

CHARLOTTESVILLE  
SYMPHONY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

PROGRAM NOTES FOR APRIL 28 & 29, 2018

***Orion* for Orchestra (2002)**

**Kaija Saariaho**

**Born 14 October 1952 in Helsinki, Finland**

**Currently residing in Paris, France**

*Approximate duration 25 minutes*

- Saariaho is arguably Finland's pre-eminent living composer.
- *Orion* has programmatic roots in classical mythology and the constellation.
- A large percussion battery enhances the otherworldly sounds in this colorful score.

Finland is a small country that boasts a remarkable number of prominent living composers, conductors and performers of international stature. Kaija Saariaho has become one of Finland's most celebrated musical figures. She studied at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki with the Finnish modernist Paavo Heininen (b.1938). Her classmates and friends included Magnus Lindberg and Esa-Pekka Salonen. The three of them were co-founders of Ears Open!, a progressive group that promoted avant-garde music.

Saariaho worked in Freiburg and Darmstadt in the late 1970s and early 1980s, eventually settling in Paris, where she was associated with the IRCAM research institute. IRCAM is a legendary center of electronic and computer-assisted technology in music. Both areas interest Saariaho, who worked with such multi-media combinations as orchestra and tape. More recently, she has explored techniques used by the French 'spectralist' school, employing computer analysis to analyze sound spectra for specific notes. The work we hear, *Orion*, is exclusively acoustic. No electronica is involved (although an electronic organ may be used, and vibraphone is an electronic instrument).

Saariaho has received worldwide acclaim for her music, including high praise for her first opera, *L'amour de loin* (2000). In February of this year, she was awarded the BBVA Foundation's Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Contemporary Music category for "a contribution to contemporary music that is extraordinary in its individuality, breadth and scope." Previous laureates of the BBVA prize, which includes a cash award of 400,000 euros, include Pierre Boulez, Steve Reich and Sofia Gubaidulina.

Despite her decades of residence in Paris, Saariaho retains a strong connection to her native Finland, and the relationship between nature and music is central to her music. Her titles reflect her diverse interests: in light (*Notes on Light, Light and Matter, Changing Light*), illusion (*Laterna Magic, Spins and Spells, Mirage*), dreams (*Grammaire des rêves, Caliban's Dream, Aile du songe*) and the internal compartments of the soul (*Chateau de l'âme*). She also draws on literature – several of her compositions are inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – and mythology. *Orion* falls into this latter category.

In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, Orion was a handsome giant and hunter. The tales of his birth vary, but he is believed to have come from the region of Boeotia. On the island of Chios, he drove out all the wild beasts. He fell in love with King Oenopion's beautiful daughter, Merope, but then offended the king with his cavalier treatment of the princess. Oenopion enlisted the assistance of Dionysus [Bacchus] to blind Orion. An oracle informed him that he could only regain his sight by directly viewing the rays of the rising sun. Hephaestus [Vulcan] provided him with a guide to the east. After his vision was restored, he lived with the goddess Artemis [Diana] as a hunter. Several tales of his death exist: at Artemis's hand, at the hands of the jealous Apollo, or as the victim of a scorpion sting. Following his death, Orion was placed among the stars as a constellation.

Saariaho is known for manipulating dense blocks of sound in shifting patterns, with an emphasis on orchestral color. Each of her three movements addresses an aspect of Orion's life and legend. 'Memento mori' ['Remember death,' or 'Remember that you will die'] unfolds as a miasma of sound within a vast space, as if the universe were coming into being. The harmonic pace is very slow, giving us no sense of groundedness. *Glissandi*, trills and sliding pitches add to the hypnotic effect as Saariaho continues a slow, inexorable build to the furious climax. We are reminded of our insignificance within the cosmos, and the very mystery of existence.

'Winter Sky' presents a sequence of individual soloists in vivid relief above a quiet, sustained pedal point from strings, harps, piano and organ. The spotlight passes from piccolo to concertmaster, thence to clarinet, oboe, trumpet and the violin section. As the texture becomes more dense, various instruments echo repeated motives. We view the firmament on a crystal clear night, far from civilization: the heavens sparkling with infinite variety against the midnight darkness. From complex textures emerge recurrent motives: the more we listen, the more layers we hear, coalescing in nature's universal order.

'Hunter' focuses on Orion in his prime. Marked *Sempre giocoso, energico* [jovial and energetic] it opens as a perpetual motion with scurrying, chattering scale runs. Interruptions jolt us: momentary silence becomes as important as sound. The faster, hunting sections are intensely rhythmic, while the slower ones return us to the suspended animation of the earlier movements. At the end, Saariaho takes us on a mythical journey as Orion ascends to the heavens to take his place as a constellation.

The Cleveland Orchestra commissioned *Orion*. Franz Welser-Möst led the Cleveland Orchestra in the premiere on 23 January, 2003.

The score calls for four flutes (third doubling alto flute and piccolo; fourth doubling piccolo), four oboes (fourth doubling English horn), four clarinets, four bassoons (fourth doubling contrabassoon), six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two sets of timpani, a large percussion complement [see sidebar], two harps, piano, organ and strings.

## **PERCUSSION BONANZA**

Kaija Saariaho's *Orion* requires four players to handle its massive percussion section - and that's over and above the two sets of timpani! The instruments are distributed among the four percussionists as follows:

Player 1: crotales (with bow) and glockenspiel

Player 2: vibraphone (with bow), marimba, xylophone, tubular bells and glockenspiel

Player 3: triangle, shell chimes, small bell, small and large suspended cymbals, tam tam, bell chimes, tubular bells, glass chimes, bass drum and four tom-toms

Player 4: tam tam, marimba, bass drum; small, medium and large suspended cymbals; glockenspiel, two bowl gongs, 2 Chinese cymbals and thunder stick (bull roarer)

A quick read of this list indicates that the players share certain of the instruments, but in total, the percussion section still comprises its own mini-orchestra - and some careful choreography among the four players as they navigate the stage.

### ***The Planets, Suite for Large Orchestra, Op. 32***

**Gustav Holst**

**Born 21 September, 1874 in Cheltenham, England**

**Died 25 May, 1934 in London**

*Approximate duration 51 minutes*

- Both a giant suite and a series of symphonic poems, *The Planets* is unique in symphonic literature.
- Decide Holst's subject for yourself: character portraits of ancient gods? Astrology? Astronomy? Or the human condition?
- Listen for the wordless women's chorus in the finale.

### **Missing Planets?**

E.D. Hirsch's original *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988) told us that a planet is "a kind of object that is in orbit around a star, but does not give off its own light; rather, it shines by reflecting sunlight. . . . There are nine major planets, including the earth, in orbit around our sun, along with many asteroids." The first thing we ought to know about Gustav Holst's most famous work is that it is *not* about mythology. Most planets in our solar system simply happen to be named for ancient Greek and Roman gods and goddesses.

We know from the program page that Holst's Suite consists of seven movements. Mr. Hirsch and our middle school science teachers taught us that our solar system had nine planets. That changed in 2003, when astronomers tentatively identified a tenth planet. They reported that the so-called tenth planet ("2003 UB313") was even larger than Pluto. Informally, they referred to it as Xena, but in 2006, they formally designated this trans-Neptunian object as Eris.

The three planets "missing" from the Holst composition are Pluto, Earth, and the recently discovered 2003 UB313, *aka* Xena or Eris. Pluto was not discovered until 1930 (and in any case was downgraded in 2006 to a "dwarf planet," as was the newcomer Eris). Holst completed *The Planets* in 1917. Earth, for whatever reason, did not stimulate his imagination. His symphonic suite is its own musical galaxy, less governed by science than by mysticism.

## Astrology, Astronomy, or Philosophy?

What then was Holst's context? Astrology, at least as a jumping-off point. But there is a lot more going on in these seven tone poems -- for that is, in effect, what they are -- than just the character he deemed appropriate to each of the planets. Holst was a bookworm who preferred the solitude of his study to almost everything. He became interested in eastern religions and mysticism early on, and worked both aspects into much of his music, including *The Planets*. For him, philosophical ideas took precedence over astrological or astronomical accuracy. He thought of *The Planets* as a series of mood pictures, and neither intended nor achieved immense contrast within any of its individual components. Between contiguous movements, however, there is a world of difference. That is precisely why this work is so enormously effective in its cumulative dramatic and musical impact.

## Homage to Schoenberg and Stravinsky

Holst had considered composing a large orchestral suite for some time. This one began with the title *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*, an homage to his contemporary, Arnold Schoenberg, whose *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 16 (1909) Holst greatly admired. Most critics compare *The Planets* to Schoenberg's Pieces or to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913), both of which were certainly influential. In terms of orchestral precedent, the best candidate for comparison is Smetana's *Má Vlast*, six movements loosely linked by the course of a great river, and each of which functions as a discrete tone poem.

## A Collection of Contradictions

*The Planets* is full of paradoxes. One irony is that Holst wrestled with large forms, uncomfortable with the structural constraints that symphonies and concerti presented. Yet in this collection of orchestral movements, he wrote one of the most monumental pieces in the literature. Another contradiction is that *The Planets* was written from 1914 to 1917, and is thus generally classified as a war work. Yet its relentless, menacing first movement -- "Mars, The Bringer of War" -- was fully drafted before Britain entered the war. Thus it is certainly not Holst's reaction to the horror of military conflict; his daughter and biographer, Imogen Holst, deems the movement prophetic.

## A Journey Through Life

We would do better to look at the progression of character that Holst makes through his seven movements: from war to peace (Venus); thence to a messenger (Mercury) who ushers in first jollity (Jupiter), then old age (Saturn). Finally, we are introduced to magic (Uranus) and mysticism (Neptune). In a way, Holst is taking us as listeners on a journey through life, not only from a temporal standpoint, but also from a spiritual one. Thus, Venus here is a palliative to war, rather than a symbol of romantic love. She tempers the brutality and violence of Mars's music, with reminders of beauty and refinement.

In "Mercury," which functions as a scherzo movement, Holst gives vent again to adolescent energy and enthusiasm. He is herald to Jupiter, whose irrepressible joviality has made this central movement the best known and most popular of the seven. From here we encounter the darker, more abstract side of Holst's personality. "Saturn" is the consummate mood piece, confronting us with fear of mortality. The sorcerer of Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* clearly had at least a rhythmic impact on Holst's evocation of "Uranus the Magician." Mystery and the occult reach their peak in the finale, "Neptune," which adds wordless women's chorus to evoke the transcendent boundlessness of the universe.

*The Planets* abounds in opportunities for every section of the orchestra and most of the instrumental principals, to an extent that rivals a concerto for orchestra. Holst's extraordinary range of mood, color and expression makes *The Planets* an engrossing and powerful listening experience.

*The Planets* calls for the largest orchestra Holst ever used. It comprises 4 flutes, (2 doubling piccolo, 1 doubling bass flute), 3 oboes (1 doubling bass oboe), English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 2 tenor trombones, bass trombone, 2 tubas, 6 timpani (requiring two players), percussion (including side drum, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, tambourine, bells, tam-tam, xylophone and glockenspiel), celesta, two harps, organ, women's chorus and strings.



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