

PROGRAM NOTES
Quincy Symphony Orchestra
April 21, 2018
Dr. Paul Borg

Smoke and Steel (2018)

Commissioned by the QSOA

Jacob Bancks
(born 1982)

from *Sunrise Mass*

2. Sunrise (Gloria)

4. Identity and the Ground (Sanctus/Agnus Dei)

Ola Gjeilo
(born 1978)

Intermission

The Planets

1. Mars, the Bringer of War
2. Venus, the Bringer of Peace
3. Mercury, the Winged Messenger
4. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity
5. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age
6. Uranus, the Magician
7. Neptune, the Mystic

Gustav Holst
(1874-1934)

Our program today encompasses works reflecting ideas that stem from "beyond" music; some sort of non-dramatic idea or verbal evocation inspired these composers to create music that goes beyond more traditional musical inspiration and explanation. Even though music can evoke emotion on its own, these compositions mean to lead us into greater experiential realms. In addition, our concert includes the realm of visual interpretation for Holst's *The Planets* (planets initially seen, not heard, by humans, of course).

First is a work that is the QSO annual commission. Composer Jacob Bancks, now a professor at Augustana College, shares these notes about his composition—*Smoke and Steel*.

Like you, my home is on the Mississippi. I moved to Moline from Chicago in 2011, and at first it seemed like an unlikely place for a composer to land (Dvorak's summers in Spillville, Iowa notwithstanding). My initial impression was that, if I ended up making western Illinois my home, I would have to look far afield—New York, Paris, Vienna—for artistic heroes, models, and inspiration.

It turned out that it was my field of vision, and not the region, that was lacking. I came slowly to discover that we in Illinois have had no shortage of outstanding artists, poets in particular. Though none of them were musicians by trade, their work pulsates with a kind of music that is distinctly Illinoisan, combining the sounds of prairie, farm, river, trade union, skyscraper, and factory, and providing me with an extraordinary base from which to build my own art. Our state has given the world Gwendolyn Brooks, Vachel Lindsay, and of course, America's finest poet, Abraham Lincoln. I may even someday find something inspiring in the works of Edgar Lee Masters, though I won't hold my breath on that one.

One towering neighbor of ours was, of course, Galesburg native Carl Sandburg (1878-1967). Often labeled (erroneously) as simply a "Chicago poet", his work in its totality comprises an incredible portrait of our cities and prairies alike, with their unique beauties and brutalities. My *Smoke and Steel* is inspired by his collection of the same name.

A representative excerpt:

"A bar of steel—it is only
Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the blood of a man.
A runner of fire ran in it, ran out, ran somewhere else,
And left—smoke and the blood of a man
And the finished steel, chilled and blue.
So fire runs in, runs out, runs somewhere else again,
And the bar of steel is a gun, a wheel, a nail, a shovel,
A rudder under the sea, a steering-gear in the sky;
And always dark in the heart and through it,
Smoke and the blood of a man."

This work was generously commissioned by Maestro Briney and your favorite symphony, the Quincy Symphony Orchestra. I hope they, and you, enjoy it.

Ola Gjeilo, a Norwegian composer who lives now in New York City, composed his *Sunrise Mass* as a conflation of the traditional Gregorian Mass Ordinary text with a very personal interpretation. That interpretation is quite meditative, almost magical, yielding sounds that challenge the listener to experience either some association with the Mass text or only some personal, emotional response to the sounds.

Gjeilo creates four movements out of the five sections of the Mass Ordinary by combining the texts of the entire Sanctus and the slightly abbreviated Agnus Dei. This evening we hear the second and fourth movements.

On his website Gjeilo states:

The reason I used English titles, seemingly unrelated to the (mostly) Latin texts, for the movements in this setting of the Mass has mainly to do with the initial idea behind Sunrise Mass. I wanted the musical development of the work to evolve from the most transparent and spacey, to something completely earthy and grounded; from nebulous and pristine to more emotional and dramatic, and eventually warm and solid – as a metaphor for human development from child to adult, or as a spiritual journey.

In "Sunrise" (*Gloria in excelsis Deo*. [Glory be to God on high.]) Gjeilo captures the wonder one feels at a morning awakening. He evokes the "transparent" or "nebulous" and moves to a more "earthy" "emotional." Various musical textures reflect not merely the visual image of a sunrise, but also articulate segments of the lengthy Latin text. Reverence due to the deity, at the beginning of the text, is preceded by an orchestral introduction. Then, we hear alternating pulsating, energetic music contrasting with quiet, meditative sections as the text praises first, God the Father, next, Jesus Christ the only-begotten son, and finally the Holy Ghost. A hauntingly beautiful a cappella Amen closes the movement.

"Identity & The Ground" fulfill his intent to conclude with something "grounded" and "dramatic," the developed "adult" human. Overlapping chords at the beginning (*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus* [Holy, holy, holy]) dissolve into lush homophonic chords as he sets the remainder of the text: "*Pleni sunt . . . Hosanna . . . Benedictus . . . In excelsis.*" A dramatic key change ushers in the *Agnus Dei* [O Lamb of God], and the full ensemble offers a powerful statement of the repeated text. An abrupt pause interrupts and the final statement (*dona nobis pacem* [grant us thy peace]) brings us his promise of "eventually warm and solid."

The two other movements couple the words "The City" with the *Credo in unum Deum* [I believe in one God] and "The Spheres" with the *Kyrie eleison* [Lord have mercy]. Although we don't deal with a City this evening, the rest of our program deals extensively with the "spheres"!

Gustav Holst was forty years old when he embarked on his musical work called *The Planets*. One inspiration was his then-new interest in astrology (not astronomy, as one might imagine). His completed work was not heard in its entirety until 1920, though various groupings of the movements were performed from 1918 on. It has become perhaps his best-known and admired composition. An interesting observation is that several of the "planets" continue to be performed individually, rather than with the complete work. We are excited to experience the work's totality, its journey through the solar system, and our imaginative engagement with it.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the classical music performing tradition was dominated by Germans, French, and Italians (opera). At our last Symphony concert, we heard Sibelius' success in competing with that tradition. This evening we experience the startling success of an Englishman in a climate that had Germans declaring England "das Land ohne Musik" (the land without music.) Critics at the time observed that his use of "folk-like" tunes in a non-dramatic context was not the norm. Yet, that seemed exactly what contributed to *The Planets*' success among the public. It is a work that doesn't fit the usual orchestral categories of the time (or even now). It is not a symphony, not a disengaged overture, not a symphonic poem (telling a story), not a suite (mostly dances), not a ballet (think Stravinsky's successes by this time).

What he has created is a musical environment that can be heard and enjoyed in multiple ways. One way is to sit back and let the sound engulf you. Another is to read the titles and figure out a connection between his titles for the movements and what you may know or experience on that basis. Another might be to try to figure out what musical forms, processes, tonal realms, melodies, contrasts, and other such details are present. (If you're not a music theorist or musicologist--not your best approach. Not even for them!)

So, just what does one experience? Several things. First, and important for us in Quincy, is the expertise of the instrumentalists and singers that we hear tonight. Everything is more engaging in a live performance. (When Holst imagined *The Planets*, recordings were only about 20 years old!) Second, an emotional response to the sounds that are organized for our hearing. This is especially important because of what Holst seems to intend. Rather than telling a story or reproducing a new, inventive interpretation of a traditional form (the symphony), he is engaging in evoking an emotional reaction--on purpose.

Perhaps most revealing are the sub-titles for the various planets. The various Greek and Roman gods that the planets have been named for bring expectations about the character of the god and the music representing them. Mars, God of War, is called "Bringer of War" by Holst. This distancing of the mythological image with his, perhaps, astrological image is crucial. Holst doesn't depict a battle, nor a soldier or leader, but the imagination of war. After all, WWI began when he started writing this composition. Yet, other gods are not described as myth suggests: Venus--not erotic love but "bringer of peace;" Jupiter--not ruler of the gods, but "bringer of jollity, Neptune--not god of the sea, but "the mystic."

Upon first look, the progress of the planets seems odd. It begins just inside the asteroid belt with Mars. Then, skipping Earth, it moves toward the sun--Venus and Mercury. Then it restarts outside the asteroid belt with Jupiter, then Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. What this allows musically is the alternation between fast, active movements with slower, meditative ones. (Everyone in the last 80 years has noticed that Pluto is not included. Pluto was not "discovered" until more than 15 years after *The Planet's* premiere. Now that Pluto has been demoted to lesser status, Holst's work needs no more explanation.)

Now a word about listening/experiencing this music: Rather than to read a description of the musical characteristics of each movement, you are encouraged to read the title; come up with some expectation of what music might evoke by that title; observe the video interpretation of that same expectation; in your mind compare what you have experienced with what you expected. Each movement does reflect Holst's imagination. Your reaction will also be individual, unique. And, I invite you at the end of Neptune, The Mystic, to escape into your own imagination!