

First Light

Richard Danielpour (1956 –)

Written: 1988

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 13 minutes

Tonight's concert has a universe theme. The major work on the second half, Gustav Holst's *The Planets*, is a musical characterization of the astrological aspects of the planets in our solar system. With the inclusion of the stunning photography the planets from NASA, we get an additional astronomical view. The first work on tonight's program is more metaphysical.

Richard Danielpour based *First Light* on the last section of Robert Duncan's four-part poem,

Four Pictures of the Real Universe:

And does not the spirit attend secretly
the music that is hidden away from me
chords that hold the stars in their courses
outfoldings of sound from the seed of first light?
Were it not for the orders of music hidden
we should be claimed by the preponderant void.

First Light is a concerto for orchestra written in four short sections. The orchestra begins ominously and aggressively with jagged syncopated rhythms. Various sections of the orchestra play off each other with short, tightly juxtaposed melodic and rhythmic fragments. A final bold statement by the trumpet, reminiscent of Charles Ives small orchestra work *The Unanswered Question*, leads to a quiet section characterized by somber chords. Fragments from the first part try to intrude over the quiet. They eventually succeed, leading to the third quicker section. This time, elements of the slower section attempt to overcome the noise. Suddenly the mood and texture change for the final section of the piece. As the aggressive elements fade away, the composer paraphrases two alleluias from the Roman Catholic liturgy. Danielpour writes "These chants are not extraneous quotes but serve both as a source for much of the

material found throughout the one movement work and as an ultimate destination of the music's journey. That journey ends on a hushed statement of a D major chord. The review of the premier performance noted that Danielpour Adares not only to turn Charles Ives's "Unanswered Question" on its head, but also to propound so simple and old-fashioned an answer.”

Richard Danielpour has become one of the most sought-after composers of his generation - a composer whose distinctive American voice is part of a rich neo-Romantic heritage with influences from pivotal composers like Britten, Copland, Bernstein, and Barber. Danielpour has commented that “music [must] have an immediate visceral impact and elicit a visceral response.” This visceral element can indeed be heard throughout Danielpour's works: expansive, sweeping, romantic gestures; energetic rhythmic accentuations; contrasting stylistic characters; arresting, introspective, melodic beauty; rich, enticing orchestrations; and brilliantly juxtaposed, yet cohesive harmonic angles.

Among Danielpour's awards are a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, the Charles Ives Fellowship and a Lifetime Achievement Award B both from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, five MacDowell Colony Fellowships, a Jerome Foundation Award, and a Rockefeller Foundation Grant.

As an educator, Danielpour serves on the faculties of both the Curtis Institute of Music and the Manhattan School of Music, while also participating in master classes and residencies around the country.

Danielpour studied at the New England Conservatory and at the Juilliard School. His teachers have been: Vincent Persichetti, Peter Mennin, and John Heiss (composition), Benjamin Zander (conducting), and Lorin Hollander, Veronica Jochum, and Gabriel Chodos (piano).

Concerto in A Major for Piano and Orchestra, K. 488

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Written: 1786

Movements: Three

Style: Classical

Duration: 26 minutes

When Mozart finally escaped from the oppressive clutches of his father and the stifling atmosphere of Salzburg and settled in Vienna, he had one major problem. He didn't have a job. So, Mozart set out to do what few, if any, composers in the eighteenth century could do: make a living as a freelance performer and composer. He filled his mornings teaching piano lessons to the children of the upper class and aristocracy. Then, he would play piano in the salons hoi-polloi. To make even more money he would present an "academy," a benefit concert for himself in one of the large halls in the city. Competition for such a space was fierce. The only time he could get into one of these halls was during Advent or Lent, (when staged productions like operas were prohibited), so he could normally give only one or two a year. He made a lot of money at these concerts, but to make more Mozart presented a series of concerts in smaller locations, like inns or ballrooms, and sold subscriptions for the whole group in advance –much like your season ticket subscriptions. He recounted his life in Vienna in a letter to his father:

“You must forgive me if I don't write very much, but it is impossible to find time to do so, as I am giving three subscription concerts in Trattner's room on the last three Wednesdays of Lent, beginning on March 17. I have a hundred subscribers already and shall easily get another thirty. The price for the three concerts is six florins. I shall probably give two concerts in the theater this year. Well, as you may imagine, I must play some new works and therefore, I must compose. The whole morning is taken up

with pupils and almost every evening I have to play. . . . Well, haven't I enough to do? I don't think that in this way I can possibly get out of practice."

Mozart had to deal with the problem of what to play that would draw in an audience. He hit on a brilliant solution: he invented the piano concerto. He described his early attempts at the concerto to his father, (and in the same paragraph explains why he remains so popular):

"They are a happy medium, between too hard and too easy—very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, natural, without lapsing into vapidness. There are passages here and there from which connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction, but they are written so that the non-connoisseurs cannot fail to be pleased even if they don't know why."

Unlike today's audiences, those in Mozart's day didn't want to hear *yesterday's* music. He had to continually write new stuff to keep them coming back. In his first four years in Vienna, Mozart didn't write *any* symphonies, but he did write *seventeen* piano concertos. The challenge was to make each different and to include something for everybody.

Mozart began writing his Piano Concerto in A Major in 1784, but for some unknown reason put it aside and didn't complete it until March 2, 1786 – at around the same time as his ebullient opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. Unlike many of his other piano concertos, there is no record of its first performance, but it was probably at one of the Lenten concerts in Vienna that year. Like *The Marriage of Figaro*, this concerto is a sunny and joyful piece that ventures occasionally into sad and somber territory with typical Mozartean panache.

The Planets

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Written: 1914-1916

Movements: Seven

Style: Early 20th Century Symphonic Poem

Duration: 51 minutes

“Every artist ought to pray that he may not be a ‘success.’” if he’s a failure, he stands a good chance of concentrating upon the best work of which he’s capable. . . If nobody likes your work, you have to go on just for the sake of the work and you are in no danger of letting the public make you repeat yourself.” Such was the advice of Gustav Holst to a student *after* his immediate and startling success with *The Planets*. That work remains Holst’s most popular work and, in this country, the *only* work that the concert-going public knows and recognizes. *The Planets* brought Holst immediate fame, but it also paralyzed him. Only after the initial furor died down could he start composing again.

Holst was a weekend composer. It is as a teacher that he probably had his most profound impact. In the words of the critic and composer Bayan Northcott, “No matter how rudimentary the techniques of his singers and players, they were to be drawn into performing as soon as possible. If suitable pieces couldn’t be found, he would write some himself or get them to write their own. Today, such ideas lie at the heart of enlightened music teaching.”

Holst began work on *The Planets* after a friend introduced him to astrology. He was careful to point out that the work had very little to do with the astronomical aspects of the planets: “These pieces were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets. There is no program music in them, neither have they any connection with the deities of classical mythology bearing the same names. If any guide to the music is required, the subtitle to each piece will be found sufficient, especially if it be used in a broad sense.” Tonight we present Holst’s character-filled images with stunning images of the planets presented by NASA.

“Mars, the Bringer of War” begins with a distant military drum beat, reinforced by the unusual technique of string players hitting their strings with the wood of their bow. Ominous chords increase in intensity and bring in the main tune, played by a tenor tuba. A slower central section, dark and foreboding, leads directly into a very loud restatement of the military tattoo from the beginning. The movement ends with crashing, dissonant chords. What a contrast, then, with “Venus, the Bringer of Peace.” Its beautiful horn solo, and lush strings and woodwinds provide a still tranquility. The speed of “Mercury, the Winged Messenger” is, indeed, fast. The way Holst plays with the internal rhythm of each measure makes the movement sound, well, mercurial. “Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity” has three distinct sections. The outer ones are fast and vivacious; the inner section is a beautiful melody, evocative of a noble English folk-song.

“Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age” begins with ethereal, almost disembodied chords. The double basses begin a dignified march that becomes more worrisome and ominous until short, almost demented insertions interrupt it. The movement finally winds down with the same ethereal chords from the beginning. A four-note motive played by the brass and timpani begins “Uranus, the Magician” The bassoons then set up the background rhythm for a macabre sort of dance. The brass introduce an inexorable march that builds to a terrifying climax and then a sudden quiet. The quiet extends through the entire final movement, “Neptune, the Mystic.” It almost lacks any theme at all; it is disembodied music. The entire orchestral suite ends with a women’s choir, singing offstage, without words. Holst’s instructions are for the women to keep repeating their final measure until they are lost in the distance.”