

Program Notes for May 19 & 20, 2017

Our understanding of our solar system has advanced just a bit in the century since Gustav Holst wrote *The Planets*. Pluto had not been discovered (by Clyde Tombaugh in 1930) or reduced to the status of "dwarf planet" (by the International Astronomical Union in 2006). A century of progress in astronomy, including flyby data collection and photography of all of the planets by satellites, gives us an entirely different understanding of our planetary system. But the sense of wonderment and colossal drama that Holst's timeless music offers is undimmed.

So, tonight we will present *The Planets* and Nancy Bloomer Deussen's hauntingly lovely complementary work *The Transit of Venus* with a 21st Century scientific and visual perspective, but also with an ageless appreciation of the powerful emotional content of this music. We will hear fascinating descriptions of each planet from the eminent astronomer Andrew Fraknoi, complemented by NASA photography, artistic imaginings of the planets from local school children, and subtitles to clarify Holst's story line.

Holst (1874-1934) wrote *The Planets* during the course of the First World War, the war to end all wars, that most futile and titanic waste of human life. England was particularly wrenched and wounded by this experience. Holst poured his emotional reaction to the War into this work (which he called "a series of mood pictures") but also brought his fascination with the astrological components of each planet (a rising interest in his time, engendered by his friend Arnold Bax) and his own amazing talent for the most colorful and expansive use of the sounds of a symphony orchestra. The influence of Rimsky-Korsakov (heard in the brilliant *Scheherazade*, performed at our last concerts) and his pupils Stravinsky and Glazunov, as well as other innovators like Ravel, Schoenberg and Debussy, was transformative. Holst employs sounds and forces that still astonish us a hundred years later.

Mars, the Bringer of War. Holst begins his suite with a brutal, angry, unrelenting picture of war. Using the relatively uncomfortable meter of 5, he unleashes all the most ferocious sounds that an orchestra can produce. Blazing brass, pounding percussion, woodwinds reinforced with instruments that expand their color range (piccolo, alto flute, English Horn, bass oboe, bass clarinet, contrabassoon), and strings using techniques like *col legno* (hitting the strings with the wood of the bow) all give us a sense of the unworldly and heartless power of combat.

Venus, the Bringer of Peace. Holst immediately give us the antidote to War, this serene and lovingly warm and aspirational song of peace.

Mercury, the Winged Messenger. The fleet, weightless Mercury flies and floats in a virtuoso display of orchestral technique, perhaps conveying a sense of connection between worlds, planetary and philosophical.

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity. Probably the most beloved movement of the suite, Jupiter is a world of energy, joy and uplift. The elegiac middle melody has become almost an alternative national anthem for Britain ("I Vow to Thee, My Country").

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age. Holst's picture of old age does not accept an artificial construct of serenity and placidity. Rather, he gives us a perceptive vision of coming to grips with mortality and despair, ultimately arriving at a place of wisdom and acceptance before the end.

Uranus, the Magician. Uranus walks on stage and takes a lavish bow (the 4-note brass motive that begins the movement and returns periodically). He then performs a series of feats of legerdemain, bowing after each one. Each trick is better and more delightful than the last.

Neptune, the Mystic. With such a vast compass of emotions, personas and worlds, Holst decides to end with a deeply philosophical, tranquil and hypnotic sense of closure. The heretofore aggressive meter of 5 is now presented as comforting, unfolding sensually harmonized melodies of the most peaceful and warmhearted sort, trailing off ultimately into a dreamlike passage of the distant sound of women's voices, disappearing into the vast beyond. What a miraculous way to lend a sense of the infinite, the ineffable to Holst's remarkable vision of our worlds.

American composer Nancy Bloomer Deussen is well known as a composer, performer and arts impresario. She is a leader in the growing movement for more melodic, tonally oriented contemporary music and is co-founder and President Emeritus of the SF Bay Chapter of the National Association of Composers, USA. Her original works have been performed in the USA, UK, Canada, Indonesia, Iran, Europe, Australia and China and she has received numerous commissions both locally and nationally. Her works have won numerous national awards.

Here is a program note by Nancy Bloomer Deussen about *The Transit of Venus*:

In 2012 I was invited to attend an unusual astronomical event called "The Transit of Venus." This gathering occurred at NASA in Sunnyvale, CA. Earlier in life I had an interest in astronomy so I was intrigued. What happened will not happen again for over 100 years. The planet Venus makes a transit across in front of the sun in pairs eight years apart and then does not do it again for over a century. This was the last of the pair and I witnessed it. It was telecast with filters from atop a mountain observatory in Hawaii and scores of scientists and ordinary people like me from all over the world watched in amazement. The absolute accuracy of the prediction was what really struck me. We all watched as the countdown began and then miraculously at the precise second Venus suddenly appeared in front of the sun. People applauded and some cried realizing that we were watching an amazing, rare and unusual event. I was completely caught up in the moment and became quite emotional as I became immersed in the mystery, miracle and planned order of the universe. The transit was slow (5 hours) and deliberate as Venus slowly traveled in front of the sun. I knew right there and then that I had to write a composition about the event. Here it is.

Tonight's soloist, William Langlie-Miletich, is the first bass player ever to win the Irving M. Klein International String Competition. We are delighted to feature this extraordinary young artist in Bottessini's Concerto No. 2 for Bass, a work every bit as virtuosic for the soloist as *The Planets* is for an orchestra.

Giovanni Bottessini (1821-1889) was known as "the Paganini of the double bass." Playing a magnificent bass crafted by Carlo Giuseppe Testore, he traveled Europe as the first great virtuoso of his instrument, creating a new repertoire of his own works for the bass in the process. Like Paganini, Bottessini was a colorful figure, influenced by the surging Romantic movement all around him and grounded in the world of Italian opera. His Concerto No. 2 brings all of this to the fore.

The first movement is in a traditional sonata-allegro form, presenting a brief orchestral introduction, before a series of urgently lyrical bass melodies. The second movement is a quiet aria, unfolding in 6/8 time. Then comes an explosive finale, bringing soaring tunes and spectacular virtuosity together brilliantly. We will be performing this concerto in a new edition prepared by Mr. Langlie-Miletich's teacher, the contemporary bass virtuoso and composer Edgar Meyer.

Mitchell Sardou Klein