

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
September 23-24-25, 2016
Subscription Concert No.1
Michael Allsen

In this opening concert we continue a tradition of the past few seasons—an orchestral showcase featuring the musicians of the Madison Symphony Orchestra. We open with the lively and colorful *Romanian Rhapsody* by Enescu. MSO Concertmaster Naha Greenholz then takes center stage to perform Corigliano's *Chaconne*—a virtuoso work on musical ideas from his Oscar-winning score to the film *The Red Violin*. We end with Holst's weighty orchestra suite *The Planets*, accompanied by stunning HD images of the planets themselves.

George Enescu (1881-1955)
Romanian Rhapsody No.1

Enescu completed this work in 1901, just a few days before his 20th birthday, and he conducted the premiere in Bucharest in February of 1903. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 13:00.

Enescu was born in a tiny village in Romania and wrote his first composition at age five. Equally talented as a violinist, he was studying at the Vienna Conservatory by age seven, and moved on to Paris as a teenager. By the time he was in his 20s, Enescu was among the most successful violin soloists in Europe and he later became a respected conductor. He was also one of Europe's most sought-after violin teachers, and his students include such virtuosos as Yehudi Menuhin, Ivry Gitlis, and Arthur Grumiaux. Though he spent most of his career outside of Romania, he remained a champion of Romanian music and musicians throughout his career. He returned to Romania during the second world war, but left after the Communist takeover of 1946, to live in exile in Paris. Enescu remains a national hero in his homeland, and his home village was later renamed "George Enescu" in his honor.

Enescu is often labeled a nationalist—like his eastern European contemporaries Bartók and Kodály, a composer who adapted the folk styles of his native land in works of art music. Though Enescu did in fact adapt some elements of Romanian music in many of his compositions, only a few early works—including the two *Romanian Rhapsodies* he wrote as a teenager—actually use authentic folk songs and dances. The *Romanian Rhapsodies* became very successful, though Enescu's

style changed considerably in the next few decades, and he actually resented the enduring popularity of these early pieces.

Whatever Enescu may have thought of the *Romanian Rhapsody No.1* later in his career, it remains an attractive and colorfully effective piece that presents a series of Romanian folk songs. The opening melody, heard first in solo clarinet, is a slightly tipsy peasant drinking song whose title translates as “I have a coin and want to spend it on a drink.” Violins introduce a lilting Gypsy melody, and the solo viola takes up a similar idea. A slow and dramatic *doina*—a rhythmically-free lament—follows. The final half of the piece is taken up with an increasingly wild series of Gypsy dances.

John Corigliano (b.1938)

***The Red Violin*, Chaconne for Violin and Orchestra**

Corigliano composed the Chaconne in 1997, and the piece was premiered on November 26, 1997, with Joshua Bell as soloist, by the San Francisco Symphony. This is the first performance of the work at these concerts. Duration 17:00.

John Corigliano emerged as one of America’s leading composers in the 1970s, and he has truly hit his stride in the last fifteen years. The powerful *Symphony No.1* (1990)—Corigliano’s impassioned response to the AIDS epidemic—has been recorded twice, and garnered a Grammy Award. *The Ghosts of Versailles*, certainly one of the most important operas of the 1990s, was an enormous success in its Metropolitan Opera productions (1991 and 1994). His *Symphony No.2* won him the Pulitzer Prize in 2001. He serves on the faculties of the Juilliard School of Music and Lehman College, City University of New York.

In 1997, director François Girard asked Corigliano to write a score for *The Red Violin*. Corigliano was no stranger to film scoring: his score for the 1980 film *Altered States* had received an Academy Award nomination, and he also wrote a score for *Revolution* in 1985. (Corigliano would later win the Academy Award for *The Red Violin*’s score.) *The Red Violin*—simply one of the finest films ever made about the power of music—follows the 300-year history of a famed violin by the 17th-century master Bussotti. The unique structure of the movie posed special challenges: it unfolds in a series of historical chapters, with a linking story from the present. Corigliano turned to the *chaconne*, a form popular when the fictional violin was created, as an organizing strategy. In an interview shortly before he won his Oscar, Corigliano noted: “Focusing the entire score on seven chords was the

idea I had. I could use a *chaconne*, which is basically a repeated series of chords—and although it's an early form, it's been used ever since the Baroque into the present. It also is a form which has a sense of cumulative power because of not only the repetition of the harmonies, but the variety of the melodic material above it. So that was the way I would deal with it. The first thing I wrote was the seven chords. Then all the thematic material is composed above those chords, the most important one being Anna's theme, the one she hums that becomes the violin's theme."

The *Chaconne* heard on this program actually preceded the film's release. Corigliano had planned to write a solo piece from the film score for Joshua Bell (who would also play all of the violin cues in the film) and scheduled a premiere for November 1997. Filming was delayed, however. According to the composer: "Consequently, the concert piece, the *Chaconne*, was built just on the materials I had—a good thing, as it turns out, because I now had the freedom, as well as the need, to explore the materials to a greater extent than I might have, had I been expected to condense an hour's worth of music into a single coherent movement. Thus, in a curiously backwards way, the film's underscoring drew much of its inspiration from the concert work..." Corigliano would eventually rework the film music as concert music in three other pieces: the virtuoso violin solo *Pope's Concert* (1997), the *Suite from "The Red Violin"* (1999), and finally the *Violin Concerto "The Red Violin"* (2003)—all of them written for Joshua Bell.

In the *Chaconne*, Corigliano uses the Baroque form quite freely. The seven-chord pattern appears from a cloud of strings at the beginning, heard for the first time in bassoons and trombones. Though they are not present in every measure the *chaconne* bass and "Anna's theme" the violin's haunting signature tune, reemerge in various characters throughout the piece: sometimes terrifying and angry, sometimes pensive. Above all of this is virtuoso showpiece for the solo part that seems to channel everything from the 17th-century masters to Vivaldi to Paganini. There is sense of inexorability about the *chaconne* as a form that Corigliano exploits beautifully in this piece, as it moves towards a powerful conclusion.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

The Planets, Suite for Large Orchestra, Op.32

Holst completed The Planets in 1917. The first performance, on September 29, 1918, was a private concert by the New Queen's Hall Orchestra in London, directed by Adrian Boult. The first public performance took place two years

later in London, on November 15, 1920. We have performed the work three times previously, in 1972, 1991, and 2008. Duration 50:00.

“There is nothing in the planets (*my planets*, I mean) that can be expressed in words.”

- Holst, to conductor Adrian Boult

When Holst began composing the music of *The Planets* in 1914, he was nearly 40 years old. He had been an eclectic sampler of philosophies and mysticism since he was a young man, and this work came out of a brief flirtation with astrology. His interest in the subject began the previous year, when he and fellow composer Clifford Bax took a trip to Spain together, and passed the time talking about astrology. Holst, however, never seems really to have believed in astrology—he used it only as source of musical inspiration. In 1913, he wrote to a friend that “...I only study things that suggest music to me. Recently the character of each planet has suggested lots to me, and I have been studying astrology fairly closely.” As Holst suggested, the movements of *The Planets* are based upon the personalities attributed to the seven astrological planets: Mars being “headstrong and forceful,” Neptune “subtle and mysterious,” and so forth. [NOTE: Earth plays no direct role in astrological calculations. Pluto—now reclassified as a “dwarf planet”—is part of astrology, but it was not discovered until 1930.]

The music of *The Planets* is more massive and somewhat more radical than anything Holst had written up until this point (or afterwards). The work uses a vastly expanded orchestra in which every woodwind section has been increased by one or two players, and augmented occasionally by such exotic timbres as bass oboe and bass flute. Holst, who spent much of his youth as a trombonist in several bands, lavished a great deal of forceful and difficult music on a large brass section that includes six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba and that most beloved of all British band instruments, the euphonium. His score also calls for a large percussion battery (at least seven players), two harps, celesta, and in the final movement, organ and an offstage women’s chorus. Holst’s acquaintances must have been surprised at the formidable and occasionally violent nature of this piece—the 5/4 rhythm and crashing dissonances of *Mars* must have seemed particularly shocking coming from this mild-mannered and unfailingly gentle man. Despite its massive nature, *The Planets* also shows elements of his earlier style, which blended elements of Oriental and north African music, and Eastern mysticism, with the foursquare and solid harmony of English church music.

Holst completed the work in 1917, and his friend Balfour Gardiner arranged for a private performance in September of 1918. Though this was apparently a rather slipshod reading of the piece (The schedule allowed for just over an hour of rehearsal time for this 50-minute work!), Holst was encouraged, and made a few minor revisions to the score. Within a couple of years after the end of the war, there had been several performances in England and the United States. *The Planets* was a tremendous success, and remains Holst's most popular work. Holst himself was more than a bit bewildered by the work's popularity, and his daughter Imogen wrote of several occasions where the composer stood tongue-tied and uncomfortable, surrounded by reporters and gushing admirers.

Early audiences assumed that the first movement, *Mars, the Bringer of War*, was written in response to the first world war. In reality, Holst completed this movement before the outbreak of hostilities, and probably had Mars's astrological significance in mind rather than current events. However, this movement still manages to convey a sense of Europe's inexorable slide towards a senseless conflict. Holst sets up a savage 5/4 rhythm in the opening bars that underlies the whole movement. An ominously rising theme is passed from bassoons and horns to the trombones, and eventually to the entire brass section. As the volume builds, Holst introduces a sliding countermelody. The euphonium and trumpets introduce a contrasting idea and an accompanying fanfare. The movement continues as a development of these paired themes, building towards a crashing conclusion.

Nothing could be more of a contrast to *Mars* than the calmly flowing *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*. Holst sets aside the trumpets, trombones, and drums of the opening movement to focus on the more delicate colors of harps, woodwinds, and strings. The solo horn plays an upward-flowing melody, which is answered by descending woodwinds. A contrasting, but equally placid melody is introduced by solo violin. This is no sharply-textured Botticelli Venus, but an impressionist portrait in soft, watercolor textures, over a constantly shifting rhythmic and harmonic background.

Mercury, the Winged Messenger opens with a feeling of perpetual motion, passing brief bits of melody from instrument to instrument. The orchestration is extremely light, focusing on the woodwinds and giving prominent passages to the celesta. A central episode uses an exotic melody first heard in the solo violin, and then repeated several times throughout the orchestra. Holst's daughter notes that the inspiration for this passage came from folk musicians that he had heard on a trip to Algeria. In its final section, *Mercury* returns to the nimble character of its beginning.

For *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*, Holst returns to full orchestra, but this movement contains none of the threatening darkness of *Mars*—Holst described *Jupiter* as “...one of those jolly fat people who enjoy life.” The main theme is a rollicking syncopated melody first heard in the horns. The first contrasting section turns to a slightly slower triple meter melody, again introduced by the horns. After a brief return to the opening texture, there is a second triple meter theme; a broad hymn-like melody marked *Andante maestoso*. (A few years later, Holst did, in fact, use this melody to set a patriotic hymn.) To close off the rondo form, Holst includes a final statement of the main theme.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age begins with a feeling of timelessness: a static ostinato played by harps and flutes supports a slow and languid melody first played by the basses. The central section becomes more agitated, although never faster, moving in a long crescendo. After reaching maximum intensity, the mood subsides into a transformation of the opening music.

Uranus, the Magician begins with a *fortissimo* statement by unison brass. According to Adrian Boult, Holst did not know *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (1897) by Paul Dukas, at the time he composed *Uranus*. However, Holst’s main themes are amazingly similar to those used by Dukas in his portrayal of magic gone astray: a humorous and somewhat eerie 6/4 melody that gives way to a spooky march. Both Dukas and Holst may have been inspired—whether consciously or not—by the “Witches’ Sabbath” movement of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*. Holst’s magician is good-natured to the end, though. After a tremendous orchestral climax, the music quiets to a final statement of the march.

The closing movement, *Neptune, the Mystic*, returns to the 5/4 of *Mars*. However *Neptune* is hushed and serene, characterized by sliding chromatic melodies played above a background of sustained chords and glissandos in the celesta and harps. At the end, Holst calls for two offstage choruses of female voices. There is no text—the women sing an unearthly hymn that fades gradually into space.