

Holst's *The Planets*—An HD Odyssey

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Caroline Shaw: *The Observatory*

Caroline Shaw rocketed into the international new music world in 2013, when she became the youngest composer ever to receive the Pulitzer Prize in music. Since then, her career has soared. The Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra co-commissioned *The Observatory* in 2019. She has written:

I always try to write for the environment in which the music will first be heard. Writing an orchestral work for a summer evening in Hollywood got me thinking about my favorite genre of film and storytelling: sci-fi. . . [*The Observatory* has] patterns and details of movements of patterns, motives that appear in diminution and augmentation simultaneously, like objects in orbit at different phases. . . are references to Strauss' *Don Juan*, Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, Sibelius' Symphony No. 2, Brahms' Symphony No. 1 and the arpeggiated chimes used to summon audiences to their seats at concerts. There is chaos and clarity. Welcome to *The Observatory*.

Ralph Vaughan Williams: *The Lark Ascending*

The Lark Ascending is a 13-minute work inspired by a George Meredith poem. Vaughan Williams originally composed it for violin and piano in 1914, then reworked it for violin and orchestra after World War I. Williams had studied violin as a boy and was deeply attuned to English literature. He included 12 lines from Meredith's poem at the head of the score. His music transports us in the joyous swoop and soar of the lark's aerial flight, momentarily suspending our earthbound existence in favor of a figurative birds-eye view of the lovely Cotswold countryside.

Gustav Holst: *The Planets*—An HD Odyssey

Gustav Holst wrestled with large forms, yet in his orchestral suite *The Planets*, he composed one of the most monumental pieces in literature. These seven movements are progressions of character: from war to peace

(Venus); thence to a messenger (Mercury) who ushers in first jollity (Jupiter), then old age (Saturn). Finally, we are introduced to magic (Uranus) and mysticism (Neptune). In a way, Holst is taking us as listeners on a journey through life, not only from a temporal standpoint, but also from a spiritual one. Holst's extraordinary range of mood, color and expression makes *The Planets* an engrossing and powerful listening experience.

These performances are complemented by stunning visual imagery of the more literal planets, the province of NASA astronomers.

Caroline Shaw: *The Observatory*

Caroline Shaw

Born: August 1, 1982, in Greenville, North Carolina

Composed: 2019

World Premiere: August 27, 2019, in Los Angeles. Xian Zhang conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic

Duration: 16 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, glockenspiel, snare drum and vibraphone), piano and strings

Caroline Shaw broke through to the forefront of the international new music world in 2013, when her *Partita for 8 Voices* won the Pulitzer Prize in music. She was the youngest composer ever to receive that prestigious award. She studied at Rice, Yale and Princeton, and currently serves on the faculty at NYU and as a creative associate at Juilliard.

Though Shaw is still in her early 40s, her career has soared. She has fulfilled commissions from soprano Renée Fleming with pianist Inon Barnatan; the Dover and Calidore Quartets, soprano Dawn Upshaw with Sō Percussion and pianist Gilbert Kalish, and the Baltimore Symphony, among others. During the 2018–19 season Jonathan Biss was soloist in *Watermark*, Shaw's then-new piano concerto for the Seattle Symphony. She remains active as a performer, both as a violinist and as a singer with Roomful of Teeth. Caroline loves the color yellow, otters, Beethoven's *Quartet Op. 74*, Mozart's operas, *Kinhaven*, the smell of rosemary and the sound of a janky mandolin.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra co-commissioned *The Observatory*. Shaw's title refers to Griffith Observatory, a landmark structure north of Los Angeles that has become the most visited observatory in the world.

Her composer's note follows in its entirety.

Creating a score for full orchestra can feel like simultaneously standing on a mountaintop, scrubbing your kitchen floor, swimming in the middle of a lake, riding the subway during rush hour and gently holding someone's hand. It's not a medium that I work in very often. I always try to write for the particular environment (place, ensemble or person, time of year, etc.) in which the music will first be heard (in this case: the Hollywood Bowl, the LA Phil, the brilliant Xian Zhang, the heat of August 2019). It's a fun constraint, and it helps keep the writing personal and connected to the real world. The first and only time I've ever been to the Hollywood Bowl was in September 2015, singing with Kanye at the 808s and Heartbreak show. It was a wild ride, and I remember feeling like an observer of a mysterious workshop that somehow churned beauty out of chaos. There is also something about writing an orchestral work for a summer evening in Hollywood that got me thinking about my favorite genre of film and storytelling—sci-fi. I love the way epic tales of the beyond can zoom in and out, using grand imagined alternate universes to tell stories about ourselves. And I love how music in these films carves and colors our attention to those worlds (in their various scales).

While writing music, I often imagine some kind of visual (usually abstract, sometimes figural, rarely narrative), as a guide for myself and sometimes as a thing to write against. There's an invisible counterpoint here, but I'd rather someone simply listen and create their own contrapuntal narrative adventure than read an account of mine—to leave space for one's own observation and reflection, whether it be of the music or their neighbor's t-shirt or cosmology or tomorrow's grocery list. (The grand story arcs of our lives sometimes play out in minutiae and the mundane). And often the imagined visuals that I write to are nothing more than shifts in color or a quick cut between undefined scenes. (Sometimes the juxtapositions and transitions [and parentheticals] are where the stories are).

I was in the midst of writing *The Observatory* while in LA [in spring 2019] to record some vocals (hi, Teddy Shapiro!). So, one morning before our session I went up to the Griffith Observatory to clear my head. I looked down at the city with all its curves and all its edges (thanks, John Legend) and up at the sky, which has been observed and wondered about since the beginning of consciousness. I had been thinking about my friend Kendrick Smith, a cosmologist at the Perimeter Institute (and also my favorite grill master). Kendrick is at the cutting edge of the ancient tradition of stargazing, constructing new frameworks for analyzing data collected by the CHIME radio telescope. My simplistic distillation of his work: Kendrick develops ways of looking at ways of looking at ways of looking at (ways of looking at) the universe. Sometimes I think maybe that's what music is. Or maybe it's just a way to acknowledge and pass the time.

If you've gotten this far in the program note, you're probably wondering if I'll actually talk about the music you will hear in *The Observatory*. Okay. There are some very large chords, and some very large spaces. There are patterns and details of movements of patterns (thanks, T.S.). There are motives that appear in diminution and augmentation simultaneously, like objects in orbit at different phases. There is foreground and background. There is love for Andrew Norman. There are references to Strauss' *Don Juan*, Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, Sibelius' Symphony No. 2, Brahms' Symphony No. 1 and the arpeggiated chimes used to summon audiences to their seats at orchestra concerts. There is

celebration and criticism of systems. There is chaos and clarity. The very large chords return at the end, but their behavior is not the same as when we began. Welcome to *The Observatory*.

Ralph Vaughan Williams: *The Lark Ascending*

Ralph Vaughan Williams

Born: October 12, 1872, in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, England

Died: August 26, 1958, in London

Composed: 1914; revised in 1920

World Premiere: December 15, 1920, in the violin-piano version. The orchestral version premiered June 14, 1921. The soloist was Marie Hall. Sir Adrian Boult led the British Symphony Orchestra.

Duration: 13 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, triangle, solo violin and strings

As a child, Vaughan Williams played violin. He was no Paganini, and once remarked that the violin had saved him from the piano. But he understood how to write for the instrument, an understanding eloquently demonstrated in his exquisite romance for violin and orchestra, *The Lark Ascending*. Beethoven wrote two romances for violin and orchestra, but the analogy is distant. Vaughan Williams was not psychologically attuned to the dramatic 19th-century view of the virtuoso. None of his compositions for soloist and orchestra is a large work; this one is decidedly evocative rather than confrontational or daring.

At the head of Vaughan Williams' score are quoted the following lines from George Meredith's *Poems and Lyrics of the Joys of Earth*.

He rises and begins to round.
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.

* * * *

For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup,
And he the wine which overflows
To life us with him as he goes

* * * *

Till lost on his aërial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

While the poem does not determine the music in the sense of direct musico-pictorial description, both the opening and closing of *The Lark Ascending* bear direct relationship to Meredith's couplets. Frank Howes has wryly observed that:

...this lark is a pentatonic bird with a propensity for leaving out the third and becoming tetratonic.

The piece has a key signature of one sharp, implying G major. Characteristically, Vaughan Williams opts for the modal progressions that flavor so much of his music. The work takes its shape from three melismatic violin cadenzas without bar lines, emulating the exploratory ascent of the bird. Enveloped within the cadenzas are three lyrical orchestral sections. The outer two are in 6/8 time; the second cadenza heralds a tranquil switch to 2/4. We always feel that the soloist is fully integrated into the orchestral texture, rather than being pitted against it. In this most pastoral of movements, the distractions of everyday life seem remote. Rather, we are caught up in the joyous swoop and soar of aerial flight, momentarily suspending humanhood in favor of a literal and figurative birds-eye view of the Cotswold countryside that inspired Vaughan Williams.

Gustav Holst: *The Planets*, Suite for Large Orchestra, Op. 32

Gustav Holst

Born: September 21, 1874, in Cheltenham, England

Died: May 25, 1934, in London

Composed: 1914–1916

World Premiere: September 29, 1918, in Queens Hall, London

Duration: 51 minutes

Instrumentation: four flutes (one doubling piccolo, one doubling piccolo and alto flute), three oboes (one doubling bass oboe), English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, tenor tuba, tuba, six timpani (requiring two players), percussion (including snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, tambourine, chimes, tam-tam, xylophone and glockenspiel), two harps, celesta, organ, women's chorus and strings

When Gustav Holst began work on *The Planets* in 1914, he had thought about composing a large orchestral suite for some time. This one began with the title *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*, an homage to his contemporary Arnold Schoenberg, whose *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 16 (1909) Holst greatly admired. Most critics compare *The Planets* to Schoenberg's *Five Pieces* or to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913), both of which were certainly influential. In terms of orchestral precedent, the best comparison is to Bedřich Smetana's *Má Vlast* (My Fatherland), six movements loosely linked by the course of a great river and each of which functions as a discrete tone poem.

The Planets is full of paradoxes. One irony is that Holst wrestled with large forms, uncomfortable with the structural constraints that symphonies and concertos presented. Yet in this collection of orchestral movements, he composed one of the most monumental pieces in literature. Another contradiction is that *The Planets* was written from 1914 to 1916 and is thus generally classified as a war work. Yet its relentless,

menacing first movement—“Mars, The Bringer of War”—was fully drafted before Great Britain entered the war. Thus, it is certainly not Holst’s reaction to the horror of military conflict; his daughter and biographer, Imogen Holst, deems the movement prophetic.

We would do better to look at the progression of character that Holst makes through his seven movements: from war to peace (Venus); thence to a messenger (Mercury) who ushers in first jollity (Jupiter), then old age (Saturn). Finally, we are introduced to magic (Uranus) and mysticism (Neptune). In a way, Holst is taking us as listeners on a journey through life, not only from a temporal standpoint, but also from a spiritual one. Thus, Venus here is a palliative to war, rather than a symbol of romantic love. She tempers the brutality and violence of Mars’ music, with reminders of beauty and refinement.

In “Mercury,” which functions as a scherzo movement, Holst gives vent again to adolescent energy and enthusiasm. He is herald to Jupiter, whose irrepressible joviality has made this central movement the best known and most popular of the seven. From here we encounter the darker, more abstract side of Holst’s personality. “Saturn” is the consummate mood piece, confronting us with fear of mortality. The sorcerer of Dukas’ *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* clearly had at least a rhythmic impact on Holst’s evocation of “Uranus the Magician.” Mystery and the occult reach their peak in the finale, “Neptune,” which adds a wordless chorus of treble voices to evoke the transcendent boundlessness of the universe.

The Planets abounds in opportunities for every section of the orchestra and most of the instrumental principals, to an extent that rivals a concerto for orchestra. Holst’s extraordinary range of mood, color and expression makes *The Planets* an engrossing and powerful listening experience.

These performances are multi-media, projecting images of each planet on the screen above the stage. NASA’s astonishing photographs of these landmarks in our solar system are a marvelous and awe-inspiring complement to Holst’s cinematic music.

E.D. Hirsch’s original *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988) told us that a planet is “a kind of object that is in orbit around a star but does not give off its own light; rather, it shines by reflecting sunlight...There are nine major planets, including the earth, in orbit around our sun, along with many asteroids.” The first thing we ought to know about Gustav Holst’s most famous work, *The Planets*, is that it is not about mythology. Most planets in our solar system simply happen to be named for ancient Greek and Roman gods and goddesses.

We know from the program page that Holst’s suite consists of seven movements. Mr. Hirsch and our middle school science teachers taught us that our solar system had nine planets. That changed in 2003, when astronomers tentatively identified a tenth planet. They reported that the so-called tenth planet (“2003 UB313”) was even larger than Pluto. Informally, they referred to it as Xena, but in 2006 they formally designated this trans-Neptunian object as Eris.

The three planets “missing” from the Holst composition are Pluto, Earth and the recently discovered 2003 UB313, aka Xena or Eris. Pluto was not discovered until 1930 (and in any case was downgraded in 2006 to a

“dwarf planet,” as was the newcomer Eris). Holst completed *The Planets* in 1917. Earth, for whatever reason, did not stimulate his imagination. His symphonic suite is its own musical galaxy, less governed by science than by mysticism.

What then was Holst’s context? Astrology, at least as a jumping-off point. But there is a lot more going on in these seven tone poems—for that is, in effect, what they are—than just the character he deemed appropriate to each of the planets. Holst was a bookworm who preferred the solitude of his study to almost everything. He became interested in eastern religions and mysticism early on, and worked both aspects into much of his music, including *The Planets*. For him, philosophical ideas took precedence over astrological or astronomical accuracy. He thought of *The Planets* as a series of mood pictures, and neither intended nor achieved immense contrast within any of its individual components. Between contiguous movements, however, there is a world of difference. That is precisely why this work is so enormously effective in its cumulative dramatic and musical impact.

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