

OSM
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14h30

On Music and Planets

“The whole heaven is harmony and number.”

The ancient Greeks knew: the universe sings. Since Pythagoras, astronomy and music follow paths that intersect. For centuries, scholars speak about and musicians compose works that attempt to capture the cosmic harmony. Is it myth or reality? In this International Year of Astronomy, music couldn't ignore their complicity; although the musicians are rather concerned by the astrological interpretation of celestial events.

Thus, this concert features two works inspired by astrological mythology: *Orion* (1979) by Claude Vivier, and *The Planets* by Gustav Holst (1918).

Claude Vivier, *Orion* (1979)

Quebec composer, born April 14, 1948, in Montreal. Died March 7, 1983, in Paris.
Premiere on October 14, 1981, in Montreal, Charles Dutoit conducting the OSM.

Observing the sky sprinkled with stars, Pascal had written: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." To exorcise this fear, we can well imagine Vivier paraphrasing: "The vastness of sidereal space marvels me." He composed three works on this theme: *O! Kosmos!* (1973), *Kopernikus* (1979), *Orion* (1979), writing music as a creative response to his cosmic visions.

Becoming a legend in Quebec music, Claude Vivier left an extensive body of work, whose richness and variety attracted attention, both at home and abroad. His life and tragic fate, his individuality full of contradictions, gave him an aura of an artist living in an imaginary world. Vivier's writings, mostly autobiographical, reveal his psychological difficulties, but also relate to his creative moments. Since last year, many concerts, conferences and publications marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of his untimely death. It was an opportunity for a large audience to rediscover Vivier's music.

In a letter to a friend, Vivier sent a short note on *Kopernikus*: "What interests me is the idea of a cosmic explorer who began to look beyond the earth [...] giving to the human race a consciousness that human beings were not alone in the universe." *Orion* is inspired by the same idea, his imagination flying beyond the stars and constellations. At the margins of the score, Vivier left a poetic note:

*I shall go towards the constellation of the mutant beings
discover the secret of the true melody
and of fair harmony
the eyes of planets will teach me
soft colours and loving proportions*

Inventing the melody of stars, he chose Orion, among the brightest constellations in the nocturnal sky. Orion had inspired myths and legends across time and cultures. The constellation is visible to the bare eye, and the Hubble telescope gives a dazzling picture of its numerous bright stars. Besides, it seems that its name means "light of sky", according to the Akkadian "Uru-anna".

The composer left a short program note for the premiere, in 1981, leaving valuable clues concerning his musical strategy:

Orion consists of six sections: statement of the melody, first development of the melody itself, second development on the melody itself, meditation on the melody, reminiscence of the melody, and finally the melody in two intervals. [...]

A melody in the trumpet, the trumpet again, as in *Kopernikus*, the instrument of death in the Middle Ages (see Bergman and read the Office for the dead).

In a letter, he expresses his opinion:

I believe that *Kopernikus* as well as *Orion* are disturbing works. I wrote them in reaction to a certain contemporary music which considers that to compose these days is equivalent to inventing structures. It is a madness, a frenzy of structuralism, meant to be the only generator of true works of art, banishing any inspiration coming from a musical emotion.

Considering the score, it is possible to discern influences on Vivier's melodic style: certain scale patterns of Asiatic music, in particular those of Balinese tradition; the similarity with the Indian ragas and their melodic development (not very far from the devices of the plain- chant, which fascinated Vivier). Melodic formulas are subject to various repetitive strategies and permutations, such as the simultaneous development in canon in two voices (second section of the composition). Balinese percussions – gongs – add an exotic touch. The sonority reminds us of Stockhausen's *Mantra*, by the melodic treatment and its ritual incantation.

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Besides Vivier's *Orion*, it would be worthwhile to mention the existence of other works in the contemporary repertoire bearing the same title:

Gérard Manset, *La mort d'Orion* (1970)

André Boukoureshliev, *Orion I* (1979) for organ, *Orion II* (1980), *Orion III* (1983).

Toru Takemitsu, *Orion* (1983)

Kaaija Saariaho, *Orion* (2003)

Philip Glass, *Orion* (2004)

Is it the Greek mythology of the legendary hunter? Or the fascination of the firmament, Orion being visible in the world everywhere? It is now up to the listener to look at the constellations on the dark nights...

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Franz Liszt, *Piano Concerto N. 2 in A Major*

Born October 22, 1811, Raiding, Hungary

Died July 31, 1886, Bayreuth, Germany

First performance in Weimar, January 7, 1857; Hans von Bronsart as soloist, Franz Liszt conducting.

Drafts, reviews, doubts. The score, composed at the time of his career of virtuoso, between 1839 and 1840, was put aside for years. Altered and corrected even after his premiere, in 1857, the work was a challenge to the author. But not because of the lack of musical ideas.

This concerto is a true experimental adventure in romantic piano repertoire, and in particular in Liszt productions. In its first version, he called it *Concerto symphonique*. The work is conceived as an unique large movement, piano and orchestra closely linked through a continuous dialogue.

The successive revisions of the score focus on piano devices, in order to simplify demanding virtuoso passages, and instead, to invent subtle sound effects.

The formal unity of this mosaic-like structure is founded on thematic variations, across the six sections of the concerto, marked by the change of tempo. Initial *Adagio sostenuto assai* introduces the dominant theme with winds, accompanied by the piano; its lyric melody creates a serene mood.

In the next sections, numerous transformations of the same theme - rhythmic, harmonic, melodic - introduce contrasting effects; in certain episodes, the variation disguises the theme in such way that it is almost undetectable.

The scherzo-like episode, *Allegro agitato assai*, is followed by a movement in the style of the Italian *bel canto*, *Allegro moderato*, cello and piano singing in a dialogue. After the chant, the *bel canto* melody is completely transformed into a military march *Allegro deciso* and *Marziale un poco meno allegro*, giving a totally different character to the initial theme. In the final sequence, *Allegro animato*, the piano asserts itself, with magnificent virtuosity effects (consecutive octaves, trills in the extreme ranges, clusters of massive accords, arpeggios sweeping the keyboard) accompanied by the brilliantly sparkling orchestra.

This concerto is in reality a symphonic poem with the piano, without any extra-musical program. Its originality lies in its continuous structure, inventive variations, unexpected contrasts and intense character of the episodes. The composer's theatrical temperament is here evident: a drama without words is played out between the piano and the orchestra. And the winner is music.

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Gustav Holst, *The Planets* , Op. 32(1918)

English composer, born September 21, 1874, Cheltenham. Died May 25, 1934, in London.
Composed between 1914 and 1917, premiered in London, September 29, 1918; Adrian Boult conducting.

The immensity of the starry sky and luminous celestial bodies had intrigued the magi of the ancient cultures. They watched carefully the movement of planets, their orbits, distance, colours and brilliance, searching to understand their influence on the earth: the change of seasons, fertility of crops and cyclic laws of nature. It was an ancient wisdom, which closely linked factual observation and its interpretation. Astronomy and astrology, considered today to be enemy sisters, has been separated since the 18th century. They represented two sides of the same reality.

Astrology observes the universe from the Earth's point of view, including its inhabitants, and interpreting astronomic facts in symbolic language. As dreams ... Planetary symbols gather the experience of life across the ages, answering the wish of men to penetrate the hidden sense of destiny, to discover the force which dominates nature and the universe, finding there the mirror of the psychical world reflecting cosmic order.

The secrets of astrology still fascinate the imagination of the artists and their works establish the link between the inner sky - our unconscious, and sidereal space.

The huge popularity of *The Planets*, Gustav Holst's orchestral suite, hasn't diminished since its creation in 1918. Recordings, adaptations for different instruments, films and multimedia productions using the score of *Planets* can't be counted. The champions are arrangements of popular music, especially heavy metal, rock and blues. *Mars, the Bringer of War*, is their favourite ...

Seven movements, seven planets compose this orchestral suite. First draft was meant for the piano, then certain movements for the organ (*Neptune*) before the final version for the big orchestra. The sound range is inventive, coloured, evocative, inserting unusual instruments for this time, such as the bass oboe, organ, xylophone, celesta, tubular bells and six timpani. The double chorus of female voices, invisible to the public, joins the orchestra.

Enchanting sound and astrological program created instantaneous and lasting success to the general public. Fascinated by the mysteries of the horoscope, the composer transposed into music the symbolic profile of every planet, which dominates the signs of the Zodiac, determining the succession of the movements. It was suggested that the order of sections corresponded to the growing distance of planets in comparison with the Earth, but if so, Venus and Mars would have exchanged their places, the astronomic facts giving up the place for musical reason. To listen to both movements makes it evident....

Movements carry the names of planets, borrowed from Roman Gods, with subtitles referring to the traditional symbols of astrology. They also suggest the character of music.

Mars, the Bringer of War

Premonition of the tragedy? Not knowing that this movement was composed before the beginning of the First World War, in 1914, one could imagine that this is an echo of war. The intensity of brassy, hectic rhythm, predominance of low registers in strings, hard dissonances, create the dark atmosphere of the Planet of War. The orchestration and the rhythm are reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

Venus, the Bringer of Peace

The planet of beauty, harmony and love is represented in Holst's music by the velvety timbres of strings, by the fluidity of rhythms and accords, far away from the fortissimo percussions and brass instruments of the planet Mars. At the end, the harp and the celesta add a sparkling touch of the Morning star.

Mercury, the Winged Messenger

Effervescent, lively, clever, curious of everything, he moves with lightning speed. Therefore, he is responsible for all forms of communication. Astrology says that he has a tendency to dispersion, but he has an excuse: he is a charmer with musical talent, one of the first virtuosos of the flute. Holst's orchestra represents him with lightness, humour, sparkling rhythm, arabesques of flutes and violins.

Mercury is considered to be patron saint of traders, intellectuals, and also of thieves. Who says better?

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

He is God of the Light, God of the Clear Sky and God of Lightning. He commands the stars and all earth, keeping good order in terrestrial and celestial spheres. A benevolent, optimistic and energetic personality, Jupiter is also a bon vivant, enjoying all good things of life. The exuberant music celebrates the jollity.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

Symbol of passing time which devours everything, also symbol of stability and long-lasting experiences, Saturn gives the impression of a climate of asperity and heaviness. He seems laden with melancholia and weariness, compared to the solar type of Jupiter. A reserved, solitary nature, Saturn bears the ancestral wisdom, and the weight of human destiny. The music expresses this by the slow movement, the gait of an old man exhausted by life, and by the voice of the bassoon, halting the rhythm, searching for its breath. There is a beauty of dusk in these oppressive sonorities.

Uranus, the Magician

A planet of invention, of the unexpected and of originality, he has a very strong personality. Refusing any conformity, typical heretic profile, Uranus is also the

progressive innovator who ignores the limits of the possible. He represents psychical energy under its positive as well as negative sides: sublime love and love bordering on the perverse; scientific intuition and mystical tendency in search of illumination. Holst builds this movement on a motive of four notes played by brass instruments. Gradually moving faster, he inserts timpani which give a stunning sonority to this movement.

Neptune, the Mystic

Master of the oceans, Neptune aspires to the infinite, where sky and water meet. His world is timeless. He dives into the depths of the collective unconscious as well as into the abyss of sea and sky. Neptune's antennae stay tuned to mysterious resonances, guided by his intuition.

The invisible feminine chorus resounds in uninterrupted pianissimo, using impressionistic tones, suggesting a surface of water reflecting light. Debussy and *Sirènes* are not far away. There is no melody, barely any harmonic and rhythmic landmarks. Sound fades out into space, and disappears on the borders of the infinite.

Dujka Smoje
Honorary professor
Faculté de musique
Université de Montréal