Mood Pictures within Gustav Holst’s *The Planets* (1917): A Psychological Way of Composing?

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What does Holst mean when he likens his composition to a series of “mood pictures?”

*Richard Greene, *Holst: The Planets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 4. “The Planets was to make its special appeal to the audience without any explanation from the composer. It was a series of ‘mood pictures,’ he was to say in a lecture some years after the piece was premiered.”
Literature Review

Two main areas of literature:

- Holst biographies and *Life and Works* sources.
- Sources on psychological and/or mood painting through music, particularly in reference to J. Joachim and C. V. Stanford.

Gap in the literature:

- Nobody has thus far discussed where Holst may have gotten the idea to compose “mood pictures”; by contextualizing Holst’s “mood pictures” in relation to Holst’s teachers, I am offering an original contribution to scholarship.
Born in Pittville Terrace, Cheltenham

Studied at the Royal College of Music

His daughter Imogen Clare Holst was born

Holst started taking instrumental lessons

Gave up orchestral career; settled into teaching career

1874

1882

1893

1903

1907
HOLST’S TEACHERS/MENTORS

JOSEPH JOACHIM
(1831-1907)
Compositions maturing like organisms

CHARLES VILLIERS STANFORD
(1852-1924)
Wrote music including psychological terminology
“... whether it’s good or bad, it grew in my mind slowly—like a baby in a woman’s womb ... For two years I had the intention of composing that cycle, and during those two years it seemed of itself more and more definitely to be taking form.”

—GUSTAV HOLST
Explaining process of writing *The Planets*
Mood Pictures? : More Showing Holst's Phases?

Movements of *The Planets* exemplify a sense of Holst's feelings and experiences from his own life.

*The Planets* - A story/narrative of emotions and feelings that audiences were able to perceive.

Similar to ....

Chapters in a book
Parts of a series
Etc.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

01 RISING DISTRESS
   Mars: The Bringer of War

02 MIXED HAPPINESS
   Jupiter: The Bringer of Jollity

03 SORROWFUL GROWTH
   Saturn: The Bringer of Old Age

04 PASSIVE MISCHIEF
   Uranus: The Magician
RISING DISTRESS

Mars: The Bringer of War
ANALYSIS I: RISING DISTRESS

Section VII: Measures 27-30
Returning Rhythms

Ostinato from beginning
Supporting phrase

Gustav Holst’s “Oppressive Ordeal”
ANALYSIS I: RISING DISTRESS (cont.)

Section VIII: Measures 1-9

Newer but returning rhythm (Section V)

Additions of rhythms together - Building of thunderous effect

“Frantic (but established) scramble”
MIXED HAPPINESS

Jupiter: The Bringer of Jollity
ANALYSIS II: MIXED HAPPINESS

Fast-paced sixteenth notes from strings (A-C-D natural)

Gives a majestic, cinematic kind of appeal to this movement

Measures 5-9: 6 horns (in F) with melody

Jupiter: Very expressive; positively open and full
ANALYSIS II: MIXED HAPPINESS (cont.)

- Iconic melody at the Andante maestoso that builds from the start
- Timbre has significant and victorious feel to it, yet key of section has contrast to beginning
- “Flourish” in Holst’s life in later life compared to early life
03
SORROWFUL GROWTH

Saturn: The Bringer of Old Age
ANALYSIS III: SORROWFUL GROWTH

A  Beginning: Bdim to Adim - similar to a pendulum on a clock*

B  Gradual rise in pitches being played (and speed) going back and forth as piece goes on

C  Holst: Misery/Agony of time passing by, giving harsh effect and somberness

D  Allude to his life and health? (experiences as a child and getting older)

*Alex Burns, ‘Gustav Holst: The Planets’ (Classicalexburns) V. Saturn - The Bringer of Old Age. “The opening bars of Saturn are often referred to as a ticking clock. With the harmonic ostinato (the harmonic intervals being of two half-diminished seventh chords – Bdim7 and Adim7) and the oscillating chord changes between the flutes and harps creates a dark image for the listener.”
ANALYSIS III: SORROWFUL GROWTH (cont.)

- Section VI - Moment of ease and resolve from the climatic, disturbing music
- Representation of Holst?
  - Experienced hardship with health, but learned to acknowledge the time he had and what he did

Movement was a way to describe the act of moving forward
04
PASSIVE MISCHIEF
Uranus: The Magician
ANALYSIS IV: PASSIVE MISCHIEF

Beginning measures (1-4) stand out in the movement coming back again and again

6/4 time signature; notes for melody on 1, 3, 4, and 6 of the measures

Playful, charismatic, joyful, upbeat with a little mystery
Understand how past experts who created ‘mood pictures’ contributed to Holst’s diversity and creativity with *The Planets*.

Observed how these different harmonic, motivic, and structural aspects give a personal and mental picture of Holst as an individual.

Looked into memorable as well as eye-catching moments of this orchestral suite and what gives them each unique characteristics.

Respond to the way that a newer composer, like myself, notice some ideas in *The Planets* and think about how it’s effective or could be more effective if changed.


