

THREE INDISPENSABLE 20th CENTURY ENGLISH COMPOSERS

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INDISPENSABLY ENGLISH

Many English composers created many musical compositions in the later part of the 19th century and well into the 20th, yet much of their music, worthy as it is, remains firmly anchored in the polite sensibilities and conservatism of the 19th century. It was not until the arrival of **Gustav Holst**, **Ralph Vaughn Williams**, and **Benjamin Britten** that 19th century English music turned the corner to keep pace with what was happening in Continental Europe during the very difficult, very exciting, very creative 20th century.

THE MUSIC IN TODAY'S LECTURE:

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) – *The Planets*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1974) – *Four Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes*

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) – *The Lark Ascending*



Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

The Planets - <https://youtu.be/be7uEyyNIT4>

Edward Gardner leads the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain and the CBSO Youth Chorus in a performance of Gustav Holst's *The Planets* with the addition of Colin Matthews' supplementary piece, *Pluto, The Renewer*. Recorded live at the Royal Albert Hall on August 6th, 2016.



Gustav Holst wrote *The Planets* between 1914 and 1915, as the Great War raged on. It was stunning music for an English audience accustomed to the jolly melodies of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Holst then continued to create wonderful compositions well into the 1930's.

One of the most unusual characteristics of some of the music of the Romantic and post-Romantic eras was its penchant for imitating the sounds of nature. But what about planets – do they make sounds? Planets supposedly emit electric waves that transform themselves into sounds that travel across outer space and can be picked up by powerful listening devices in places like Mount Palomar Observatory. But, at the time of composition of *The Planets* and without the aid of any electronic devices, composer **Gustav Holst** was only able to imagine what Jupiter and Venus and Mars sounded like.

Holst wrote music about six planets in the solar system – the six that had been discovered up to the time of Holst's composition: **Mars** (Ares), **Venus** (Aphrodite), **Mercury** (Hermes), **Jupiter** (Zeus), **Neptune** (Poseidon) and **Saturn** (Cronus).

Holst had a rich source of inspiration in all the material left by the Greeks and Romans of Ancient times, who assigned human personalities to the various deities: warrior (Mars), lover (Venus), messenger (Mercury), king (Jupiter), seaman (Neptune) and timekeeper (Saturn.) These gods had been written about in stories, myths, plays, and poems, from Sophocles to Homer to Shakespeare - literature that informed and inspired Gustav Holst.

In 2000, the conductor Kent Nagano asked composer Kevin Matthews to add his work *Pluto, The Renewer* to Gustav Holst's *The Planets*, as the planet Pluto had been discovered four years before Holst's death and twenty years after Holst's composition had been completed,



Mars, the Bringer of War

Mars (Aries to the Greeks), the warrior god gets martial music to match. But this is an unusual march. Instead of getting the usual ONE-two-three-four- ONE-two-three-four that we associate with our John Phillip Sousa marches, we get ONE-two-THREE-four-five- ONE-two-THREE-four-five- ONE-two-THREE-four-five, which signals that this Martian god walks to the beat of a different drum (or else he has an extra foot to walk with...)

In Holst's **MARS** we get a military fanfare. Now, fanfares can be used for different purposes. *Taps* is a fanfare to signal the passing of a fallen comrade. A fanfare can be used to signal "time to get up!" And, then there is the ominous-sounding fanfare that signals the start of a battle, for which Holst makes a surprising choice of an *Euphonium* – a cousin to the tuba, but smaller and with a more penetrating sound.



When that Euphonium sounds half-way through **MARS**, we know that a battle is about to take place and that all the previous marching was just getting ready for the big moment.

Throughout the centuries composers have occasionally used music to depict war...warlike sentiments...the glories of war... Think of Haydn's Military Symphony or Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. Gustav Holst, too old to enlist during the Great War, used his musical talent to express the devastation of war in a way that no composer had ever done up to that moment.

Writing this music, Gustav Holst ushered in a new century during which no decade would pass without some corner of the world being engaged in wars that no longer took place in the countryside, but wars that visited urban populations and decimated millions of civilians, as it has recently been happening.

Not content with merely writing music for its own sake, Holst in England and, later, Shostakovich in Russia, and before him Schoenberg in Austria, sought to comment on the evil ways of the 20th century world through their art.



Venus, the Bringer of Peace

Venus (Aphrodite to the Greeks) Goddess of love and beauty. This is unequivocally music for the wee hours of the evening... Slow music...French horn...flutes...harp...violin solo...oboe solo...

*Music has Charms to soothe a savage Breast,
To soften Rocks or bend a knotted Oak.
I've read, that things inanimate have moved
And, as with living Souls, have been informed
By Magic Numbers and persuasive Sound.*

- William Congreve



Mercury, the Winged Messenger

Lean and mean and fast, Mercury (Hermes to the Greeks) is Jupiter's errand-boy-God. Holst sets his music to a *Scherzo* (the Italian word for joke.) The music plays with the rhythm, the harmony, and the melody, writing its own rules and obeying no others.



Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity

Holst calls this movement "Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity" which is fine if that's how Holst sees Jupiter, (Zeus among the Greeks.) But Jupiter was always on the prowl for a human female and assumed all sorts of disguises to have his way. Why the disguises? Because, if Jupiter appeared in his true incarnation, the sight of him would cause something terrible to happen to the mortal who beheld him, like being turned into an animal, for instance. The Greeks called this stunt **θεοφάνεια** (Theophaneia...)

Jupiter could turn himself into a swan...a bull...an eagle...an old lady...another god...a goddess... Jolly for him. Not so jolly for the unwilling targeted female. Listen to how Holst has this music convey all this "jollity." He uses the full range of instruments, from the frog-like sound of the contrabassoon to the flutes and violins.



Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

Saturn was the god of time: inexorable and uncompromising. Saturn (*Chronos* for the Greeks) ate his six children so that they would not overthrow him, but Rhea, his wife, saved one little fellow by the name of Zeus and the rest, as they say, is mythological history.

Saturn, the planet is as remote as you can get. The music Holst provides sounds saturnine - a word meaning sullen...moody...gloomy...



Uranus, the Magician

Holst gives Uranus (Ouranos to the Greeks) an *Adagio* (slow) movement filled with syncopated chords - like heartbeats that don't happen on the DOWNBEAT but on the AND upbeat.

He uses harp...flutes...double bass...trombone...all with a big *crescendo* (louder and louder) and a dramatic sense of the passing of time.

Uranus, whom Gustav Holst labels: "Uranus, the Magician" doesn't really have much of a ranking in the hierarchy of gods, and anyway, the stories attributed to him are very unpleasant, to say the least.

Holst utilizes a heavy, ponderous march-*scherzo* using the brass section and the percussion at top capacity to describe this second-tier god.



Neptune, the Mystic

Neptune (Poseidon to the Greeks) - another angry god, envious of his brother Jupiter who landed the corner office of Olympus with a 360-degree view, always caused storms and shipwrecks.

Holst uses here one of the most original effects in all of his music: a chorus of female voices singing on a vowel sounds (AH or OO) and then humming on and on and *DECRESCENDO*... (Italian word for **decreasing**) and getting softer and softer and softer and softer...as if the planet were getting farther and farther away...moving through the galaxy on its way to the infinite...



Benjamin Britten (1913-1974)

<https://youtu.be/ht9mQE6X0CO>

Benjamin Britten Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*, Op 33a 1 Dawn 2 Sunday Morning 3 Moonlight 4 Storm BBC Symphony Orchestra, Sakari Oramo, conductor

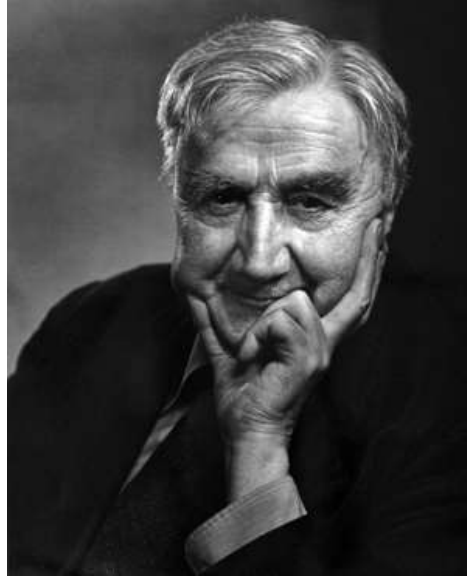
Benjamin Britten composed music that clearly broke with all traditions of the past. Britten wrote the opera *Peter Grimes* for one of the first television broadcasts ever held in Great Britain. From that work, the four interludes in the suite we will listen to are among the most potent music Britten ever wrote:

Interlude 1 "On the Beach" Interlude 2 "The Storm" Interlude 3 "Sunday Morning by the Beach"
Interlude 4 "Evening."



Peter Grimes is set in an English fishing village where the changes of the ocean echo the emotionally charged events in the life of its protagonist, a loner who is ostracized and hunted down by the villagers for allegedly killing an apprentice boy. Though ultimately proven innocent, the desperate Grimes takes his boat out in the ocean and scuttles it...himself on board.

The music is descriptive, with a sweep that embodies the vastness of the ocean and its overwhelming unpredictability, threatening and restless one moment, calm and utterly beautiful at other times.



Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

The Lark Ascending <https://youtu.be/IOWN5fQnzGk> Hilary Hahn performs *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughan Williams at the George Enescu Festival.



Ralph Vaughan Williams (pr: **Rayff-Vawn**-Williams) (1872-1958) straddled two eras. His music embodied the sensibility of the Victorian Era that lingered on in England through the Edwardian years and the modern sounds that followed the end of the First World War.

An adamant romantic melodist, Williams gave us his *The Lark Ascending* – an exquisite musical depiction of a bird in flight.

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