Mood Pictures within Gustav Holst's *The Planets* (1917): A Psychological Way of Composing?

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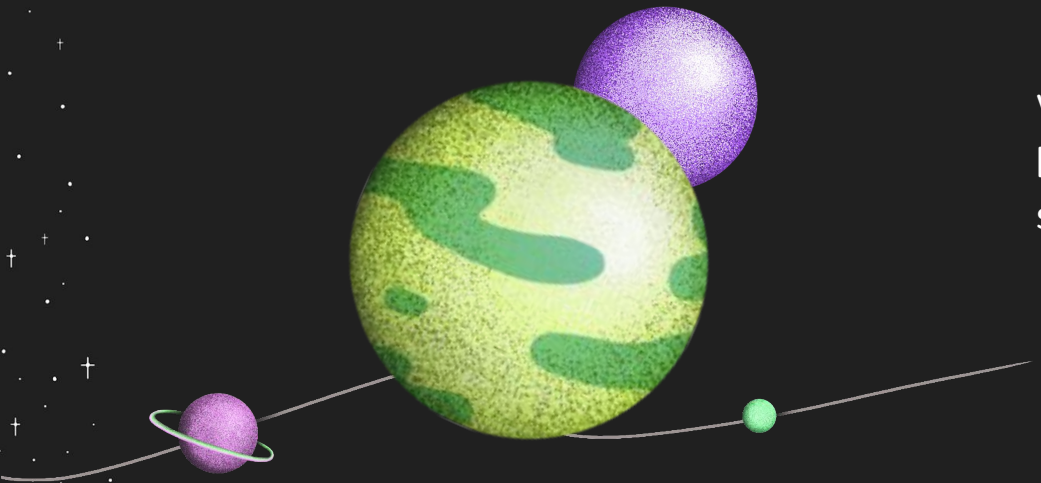
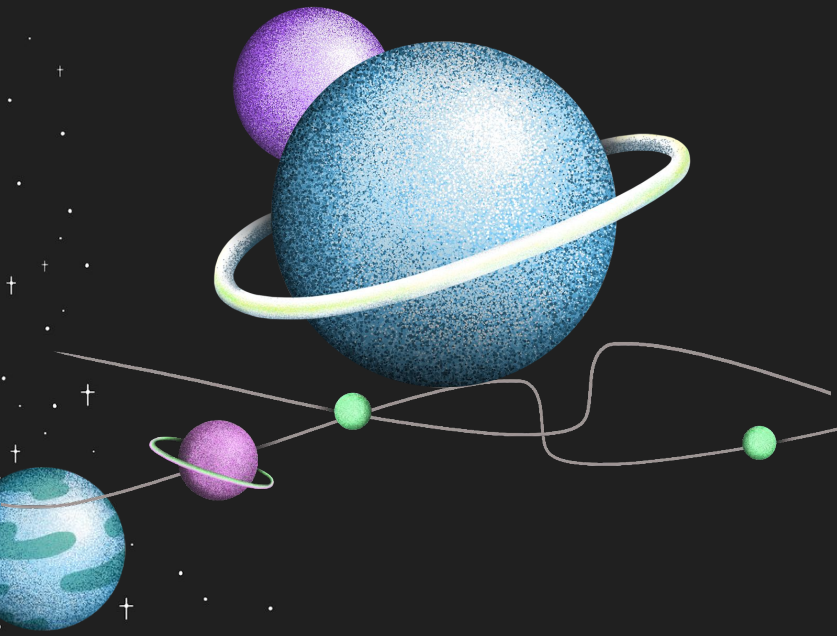
WHAT IS MY RESEARCH QUESTION?



What does Holst mean when he likens his composition to a series of “mood pictures?”*

*Richard Greene, ***Holst: The Planets*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 4. “The Planets was to make its special appeal to the audience without any explanation from the composer. It was a series of ‘mood pictures,’ he was to say in a lecture some years after the piece was premiered.”

Literature Review



Two main areas of literature:

- Holst biographies and *Life and Works* sources.
- Sources on psychological and/or mood painting through music, particularly in reference to J. Joachim and C. V. Stanford.

Gap in the literature:

- Nobody has thus far discussed where Holst may have gotten the idea to compose “mood pictures”; by contextualizing Holst’s “mood pictures” in relation to Holst’s teachers, I am offering an original contribution to scholarship.

BACKGROUND

1874
Born in Pittville Terrace, Cheltenham

1882
Holst started taking instrumental lessons

1893
Studied at the Royal College of Music

1903
Gave up orchestral career; settled into teaching career

1907
His daughter Imogen Clare Holst was born

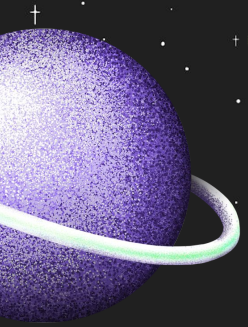
HOLST'S TEACHERS/MENTORS

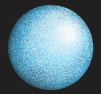
JOSEPH JOACHIM

(1831-1907)
Compositions maturing like organisms

CHARLES VILLIERS STANFORD

(1852-1924)
Wrote music including psychological terminology





"... whether it's good or bad, it grew in my mind slowly—like a baby in a woman's womb ... For two years I had the intention of composing that cycle, and during those two years it seemed of itself more and more definitely to be taking form."

—GUSTAV HOLST
Explaining process of writing *The Planets*

MOOD PICTURES?: MORE SHOWING HOLST'S PHASES?

Movements of *The Planets* exemplify a sense of Holst's feelings and experiences from his own life

The Planets - A story/narrative of emotions and feelings that audiences were able to perceive

Similar to ....

Chapters in a book
Parts of a series
Etc.

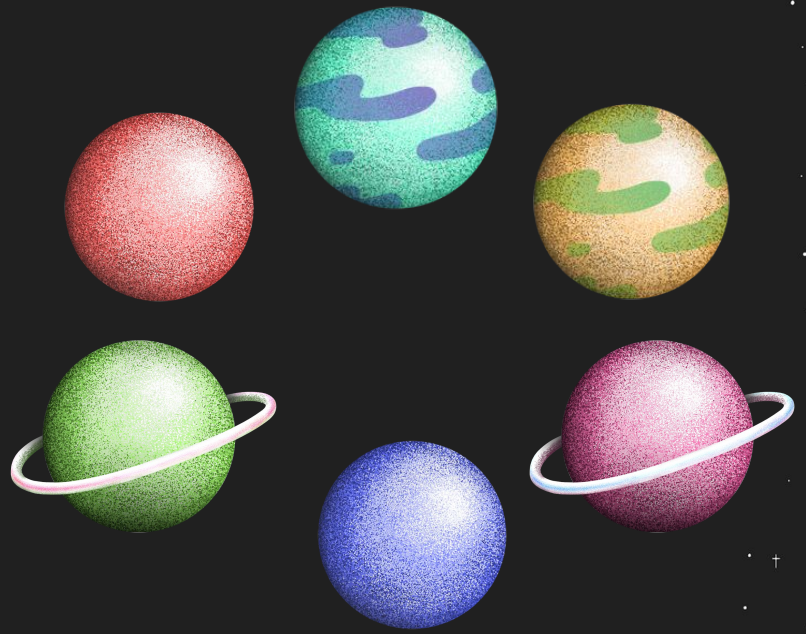


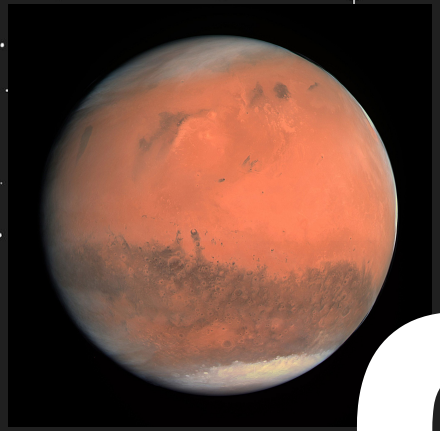
TABLE OF CONTENTS

01 RISING DISTRESS
Mars: The Bringer of War

02 MIXED HAPPINESS
Jupiter: The Bringer of Jollity

03 SORROWFUL GROWTH
Saturn: The Bringer of Old Age

04 PASSIVE MISCHIEF
Uranus: The Magician



01 RISING DISTRESS

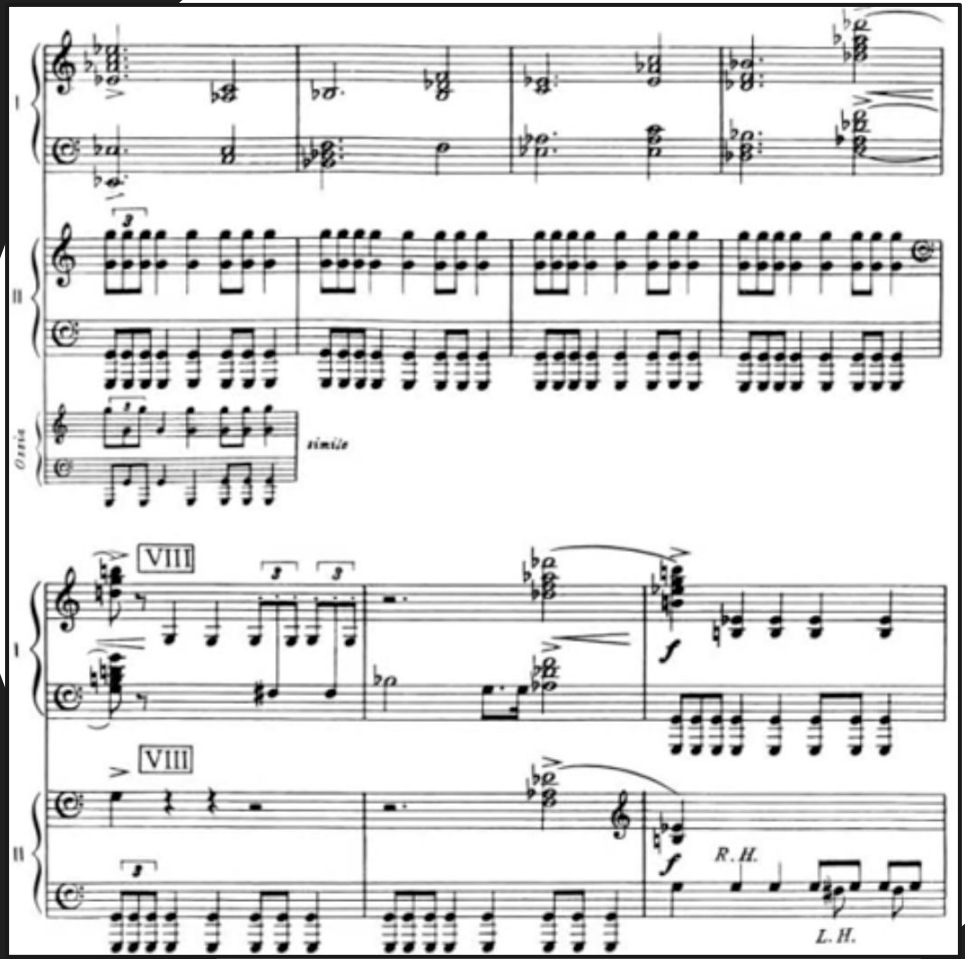
Mars: The Bringer of War

ANALYSIS I: RISING DISTRESS

Section VII: Measures 27-30
Returning Rhythms

Ostinato from beginning
Supporting phrase

Gustav Holst's "Oppressive Ordeal"



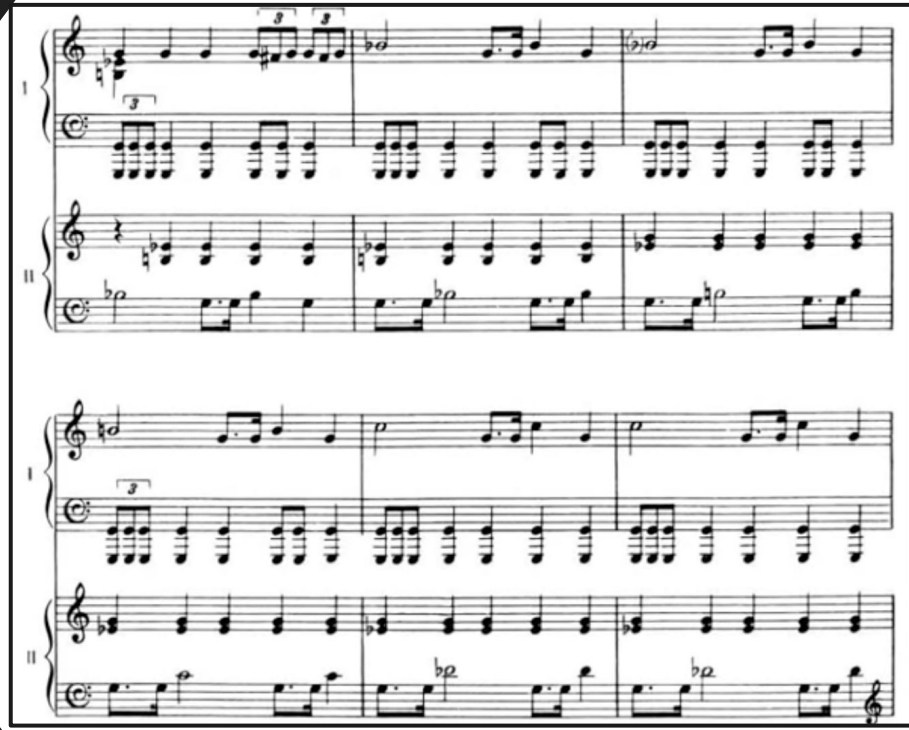
ANALYSIS I:
RISING DISTRESS (cont.)

Section VIII: Measures 1-9

Newer but returning rhythm (Section V)

Additions of rhythms together - Building of thunderous effect

“Frantic (but established) scramble”

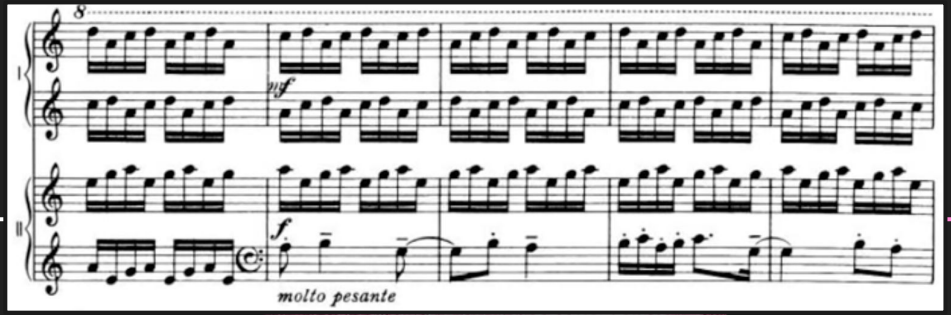


02 MIXED HAPPINESS

Jupiter: The Bringer of Jollity

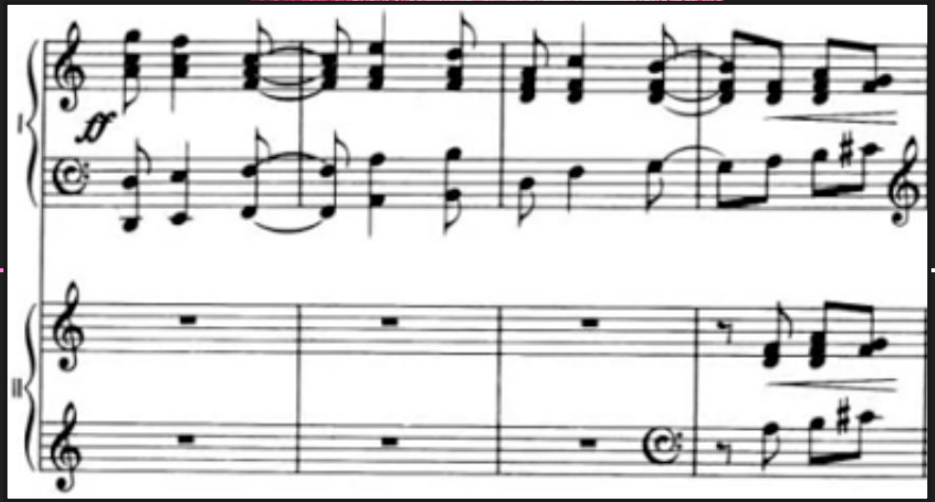
ANALYSIS II: MIXED HAPPINESS

Fast-paced sixteenth notes from strings (A-C-D natural)



Measures 5-9:
6 horns (in F) with melody

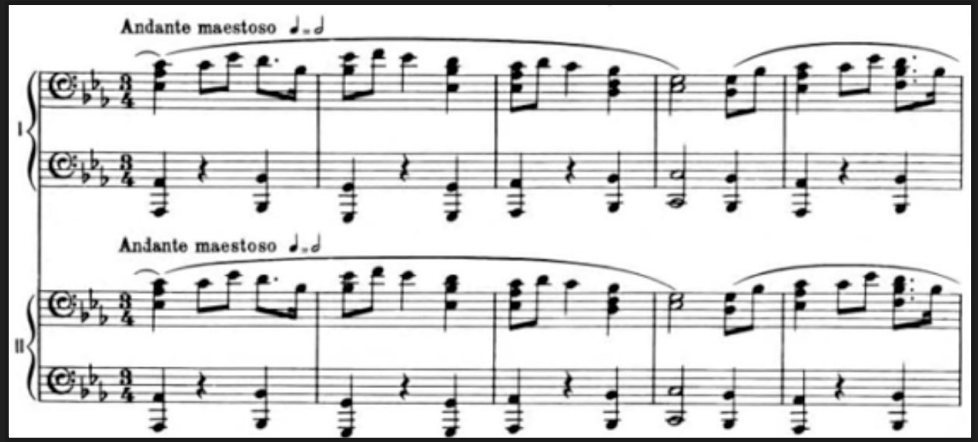
Gives a majestic, cinematic kind of appeal to this movement



Jupiter: Very expressive; positively open and full

ANALYSIS II: MIXED HAPPINESS (cont.)

- Iconic melody at the Andante maestoso that builds from the start
- Timbre has significant and victorious feel to it, yet key of section has contrast to beginning
- “Flourish” in Holst’s life in later life compared to early life



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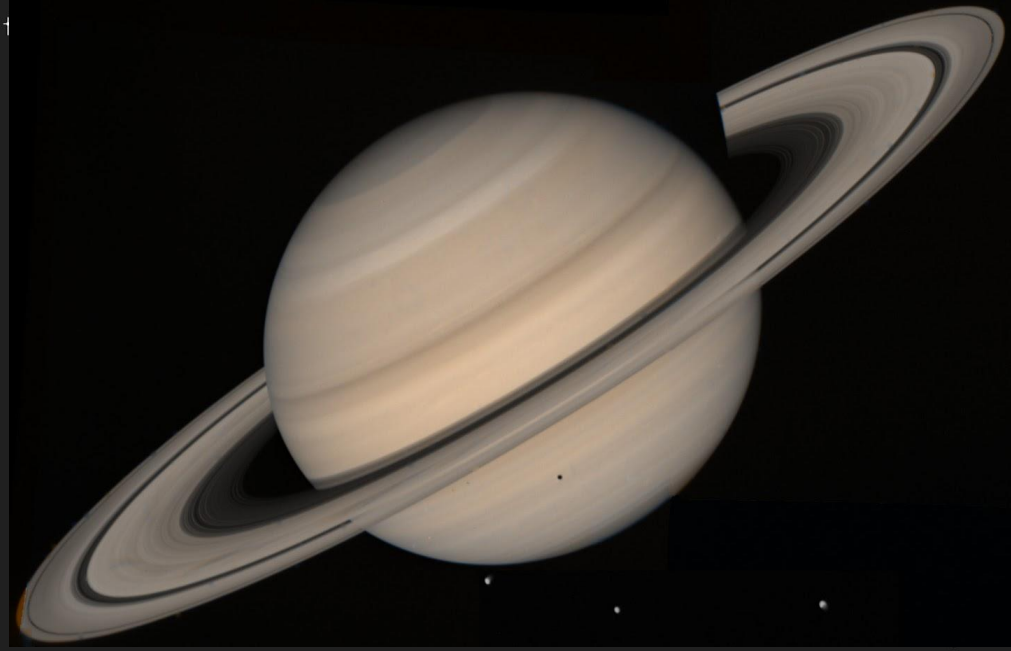
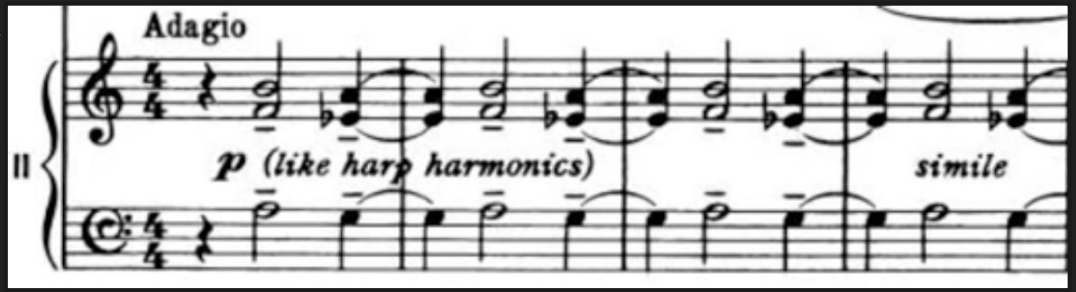
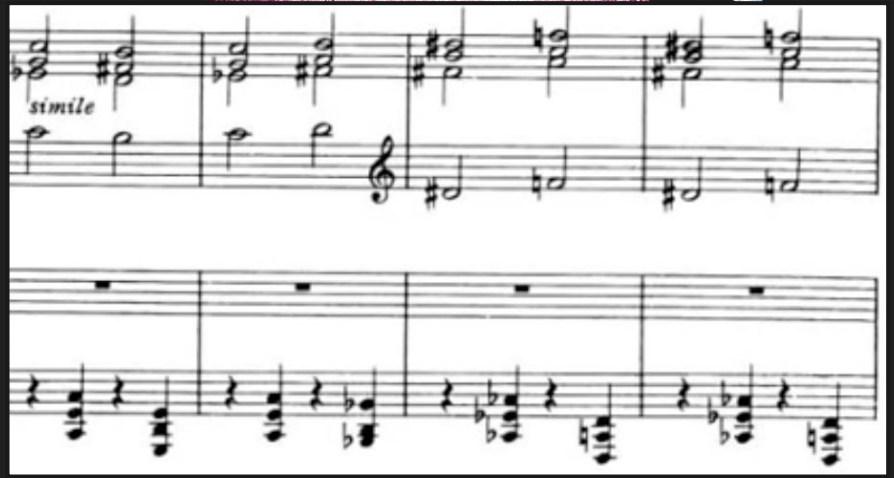
SORROWFUL GROWTH



Saturn: The Bringer of Old Age

ANALYSIS III: SORROWFUL GROWTH





A Beginning: Bdim to Adim - similar to a pendulum on a clock*

B Gradual rise in pitches being played (and speed) going back and forth as piece goes on

C Holst: Misery/Agony of time passing by, giving harsh effect and somberness

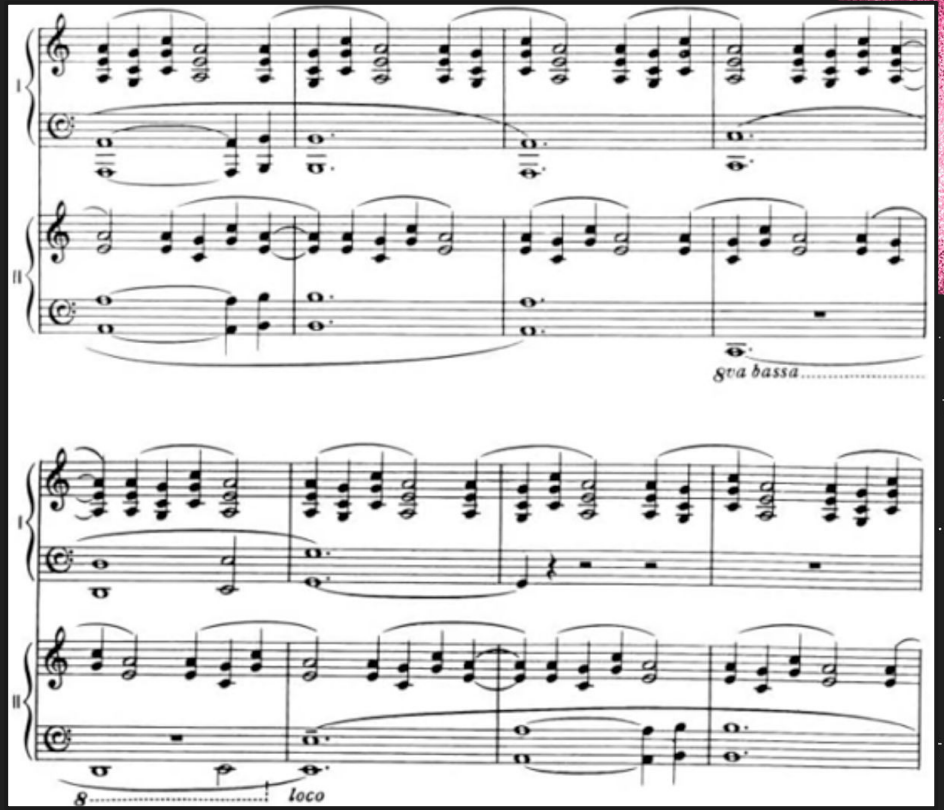
D Allude to his life and health? (experiences as a child and getting older)

*Alex Burns, '*Gustav Holst: The Planets*' (Classicalexburns) V. Saturn - **The Bringer of Old Age.** "The opening bars of *Saturn* are often referred to as a ticking clock. With the harmonic ostinato (the harmonic intervals being of two half-diminished seventh chords – Bdim7 and Adim7) and the oscillating chord changes between the flutes and harps creates a dark image for the listener.."

ANALYSIS III: SORROWFUL GROWTH (cont.)

- Section VI - Moment of ease and resolve from the climatic, disturbing music
- Representation of Holst?
  - Experienced hardship with health, but learned to acknowledge the time he had and what he did

Movement was a way to describe the act of moving forward

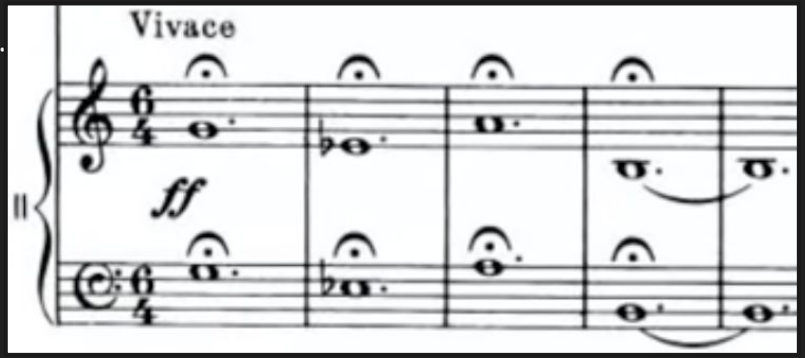


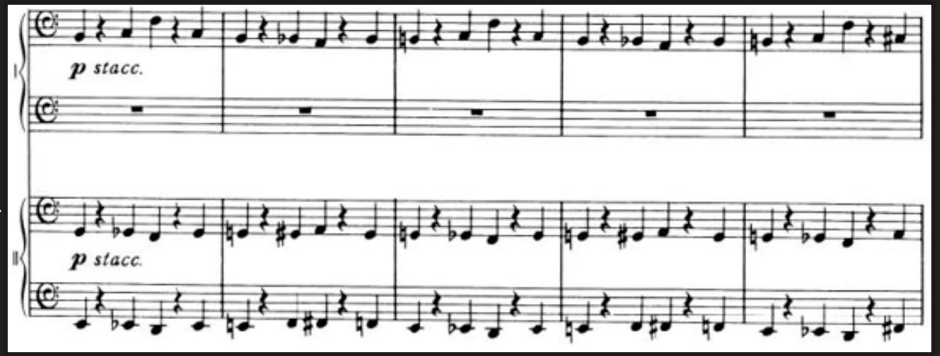
04

PASSIVE MISCHIEF

Uranus: The Magician

ANALYSIS IV: PASSIVE MISCHIEF





Beginning measures (1-4) stand out in the movement coming back again and again

6/4 time signature; notes for melody on 1, 3, 4, and 6 of the measures

Playful, charismatic, joyful, upbeat with a little mystery

CONCLUSIONS

01

Understand how past experts who created ‘mood pictures’ contributed to Holst’s diversity and creativity with *The Planets*

02

Looked into memorable as well as eye-catching moments of this orchestral suite and what gives them each unique characteristics

03

Observed how these different harmonic, motivic, and structural aspects give a personal and mental picture of Holst as an individual

04

Respond to the way that a newer composer, like myself, notice some ideas in *The Planets* and think about how it’s effective or could be more effective if changed

RESOURCES

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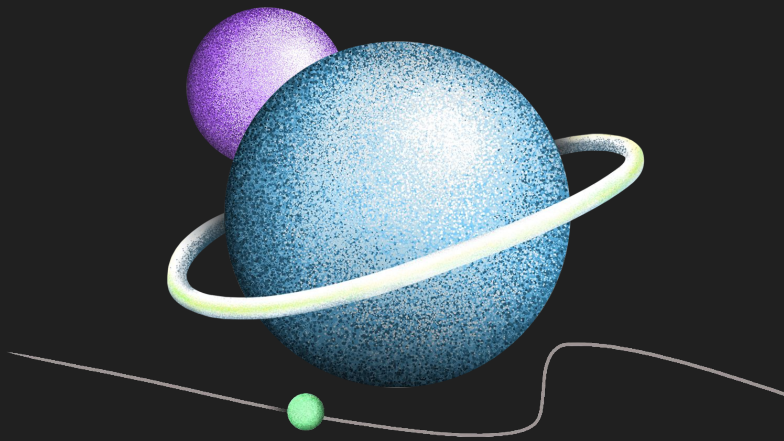
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