrote a number of significant religious works, including the *Mass in G major* (1936) and *Stabat Mater* (1950). He once said, "I am religious, by deepest instinct and heredity. I feel myself incapable of ardent political conviction, but for me it seems quite natural to believe and practice religion. I am a Catholic. It is my greatest freedom."

In 1959 and 1960 he composed his *Gloria*, which has become one of his most popular works. Scored for soprano solo, large orchestra, and chorus, the *Gloria* was commissioned by the Koussevitsky Foundation, in honor of Serge Koussevitzky and his wife Natalia, and was given its premiere in Boston on January 21, 1961, with Charles Munch conducting the Boston Symphony, the Chorus Pro Musica, and soprano soloist Adele Addison.

Poulenc divided the traditional text into six sections.

1. Gloria in excelsis Deo: A stately fanfare is repeated in three slightly different ways. Then the chorus enters, singing in lively syncopations.
2. Laudamus te: After a short introduction, the chorus presents the light-hearted main theme, with its saucy, playful, off-beat rhythm. Poulenc wrote after one performance of the work that this movement “caused a scandal; I wonder why? I was simply thinking, in writing it, of the Gozzoli frescoes in which the angels stick out their tongues; I was thinking also of the serious Benedictines whom I saw playing soccer one day.” By way of contrast, the last line of the text, beginning “Gratias agimus,” is more dissonant and sets off the liveliness of the rest of the movement.
3. Domine Deus, Rex caelestis: Much more tranquil and lyrical than first two movements, this section opens with woodwinds. Then the soprano enters with a dramatic, wide-ranging melody. More than in most of Poulenc’s works, one hears a hint of the Impressionism of Claude Debussy in the orchestral textures here.
4. Domine Fili unigenite: This short section returns to the lively tempo and rhythms of the opening two movements.
5. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei: A dark orchestral introduction is followed by the exquisite soprano solo, with its striking high notes as the melody line ascends penitentially.
6. Qui sedes: This final section opens with the juxtaposition of the strong *a capella* chorus and the brass fanfare of the opening movement. The soprano takes another solo. Then the soprano and chorus take increasingly peaceful turns singing “Amen,” leading to the work’s lovely, calm conclusion as the soprano sings a final benediction.

The Planets, Op. 32
Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Gustav Holst’s music is a unique amalgamation of the large orchestras and programmatic content of Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner, the tunefulness of Edvard Grieg and Arthur Sullivan, an interest in Eastern spirituality (particularly Hinduism), and a fascination with the folk music of his native Great Britain developed in tandem with his lifelong friend and fellow British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. Holst was also a noted teacher who worked with students at the St. Paul’s Girls’ School, Morley College, and London’s Royal Academy of Music.

While traveling in Spain in the early 1910s, Holst developed a fascination with astrology. It quickly became what he called his “pet vice,” and he often cast horoscopes for his friends. Astrological views of the influence of the planets on the human psyche helped inspire the composition over the years 1914-1916 of his symphonic suite *The Planets*. Originally scored for piano duet (except for the “Neptune” movement, for which he thought a church organ more appropriate for the music’s mysterious, ethereal sound), *The Planets* was subsequently arranged

for an extremely large orchestra including two harps, celesta, organ, lots of percussion (and seven percussionists), and unusual instruments like the bass flute and bass oboe.

After several incomplete private performances, the first complete public performance of *The Planets* was on November 15, 1920, with Albert Coates conducting the London Symphony. *The Planets* quickly became famous, although later in life, Holst complained about the fame the work brought him and the relative lack of attention given to his other 200 or so compositions.

The titles of the seven movements of *The Planets* were taken from once-popular books by the astrologer Alan Leo, including *What Is A Horoscope?* and *The Art of Synthesis*. The order of the seven corresponds to the increasing distance of the planets from the Earth, with the exception of Mars preceding Venus. (When Holst wrote the work, Pluto had yet to be discovered, and six years before the issue of Pluto's planetary status was raised in 2006, composer Colin Matthews composed a "Pluto, The Renewer" movement that optionally could be appended to Holst's work.)

Holst composed the first movement, "Mars, The Bringer of War," just before World War I was breaking out. But one can't help but think of the brutality of the battles to come when hearing this music's relentless 5/4 ostinato rhythm, military fanfares, and clashing dissonances. In remarks about a too-restrained early performance, Holst suggested that the music should "sound more unpleasant and far more terrifying." The opening ostinato figure eventually transforms itself into a slow, emphatic tattoo, separated by silences.

By contrast, "Venus, The Bringer of Peace" provides a feeling of stasis and tranquility. Dominated by two themes – one an ascending French horn figure, answered by descending woodwind chords, the other an almost romantic violin phrase introduced by the cellos – the movement also features several lovely solo passages. Strings dominate, with only French horns featured among the brass. A brief interlude decorated by the harps and celesta fades into a peaceful coda.

Associated by Holst with the "process of human thought," "Mercury, The Winged Messenger" is quicksilver and scherzo-like, with exciting rhythms and bitonal harmonies. The central section is a remarkably orchestrated series of eleven repetitions of a theme introduced by the violin, a passage inspired, according to Holst's daughter, by folk musicians that he had heard in Algeria.

Opening with a vigorous tune set against scurrying strings and woodwinds, "Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity" takes the form of a symmetrical rondo, ABACABA. Robust tunes evoke the world of English folk song that so fascinated Holst. In fact, in 1921, Holst turned the big central tune from "Jupiter" into a song called "Thaxted," named after his home at that time and setting Sir Cecil Spring-Rice's patriotic WWI poem "I Vow to Thee My Country."

Holst's own favorite movement, "Saturn, The Bringer of Old Age," opens uncertainly with a slow, repeating two-note pattern introduced by flutes and harps. Then a solemn march takes over, building slowly to a climax with clangorous bells, which retreat into the distance as the movement subsides into serene acceptance of the transience of human life.

“Uranus, The Magician” is heralded by a dramatic four-note phrase in the brass. Dancing bassoons right out of Paul Dukas’s famous *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* lead into a march-like tune in the brass and percussion that, overcoming other more playful ideas, builds to a brilliant climax. But suddenly there is a hush, as the magician’s incantation takes hold.

In the diaphanous concluding “Neptune, The Mystic,” the five-beat rhythm of “Mars” returns, but here transformed into something disembodied and ethereal. Fleeting melodic ideas spin out over long woodwind and brass chords, largely in a hushed pianissimo that fades away gently as a wordless six-part female chorus – originally meant to be located in a separate space adjacent to the orchestra and screened from audience view – emerges, then moves into the distance. This may have been the first occurrence of the fade-out ending in music history; it was described vividly by Holst’s daughter Imogen as “unforgettable, [the] hidden chorus of women’s voices growing fainter and fainter ... until the imagination knew no difference between sound and silence.”