

2022–2023 | 123rd Season

# The Philadelphia Orchestra

Thursday, November 17, at 7:30

Friday, November 18, at 2:00

Saturday, November 19, at 8:00

**Marin Alsop** Conductor

**Charlotte Blake Alston** Speaker

**Jennifer Koh** Violin

**Women of the Philadelphia Symphonic Choir**

**Amanda Quist** Director

**Brahms** *Tragic Overture*, Op. 81

**Mazzoli** Violin Concerto ("Procession")

I. Procession in a Spiral—

II. St. Vitus

III. O My Soul—

IV. Bone to Bone, Blood to Blood—

V. Procession Ascending

*First Philadelphia Orchestra performances*

## Intermission

**Holst** *The Planets*, Op. 32

I. Mars, the Bringer of War

II. Venus, the Bringer of Peace

III. Mercury, the Winged Messenger

IV. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

V. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

VI. Uranus, the Magician

VII. Neptune, the Mystic

This program runs approximately 1 hour, 50 minutes.

These concerts are dedicated to **Bramwell Tovey**, who was originally scheduled to conduct this week but passed away on July 12.

Marin Alsop's appearance is sponsored by **Elia Buck and Caroline Rogers**.

Philadelphia Orchestra concerts are broadcast on WRTI 90.1 FM on Sunday afternoons at 1 PM, and are repeated on Monday evenings at 7 PM on WRTI HD 2. Visit [www.wrti.org](http://www.wrti.org) to listen live or for more details.



## The Philadelphia Orchestra

The world-renowned Philadelphia Orchestra strives to share the transformative power of music with the widest possible audience, and to create joy, connection, and excitement through music in the Philadelphia region, across the country, and around the world. Through innovative programming, robust education initiatives, a commitment to its diverse communities, and the embrace of digital outreach, the ensemble is creating an expansive future for classical music, and furthering the place of the arts in an open and democratic society. In June 2021 the Orchestra and its home, the Kimmel Center, united to form The Philadelphia Orchestra and Kimmel Center, Inc., reimagining the power of the arts to bring joy, create community, and effect change.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin is now in his 11th season as the eighth music director of The Philadelphia Orchestra. His connection to the ensemble's musicians has been praised by both concertgoers and critics, and he is embraced by the musicians of the Orchestra, audiences, and the community.

Your Philadelphia Orchestra takes great pride in its hometown, performing for the people of Philadelphia year-round, in Verizon Hall and community centers, in classrooms and hospitals, and over the airwaves and online. In response to the cancellation of concerts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Orchestra launched the Digital Stage, providing access to high-quality online performances, keeping music alive at a time when it was needed most. It also inaugurated free offerings: HearTOGETHER, a podcast

on racial and social justice, and creative equity and inclusion, through the lens of the world of orchestral music, and Our City, Your Orchestra, a series of digital performances that connects the Orchestra with communities through music and dialog while celebrating the diversity and vibrancy of the Philadelphia region.

The Philadelphia Orchestra's award-winning education and community initiatives engage over 50,000 students, families, and community members of all ages through programs such as Play!Ns; side-by-sides; PopUP concerts; Our City, Your Orchestra Live; School Concerts; the School Partnership Program and School Ensemble Program; and All City Orchestra Fellowships.

Through concerts, tours, residencies, and recordings, the Orchestra is a global ambassador and one of our nation's greatest exports. It performs annually at Carnegie Hall, the Mann Center, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, and the Bravo! Vail Music Festival. The Orchestra also has a rich touring history, having first performed outside Philadelphia in its earliest days. In 1973 it was the first American orchestra to perform in the People's Republic of China, launching a five-decade commitment of people-to-people exchange.

Under Yannick's leadership, the Orchestra returned to recording with 12 celebrated releases on the Deutsche Grammophon label, including the GRAMMY® Award-winning *Florence Price Symphonies Nos. 1 & 3*. The Orchestra also reaches thousands of radio listeners with weekly broadcasts on WRTI-FM and SiriusXM. For more information, please visit [www.philorch.org](http://www.philorch.org).

# Conductor



The first woman to serve as the head of a major orchestra in the United States, South America, Austria, and Britain, conductor **Marin Alsop** is recognized internationally for her innovative approach to programming and audience development, her deep commitment to education, and advocating for music's importance in the world. Now embarking on her fourth season as chief conductor of the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony, she leads the orchestra at Vienna's

Konzerthaus and Musikverein and on recordings, broadcasts, and international tours. As chief conductor of Chicago's Ravinia Festival, she curates and conducts the Chicago Symphony's summer residencies, formalizing her long relationship with Ravinia, where she made her debut with that orchestra in 2002. Appointed in 2020 as the first music director of the National Orchestral Institute + Festival (NOI+F), a program of the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, she has launched a new academy for young conductors and conducts multiple concerts.

At the close of the 2020–21 season, Ms. Alsop assumed the title of music director laureate and OrchKids founder of the Baltimore Symphony, where she continues to conduct the orchestra for three weeks each season. During her 14-year tenure as music director, she led the ensemble on its first European tour in 13 years, released multiple award-winning recordings, and conducted more than two dozen world premieres, as well as founded OrchKids, a groundbreaking music education program for Baltimore's most disadvantaged youth. In 2019, after seven years as music director, she became conductor of honor of Brazil's São Paulo Symphony, with which she continues to undertake major projects each season, including its Carnegie Hall debut to celebrate 200 years of Brazilian independence. Deeply committed to new music, she was music director of California's Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music for 25 years, over the course of which she led 174 premieres. She made her Philadelphia Orchestra debut in 1990.

Recognized with *BBC Music* magazine's "Album of the Year" and Emmy nominations in addition to GRAMMY, Classical BRIT, and *Gramophone* awards, Ms. Alsop's discography comprises more than 200 titles. Recent releases include a live account of Bernstein's *Candide* with the London Symphony and a Hindemith collection that marks her first recording as chief conductor of the Vienna RSO. She is the only conductor to receive the MacArthur Fellowship. *The Conductor*, a documentary about her life, debuted at New York's 2021 Tribeca Film Festival and has subsequently been broadcast on PBS television, screened at festivals and theaters nationwide, and recognized with the Naples International Film Festival's 2021 Focus on the Arts Award.

# Speaker



**Charlotte Blake Alston** is an internationally acclaimed storyteller, narrator, and librettist and is The Philadelphia Orchestra's Imasogie Storyteller, Narrator, and Host. She has appeared as host and narrator on the Orchestra's School and Family concerts since 1991 and has been the host of Sound All Around, the Orchestra's preschool concert series, since 1994. She has also appeared on each of the Orchestra's Martin Luther King, Jr., Tribute Concerts since 2003.

Committed to keeping alive African and African-American oral traditions, Ms. Alston has performed on national and regional stages including the Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. She has been a featured artist at the National Storytelling Festival; the National Festival of Black Storytelling; and festivals in Ireland, Switzerland, South Africa, and Brazil. She has performed at Presidential inaugural festivities in Washington, D.C., and the Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Children's Inaugural Celebrations in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. She was also one of two storytellers selected to present at the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. She has been guest narrator for several orchestras including the Cleveland Orchestra, the Boston Symphony, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. During a 20-year association with Carnegie Hall, she was the featured preconcert artist, host, and narrator on the Family, School, and Global Encounters concert series and represented the Hall in Miyazaki, Japan. She has also performed as a touring artist for Lincoln Center Institute.

Ms. Alston has produced several commissioned works for orchestras and opera companies including original narrative texts for Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*. Her honors include two honorary Ph.Ds, a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and the Circle of Excellence Award from the National Storytelling Association. She is the recipient of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Artist of the Year Award and the Zora Neale Hurston Award, the highest award bestowed by the National Association of Black Storytellers.

# Soloist



Jurgen Frank

Violinist **Jennifer Koh** is a forward-thinking artist dedicated to exploring a broad and eclectic repertoire, while promoting equity and inclusivity in classical music. She has expanded the contemporary violin repertoire through a wide range of commissioning projects and has premiered more than 100 works written especially for her. Her critically acclaimed series include *Alone Together*, *Bach and Beyond*, *Bridge to Beethoven*, *Limitless*, *Shared Madness*, and *The New*

*American Concerto*. This season she continues *The New American Concerto* series, an ongoing, multi-season commissioning project that explores the form of the violin concerto and its potential for artistic engagement with contemporary societal concerns and issues through commissions from a diverse collective of composers.

Ms. Koh made her Philadelphia Orchestra debut in 2008. In addition to these current performances, highlights this season include Missy Mazzoli's Violin Concerto with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Santtu-Matias Rouvali, the Lahti Symphony and Dalia Stasevska, and the Kansas City Symphony and Teddy Abrams. Additional *New American Concerto* commissions include Tyshawyn Sorey's *For Marcos Balter*, premiered with the Detroit Symphony in 2020; Courtney Bryan's *Syzygy*, premiered with the Chicago Sinfonietta in 2020; Lisa Bielawa's *Sanctuary*, premiered with the Orlando Philharmonic in 2019 and given its New York premiere with the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in 2021; Christopher Cerrone's *Breaks and Breaks*, premiered with the Detroit Symphony in 2018; and Vijay Iyer's *Trouble*, premiered at the 2017 Ojai Music Festival. As part of BAM's Next Wave Festival, Ms. Koh performed the New York premiere of *Everything Rises*, a staged musical work co-created with bass-baritone Davóne Tines. The piece is an exploration of family history—telling the stories of Koh's mother, Gertrude Soonja Lee Koh, a refugee from North Korea during the Korean War, and Tines's grandmother, Alma Lee Gibbs Tines, who holds vivid memories of anti-Black discrimination and violence.

Ms. Koh's GRAMMY Award-winning *Alone Together*—launched in 2020 as a virtual performance series—was developed in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the financial hardship it placed on many in the arts community. The project brought composers together in support of the many freelancers among them—with the more established composers each donating a new micro-work for solo violin, while also recommending a fellow freelance composer to write their own solo violin micro-work on paid commission from Ms. Koh's nonprofit ARCO Collaborative. Released in 2021 by Cedille Records, *Alone Together* features 39 world-premiere recordings.

# Choir



Jessica Griffin

The **Philadelphia Symphonic Choir** made its debut in December 2016, performing in three programs with The Philadelphia Orchestra that season. Consisting of talented vocalists auditioned from around the country, the ensemble was created to marry gifted and unique voices of Philadelphia and beyond with the legendary Philadelphia Sound. In the 2017–18 season, the Choir appeared in The Philadelphia Orchestra's performances of Haydn's *The Seasons* and Puccini's

*Tosca*. In the 2018–19 season the ensemble sang in performances of Bernstein's Symphony No. 3 ("Kaddish") and Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, as well as holiday performances of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. In the 2019–20 season the choir joined the Philadelphians for Handel's *Messiah*. More recent performance highlights with the Orchestra include the world premiere of the concert version of Kevin Puts's opera *The Hours* in Verizon Hall and performances of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* in Philadelphia and at Carnegie Hall.

The women of the Philadelphia Symphonic Choir are directed by Amanda Quist, director of choral activities for the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami. She directs the graduate program in choral conducting and is conductor of the award-winning Frost Chorale. Under her direction, the Frost Chorale has been invited to perform with the New World Symphony and Michael Tilson Thomas, the Martha Mary Concert Series, and in collaboration with professional ensembles Voces8 and Seraphic Fire. The Chorale has been featured on [wwfm.org](http://wwfm.org). She created the Seraphic Fire Scholars program and conducting internship partnerships with the South Florida Master Chorale and the Miami Children's Chorus. She has also served as chorus master for the Spoleto Festival. She was previously chair of the Conducting, Organ, and Sacred Music Department and associate professor of conducting at Westminster Choir College of Rider University. She is the recipient of Westminster Choir College's 2014 Distinguished Teaching Award, the 2018 Mazzotti Award for Women's Leadership, and the Carol F. Spinelli Conducting Fellowship. Her ensemble, Westminster Kantorei, won first place in the 2018 American Prize for College & University Choral Performance. With the Westminster Symphonic Choir, she collaborated with The Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the Dresden Staatskapelle.

The Philadelphia Symphonic Choir joins The Philadelphia Orchestra later this season for performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Bruckner's "Christus factus est" and Te Deum.

# Framing the Program

## Parallel Events

**1880**  
**Brahms**  
*Tragic*  
*Overture*

**Music**  
Tchaikovsky  
*1812 Overture*

**Literature**  
Zola  
*Nana*

**Art**  
Cézanne  
*Château de*  
*Medan*

**History**  
New York  
streets first lit  
by electricity

**1916**  
**Holst**  
*The Planets*

**Music**  
Prokofiev  
*Symphony*  
*No. 1*

**Literature**  
Joyce  
*Portrait of*  
*the Artist as a*  
*Young Man*

**Art**  
Matisse  
*The Three Sisters*

**History**  
Easter  
Rebellion in  
Dublin

In the summer of 1880 Johannes Brahms composed two concert overtures: the *Academic Festival Overture* and the *Tragic Overture*. The first, a cheery work, was meant to acknowledge an honorary doctorate bestowed by the University of Breslau; the other, its unidentical twin, is a serious dramatic piece. Brahms said of them that "one laughs and the other cries" and conducted them together in Breslau in January 1881.

During the pandemic many composers faced the challenges of isolation and felt a need to address the situation in their music. In 2021 Missy Mazzoli wrote her Violin Concerto, titled "Procession," for her colleague Jennifer Koh, who is the soloist today. Mazzoli composed the work on a remote Swedish island with thoughts of medieval rituals connected with the Black Death. In the context of plagues, injuries, and illnesses, she pondered "how we use music to heal."

The reputation of the prominent English composer Gustav Holst rests today primarily on his brilliant orchestral suite *The Planets*, which he began writing on the eve of the First World War. Cast in seven movements (Earth is not included and Pluto was not yet discovered), Holst's stated goal was to represent "the character" and "the astrological significance of the planets." The movements name gods and an associated quality, mood, or activity, starting with "Mars, the Bringer of War" and ending with "Neptune, the Mystic."

The Philadelphia Orchestra is the only orchestra in the world with three weekly broadcasts on SiriusXM's *Symphony Hall*, Channel 76, on Mondays at 7 PM, Thursdays at 12 AM, and Saturdays at 4 PM.

# The Music

## Tragic Overture

**Johannes Brahms**

**Born in Hamburg, May 7, 1833**

**Died in Vienna, April 3, 1897**



Despite his eventually composing some of the greatest symphonies, overtures, and concertos ever written, Johannes Brahms's production of orchestral music was slow to start. Robert Schumann's declaration in 1853 that the 20-year-old Brahms was the musical messiah for whom everyone had been waiting since the death of Beethoven in 1827 proved a mixed blessing. Such lavish praise was deserved (and turned out to be prescient), but it also raised the stakes for the young composer. Brahms

acutely felt the pressure to show what he could do. His youthful piano and chamber music earned the admiration of musicians, critics, and audiences alike, but everyone wondered when he would turn to what really mattered: symphonies and operas. Of course, Brahms never did write an opera, and his First Symphony took more than another 20 years to arrive, with abortive attempts on the way diverted into other compositions, such as the First Piano Concerto. Unwilling to write programmatic symphonies along the lines of the ones by Liszt and others, Brahms remained true to his Classical ideals.

After the success of the First Symphony in 1876—appropriately hailed as “Beethoven's Tenth”—orchestral masterpieces flowed with greater ease and frequency. The Second Symphony appeared the next year and a few years later Brahms composed two concert overtures, the *Academic Festival Overture*, Op. 80, and the *Tragic Overture*, Op. 81.

**Twin Overtures** The happy birth of these pieces, unidentical twins, occurred during the summer of 1880 when Brahms was vacationing at Bad Ischl. The circumstances leading to the *Academic Festival Overture* are well known—Brahms was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Breslau in 1879 and wrote the Overture as a gesture of thanks. While composing the piece, however, he felt the need to provide a companion. “The *Academic* has led me to a second overture that I can only entitle the ‘Dramatic,’ which does not please me.” Problems with a title continued, as he informed the Breslau Orchestra Society, “You may include a ‘Dramatic’ or ‘Tragic,’ or ‘Tragedy Overture’ in your program for January 6; I cannot find a proper title for it.” Eventually the title *Tragic* was chosen, although it is meant as an overture to a tragedy, not an expression of personal pain or grief. Indeed, performances of



Goethe's *Faust* in Vienna's Burgtheater, for which Brahms contemplated writing incidental music, may have been in his mind.

Hans Richter, the noted conductor, led the Vienna Philharmonic in the Overture's premiere in December 1880 and Brahms conducted both overtures in Breslau the following week.

**A Closer Look** As is the case with Brahms's other orchestral music, there is no story or other extra-musical element attached to the *Tragic Overture*—simply the idea of it preceding a tragedy. Yet the composer Hugo Wolf was unwilling to listen to the work innocently, on Brahms's terms, and therefore provided a story, just as he no doubt would have had he composed the piece himself. As one often encounters in writings about music at the time, Wolf's plotline helps to orient listeners. (Wagner and others often did this for Beethoven's music.) In one of his more favorable reviews of Brahms, Wolf writes:

Brahms's *Tragic Overture* reminds us vividly of the ghostly apparitions in Shakespeare's dramas who horrify the murderer by their presence while remaining invisible to everyone else. We know not what hero Brahms murdered in this Overture, but let us assume that Brahms is Macbeth and the Overture is the embodiment of the murder of the spirit of Banquo, whom, with the first down-bows falling like the blows of an ax, he is just murdering. In the course of the composition the ghost of his victim appears again and again, the blows of the ax reintroduce the motif of the murder as at the opening of the Overture, reminding him pointedly of these events. Horrified, he turns away and seeks in feigned repose to pull himself together. Brahms-Macbeth expresses this excellently in a very stilted, artificial middle theme. This spectacle repeats itself until the end of the Overture.

This description captures some of the most striking musical moments in the work, from the two thundering chords that open the work (and that look back to Beethoven's concert overtures) to the stark conclusion. A dark and mysterious mood pervades the entire composition, even when the thematic material is treated with warmth and tenderness. This is an underrated and somewhat neglected composition, but a great and most characteristically Brahmsian one.

—Christopher H. Gibbs

*Brahms composed the Tragic Overture in 1880.*

*Carl Pohlig was on the podium for The Philadelphia Orchestra's first performances of the Overture, in November 1907. Since then it has appeared a little more than 25 times, including the Orchestra's 1958 tour to Europe and the Soviet Union, with Eugene Ormandy. The most recent subscription performances were in March 2010, with Vladimir Jurowski conducting. Some of the other conductors who have led the work with the Philadelphians include Leopold Stokowski, José Iturbi, Bruno Walter, Ernest Ansermet, Pierre Monteux, Michael Tilson Thomas, Robert Shaw, Riccardo Muti, Vladimir Ashkenazy, and Christoph Eschenbach.*

*The Orchestra has recorded the work twice: in 1977 with Ormandy for RCA and in 1988 with Muti for Philips.*

*Brahms scored the piece for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.*

*Performance time is approximately 15 minutes.*

# The Music

## Violin Concerto ("Procession")

**Missy Mazzoli**

**Born in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, October 27, 1980**

**Now living in Brooklyn, New York**



Hailed by NPR as "the 21st century's gatecrasher of new classical music," Missy Mazzoli resists easy categorization. Not only a composer, she is also a performing keyboardist, an impresario, educator, advocate, and mentor. Even as a composer, she consciously avoids fostering a singular, recognizable voice. "With each work," she explains, "I endeavor to provide a new language for thoughts and feelings. ... I try to create a totally different sound world."

Mazzoli was born in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, a small commuter town just north of the Philadelphia metro area. She earned music degrees from Boston University and Yale before pursuing additional studies at the University of the Hague. The list of her composition teachers is long—evidence of her respect for distinct approaches and different processes—and includes such luminaries as David Lang, Aaron Jay Kernis, and Louis Andriessen.

One of the first two women (along with Jeanine Tesori) to be commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, Mazzoli has enjoyed particular success with opera throughout her career, including a residency with Opera Philadelphia from 2012 to 2015. She has also served as the Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 2018 and currently teaches composition at the Mannes School of Music in New York.

**A Collaborative Advocacy** In her compositions, performances, and advocacy work, Mazzoli actively champions new music for, and by, groups not traditionally supported by the classical music establishment, especially female composers and musicians of color. She co-founded, for example, the Luna Composition Lab, set up specifically to assist female-identifying composers in their teens, and was executive director of New York's MATA Festival from 2007 to 2010.

That collaborative advocacy was pivotal in the creation of Mazzoli's 2021 Violin Concerto, subtitled "Procession." The Concerto was commissioned for American violinist Jennifer Koh, Mazzoli's faculty colleague at the Mannes School, for whom she had already written "Hail, Horrors, Hail" from *Alone Together* (Koh's 2020 pandemic-related project for violin) and the short *Kinski Paganini*

(2016). The commission came from the National Symphony Orchestra, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and BBC Radio 3, with support from the ARCO Collaborative, a non-profit commissioning body that advocates for inclusivity in new music.

Mazzoli wrote this new concerto during the COVID pandemic, while residing on the remote Swedish island of Fårö. The pandemic itself and the quasi-enforced isolation directly influenced the work, inspired by medieval rituals connected with the Black Death and other plagues, injuries, and illnesses. "I was thinking a lot about music as a healing ritual," she reflects, "and how we use music to heal." In the almost programmatic narrative of the Concerto, the solo violin takes on the role of an incantator, the weaver of spells and charms.

**A Closer Look** The Concerto's five movements create a symmetrical, chiastic form. The outer movements—both processions—are based on similar materials; the second and fourth movements function as dance interludes, and the central movement is a reworking of a hymn tune.

In the opening movement ("**Procession in a Spiral**"), the solo violin stretches taut portamentos over sustained dissonances, at times searching upward toward the numinous, then plunging to sepulchral depths. Whether the violin is leading the orchestra in this spiral procession, or fighting against it, the direction in which the procession moves is hauntingly ambiguous.

Without a break, the second movement ("**St. Vitus**") leaps into an angular solo dance against a backdrop of Post-Minimalist patterns in the strings and winds. St. Vitus, the patron saint of dancing, is one of the 14 Holy Helpers in Roman Catholic theology who give aid in times of trouble and sickness. This dance—an homage to Vitus—reaches an anxious, crunching crescendo before rapidly fragmenting, then disappearing entirely.

Mazzoli describes the third movement ("**O My Soul**") as a "twisted reworking" of a hymn tune. Slowly descending scales in the orchestra create a disheartening backdrop for the solo violin, whose motifs (including an extended cadenza in the middle of the movement) seek freedom from the inexorable downward cascade. The violin eventually succumbs, tumbling into the Agitato fourth movement titled "**Bone to Bone, Blood to Blood**"—a name derived from the second of the two 9th-century Merseburg Charms. These words come from a pagan spell cast by Odin (a prominent god in pagan Germanic mythology) originally intended to cure a horse's broken limbs. Several stanzas of a moto perpetuo incantation in the violin, punctuated by sharp accents in the orchestra, suggest a kind of magical twitching as the charm takes effect.

A massed string glissando—fragile and trembling—rises into the concluding "**Procession Ascending**" movement. The solo bassoon intones a funereal chant at the outset before the violin attempts again to break free of the somber procession. This time it eventually succeeds, soaring stepwise in its highest

registers. Even the deep orchestral sonorities turn to C major(-ish) harmony in sympathy near the conclusion. But the orchestra suddenly loses sight of the violin line, which for a time continues to yearn ecstatically to upward release before abruptly disappearing itself.

—Luke Howard

*Missy Mazzoli composed her Violin Concerto in 2021.*

*These are the first Philadelphia Orchestra performances of the work.*

*The score calls for solo violin, two flutes (II doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (II doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons (II doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, percussion (bass drum, brake drum, glockenspiel, snare drum, suspended cymbal, temple blocks, vibraphone), harp, and strings.*

*The Concerto runs approximately 20 minutes in performance.*

# The Music

## *The Planets*

**Gustav Holst**

**Born in Cheltenham, England, September 21, 1874**

**Died in London, May 25, 1934**



During the first half of the 20th century, Great Britain was blessed with at least five marvelous composers, of whom Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams have become a regular part of our concert life—albeit through a mere handful of works—and Frederick Delius and Arnold Bax are perhaps not far behind in making inroads here. But no British master is known through fewer works than Gustav Holst, who despite a large and excellent output remains for most listeners

the composer of a single composition: the popular and influential *Planets*, which continues to make its mark today in everything from television to *Star Wars*.

Born in Cheltenham, England, of Swedish, German, and English parentage, Gustavus “von Holst” received his schooling at the Royal College of Music, where he studied harmony and counterpoint with Charles Villiers Stanford. A severe case of neuritis forced him to give up his ambition of becoming a pianist, and he subsequently took an interest in composition. Later he studied trombone and played in the Carl Rosa Opera Company, which proved to be extremely valuable experience for his experiments in orchestral composition. Some have cited his travels in the Far East as being partly responsible for Holst’s streak of mysticism, which colors a number of his works. He was an impressive scholar of languages and learned enough Sanskrit to set parts of the *Rig Veda* to music.

In any case it appears that it was partly the astrological significance of heavenly bodies that first sparked the composer’s idea to forge a set of orchestral tone poems to reflect the character of each planet. He began the cycle that became *The Planets* in 1914, just before the first shots of World War I were sounding in Sarajevo.

**A Non-programmatic Work** The hardships of the war years slowed the work on this unprecedented composition—which took two years to finish—and appear to have influenced the outcome as well. *The Planets* was completed in 1916 and was first presented in a private performance in London on September 29, 1918, under Adrian Boult’s baton. The public premiere was not until after the war—on November 15, 1920, with Albert Coates conducting.

There are seven movements, each with a distinctive musical character that seems to relate both to the god for which the planet is named and to the quality, mood, or activity that this god has come to represent. (Earth is not represented in *The Planets*, and although Pluto's existence had been "theorized" as early as 1919, it wasn't actually discovered until 1930.) To the very end Holst insisted that his goal in this concert favorite was to represent "the character ... the astrological significance of the planets," and that the pieces had no further extramusical meaning. "There is no program music in them," he said, "neither have they any connection with the deities of classical mythology bearing the same names. If any guide to the music is required, the subtitle to each piece will be found sufficient, especially if it be used in a broad sense."

Partly, Holst's insistence that these works were only "suggested" by astrological concepts was the composer's way of keeping *The Planets* from becoming ludicrously sentimental or programmatic. Indeed, one can easily listen to this work as a marvelous symphony, without giving a thought to gods or heavenly bodies, and still derive meaning and pleasure from the music's sheer sonic vitality.

**A Closer Look** But it's more fun, perhaps, to listen for programmatic ties. "**Mars, the Bringer of War,**" for example, might well be about the god Mars—but since this god represents war anyway, there is really no way to separate the war-god Mars from the overtly "martial" character that the planet has come to embody. In fact Holst himself said, on another occasion, that he was seeking here to express "the stupidity of war." The piece is not a "march" per se, but it does contain something of the relentless gunfire and violence of the battlefield. Its resemblance to John Williams's *Star Wars* music is hardly coincidental, for music such as this plainly formed one of that composer's most potent influences.

Holst's daughter, Imogen, would later greet speculation about the work's programmatic nature—especially the notion that it was some sort of statement on World War I—with a caveat, pointing out that "Mars" was completed in 1914, before the war had begun. "It would be easy to take it for granted that 'Mars' had been commissioned as background music for a documentary film of a tank battle. But Holst had never heard a machine gun when he wrote it, and the tank had not yet been invented."

In grave contrast, "**Venus, the Bringer of Peace**" is a lyric love song, not unlike the goddess for whom this most tranquil of planets was named. "**Mercury, the Winged Messenger**" is a fleet scherzo that conveys the volatile nature of both god and planet.

"**Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity**" is less about the imposing nature of this god—and this most mysterious of planets—than about what Holst called the spirit of "one of those jolly fat people who enjoy life." Clearly this Jupiter is more Falstaff than Zeus. A contrasting middle section employs a broad-limbed and rather innocently constructed tune that was later adapted to a sentimental patriotic hymn, "I Vow to Thee, My Country."

**"Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age"** is a ghostly funeral-march that reminds us of the forceful vision of old age and destiny. **"Uranus, the Magician,"** forceful but mystical (and more than a bit like Paul Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice*), stands as one of the most skillful uses of the modern orchestra of the era.

**"Neptune, the Mystic"** brings the work to a puzzling yet deliciously lyrical close; again the textures of more recent film scores seem to have been derived from this piece. Some have claimed also to hear the influence of Debussian evocations of "Neptune's realm"—such as the "Sirens" movement from *Nocturnes* (which also features a wordless women's choir), and of course *La Mer*, a work whose influence could hardly be avoided in the first half of this century.

—Paul J. Horsley

*The Planets was composed from 1914 to 1916.*

*Leopold Stokowski presented the first Philadelphia Orchestra performances of The Planets in November 1934, just six months after Holst's death. The Women's Glee Club of the University of Pennsylvania collaborated in the "Neptune" movement. The Planets was most recently heard on subscription in November 2017, with Cristian Măcelaru leading women from the Westminster Symphonic Choir.*

*The Orchestra recorded the work with Eugene Ormandy and women of the Mendelssohn Club in 1975 for RCA.*

*The Planets is scored for an orchestra of four flutes (III doubling piccolo I, IV doubling alto flute and piccolo II), three oboes (III doubling bass oboe), English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tenor and bass tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, gong, orchestra bells, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, xylophone), two harps, celesta, organ, strings, and women's chorus.*

*The work runs approximately 50 minutes in performance.*

# Musical Terms

## GENERAL TERMS

**Cadence:** The conclusion to a phrase, movement, or piece based on a recognizable melodic formula, harmonic progression, or dissonance resolution

**Cadenza:** A passage or section in a style of brilliant improvisation, usually inserted near the end of a movement or composition

**Chord:** The simultaneous sounding of three or more tones

**Counterpoint:** The combination of simultaneously sounding musical lines

**Diatonic:** Melody or harmony drawn primarily from the tones of the major or minor scale

**Dissonance:** A combination of two or more tones requiring resolution

**Glissando:** A glide from one note to the next

**Harmonic:** Pertaining to chords and to the theory and practice of harmony

**Harmony:** The combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce chords and chord progressions

**Legato:** Smooth, even, without any break between notes

**Meter:** The symmetrical grouping of musical rhythms

**Minimalism:** A style of composition characterized by an intentionally simplified rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic vocabulary

**Modulate:** To pass from one key or mode into another

**Moto perpetuo:** See perpetual motion

**Nocturne:** A piece of a dreamily romantic or sentimental character, without fixed form

**Op.:** Abbreviation for opus, a term used to indicate the chronological position of a composition within a composer's output. Opus numbers are not always reliable because they are often applied in the order of publication rather than composition.

**Perpetual motion:** A musical device in which rapid figuration is persistently maintained

**Portamento:** A glide from one note to another

**Scale:** The series of tones which form any major or minor key

**Scherzo:** Literally "a joke." Usually the third movement of symphonies and quartets that was introduced by Beethoven to replace the minuet. The scherzo is followed by a gentler section called a trio, after which the scherzo is repeated. Its characteristics are a rapid tempo, vigorous rhythm, and humorous contrasts. Also an instrumental piece of a light, piquant, humorous character.

**Timbre:** Tone color or tone quality

**Tone poem:** A type of 19th-century symphonic piece in one movement, which is based upon an extramusical idea, either poetic or descriptive. Also called a symphonic poem.

**Tonic:** The keynote of a scale

## THE SPEED OF MUSIC (Tempo)

**Agitato:** Excited

## DYNAMIC MARKS

**Crescendo:** Increasing volume