

The Planets - Notes on the Program

By Aaron Grad

***Kentuckiana: Divertissement on 20 Kentucky Airs, Op. 287* [1948]**

DARIUS MILHAUD

Born September 4, 1892 in Marseilles, France

Died June 22, 1974 in Geneva, Switzerland

Darius Milhaud fell in love with the songs of ordinary people early in life, as he listened to workers singing to pass the time at his family's almond business in southern France. When he served as a young diplomat in Brazil, he came home with samba in his ear; after he visited Harlem, he wrote the first true jazz-classical hybrid. Music always flowed easily and joyfully from Milhaud's pen, even after he fled Europe in 1940 (knowing that his Jewish roots made him a prime Nazi target) and settled in California.

Milhaud was among the first composers approached when the Louisville Orchestra, with the backing of new mayor Charles P. Farnsley, launched an initiative in 1948 to commission and record world-class music. Milhaud went all in on local source material, incorporating 20 "Kentucky airs" into his raucous *Divertissement* (the French term for a piece of music meant as unabashedly lighthearted entertainment). With its flowing, fiddle-like tunes and accented offbeats, there are clear links to bluegrass in *Kentuckiana*, but as in all of his many works (this being Opus 287 out of a lifetime total of 443), the attractive tunes serve as delicious ingredients for Milhaud to make his own as he slices, stacks and dishes them out with uncommon gusto.

Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major, K. 467 [1785]

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born January 27, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria

Died December 5, 1791 in Vienna, Austria

When Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the former child prodigy, found himself still stuck at home in Salzburg in his early twenties with no solid job prospects, he took the leap of moving to Vienna in 1781 to start a freelance career. He soon attracted a loyal following on the strengths of his incomparable keyboard playing, leading to a life setup that astonished his father when he visited in 1785. "We never get to bed before one o'clock," Leopold Mozart lamented in a letter to his daughter, "and I never get up before nine. We lunch at two or half past. The weather is horrible. Every day there are concerts; and the whole time is given up to teaching, music, composing and so forth. I feel rather out of it all. If only the concerts were over! It is impossible for me to describe the rush and bustle. Since my arrival your brother's fortepiano has been taken at least a dozen times to the theater or to some other house."

Some of Mozart's most profitable ventures in those days were the orchestra concerts he self-produced and sold on subscription. His piano concertos were consistent fan favorites, and he kept audiences coming back by presenting a dozen new examples between 1784 and 1786. He added this concerto in C-major to his catalog of finished compositions on March 9, 1785, just in time for a concert the next night. (Leopold may not have endorsed his son's chaotic lifestyle, but he did note approvingly that Mozart netted 559 *Gulden* from that one evening.)

The orchestral introduction establishes the majestic tone of the Piano Concerto No. 21 with a marching motive in a broad tempo, but the first movement has its darker moments as well, like when the piano veers into the key of G-minor for a melody quite similar to the opening movement of Mozart's Symphony No. 40, composed three years later. The *Andante*—familiar to vintage movie buffs from its prominent use in the 1967 Swedish film *Elvira Madigan*—plays like an operatic aria for the piano. After music of such breadth and high emotion, the finale provides a charming and uncomplicated affirmation in C-major, featuring glitzy runs that must have delighted those patrons who shelled out their *Gulden* to see the fastest fingers in Vienna.

***The Planets, Op. 32* [1914-16]**

GUSTAV HOLST

Born September 21, 1874 in Cheltenham, England

Died May 25, 1933 in London, England

Around the turn of the 20th century, Gustav Holst helped end the dry spell that had left England without any major homegrown composers for 200 years. He shared with his peers Elgar and Vaughan Williams a deep affection for English folksongs, but Holst also took inspiration from more esoteric sources like astrology and Sanskrit literature, and his great admiration for Wagner's mythmaking operas helped him learn how to create new worlds in his music. Meanwhile he kept pace with younger rivals like Stravinsky and Schoenberg, opening his ears to new approaches to the orchestra. All those forces culminated in Holst's masterpiece, *The Planets*, composed in seven movements for orchestra between 1914 and 1916, and still his chief claim to fame.

Holst allowed the astrological meanings of the planets and associated traits drawn from Roman mythology to dictate the character of the movements, as summarized in their titles. The cycle begins with *Mars, Bringer of War*, an ominous and ultimately brutal evocation of battle that took a page from Stravinsky's ritualistic ballets. Holst's approach to the orchestral sound of war has been imitated so often and effectively (John Williams' score for *Star Wars* being the quintessential example) that it's easy to forget how original and astounding this sound was when it first reached the public in 1918.

Mars gives way to the gentle strains of *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*, followed by the quicksilver charms of *Mercury, the Winged Messenger*. In this cycle organized purely for its musical flow, next comes *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*, a gentle giant that is

surprisingly nimble and buoyant, even with its brassy heft. Slow and noble music marches inevitably onward with clocklike regularity in *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*, and then *Uranus, the Magician* conjures a swirl of organized chaos unified by a recurring four-note motive.

There's no Earth in this cycle that concerns the celestial arcs of astrology, and at the time of its writing Pluto had not yet been discovered (nor demoted to a dwarf), and so *The Planets* stands as a set of seven, ending with *Neptune, the Mystic*. Tinkling celesta colors the quiet and unknowable mysteries of this most distant planet, and a concealed women's choir heightens the sense of mysterious ritual.

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