

Class 4 : Heightened States

B. Revisiting a Classic

1. Main title 3 (Villa-Lobos, Holst, and Nash)

I found all sorts of wonderful pieces to play and show in this second hour, many of them probably unknown to most of you. However, I thought it might be more useful to get to talk about something really familiar, *The Planets* by **Gustav Holst** (1874–1934). First performed in 1918; he is the figure on the right. But first, I want to give you a brief comparison of short passages taken from the finales of *Symphonies 3 and 4* by the man on the left, the Brazilian composer **Heitor Villa-Lobos** (1887–1959); they both date from 1919, and both have titles: can you guess what they are? [The painting is a later impression of Gustav Mahler conducting; it is just there because it is pretty.]

2. Villa-Lobos: *Symphonies 3 and 4*, excerpts (Stuttgart Radio Orchestra, Carl St. Clair)

3. Paul Nash: *We Are Making a New World* (1918, Imperial War Museum)

This shouldn't take much guessing, but let's try. As you can probably guess from my choice of *We Are Making a New World* by **Paul Nash** (1889–1946) as the background picture, they both have to do with the recent World War, although Villa-Lobos was safe in Brazil and not involved in the fighting. The titles for the two symphonies are *War* and *Victory respectively*.

4. Graphics for *The Planets*

Looking through Wikipedia for musical works performed within the general time period we have been discussing—the first two decades of the 20th Century—I was surprised to see that Holst's *Planets* was first performed in 1918. As suggested by the top graphic, which comes from the BBC, Holst was inspired by his interest in astrology. The bottom graphic, with the score of the opening movement, ***Mars, the Bringer of War***, shows a statue of the Roman god. But for a Briton in 1918, War was not an abstract concept but very much real. Never mind that Holst first conceived the idea of the suite in 1913; by the time he was actually writing, 1914 through 1917, the war was already bogged down in the Flanders mud. So I want to look at three movements from the piece (or parts of them), not as a concert-hall classic, but as an urgent document of the time.

5. Questions about *Mars*

Let me suggest some things to think about as you listen: the **rhythm** of the piece (try beating time to it!); what gives it its sense of **propulsion**; the **orchestration** (what instruments are predominantly used); the harmony, or more likely the **discords**; the range of **dynamics**; the **shape** that this gives the piece, in terms of the number and placement of its climaxes; and the use of **bugle calls**. My examples are taken from a BBC Proms performance under the Finnish conductor **Susanna Mälkki**.

6. Holst: *The Planets*, Mars

7. Questions about *Mars*

Let's discuss that, using these bullet points as a guide.

8. Questions about *Jupiter*

Villa-Lobos wrote symphonies entitled "War" and "Victory." Holst answer his war movement with ***Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity***. Here are some questions to consider about it. First of all, a general one: what give it its **jollity**? Specifically, what about: the **orchestration**; the **tempo** (or tempi); the different **types of tune** that Holst uses; and the **shape** this gives to the whole? And what is the effect on you of that famous middle section?

9. Holst: *The Planets*, Jupiter

10. Questions about *Jupiter*

Let's discuss that, using these bullet points as a guide. But what about that big tune in the middle? It is uplifting, but hardly "jollity," is it? Did Holst perhaps feel that the country needed some uplift after the War (although he composed it before hostilities ended)? Or was it his personal attempt to transcend?

11. Sir Cecil Spring Rice: "I vow to thee my country" (1918)

12. — pre-1912 version of the above

And what about the words? You may know that famous tune as a patriotic hymn, with the words "I vow to thee, my country"; it was played both at the wedding and funeral of **Princess Diana**. I always thought that somebody took this tune and put words to it after the event, but in fact the words were written by an English diplomat, **Sir Cecil Spring Rice**, before *The Planets* was even performed. Holst was asked to make a setting of it for a hymn book in 1921; he was busy at the time, so was relieved to find that he could use his old *Jupiter* tune with minimal alteration. In fact Spring Rice also adapted an older poem of his own as the postwar hymn; his original is much more War-specific, even rather gruesome. Yet here's the thing: it was not written during the War at all, but well before, perhaps as early as 1908. What we assume from reading, seeing, or hearing something does not always cohere with the facts!

13. Neptune, with Holst quotation

Holst did not arrange his *Planets* in either astronomical or astrological order; he began, for instance, with *Mars*, which is not the first planet in either system. So he could easily have ended with *Jupiter*, but he chose not to. In fact, he ends with ***Neptune, the Mystic***, a movement almost without movement that ends with an offstage chorus of sopranos endlessly repeating two unresolved chords while the door to their room is slowly closed. I'll play you the beginning an end. Why did Holst risk ending with such an anticlimax? Was it because, as this quote suggests, he saw the *eternal* quality of music as more meaningful than any momentary thrill? Or was he too honest to accept that the trauma of the Great War could be answered by a jolly tune or two and patriotic sentiment? A scholar would sift through his papers and come up with a definite answer. As an amateur, I am content with the mere speculation.

14. Holst: *The Planets*, Neptune (beginning and end)