

Symphonic Cinema: Holst's The Planets

Sunday, January 31, 2027 · 18:00 · Barbican

Matteo Dal Maso, conductor · Lucas van Woerkum, film director

approximately 50 minutes

Gustav Holst

1874–1934

The Planets, Op. 32

THE COMPOSER

Gustav Holst (1874–1934) was born in Cheltenham and spent most of his working life in London. Alongside composing he was a teacher throughout his career, most lastingly at St Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, where he taught from 1905 until his death. His closest friend was Ralph Vaughan Williams, with whom he shared a love of English folk song, heard in works such as *A Somerset Rhapsody*. His curiosity ranged much further afield: he learned Sanskrit in order to set Hindu texts, and his reading in astrology gave him the plan for *The Planets*, the orchestral suite that made him internationally known in the years after the First World War. A shy man, he did not welcome that fame, and the sparser music of his later years never matched the suite's popularity. He generally avoided the standard forms of symphony, sonata and string quartet in favour of suites and unconventional groupings of pieces.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Planets made Gustav Holst famous, somewhat against his wishes, and it has a particular link with this orchestra: the London Symphony Orchestra gave the first complete public performance, under Albert Coates, on 15 November 1920.

The idea came from astrology, not astronomy. Around 1913 Holst became absorbed in the subject and was reading the popular astrologer Alan Leo. 'As a rule I only study things that suggest music to me,' he explained. 'That's why I worried at Sanskrit. Then recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me.' He began with Mars in 1914, before the outbreak of the First World War, and went on to Venus and Jupiter later that year. Saturn, Uranus and Neptune followed in 1915 and Mercury, the last to be written, in 1916. Progress was slow because he was a busy schoolteacher, at St Paul's Girls' School in London among other places, and could compose only at weekends and in the holidays.

50 minutes

What he produced is a set of seven character pieces for a very large orchestra. His first title was simply *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*, probably with Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* in mind, which he had heard in London. Each movement carries the name of a planet and a subtitle giving its astrological character, and Holst maintained that the subtitles were all the guidance a listener needed. There is no programme, and the gods of classical mythology are beside the point. Nor is the order that of the solar system. Holst arranged the movements for musical effect, so that the suite travels from the physical violence of Mars to the disembodied stillness of Neptune. There is no Pluto, which had not yet been discovered.

The first performance was a private one. Holst's friend and benefactor Balfour Gardiner paid for it, and on 29 September 1918, in the last weeks of the war, Adrian Boult conducted the Queen's Hall Orchestra before an invited audience. The players had hardly seen the music beforehand. Partial performances followed, to Holst's irritation: he disliked hearing the suite cut, and particularly disliked seeing Jupiter placed last to make a happy ending. After the complete performance of 1920 its success was rapid and has lasted.

These concerts present the suite complete, but in an unusual way: as the live score for *LOSS*, a silent film by the Dutch director Lucas van Woerkum, who sits among the players and runs the images in time with them. The film, with Emma Thompson and Greg Wise, is a meditation on grief and on what may follow death. Van Woerkum has said that his starting point was a remark he attributes to Holst's daughter Imogen, that *The Planets* can be heard as a progression of the human soul.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Mars, the Bringer of War. A five-beat rhythm is tapped out quietly by timpani, harps and strings played with the wood of the bow, and it hardly lets up. The music builds again and again to brutal, dissonant climaxes, with the organ adding its weight.

Venus, the Bringer of Peace. A solo horn is answered softly by flutes and oboes; later come a solo violin and the cool glitter of harps, celesta and glockenspiel. It is the answer to Mars.

Mercury, the Winged Messenger. The shortest movement and the scherzo of the set, over in about four minutes. Fragments dart between instruments in two keys at once, and in the middle a small tune, first heard on a solo violin, is passed around the orchestra a dozen times in different colours.

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity. Bustling high spirits frame the broad central melody that Holst later allowed to be sung as the hymn 'I Vow to Thee, My Country'. In the suite it moves at half the speed of the music around it, and its final cadence is left unresolved.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age. Holst's own favourite. Flutes and harps tread like a slow clock, a solemn melody rises in the trombones, and the procession grows to a clangorous climax with bells before it fades into calm.

Uranus, the Magician. Four loud brass notes cast the spell. A galumphing dance for bassoons and timpani gets more and more out of hand, in the manner of Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, until it is swept away at a stroke.

Neptune, the Mystic. Quiet throughout, in a swaying five-beat metre, with flutes, harps and celesta to the fore. In Holst's score a hidden chorus of women's voices joins without words and recedes until it is hard to say where sound ends and silence begins. The LSO's listing for these film performances does not name a choir.

Tonight's artists

Lucas van Woerkum *film director*

The LSO bills van Woerkum as ‘film-maker and image soloist’. For these two performances, at 6pm and 7.45pm, he plays LOSS, his silent film for The Planets, from a place inside the orchestra. The film stars Emma Thompson and Greg Wise as a married couple separated by death, with dance sequences by the Arts Umbrella Dance Company of Vancouver. The LSO announces these as its UK premiere; the Sydney Symphony Orchestra gave the first performances in May 2026.

Lucas van Woerkum is a Dutch film director and the creator of Symphonic Cinema, a format in which a silent drama film is performed with a live orchestra and edited in real time to follow the players. He trained as a horn player before turning to film, and began with documentaries about music and composers. The first Symphonic Cinema film, *The Isle of the Dead*, after Rachmaninoff, dates from 2011. It was followed by *Firebird*, after Stravinsky, *Daphnis & Chloe*, after Ravel, *The Echo of Being*, set to music from Mahler's symphonies, and *LOSS*, made for Holst's *The Planets*. In performance he sits on stage with a touchpad and triggers each shot himself, speeding the film up or slowing it down to match the orchestra.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Holst: A Biography**

Imogen Holst, Faber and Faber 2011

The life of the composer by his daughter, who saw the making of *The Planets* and its first performances at close range.

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Holst: The Man and His Music**

Michael Short, Oxford University Press 1990

The fullest modern account of Holst's life and works, clear on how astrology, teaching and overwork shaped *The Planets*.

DEEPER **Holst: The Planets**

Richard Greene, Cambridge University Press 1995

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to the suite: its sources, its early performances and reviews, and a movement-by-movement analysis.

SOURCES

1. Symphonic Cinema: *The Planets*, 31 January 2027, 6pm, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/symphonic-cinema-31-jan-27-6pm/>

2. Symphonic Cinema: The Planets, 31 January 2027, 7.45pm, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/symphonic-cinema-31-jan-27-7-45pm/>
3. The Planets, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Planets
4. The Planets, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/the-planets>
5. The Planets, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/752/the-planets>
6. 'The Planets,' the work that made Gustav Holst a rock star, Chicago Symphony Orchestra. <https://cso.org/experience/article/15605/the-planets-the-work-that-made-gustav-holst-t>
7. Gustav Holst, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Holst
8. Moving Pictures: Lucas van Woerkum on Symphonic Cinema, Sydney Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.sydneyssymphony.com/posts/moving-pictures-lucas-van-woerkum-on-symphonic-cinema>
9. Silent Film Created to Accompany Performance of Holst's 'The Planets', The Violin Channel. <https://theviolinchannel.com/silent-film-created-to-accompany-performance-of-holsts-the-planets/>
10. Matteo Dal Maso, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/about-us/the-orchestra/conductors/matteo-dal-maso/>
11. Matteo Dal Maso, Donatella Flick Conducting Competition. <https://donatellaflickcompetition.com/matteo-dal-maso>
12. Matteo Dal Maso Wins Donatella Flick Conducting Competition, The Violin Channel. <https://theviolinchannel.com/matteo-dal-maso-wins-donatella-flick-conducting-competition/>
13. Gustav Holst: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571241996>
14. Gustav Holst: The Man and His Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780193141544>
15. Holst: The Planets, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521456333>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-01-31-dal-maso>

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