



Milwaukee Symphony Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 2 Notes

CHARLES IVES

Born 20 October 1874, Danbury, Connecticut

Died 19 May 1954, New York, New York

The Unanswered Question

Composed: 1906

First performance: 11 May 1946; New York, New York

Unquestionably one of America's greatest composers, Charles Ives was a heroic figure in experimental music during the first half of the 20th century. Though as an undergraduate he studied composition at Yale with Horatio Parker (1863-1919), his music was constrained neither by academicism nor adherence to European tradition: He made his fortune in the insurance business, so he was free to write music as he pleased. Musical "success" came only in the last decades of his life.

Ives's first sketches for *The Unanswered Question* date from 1906; in the 1930s, he developed these into the piece as we know it. First published in 1941, it had its premiere five years later, performed by a chamber orchestra of graduate students from the Juilliard School.

In a preface to the printed score, Ives provided a clue to his compositional intent, giving the work a programmatic narrative. Throughout the piece, the offstage strings sustain hymn-like, slow-moving diatonic chords. Ives said these depict "The Silence of the Druids – who Know, See, and Hear Nothing." Against this background, the solo trumpet intones an atonal phrase seven times – "The Perennial Question of Existence." To this, the woodwinds answer the first six times in a progressively volatile manner. These replies represent, stated the composer, "Fighting Answerers" who, after a time, "realize a futility and begin to mock 'The Question,'" before finally giving up and leaving "The Question" to be asked a final time before "The Silences" are left to their "Undisturbed Solitude." ☺

AUGUSTA READ THOMAS

Born 24 April 1964; Glen Cove, New York

Radiant Circles

Composed: 2010

First performance: 10 March 2011; New Haven, Connecticut

Grammy-winning composer Augusta Read Thomas is a designated University Professor (one of only seven) at the University of Chicago. Previous teaching posts include Eastman, Northwestern, and Tanglewood. Thomas states, "Teaching is a natural extension of my creative process and of my enthusiasm for the music of others." During her tenure as composer-in-residence for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1997-2006), that venerable ensemble premiered nine commissioned works.

Radiant Circles (2010) was written for the New Haven Symphony Orchestra and its conductor William Boughton during her time as their composer-in-residence. Its title follows Thomas's practice of choosing names that are poetic and suggestive (e.g., *Astral Canticle*, *Earth Echoes*, *Galaxy Dances*, *Orbital Beacons*), rather than explanatory.

Though only about ten minutes' duration, *Radiant Circles* reveals itself slowly as spacious chords are formed one note at a time, building either from the sky down or from the earth upward. Before long, brass fanfares are heard, and the timpanist adds thunderous exclamations. And at the end, upon building to one final resplendent chord, the music is left to vibrate into the waiting silence. ☺

GUSTAV HOLST

Born 21 September 1874, Cheltenham, England

Died 25 May 1934, London, England

The Planets, Op. 32

Composed: 1914-16

Premiere: 28 September 1918; London, England

These pieces were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets. There is no program 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 of each piece will be found sufficient, especially if it is used in a broad sense. For instance, *Jupiter* brings jollity in the ordinary sense, and also the more ceremonial kind of rejoicing associated with religious or national festivities. *Saturn* brings not only physical decay, but also a vision of fulfillment. *Mercury* is the symbol of mind.

–Gustav Holst

The English composer Gustav Holst is best known for his seven-movement suite *The Planets*. That such should be the case was a source of great consternation to him – much like *Bolero* for Ravel or the piano prelude in C-sharp minor for Rachmaninoff. With other fine orchestral music, several operas, chamber music, songs, and a plethora of sublime choral music in his catalogue, the composer never thought it his best work; he was flummoxed by the sensation it caused. Regarding success, he stated, “It made me realize the truth of ‘Woe to you when all men speak well of you.’”

Born into a musical household – his father was a pianist and organist, his mother a pianist and singer – Gustavus Theodore von Holst’s family tree had its roots in Scandinavia, Russia, and Germany. (He anglicized his name in the course of WWI.) As a child, he took piano lessons and began writing music while still in grammar school. In his late teens, he entered the Royal Academy of Music, where he studied composition with the eminent Charles Villiers Stanford. At the RCM, he met fellow student Ralph Vaughan Williams. The two immediately became fast friends and began the lifelong habit of playing their newest works-in-progress to each other.

Throughout his adult life, Holst was a teacher – and an influential one. That profession took up most of his time, allowing him to compose only on weekends and in August, when he worked undisturbed in his soundproof music room at St. Paul’s Girls’ School, Hammersmith. (Appointed director of music there in 1905, it was the only teaching post he kept to the end of his life.) Often lecturing in evening institutes as well, he was forced to save up his compositional ideas until the end of each week. That’s why it took him two years (1914-16) to write *The Planets*. (Bad eyesight and neuritis in his right arm had kept him from war service.)

As Holst makes clear in the quote above, offered in connection with the work’s first performance, *The Planets* was conceived with an astrological, rather than astronomical, mindset. Holst was first introduced to astrology in 1913 by Clifford Bax, brother of composer Arnold Bax, while the two were on a tour of Spain. Not long afterward, he wrote to a friend, “Recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me, and I have been studying astrology fairly closely.” Thus, their contrasting personalities gave rise to a work unlike anything he had ever composed.

The first performance was for an invited audience of a few hundred people; Sir Adrian Boult led the New Queen’s Hall Orchestra. Many thought *Mars* was a depiction of the war still being fought, when in fact it was composed prior to August 1914. The end of *Neptune* – with its offstage women’s chorus fading into silent infinity – caused the biggest commotion, but Holst’s own favorite was always *Saturn*. Over one hundred years later, the piece never fails to please. His daughter and biographer Imogen Holst (1907-84) summed it up best: “During the many years since it was written, *The Planets* has suffered from being quoted in snippets as background music, but in spite of all unwanted associations it has survived as a masterpiece, owing to the strength of Holst’s invention.” ☺