

Program Notes and Bios

The Planets—An HD Odyssey plus *Star Wars*

Friday, July 16, 2010, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, July 17, 2010, 7:30 p.m.

Brett Mitchell, conductor

Duncan Copp, producer/director

Women of the Houston Symphony Chorus

Charles Hausmann, director

J. Williams

Suite from *Star Wars*

J. Williams

Excerpts from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

J. Williams

Adventures on Earth from *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*

INTERMISSION

Holst

The Planets

THE PLANETS

Gustav Holst

Born: Sep 21, 1874, Cheltenham, England

Died: May 25, 1934, London, England

Work composed: 1914-16

Recording: *The Planets—An HD Odyssey* DVD featuring the Houston Symphony conducted by Hans Graf and video by Duncan Copp

Instrumentation: four flutes (two doubling piccolo and one doubling alto flute), three oboes (one doubling bass oboe), English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tenor, and bass tubas, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta, organ, strings and women's chorus

When Gustav Holst composed his famed orchestral suite, *The Planets*, nearly a century ago, there were only eight known planets in our solar system. Pluto's existence was not discovered until the 1930s, and questions have been raised in recent times whether it really is a planet. In planning the work, Holst focused his interest on our celestial companions, completely ignoring the existence of Earth in the planetary lineup. He also jumbled the natural order of the first four "inner planets" in their distance from the

sun, in order to suit his own musical needs. And his interest was aroused not by any scientific astronomical observations of the planets, but by astrological associations suggested by the mythological names they had been given.

Holst scholars have noted that the composer made a hobby of casting horoscopes and owned a book by Alan Leo on the subject. Leo's book was Holst's source in determining the descriptive character of each piece in the seven-movement suite.

Holst completed work on the first movement, "Mars, The Bringer of War," during the summer of 1914, just before World War I began. While the international tensions that led to war were certainly apparent, there is no evidence he planned the piece as a prophecy of that bloody conflict. Over the next two years, he composed the remaining six movements of *The Planets* during weekends and summer holiday periods, when he was free from his teaching duties at a girl's school. Then, in 1917, he orchestrated the entire suite. He composed the seven movements in the order in which they are heard, except "Mercury," which was the last piece he completed, early in 1916.

The first four movements follow each other in a sequence analogous to that heard in standard symphonic works: two big-boned outer movements, "Mars" and "Jupiter" enclose two smaller, more intimate ones, "Venus" and "Mercury." The third and fourth movements, "Mercury" and "Jupiter," also approximate the character of a symphonic scherzo and rondo.

However, the analogy to a symphonic piece is obscured when all seven movements are played and the music itself has little in common with the organic developmental growth of themes characteristic of a symphony.

Instead, Holst seems to focus on the notion of planets suspended in space with music that is rather static and unchanging within each musical portrait. "Mars, The Bringer of War" is generally loud and bellicose with heavy brass climaxes. Certain rhythms and notes are insistently repeated throughout much of the piece.

By contrast, "Venus, the Bringer of Peace," is a diaphanous slow movement, noted for its exotic tone colors and its subtle, elusive harmonies.

"Mercury, the Winged Messenger," has a will-o'-the-wisp lightness, punctuated by sudden bursts of tone as the music flits from one orchestral group to another. "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity," is full of robust humor and an easy sense of power. The proud theme at the center of the movement was later set as the patriotic hymn, "I vow to thee, my country."

It is in the last three movements that Holst's imagination results in the most colorful orchestral effects. "Saturn, The Bringer of Old Age," is represented by a solemn processional emerging from a faint, indefinite pulse of soft flutes and harps. After working its way to an inexorable climax, the movement bursts open with the brilliant sound of pealing bells.

"Uranus, The Magician," begins with an ominous motto shouted out by the brass and timpani, then proceeds into a bold, riveting dance movement, interrupted twice more by the motto. And the foggy gases surrounding mystic "Neptune" are softly represented by undulating woodwind chords, growling brasses, a filmy curtain of broken chords in the

celesta, harps and strings and, finally, by an unseen women's chorus, whose wordless vocalise gradually disappears into a silent ending of *The Planets*.

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Biographies

Brett Mitchell, conductor

Now entering his fourth season as assistant conductor of the Houston Symphony, Brett Mitchell is one of America's most promising young conductors. Since his appointment in September 2007, he has led the orchestra in nearly 100 performances; several of which were broadcast on *SymphonyCast* and *Performance Today*. He is the newly appointed music director of the Saginaw Bay Symphony Orchestra and serves as a regular cover conductor for The Philadelphia Orchestra.

Mitchell has led the London Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Philadelphia, Rochester Philharmonic, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Oregon, Memphis, Peoria and Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestras, as well as the Northwest Mahler Festival Orchestra. He served as a musical assistant at the New York Philharmonic during the 2007-08 season and as cover conductor with the Cleveland Orchestra in 2009. He made his European debut in 2004 with Romania's Brasov Philharmonic and his Latin American debut in 2005 with the Orquesta Filarmónica de la UNAM in Mexico City.

Highlights of this season include debuts with the National Symphony Orchestra and Da Camera of Houston, as well as preparing a new production of Puccini's *Trittico* for Maestro Lorin Maazel at the 2010 Castleton Festival.

Mitchell was assistant conductor of the Orchestre National de France (2006-2009), director of orchestras at Northern Illinois University (2005-2007) and associate conductor of the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble (2002-2006). He has served as music director of numerous opera productions, including Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, Mark Adamo's *Little Women* and Robert Aldridge's *Elmer Gantry*.

A Seattle native, Mitchell earned his bachelor of music in composition from Western Washington University and holds a doctorate degree from The University of Texas, where he was music director of the university's orchestra.

Mitchell participated in the National Conducting Institute in Washington, D.C., and studied with Kurt Masur as a recipient of the inaugural American Friends of the Mendelssohn Foundation Scholarship.

Duncan Copp

Duncan Copp grew up in Southwest England, where he discovered a passion for the landscape around him. His enjoyment of geology and space exploration became the backbone of his education. He holds a master's degree in Satellite Remote Sensing and a doctorate in Astronomy, both from the University of London.

His doctoral research focused on unraveling the volcanic and geologic processes on Venus; he was a member of NASA's Venus mapping team responsible for creating the first detailed geological maps of the planet.

While finishing his Ph.D., Copp researched the BBC's landmark geology series *Earth Story* that was awarded the Walter Sullivan Award for Excellence in Science Journalism. BBC's series *The Essential Guide to Rocks* and Pioneer Productions' *Universe 2001* followed – both received awards from The Association of British Science Writers.

A freelance producer-director for more than 10 years, he worked with *Rocket Men of Mission 105*, *Magnetic Storm* and *Global Dimming*. He produced the much-acclaimed documentary *In the Shadow of the Moon*, the intimate story of the Apollo astronauts. It has received more than 15 awards internationally, including Best International Film at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival.

Moon Machines (Discovery) recounts the trials of the engineers who built the machines that took the Apollo astronauts to the Moon. It was a Grand Remi winner.

Copp received the 2009 American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics distinguished public service medal for stimulating public interest in science and technology, specifically in space exploration.

He recently produced *Henry VIII: Mind of a Tyrant*. He is currently producing and directing *Star City*, a National Geographic documentary detailing the natural history of the Milky Way.

Duncan Copp is a freelance science writer of more than 70 publications to date; he has been an on-screen presenter for BBC, Discovery and National Geographic. He lives in London.