

FAME V
Lesson 2
October 2008

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Costume for FAME player & Props	Costumes for the kids
Costume 1. Apron with planets on it. Prop 1. Place mat with Solar System on it. Still includes Pluto.	1. Mars (shield and helmet) 2. Venus (dove headdress – hold dove) 3. Mercury (winged hat and mail envelope) 4. Jupiter (jester’s hat) 5. Saturn (shawl and cane) 6. Uranus (magician’s hat) 7. Neptune (face mask)

In Van Gough’s painting we saw the stars and the moon. What else do you see in the sky? (Planets)

Our composer today, Gustav Holst, was fascinated with astrology. Does anyone know what astrology is? It is when you can tell your fortune or future by the position of the stars and planets. He was also interested in the ideas that the ancient Greeks and Romans had associated with the planets and the unique personalities given to each. During the summer of 1914 he decided to set the planets to music.

How could he organize his music so that each planet could be given its own identity, be unique, but still a part of each other? We talked about it in our last FAME lesson. Holst created a suite. Do you remember what a suite is? (Is a collection of musical pieces, songs or dances of different character that are meant to be played together?) So today we will talk about Holst’s suite *The Planets*.

How many planets are in our solar system and what are their names, look at my apron for help or the place mat? (They should answer 9 or 8 considering the new information on Pluto. Be aware that you might start conversation on the fact that Pluto is not considered a planet.)

*(More info on Pluto if you need it: **Pluto**, is the second-largest known dwarf planet in the Solar System and the tenth-largest body observed directly orbiting the Sun. Originally classified as a planet, Pluto is now considered the largest member of a distinct population called the Kuiper belt (pronounced /kaɪpə/, to rhyme with "viper"). Like other members of the Kuiper belt, Pluto is composed primarily of rock and ice and is relatively small: approximately a fifth the mass of the Earth's moon and a third its volume. It has a highly eccentric and highly inclined orbit.)*

So how many pieces or movements do you think Holst composed for his suite? There are actually only seven parts to this suite – can you guess why? (Holst did not write music for earth and Pluto had not yet been discovered!) The first planet Holst started with was *Mars* which he called *The Bringer of War*. Do you know why Holst gave *Mars*, this title? Because the planet is named after the ancient Roman god of war, Mars. He had just completed this movement when World War I broke out in Europe.

{From this point until the biography, you will call up volunteers as you present each movement. Tell the students that you are only looking for volunteers who will become statues. If they can not remain still while up front, they will have to sit down, and another volunteer will take their place.}

*Call up a volunteer – dress in “Mars” costume (shield and helmet)
Mars stands still as a war statue.*

Listen to Mars {Play at least 2-3 minutes of Mars #1} What did you hear that suggests war? (Ideas: The beat suggests marching... there’s the feeling of impending doom.. growing disaster) What instruments do you hear in this piece? (You hear trumpets, drums and a full orchestra with a loud brassy dissonance.)

*Call up a volunteer – dress in “Venus” costume (dove headdress—holds a dove)
Venus stands still as a statue on the other side of the room apart from Mars.*

For the rest of the year, as war raged in Europe, Holst only worked on Venus, the Bringer of Peace. The planet Venus was named after the Roman goddess of love. {Play 2 minutes of Venus #2} How is this different from Mars? (Quieter, slower, sometimes single instruments carry the melody.) What suggests peace? What instruments do you hear? (woodwinds and stings mainly)

{Mars and Venus sit down}

*Call up a volunteer – dress in “Mercury” costume (winged hat and mail envelope)
Mercury stands still as a war statue.*

Why do you think we have this costume for Mercury? Because the planet was named after the Roman messenger of the gods Mercury and he is characterized as having a winged hat and shoes so he could fly. {Play a short segment of Mercury #3} What suggests The Winged Messenger? (violin flurry)

*Call up a volunteer – dress in “Jupiter” costume (Jester’s hat)
Jupiter stands still as a war statue.*

*{Play at least 2-3 minutes of Jupiter #4} How would you describe this music? (Happy, hopeful). Holst called this piece *The Bringer of Jollity*; I find this interesting because Jupiter is named after the Roman god of thunder who was the ruler of the gods and in charge of justice. You might know him by the Greek name Zeus. Do you think he would be very funny? Well because this piece is so happy sometimes an orchestra would save this movement for last, so as to have a happy ending. But, Holst hated this, for, as he said, “In the real work, the ending is not happy at all.”*

{Mercury and Jupiter sit down}

It was a full 2 years before Holst was finished with *The Planets*. During the war Holst knew it would be too expensive to hire the full orchestra he would need to play Jupiter, the way it was meant to be. However a wealthy friend in 1918 hired the Queen's Hall in London and engaged the Queen's Hall Orchestra to sight read the new work. To fill out the orchestra, they used some gifted German musicians who were in London as prisoners of war. It was clear to everyone present that this music was unlike anything they had ever heard before.

The last three movements are slower, sometimes murky, misty and magical – we will play a bit of each piece and you can guess the personalities of these planets.

Call up a volunteer – dress in “Saturn” costume (shawl and cane) ...statue.

{Play a short segment of Saturn— The Bringer of Old Age #5} This movement was Holst's favorite. What does it make you feel like? Do you know what personality it has? Holst called this *The Bringer of Old Age*. If you listen to the whole piece you can feel yourself growing older.

Call up a volunteer – dress in “Uranus” costume (magician's hat) ...statue.

{Play a short segment of Uranus— The Magician #6} Can you guess the personality for this one?

Call up a volunteer – dress in “Neptune” costume (face mask) ...statue.

{Play a short segment of Neptune— The Mystic #7} The end fades out into nothingness. Holst accomplished this by having a hidden choir sing quietly as they secretly exited the backstage area and walked down a long hallway into a room behind the stage. They would stop singing only when the audience clapped because then they knew they no longer could be heard. No squeaky shoes allowed in this choir! *{Fast forward -- play a bit on the middle, then hold the button down until 7.00 – and listen to the end.}*

{Saturn, Uranus and Neptune sit down}

Such extraordinary music had never been played before. People began to pay attention to Gustav Holst. By the end of the 1920's it was clear that Holst had become a very popular composer. They began to ask, “Where did this man come from? Who is he?”

Biography

Gustav von Holst was born in England in 1874. He came from a very musical family. His mother was English and his father's family came from Latvia (Russia) His grandfather composed music for the harp. He earned his living as a musician, giving recitals, playing organ on Sundays at church and teaching music lessons. One of his students, an excellent singer, became his wife and Gustav's mother.

When Gustav was eight, his mother died and his aunt, a pianist, looked after him and his brother, Emil. Gustav was a delicate child who suffered from asthma and bad eyesight. This made it hard for him to keep up with his younger brother Emil. But Gustav liked to walk a lot and as he walked, music would ring in his head and he would race home to write it down. He started composing at age twelve. He would wait until nobody was home and then he would play his works on the piano. Sometimes he was shocked at how terrible they sounded.

Gustav's father wanted him to become a concert pianist instead of a composer, since composers made very little money at this time. Gustav was a very gifted pianist, but while at the Royal College of Music, he began to suffer from neuritis in his right arm and he was told that he must give up all hope of becoming a pianist. His arm was to trouble him, on and off, for the rest of his life, and there were many occasions when it hurt so much that he could hardly write. When the pain was so bad that he could not hold a pen he would tie a pin to his finger, and then moved his arm with his other hand to write down notes. He was very determined. He was advised to take up the trombone instead of the piano and this cured him of his asthma.

Gustav had many musical jobs – in varying locations he served as an organ or choir master, and met his wife Isobel who was in the choir. They had to wait several years until they could afford to get married. He was appointed Musical Director of St Paul's Girl's school and this is the one job he kept until his death. Gustav and Isobel had a daughter, Imogen, who later wrote a book about her father and was a British composer and conductor in her own right.

When World War I broke out in 1914, some of the neighbors were suspicious of a stranger with 'von' in his name, several went to the police and complained, and yet he had been born in England. So Holst dropped the 'von' from his name to sound more English. Throughout his life, Holst suffered from a variety of ailments. The increasing pressures of composing and performing his works wore him out emotionally and physically, and eventually he developed serious stomach problems that ended his life in 1934 at the age of 60.