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1

Gustav Holst: The Planets, Op. 32

Finding meaning in Holst's seven-movement suite, with each movement named after the planets from our solar system.

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/classical-features/best-holst-works-10-essential-pieces>

How is musical sound used to convey meaning?

This page examines the deeper meanings in *The Planets*, composed by Gustav Holst between 1914 and 1920.

Why did Holst create a work with movements named after the planets in our solar system? Is there a deeper meaning behind each movement named after the planets?

Looking into the historical context and examining musical meaning allows us to gain a deeper understanding of this piece.

The Planets is known for its use of groundbreaking symphonic textures with the two most notable movements, Mars and Jupiter, which have been influential in cultural history and widely recognized for their use in popular media. However, the development of this work was complicated and not always popular.



[insert image here]

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) was a British composer who came from a family of professional musicians, but his musical career didn't come easily. Holst was a frail child who suffered from many physical ailments, including asthma, myopia, and neuritis. This development of neuritis in his hand made it difficult to play the piano and quickly ended his childhood aspirations of becoming a concert pianist. His neuritis was so severe during his later life that he had to dictate some of his compositions, including parts of *The Planets*.²

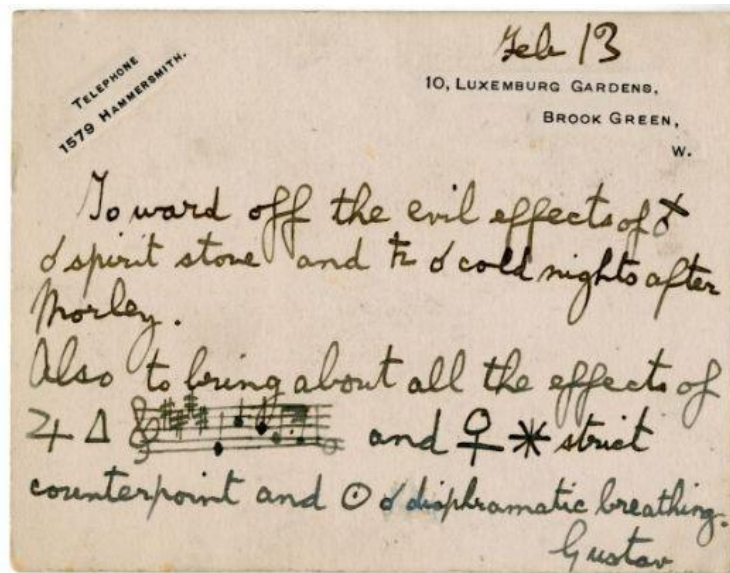
Holst's early years were filled with psychological turmoil as well. Rejection from the Trinity College of Music in 1892 set him on a path of self-doubt. Furthermore, his state of financial insecurity left him feeling like a failure. During that time, Holst took a trip with

² Greene, Richard. *Holst, The Planets*. Cambridge, [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1995. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/2027/heb.07609>. EPUB. pp. 28.

several friends where he met Clifford Bax, an astrologer and theosophist, who introduced him to astrology. Out of this friendship with Bax and turmoil in life grew the idea for *The Planets*, one of the most enduring symphonic works of the 20th century.³

Astronomy vs. Astrology

Holst once wrote, "As a rule I only study things that suggest music to me...recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me, and I have been studying astrology fairly closely...everything in this world...is just one big miracle. Or rather, the universe itself is one."⁴



[insert image here]

A postcard written by Gustav Holst, using astrological symbols to talk about *The Planets*⁵

³ Trippett, David. "A Biography of Gustav Holst: Part 1: 1874-1902." *MusicWeb International*, <http://www.musicweb-international.com/holst/page2.html>. Accessed 29 April 2022.

⁴ Holst, Imogen. *Holst*. London, Faber & Faber, 1981.pp.5

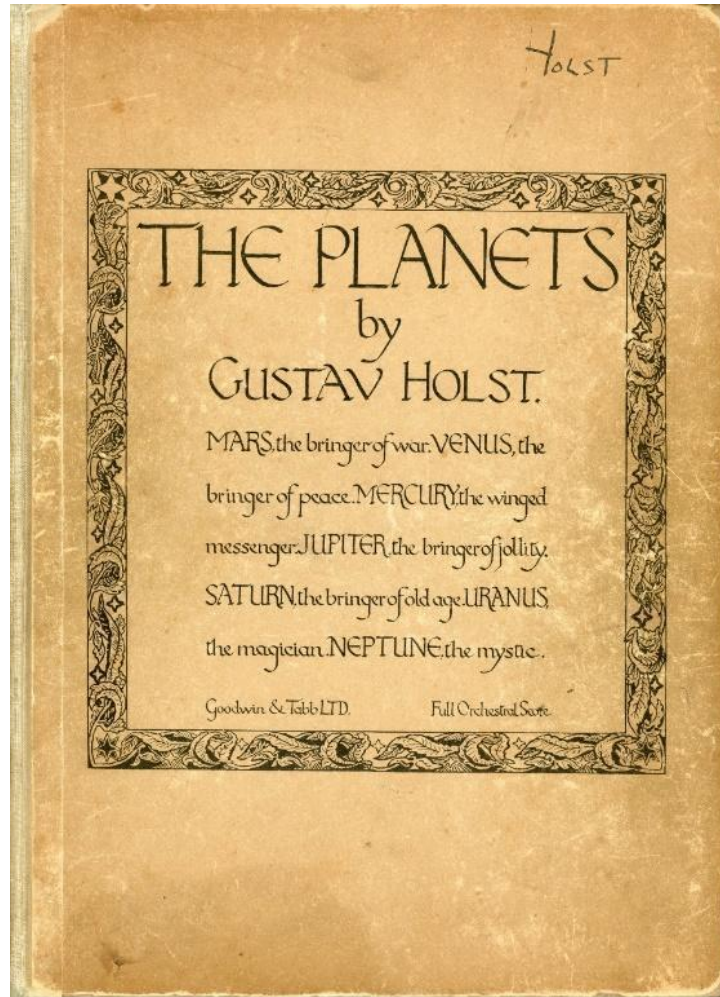
⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.bpacatalogue.org/view/2026229#>

+)	o	nature	element
I	II	IX	Individual	△
II	VI	X	temporal	□
III	VII	XI	relative	=
IV	VIII	XII	terminal	▽

[insert image here] Astrological drawing from Gustav Holst's 1914 notebook⁶

One of Holst's favorite books was *The Art of Synthesis*, written by Alan Leo, a pioneer astrologer, which he studied to create *The Planets*. Alan suggests that each planet in the solar system has different qualities and characteristics as they relate to the horoscope. Holst closely followed these planetary characteristics in writing his work. In fact, the title for the last movement, "Neptune the Mystic," is the same as the heading of Leo's chapter.

⁶ Retrieved from <https://holstarchiveproject.org/2016/09/30/philosophy-astrology-and-christmas-lists/>



[insert image here] *Original score for The Planets with the title of each movement describing its characteristic⁷*

⁷Retrieved from <http://www.imogenholst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Planets-score-cover.jpg>

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[insert image here] Each chapter of Alan Leo's, *The Art of Synthesis*, describing the characteristic of the planets. Note that Neptune, *The Mystic* is titled the same as *The Planets 7th movement*⁸

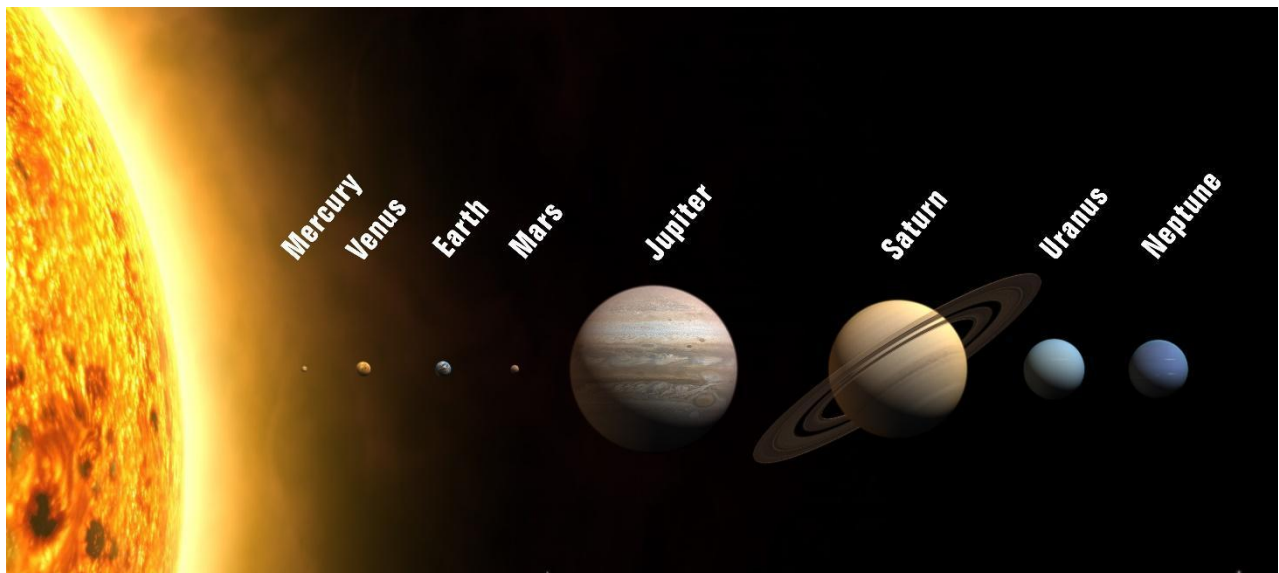
⁸ Retrieved from: <https://archive.org/details/artofsynthesis00leoa/page/n25/mode/2up?view=theater>

Why Only Seven Planets? *A look into astrology...*

Astronomy and astrology are often confused. Astronomy is the study of the universe outside of Earth's atmosphere, while astrology studies the influence of these properties surrounding Earth and how it affects individual beings and events on Earth. This becomes important in understanding the construction of Holst's composition and his interest in astrology.

It may be surprising to listeners that with a suggestive title such as *The Planets*, only seven of the planets are represented in the composition. Most recognize that there are eight planets in our solar system, with the exception of Pluto being recognized as the ninth planet up until 2006⁹. Pluto wasn't discovered until 1930, several years after the completion of *The Planets*, which explains the omission of this movement and astronomical significance of the piece.

Using astronomical principles, the arrangement of Holst's seven planets may seem unusual. The astrological influence is apparent as the planets are presented according to the traditional order of the zodiac signs and their ruling planet. This explains why Earth is omitted because it bears no astrological significance.

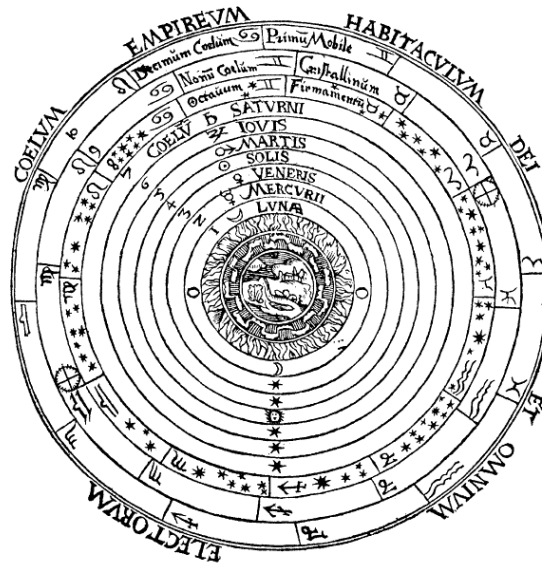


[insert image here] Astronomical order of planets with the Sun being central and

⁹ Pluto, was discovered in 1930 after the completion of *The Planets* in 1919. However, the International Astronomical Union changed Pluto's planetary status to that of dwarf planet in 2006. *Pluto*. NASA Science. <https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/planets/dwarf-planets/pluto/overview>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022.

Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune being bound to it by gravity.¹⁰

Schema huius præmissæ diuisionis Sphærarum .



[insert image here] A depiction of the ruling planets of the zodiac signs.¹¹

Stylistic Choice

 [Audio Link here: <https://youtu.be/8AQx0V2IZs8?t=80>]

Listen to this clip of Arnold Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 16.

 [Audio Link here: <https://youtu.be/AhFfuLqoiUI?t=200>]

Compare this with Gustav Holst - *The Planets*, Op. 32, "Mars, The Bringer of War" (03:20)

Do you hear similarities in the use of instrumentation and tonality? Listen for the heavy use of brass and percussion instruments and dissonance.

Holst's musical choices, inspired by composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky, veered away from the standard music scene in England. British music was "quaint and isolated in its nostalgic mood"¹² making it difficult for critics to appreciate *The Planets*.

¹⁰ Retrieved from https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/image/0608/planets_iau_big.jpg

¹¹ Grant, Edward. "Celestial Orbs in the Latin Middle Ages." *Isis*, vol. 78, no. 2, 1987, pp. 153.

¹² Greene, Richard. *Holst, The Planets*. Cambridge, [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1995. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/2027/heb.07609>. EPUB. pp.14.

The first premiere of the work was in 1918, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, and was not well received. Critics described it as “noisy and pretentious,” “a great disappointment. Elaborately contrived and painful to hear,” and “detestable music.”¹³

Furthermore, the work was not presented in its entirety due to the thought that the public was listening to a new language and “half an hour of it was as much as they could take in.”¹⁴ Holst did not approve, as he “hated incomplete performances of *The Planets*...He particularly disliked having to finish with Jupiter, to make a 'happy ending', for, as he himself said, 'in the real world the end is not happy at all.'”¹⁵

Meaning in Music

Holst didn't intend for *The Planets* to be program music, music written to tell a narrative. The title of each movement was meant to be metaphorical. Holst noted that “These pieces were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets; there is no programme music in them, 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.”¹⁶

Without a program, how was the music able to bring about any meaning? Looking at several of the movements of *The Planets* will help us understand how Holst used different musical elements to embody the unique characteristics of each planet's astrological meanings.

Structure

While each individual movement has unique qualities, the overall structure holds significance. The work can be seen as an allegory to the progression of aging by looking at the overall succession of the movements. It starts with the “chaotic energy of youth”¹⁷ in the Mars movement, progressing through “physical decay”¹⁸ in the Saturn movement, and ending in the mystic nature of the afterlife in the Neptune movement.

¹³ Greene, Richard. *Holst, The Planets*. Cambridge, [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/2027/heb.07609>. EPUB. pp.32

¹⁴ Kennedy, Michael. *Adrian Boult*. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987. pp. 68

¹⁵ Holst, Imogen. *A Thematic Catalogue of Gustav Holst's Music*. London, Faber & Faber, 1974 .pp. 125

¹⁶ Madey, Scott F., and Dean D. VonDras. "Music, Wellness, and Aging." *Music, Wellness, and Aging: Defining, Directing, and Celebrating Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. pp. 147

¹⁷ Head, Raymond. “Holst - Astrology and Modernism in ‘The Planets.’” *Tempo*, no. 187, 1993, pp. 15–22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/945181>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022.

¹⁸Sobel, Dava. *The Planets*. New York: Viking, 2005. pp. 166

The Planets can be seen as progression parallels the ages of a man, from youth to old age.¹⁹ The following paragraphs will look more closely at some of these ideas.

Mars-Bringer of War

Mars represents the “chaotic energy of youth and desire for revolutionary action.”²⁰

Why is the listener reminded of war, so much so that parts of *Mars* have become part of popular media culture? This frequently imitated movement is recognized in music such as John Williams’s soundtrack for the *Star Wars* films. Hans Zimmer also closely used the melodies and instrumentation as inspiration for the soundtrack for *Gladiator*.



[Audio link here:
<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxYIHgAnxw0WLh7mKv53VyTurqXvqrpAgT>]

First, listen to this portion of the Mars movement.



[Audio link here:
<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxfqRGXWvVTIJiozN1juPnddv3iQdFtwhH>]

Next, listen to these examples from a portion of the “Barbarian Horde” from the *Gladiator*. Are you reminded of any elements from the Mars movement?

Here’s another example from “The Imperial March” in *Star Wars*.



[Audio link here:
<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxOzfsgVvchpVUkYbJEUWmsHrp3PyICf2Z>]

Listen to this portion of the Mars Movement



[Audio link here:
<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxSleORVOR0CFpkiU62HyP8BYeZwZe2Pkh>]

Does this sound familiar?

This movement can be seen as an allegory to the idea of human nature’s internal conflict, hostility, and aggression. This sets the stage for the rest of the movements, the

¹⁹ Foreman, Lewis: notes to the Elder/Hallé CD (Hyperion CDA 67270, 2001)

²⁰ Head, Raymond. “Holst - Astrology and Modernism in ‘The Planets.’” *Tempo*, no. 187, 1993, pp. 15–22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/945181>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022. pp.17

aftermath of the destruction created, through a variety of paths to redemption, both musically and psychologically.

- The brass and harp offer a hollow feeling of doom, playing in their lowest register
- The use of tritones (three adjacent whole tones) and the restless 5/4 rhythm to create a conflicting nature in the music
- The col legno technique, (a sound created by the striking of the wooden part of a bow), creates an unexpected percussive sound, bringing attention to the listener, and creating an unworldly experience.



[Audio link here:

https://www.youtube.com/clip/UgkxW5cOwKWNsQcOc_YRBZxbqDyHI26aNckt

- The topical use of fanfare in the horns and brass adds to the militaristic and war-like nature of the music, adding to the resulting devastation that war ensues



[Audio link here:

<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxqTTSrZqDJEU9yIH36taqGwe-PI3D8H3F>

- Some symbolism is also heard throughout the movement. The snare drum cadence and trumpet fanfare imitate the sounds of an army going into battle



[Audio link here:

<https://www.youtube.com/clip/Ugkx8wGGQAIQEeqFeo6C-dP8Adxk9wlagUMqg>

- The element of unexpectedness

Listen to how this clip starts out less tense but by 00:05, becomes tense with the shift in tone. At 00:26, the most dissonant and aggressive interval is encountered by the listener



[Audio link here:

https://www.youtube.com/clip/Ugkxb7xRn5tAJAvhZNLyCj_OXraKABuMXWww

These musical elements, chromatic inflections, ramblings, unconventional rhythmic figures, act as metaphors of emotions and psychological states that we associate with the idea of war.

Venus-Bringer of Peace

It was noted by Holst that “The whole of this movement...is pervaded by the serenity of a world which nothing seems able to disturb. The mood is unmistakably mystical and the hero may indeed imagine himself contemplating the twinkling stars on a still night...”²¹

Perhaps this undisturbed world described by Holst is an idea of a world away from war and destruction previously heard in the Mars movement.

- Notice the stark contrast of delicate sounds depicted by the lighter instrumentation and soaring melodies.
- Tranquility and peaceful nature are portrayed through this choice of instrumentation and melody.
- The harps, glockenspiel, and celeste play oscillating chords throughout the movement, adding to the mystical and twinkling nature of the still night.
- The “personality” of Venus, the solo violin sings its peace, showing affection and beauty



[Audio link here:

[https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxcQhpw-T7_tyTwgyt-s23RxNDCQEC_7Ke\]](https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxcQhpw-T7_tyTwgyt-s23RxNDCQEC_7Ke)

This reminds the listener of the hope for human dignity and peace. However, the journey of the human psyche isn't over yet. The journey through human turmoil is set to continue.

Saturn-the Bringer of Old Age

²¹ Greene, Richard. *Holst, The Planets*. Cambridge, [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1995. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/2027/heb.07609>. EPUB. pp. 48



[insert image here] Holst's Saturn²²

This is the longest of *The Planets'* seven movements and was Holst's favorite. He said, "Saturn brings not only physical decay but also a vision of fulfillment."²³ The

²² Retrieved from <https://www.bpcatalogue.org/view/2026230#>

²³ Sobel, Dava. *The Planets*. New York: Viking, 2005. pp. 166

astrological belief is that Saturn progresses through life slow and steady, having a similar personality to that of Holst's.²⁴

- Instrumental persona portrays the struggle for breath. Throughout the movement, these syncopated rhythms remind the listener of the gradual end of life, as if each gasp might be the last.



[Audio link here:

https://www.youtube.com/clip/UgkxX9DpDQLf4nywlpFr0j67_o_GMkM3rcG5]

- Another reminder of old age is depicted through the sounds of a slow march towards the end of life. Along with it, the regal nature of the horn's fanfare celebrates all that was fulfilled during life.



[Audio link here:

https://www.youtube.com/clip/Ugkxd_e881Mm5vn-1GplkAei_pLV-d8Mvzbw]

Neptune, The Mystic

This movement has unique elements that are used to convey the mystical Neptune which represents the mystery of the afterlife.

One element is the use of offstage presence. Holst carefully planned the execution of the voice and offstage presence, leaving detailed stage directions to achieve this haunting celestial effect.

"The chorus is to be placed in an adjoining room, the door of which is to be left open until the last bar of the piece, when it is to be slowly and silently closed. The Chorus, the door, and any Sub-Conductors that may be found necessary are to be well screened from the audience."²⁵

"Holst made them rehearse this over and over again; any shoes that squeaked had to be taken off, and the door had to be shut absolutely silently. And he implored them to control their breathing so that nothing would interrupt the legato of that diminuendo."²⁶

- This separation of voice from orchestra creates a super-human effect, reminding the listener of a mystical world in the afterlife.
- The gradual diminuendo and fade into silence to end the piece evokes the infinite nature of the universe.



[Audio link here:

<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxmLXWCImQg6Bw9Abv3gUC9kPkaAxJccYp>]

²⁴ Greene, Richard. *Holst, The Planets*. Cambridge, [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1995. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/2027/heb.07609>. E PUB. pp.57

²⁵ Gustav Holst, *The Planets*. (New York: Dover, 2000), 162.

²⁶ Holst, Imogen. "Introduction." *The Planets, op. 32*, by Gustav Holst. In *Collected Facsimile Edition of Manuscripts of the Published Works*, vol. 3. London: Faber Music, 1979

Holst's interest in astrology inspired the creation of a work in which characters of each planet are expressed through music. Familiar topics are used throughout the piece to represent the character of each planet that Holst envisioned. Musical themes and motifs help listeners find the meaning of *The Planets*.