

Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Holst's The Planets

Michael Francis, *Conductor*

The Percussion Collective, Robert Van Sice, *Artistic Director*

The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay; Matthew Abernathy, *Artistic Director*

Saturday, Sept 30, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm

Sunday, Oct 1, 2023, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

Smith/Damrosch

Christopher Theofanidis

(b. 1967)

Gustav Holst

(1874-1934)

Star-Spangled Banner

Drum Circles

I. Rivers and Anthems

II. Sparks and Chants

III. How Can You Smile When You're Deep in Thought?

IV. Spirits and Drums

V. Three Chords and the Truth (or, Learning to Breathe Again)

Intermission

The Planets, Op.32

1. Mars, the Bringer of War

2. Venus, the Bringer of Peace

3. Mercury, the Winged Messenger

4. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

5. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

6. Uranus, the Magician

7. Neptune, the Mystic

 Music represented by Bill Holab Musi

The Percussion Collective appears by arrangement with Colbert Artists Management, Inc., 180 Elm Street, Ste I #221, Pittsfield, MA 01201-6552.

Visuals by Adrian Wyard.

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Christopher Theofanidis (1967-)

Drum Circles (2019)

Duration: ca. 25 minutes

Percussionists seldom get to enjoy the fanfare given their colleagues in the string, woodwind and brass sections, always sitting behind the orchestra, banging on exotic instruments you hear but don't often see.

A reversal of percussive fortunes opens The Florida Orchestra's new Hough Family Foundation Masterworks season with *Drum Circles* by Christopher Theofanidis, the Texas-born composer and professor at Yale University best known for his one-movement *Rainbow Body*. Audiences may remember his engaging *Symphony No. 1* in performances here three years ago, and if Music Director Michael Francis continues to embrace him, we can expect more Theofanidis in the future.

"*Drum Circles* is a spectacular piece of music, and he's one of the most colorful of our American composers," Francis says. "So, we're starting the season with a bang and in glorious rhythm right before your eyes."

Theofanidis composed the piece in 2019 as a commission by the Aspen Music Festival and Baltimore, Colorado and Oregon symphonies. He wrote it specifically for the Percussion Collective, a group of virtuoso musicians based in Ithaca, NY, and guest artists for the upcoming concerts in St. Petersburg and Clearwater.

Their premise is to introduce new works to the repertoire and deliver them with precision and sonic refinement. Similarly, the composer wants to elevate the art of playing percussion to the level of other concerto instruments, such as the piano, violin and cello.

The artists, however, will "play in a way that's very different from a typical soloist on stage," Theofanidis says. "Here you get something that feels like an organism, like it's part of something greater. It's really different from other kinds of concertos."

The Percussion Collective gave the world premiere four years ago with the Oregon Symphony, playing a barrage of instruments – xylophones, Chinese cymbals, bongos, guiro, marimba, glockenspiel, and double-headed tom-tom – in front of the orchestra, augmented by members of its percussion section. The result, according to early reviews, creates both a sonic and visual impact.

"There's a nice mix of fun instruments, including an amplified typewriter, wooden slats and spring coils, among the more traditional array of instruments," the 55-year-old composer says. "Plenty of bells and whistles, so to speak."

The suite's five movements have their own character, varying in mood, color and texture – not unlike *The Planets* on this program. Here are brief descriptions of each section:

- I. Rivers and Anthems opens with an abrupt wakeup call, chimes clamoring and multiple melodies cascading over each other like a turbulent musical river.
- II. Sparks and Chants stands in contrast to the intro with music of mystery and mysticism played on marimbas and wooden instruments, supported by lush orchestral strings.
- III. How Can You Smile When You're Deep in Thought serves as a short scherzo, piqued by the lighthearted sound of typewriters and toy bells.
- IV. Spirits and Drums creates a persistent circle of drumming, reminiscent of an ancient ritual.
- V. Three Chords and the Truth ends the suite with a blend of country and blues themes before resigning on a quietly lyrical note.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

The Planets, Op. 32

Duration: ca. 50 minutes

Orchestras around the world seldom go wrong in presenting *The Planets*, Gustav Holst's ever-popular suite that takes listeners on a cosmic, although abstract, tour of the solar system.

The Florida Orchestra has visited this brilliantly inventive score several times over the years, delivering performances that reveal a fearless rhythmic plan full of nuance and power. Although the music stands on its own as impressionistic, many orchestras provide visuals, and in opening its new season, TFO will project NASA video of the planets above the stage.

Pieced together from the Viking, Voyager and Magellan missions, the video uses computer realizations based on synthetic aperture radar, which creates the illusion of a craft flying over peaks and valleys along a planet's surface.

Although it may be an artistic gamble to be so overtly programmatic with a suite inspired more by mysticism and astrology than astronomy, the mosaic delights audiences – especially children – and if this brings them back to the concert hall, Holst would have approved.

The Planets is a suite of miniature, often turbulent tone poems of varying moods. Holst, who died in 1934, wanted an emotional experience rather than a postcard tour, and he fleshed out his score with an ear for drama, the compact, contrasting themes of each section creating tension and release as a whole. Some might compare it to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* or Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, but Holst's innovative approach more closely mirrors the influence of Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

"There's just a powerful juxtaposition of the different sections, especially between Venus and Mars," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "And it was an absolutely radical piece of orchestration for its time and utterly modern in its language."

"It's about human nature symbolized, and this notion of astrology," he adds. "Holst gives us a complete understanding of the human condition through a celestial lens. I find it a very profound piece of music and a wonderful work of art."

Holst began crafting the suite in 1913 after a friend introduced him to astrology. In the years after its premiere in 1918, people began to associate the music with the horrors of the First World War, especially the tumultuous opening, *Mars*. Soon, *The Planets* was being played everywhere, much to the consternation of the introverted composer, who felt its popularity overshadowed, and even diminished, his lesser-known works. Royalties from *The Planets*, however, made him a wealthy man.

Originally titled *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*, the suite is remarkably diverse, with each section in complete contrast to those around it. Holst omitted Earth because it had no astrological significance, and Pluto had yet to be discovered at the time.

Of all the sections, the most evocative music comes at the end, in *Neptune*. It employs a melismatic women's chorus – no words or text, just sound – and ends with a "fade out" where notes and silence are indiscernible.

Here's a summary of each stop in your celestial journey:

- I. Mars, the Bringer of War – The first section to be composed, in 1914, opens with a menacing ostinato in 5/4 rhythm that quickly turns into a brassy, barbaric masterpiece of rhythm designed to unsettle listeners from the get-go.
- II. Venus, the Bringer of Peace – Relaxed and ethereal, this portrayal of the goddess offers a bit of relief from the turmoil that came before, featuring the luminous blend of strings and harp.
- III. Mercury, the Winged Messenger – The last section to be completed, in 1916, this scherzo exchanges quicksilver themes in a delicate dance that ends almost as soon as it begins.
- IV. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity – This Jovian celebration is the most extroverted of the bunch and sets up a contrast against a serious middle section. The melody was later used in the hymn "I vow to thee, my country."
- V. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age – This solemn section unfolds as an expansive march of time, first grim, then peaceful, with tolling bells suggesting a release from life.
- VI. Uranus, the Magician – Four notes from the brass introduce the next planet, the music transformed into a macabre march that seems to represent spent souls.
- VII. Neptune, the Mystic – A disembodied women's chorus sings a wordless hymn that evaporates into silence, which listeners can visualize as eternity or the celestial void beyond our solar system. This section is entirely in pianissimo.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.