

# NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

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## *Mediterranean* *Sir Arnold Bax*

*born in Streatham, Surrey, England, in 1883;*  
*died in Cork, Ireland, in 1953*

*premiere: Queen's Hall, London, November, 1922*  
*instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4*  
*horns; timpani, percussion, harp; strings*  
*duration: 4 minutes*

Sir Arnold Bax was born to a wealthy English Quaker family in a leafy suburb of south London. He studied composition and piano at the Royal Academy where he was influenced by the music of Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Elgar, then at the height of his late Victorian popularity. As a young man Bax read the poetry of W. B. Yeats and fell in love with things Irish, so much so that many considered him native to the Old Sod. He traveled to Ireland often and much of his early music has Celtic overtones. His Irish idyll ended with the onset of World War I and the 1916 Easter Rebellion in Dublin, although he continued to visit sporadically. His death came in Ireland's second city, Cork, in 1953, shortly after having composed a coronation march for the young Queen Elizabeth II.

After the First World War Bax's career had taken off, with a host of fresh new works, including seven symphonies, various chamber works, and popular tone poems such as *Tintagel* and *The Garden of Fand*. An extended liaison with the concert pianist Harriet Cohen added to his sense of contentment during these years, as did the flowering of a friendship with composer Gustav Holst (see below) that included numerous holidays together. One such was on the Mediterranean island of Majorca in the winter of 1913 where Bax shared accommodations with Holst, composer Balfour Gardiner, and Bax's younger brother, the poet and essayist Clifford Bax. Nearly seven years later Bax composed a picture post card miniature

for solo piano which he called *Mediterranean* and which he dedicated to Holst. It was performed in its orchestrated version at a public concert commemorating Bax's music at the Queen's Hall in November, 1922.

*This is the first performance of Mediterranean, or indeed of any of Bax's music, by the RSO.*

*Concerto No. 1 for Guitar & Orchestra, Op. 99*  
*Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco*

*born in Florence, Italy, in 1895;*  
*died in Hollywood, California, in 1968*

*premiere: Montevideo, Uruguay, October 1939*  
*instrumentation: solo guitar; flute, oboe, 2 clarinets, bassoon; horn; timpani;*  
*strings*  
*duration: 20 minutes*

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (what a cosmopolitan name! "Tedesco" is Italian for "German") was born in Florence and studied at its conservatory under Alfredo Casella, one of the leading Italian composers of the period. Casella became an early champion of Castelnuovo-Tedesco who thereby enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence in the 1920s. The young composer was, however, increasingly uncomfortable in the Fascist Italy of Mussolini, and after the Nazis came to power in Germany and Hitler forged the Axis with "Il Duce," the composer, who was Jewish, found his music banned from the radio and the concert hall. Under the sponsorship of Arturo Toscanini, he left his homeland in 1939 for the haven of the United States. He settled in southern California where he enjoyed the company of a number of expatriate artists and composers, among them Heifetz, Schoenberg, Korngold, and Rachmaninoff. He supported himself as a film composer (he scored over 200 films) and professor of composition at the Los Angeles Conservatory.

Castelnuovo's youthful reputation as a composer of exceptional promise was not sustained in his maturity—much like his more successful film composer colleague, Korngold. He was very prolific (though much of

his music remained unpublished at his death), but the very facility with which he turned out his works may have contributed to a certain facility in their quality. This is not to say that he failed to please the general public. He became noted for his embrace of Spanish musical idioms and wrote a large body of work for the guitar (nearly 100 pieces). His most widely performed work today is his Guitar Quintet of 1950, followed closely by his Guitar Concerto No. 1.

This work was completed in January, 1939, shortly before his departure from Florence. The first movement was written in close collaboration with the great Spanish guitarist, Andres Segovia, whom he had met in Venice in 1932 and for whom the composer wrote many works for guitar. It is to Segovia that the Concerto is dedicated and it was he who performed its premiere in Montevideo, Uruguay, in October of 1939.

Castelnuovo-Tedesco understood the guitar intimately, especially how to balance the orchestral writing against the quiet beauty of the guitar's tones. As he wrote, he wanted "more the appearance and the color of the orchestra than its weight." The result is a work that allows the solo guitar to be heard clearly above its accompaniment.

The first movement, marked *allegretto*, opens with a sober neo-classical melody patterned after Boccherini that is developed gently throughout the movement, ending with a cadenza. The slow second movement, *andantino alla romanza*, is wistful, even melancholy, based on three Italian (not Spanish) folk songs. Segovia said of it that it was a "tender farewell to the hills of Tuscany which he was about to leave" forever. The finale, *ritmico a cavalleresco* (a sort of "poem of chivalry"), is the most clearly "Spanish" of the three movements. It begins with a happy-go-lucky tune that yields to a rather mysterious central section before returning to the carefree opening and ending with a flourish.

*This is the first performance of the Concerto by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.*

*The Planets*  
*Gustav Holst*

*born in Cheltenham, England, in 1874;  
died in London, in 1934*

*premiere: London, February 27, 1919*

*instrumentation: 4 flutes (including 2 piccolos and an alto flute), 4 oboes (including an English horn and a bass oboe), 4 clarinets (including a bass clarinet), 4 bassoons (including a contrabassoon); 6 French horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones (including a bass trombone), euphonium, tuba; 2 harps, keyboard, 2 timpanists, 3 percussionists; strings  
duration: 52 minutes*

Born in the market town of Cheltenham in the Cotswolds, the young Holst bore the name “Gustavus Theodor von Holst” before softening its Teutonic associations at the dawn of the Great War in 1914. A student of Sir Charles Stanford, his best friend for life was Ralph Vaughan Williams who stimulated in Holst a love of English folk song. Early on he developed, as well, a passion for Eastern mysticism, his study of Sanskrit influencing his early music. Despite a considerable talent Holst could never make a living solely as a composer, instead earning his keep as a schoolmaster, notably at St. Paul’s Girls’ School in Hammersmith, west London.

Outside of England Holst is known almost exclusively as the composer of *The Planets*. This monumental tone poem to the astrological heavens is, however, not typical of Holst’s music. Indeed, its popularity became a source of embarrassment to this self-effacing gentleman who cared not a fig for fame or fortune. He deplored what he called the “perilous success” of *The Planets*. “Every artist should pray not to be a success,” he wrote. “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.” As one might imagine, Holst was the bane of journalists, photographers, and fans, preferring essentially the life of a recluse.

The idea for what became *The Planets* came in a chat in 1913 with his friend Clifford Bax (brother of another good friend, composer Arnold Bax). Both had a lifelong interest in astrology (Holst confessed that his “pet vice” was to cast horoscopes for his friends), and Bax suggested that Holst experiment with sound images of the signs of the Zodiac. Not strictly speaking “program music,” the titles of each of the seven movements (“Earth” is not included and the now-pseudo planet “Pluto” had not yet

been discovered) merely provide useful signposts for the imagination, suggesting the character of each planet in a series of contrasting moods.

Because of his heavy duties at St. Paul's, Holst could only compose on weekends and during August. By the summer of 1914 he had completed the first movement, "Mars." "Venus" and "Jupiter" followed that autumn, with "Saturn," "Uranus," and "Neptune" occupying much of 1915. With "Mercury" completed in 1916, he began the task of orchestrating the whole. A performance, however, had to await events. Through the generosity of a friend, Holst first heard *The Planets* in its entirety in the winter of 1919 at a private performance in the Queen's Hall, London, with Sir Adrian Boult conducting. Despite only one 2-hour rehearsal of this difficult music, the work was well received by the invited guests dotting the cavernous hall. They were frankly astonished by the scope of the work. Many were shocked as well as thrilled by the opening "Mars" movement, but they singled out "Neptune" for praise as well (Holst always considered "Saturn" to be the best of the lot). During the playing of "Jupiter," so it is reported, the cleaning women in the corridors put down their scrub brushes and broke into dance!

But no one, least of all the composer, anticipated the notoriety that *The Planets* would receive after its first public hearings, an incomplete performance on February 27, 1919, and a full one in November of 1920. Holst was suddenly famous, his music in demand for the first time. One enthusiast from Sussex wrote him, "Dear Sir, as you have painted The Planets in music, could you do the eight [sic] wives of Henry VIII?"

"Mars, the Bringer of War" opens *The Planets* with astonishing force, its pounding rhythm played at a driving, inexorable tempo. The music suggests, as Ethan Mordden has put it, that "War is not Mars' passion, but his job. Holst gets his effect in rude, stupid, *unfeeling* power." To a modern ear the relentless force of the music calls to mind the full horrors of mechanized 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare; but when he wrote it Holst had never heard a machine gun, and the battle tank was two years away.

A startling change of direction follows with "Venus, the Bringer of Peace." A solo violin, a sweet oboe solo, a harp, each utters a sigh of solace in what is essentially a lullaby.

"Mercury, the Winged Messenger" is a scherzo, the muted strings suggesting the rushing winds of buffeted air stirred by the passing of the fleet-footed god. Melodies are passed around swiftly in an exercise in bitonality.

“Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity” is the centerpiece of *The Planets*, as befits the king of the gods. Odd, though, that such a Titan would be remembered for “jollity,” until one understands that to Holst “Jupiter brings not only jollity in the ordinary sense but also the more ceremonial kind of rejoicing associated with religious or national festivities.” The solemn hymn-like middle section serves as this ceremonial, one of the most telling moments in the piece.

With the arrival of “Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age,” the mood is once again transformed. Here all is initially ice, a bleakness and desolation that grips the listener as each solo instrument adds its melancholy tread to the sad procession. The rhythm beneath is once again inexorable, like the tolling of a tocsin. Further along, however, the mood subtly changes; the harp and chimes reach a sort of peace and the movement ends in calm resignation, freed of the tolling bell. “Saturn,” wrote Holst, “brings not only physical decay but also a vision of fulfillment.”

But this vision is promptly shattered by the onslaught from “Uranus, the Magician.” *Fortissimo* brass cast the magician’s spell, heralding what comes in the middle section, a kind of bizarre burlesque, a witch’s Sabbath, as the full orchestra joins in. Soon a hush arrives as the opening “spell” idea returns in the brass and, one last time, in the harp.

“Neptune, the Mystic” continues the hush, the orchestra instructed by Holst to play in “dead tone.” These atmospherics do not, however, depict despair but rather the contemplation of eternity itself. As the movement closes, the music dies out to the merest whisper; only the careful listener will know when it ceases. As Holst’s daughter, Imogen, described it, “There can be no coming to an end on that tideless sea of sound.”

*While the RSO has played individual movements of The Planets on several occasions, this is only the second performance of the full work, the first having come under Guy Bordo’s direction in the 2000 season.*

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