

Symphony No. 2: Ad Astra

Instrumentation

- 3 Flutes (2nd and 3rd doubling Piccolo), 3 Oboes (3rd doubling English Horn), 3 Clarinets in Bb (2nd doubling Eb Clarinet; 3rd doubling Bass Clarinet), 3 Bassoons (3rd doubling Contrabassoon)
- 4 Horns in F, 6 Trumpets in C (3rd doubling Piccolo Trumpet in A), 1 Piccolo Trumpet in A, 3 Trombones (3rd doubling Contrabass Trombone), 1 Tuba
- Timpani; Perc. 1: Vibraphone, Glockenspiel, Suspended Cymbal, Triangle (med-hi), Crash Cymbals, Paper, Sand Blocks, Tubular Bells, Floor Tom, Crotales; Perc. 2: Triangle (med-lo), Piccolo Triangle (should be even smaller than High Triangle), Tubular Bells, Glockenspiel, Tam-tam, Large Tam-tam, Small Symphonic Gong, Suspended Cymbal, Güiro (extra long), Snare Drum, Tambourine, Crash Cymbals, Tom-tom (hi), Vibraphone; Perc. 3: Crash Cymbals, Tam-tam, Large Tam-tam, Mark Tree, Glockenspiel, Bass Drum, Glass Harmonica, Tubular Bells, Wind Machine, Triangle (hi-med-lo), Paper, Güiro, Snare Drum, Suspended Cymbal, Woodblocks (hi-lo), Hand Siren Alarm.
- Harp
- Celesta
- Strings

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Duration: 45 minutes.

For millennia human eyes have looked up to the stars awakening both, a profound sense of humility, and a feeling of infinite expansion. Space has inspired countless generations to dream of worlds beyond our worlds and to imagine unfathomable life forms, but it has not been until very recently that us, humans, were able to leave and set foot on a celestial body other than the one we call home. "Ad Astra" is a homage to humanity's unrelenting spirit of exploration told through a few iconic NASA missions and programs that forever changed our understanding of space and our place in the Universe.

Voyager, the first of this symphony's five movements, starts with the solo Vibraphone conveying the words "Ad Astra" in Morse code. At the initiative of Carl Sagan, the Latin phrase "per aspera ad astra" (through hardship to the stars) was embedded in the golden records that both Voyager probes carry with them. The last two words of this phrase serve as a rhythmic motif, permeating the whole movement and gaining increasing significance as the symphony unfolds.

Instead of focusing on a single mission, the second movement tells the story of the entire Apollo program. From its inception, to the tragic loss of life of Apollo 1, the awe-inspiring television broadcast of Apollo 8 in which the crew read verses from the Book of Genesis, the historic first moonwalk of Apollo 11, and subsequent missions, this movement walks us through one the greatest adventures that humanity has ever embarked on. The glass harmonica, with its

eerie overtones, plays a central role in this movement, evoking the Moon's barren yet inviting landscape.

The third movement opens amidst jolting phrases and sounds of the wind machine, meant to represent the bumpy beginnings of the Hubble Space Telescope. Eventually, after an ingenious repair mission, this incredibly complex and sophisticated piece of machinery finds its footing and goes on to make some of the most remarkable discoveries, including the age of our Universe, and numerous stars, nebulae, galaxies, and exoplanets. But perhaps the emotional core of the piece lies within its fourth movement.

The Space Shuttle Challenger had carried nine successful missions before that fateful January morning when seven crewmembers lost their lives shortly after liftoff. Its tenth mission was supposed to be the inaugural flight of the Teacher in Space Project, an initiative meant to inspire students and teachers, and to further incentivize interest in space exploration. Christa McAuliffe was selected among 11,000 applicants, undergoing months of rigorous training, and carrying with her the hopes of millions. The months leading up to the tragedy were filled with joy and anticipation, so I have tried to convey all that exhilaration and optimism up till the very end, when all those dreams were shattered in a traumatic turn of events that silenced millions of people who had tuned in to watch the launch via live television.

We are now in the future; the Voyager space probes have stopped emitting signals to Earth and are now nothing more than time capsules. With its golden record as the only evidence that humanity exists, one of the probes is found by intelligent beings (here represented by four offstage trumpets gradually joining the orchestra onstage) who are able to decode our "per aspera ad astra" message. When all hope is thought to be lost, our radio telescopes are able to detect a foreign signal, prompting, for the very first time in human history, a dialogue (in Morse code) between us and a civilization other than ours. With a total of seven trumpets now on stage (three representing us and an additional four representing our distant neighbors), the message we exchange is one of the 55 audio-recorded greetings contained within the golden record: "Salvete quicumque estis; bonam erga vos voluntatem habemus, et pacem per astra ferimus", which is Latin for "Greetings to you, whoever you are; we have good will towards you and bring peace across space". A quick glance back at our musical journey frames this message, and a new era, where countless civilizations begin to sprout in front of our eyes, ensues. This is the great Revelation that humankind has been awaiting for.

Commissioned by the Houston Symphony (Andrés Orozco-Estrada, Music Director) this work will receive its world-premiere performances in December 2019. It is dedicated to the people of NASA, whose bravery and vision continue to inspire humanity's most ambitious dreams.