A Season in Space has celebrated flight in music on the fiftieth anniversary of the first moon landings. We’ve been pleased to present out-of-this-world music, performed by our gifted musicians, and joined by some of the finest soloists in the world today. Tonight, we venture out beyond the moon, exploring the planets, and moving beyond.

The 2018-19 season has been “One small step” for your Symphony, one that we hope portends giant leaps for GBS, into next season and beyond.

Program Notes, April 13, 2019

Across the Universe

Lennon-McCartney

Across the Universe (1968)

Across the Universe was written mostly by John Lennon for an obscure British group called The Beatles. [I knew it was time to stop teaching undergraduate students when a young woman in my class asked me if it was true that Paul McCartney had been in a group before WINGS.] Lennon wrote the song in late 1967 heavily influenced by his interest in Transcendental Meditation, although the song is best known today in the version that appeared on the group’s last album, Let It Be, in 1970. Lennon was particularly proud of the lyrics, remarking to an interviewer, "It's one of the best lyrics I've written. In fact, it could be the best. It's good poetry, or whatever you call it, without chewin' it. See, the ones I like are the ones that stand as words, without melody. They don't have to have any melody, like a poem, you can read them.”

The song first appeared in 1968 on a charity compilation album for the World Wildlife Fund. In this version, sound effects of birds were added, keeping with the theme of the album. The Let It Be version was done when the Beatles were breaking up, and the job of remixing it went to Phil Spector, who added orchestral and choral overdubs. Lennon approved the version.
In 2008, NASA aimed a transmission of the song in the direction of the star Polaris, a mere 431 light years from earth. The idea was to celebrate simultaneously the 40\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the song’s recording, the 45\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Deep Space Network and the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of NASA. Beatles historian Martin Lewis conceived of the idea and he encouraged all fans to play the song as it was beamed into outer space. Paul McCartney and Yoko Ono lent their support to the idea, and the song is now eleven light years into space—roughly 55 trillion miles. Only 420 light years to go.

Ludwig van Beethoven 1770-1828

\textit{Violin Concerto in D (1806) Op. 61}

GIL SHAHAM, Violin

In 1806 Ludwig van Beethoven at the age of 35 was at the height of his powers during the so-called “heroic” middle period. He had written his breakthrough symphony, the \textit{Eroica}, and in the course of 1806 would write his 4\textsuperscript{th} symphony, the 4\textsuperscript{th} Piano Concerto and tonight’s signature Beethoven work, his one and only Violin Concerto. He was the most famous composer in Vienna, somewhat controversial for the brute force and power of his compositions, but greatly admired. His hearing had begun to decline, but he had managed to hide it from most, and remained a successful pianist in public concerts.

In spite of his fame and in spite of the obvious beauty of the Concerto, the first performance, given by French violinist Franz Clement, was unsuccessful. Among the possible reasons for its failure is that Beethoven finished the solo part so late that Clement had to sight-read most of the concerto. At any rate, it was considered a rare failure on Beethoven’s part.

Even as his symphonies, piano sonatas and concertos, and string quartets were performed regularly, the concerto was forgotten until 1844, almost 40 years after its debut. In 1844, Felix Mendelssohn, who did so much to revive the forgotten music of Johann Sebastian Bach, discovered the concerto and engaged a 12-year-old prodigy to perform it. Joseph Joachim would become the most important violinist and violin teacher of the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

Has anyone written such beautiful music from such simple building blocks as Beethoven? The concerto opens with four equal strokes of the tympani. These four repeated strokes become four repeated pitches as the strings take them up. They are sometimes heard alone, but other times appear in the background to one of the beautiful lyrical melodies of the first movement. In spite of occasional bravura moments, the quite long first movement is remarkable for its gentle lyricism—almost what we might expect from a middle movement of a concerto.

The second movement is in a style Beethoven developed in many slow movements—a hymn-like solemn mood similar to the slow movement of the Appassionata or Pathetique Piano Sonatas, or the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos. We feel we are listening to a secular hymn—and the concert hall becomes a sacred space. Notice how the violin often decorates the hymn-like melody played by the orchestra. There is no break between the second and final movement, although the change to the new mood is totally clear.

The final movement is a rollicking dance with a wonderful melody that returns many times. There is a lovely contrasting middle section that darkens the mood briefly, but the general mood is joyous. Perhaps the opening melody was influenced by Austrian peasant dances—it has a popular sound. This movement has some incredible technical challenges for the violinist and perhaps, as we enjoy it, we might think for a moment of poor Monsieur Clement, in 1806, sight-reading the piece in front of a paying Viennese audience. Well, nobody said being a musician was easy, and that goes double for anyone dealing with Herr Beethoven.
**Gustav Holst  1874-1934**

*The Planets* (1914-16)  Op. 32

Although English composer Gustav Holst wrote many chamber and orchestral works, he is certainly best known for tonight’s concluding work, *The Planets*. Written between 1914 and 1916, this seven-movement orchestral suite was influenced by Holst’s interest in astrology. For example, the seven movements omit a planet we normally consider important—Earth. But in astrology, our planet is the center of the Universe and the celestial planets are seen in relation to the earth, not in their orbit around the Sun. (Poor Pluto, now no longer a planet, hadn’t been discovered at the time of this composition—if it had been, we would have had an eight-movement suite.) Holst had recently been introduced to astrology. He became quite a follower of the ancient practice and would often work out his friend’s horoscopes for fun.

*The Planets* was a popular success from its first performance in 1920, not always to the shy composer’s liking. He seemed to resent both the recognition the suite brought him as well as the lack of interest in almost all his other compositions. But the public was certainly correct in its approval. The suite is a remarkable series of tone poems reflecting the astrological character of each planet. Each movement conveys ideas and emotions associated with the influence of the planets on the human psyche, not necessarily the Roman deities for whom they are named. Thus Venus is the bringer of peace, one of the astrological attributes of this planet, and not the bringer of love, as the Roman goddess would have it.

The suite has seven movements, each named after a planet and its corresponding astrological character as follows:

I.  *Mars, the Bringer of War*. When I first heard John Williams’s exciting music for the *Star Wars* movies, I thought instantly of this movement. Some have suggested that Williams should pay the Holst estate royalties! It does sound like movie music and is among the most impressive movements of this suite. Of course, it must have had special force coming so soon after World War I.

II.  *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*. This gentle movement is all the more effective for following the stormy and powerful Mars.

III.  *Mercury, the Winged Messenger*. Speed and quickness are highlighted here. Mercury’s role as a trickster is also displayed by passages in two different keys.

IV.  *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*. Jupiter is the largest planet and has a number of attributes according to astrologers, but Holst concentrates on jollity. It is a somber form of jollity to my ears. This is the most famous movement, because of the lovely melody toward the middle of the movement, which has become England’s unofficial second national anthem.

V.  *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*. This was Holst’s favorite movement. The movement begins with two chords that are repeated for almost two minutes—what musicians call “ostinato”, meaning “stubborn”. The idea of a few chords repeated well fits the subject of this movement, the inexorable march of time. It ends with a beautiful, contemplative passage perhaps indicating acceptance and peace.

VI.  *Uranus, the Magician*. According to astrology, the planet Uranus controls changes, revolutions, and the sign of Aquarius. This movement may remind us of Dukas’ famous *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* animated so beautifully in Disney’s *Fantasia*. The piece breaks into a grandiose swaggering march. Toward the end, the music becomes hushed and we seem to be outer space!

VII.  *Neptune, the Mystic*. This final leg of our journey through outer space takes us to Neptune, the mysterious, mystical land. It asks for an invisible chorus as part of the mystery. Holst asks for a women’s chorus “to be placed in an adjoining room, the door of which is to be left open until the last bar of the piece, when it is to be slowly and silently closed”. Our journey through space comes to a conclusion in a world hovering between sound and silence, a remarkable evocation of the boundlessness of our universe.
Joe Meek  1929-1967

**Telstar** (1962)

Regarded as the first piece of “sci-fi rock’n’roll,” *Telstar* was also the first song by a British group to hit #1 on the American charts. Originally recorded by the British group The Tornados, and later covered by The Ventures, it strikes a positive tone reminiscent of the early days of the U.S. space program. In a show of hands-across-the-water enthusiasm, *Telstar* was named for the twin U.S. satellites that allowed broadcasts between the United States and Europe. Its original instrumentation, in addition to electric guitars and drums, was notable for its use of the distinctive—and, for its time, brand-new—electronic sounds of the clavioline.

*Telstar* fits well with our “Season in Space,” not only for its futuristic (for 1962) sound and reference to space, but for its political impact as well. The upbeat tune became so popular that a version with German lyrics was recorded by the Luxembourg-born German language singer Camillo Felgen. *Irgendwann erwacht ein neuer Tag* (“Someday a new day will dawn”) features uplifting lines such as “The dark hours will pass,” and “All hearts become free to soar.” It’s not hard to imagine this song being broadcast across the Berlin Wall over Radio Free Europe, spreading hope for a better world.

— Dr. Orin Grossman