MasterWorks 2: Into the Heavens Program Notes

Gloria
Francis Poulenc (1899 – 1963)
Written: 1959
Movements: Six
Style: 20th Century French
Duration: 25 minutes

Paris in the early part of the twentieth century was in the front lines of modern art. Countless artists from all over the globe flocked there. Native French composers were also making their mark in Paris. An iconoclastic bunch of young composers, labeled "Les Six" by a newspaper, gathered themselves around the composer Eric Satie and the poet Jean Cocteau. Members of "Les Six" included Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, and Francis Poulenc. The organizing principle of this group was that French music must free itself from foreign traits, particularly German ones. These composers used common life as their subject matter. They emulated the music hall and circus bands and incorporated jazz into their "serious" music. The principle qualities of this new French music were "dryness, brevity, and straightforwardness" – and a great deal of irreverence and flippancy.

The most flippant member of "Les Six" was Francis Poulenc. That is, until 1936, when he came face to face with the frailty of the human condition. His friend and fellow composer, Pierre-Octave Ferroud, was killed in an auto accident. As a friend of Poulenc tells it, "Poulenc wanted to go to Rocamadour, an ancient place of pilgrimage ... We all three entered a silent chapel in which stood the statue of the Black Virgin. Outwardly, nothing happened, yet from that moment everything in the spiritual life of Poulenc changed." So did Poulenc's music. He began writing serious religious music, void of any of his former irreverence.

For Poulenc's *Gloria* we have the Russian composer and conductor Serge Koussevitzky to thank. He was the conductor of the Boston Symphony for many years and a tireless proponent of new music. He set up a foundation to commission new works in memory of his late wife Natalie.

That foundation commissioned the *Gloria.* The premiere, in 1961 with Charles Munch conducting the Boston Symphony, was almost a disaster. Poulenc arrived late for the first rehearsal:

> "I heard something so unlike me that my legs almost failed me on the staircase. *Excellent* choir but Patterson [the chorus-master] is not the intuitive [Robert] Shaw, and all those worthy Protestants were singing sharp and shrill (especially the women) as they do in London, with that 'Oh! my good Lord' quality. *All* Munch's tempi were *wrong* – all too fast, naturally. A well-intentioned lady was singing [the solo part] with a voice like a goat and all out of tune. A pale, wan pianist tinkled the keys, and not always the right ones! I wanted to run a mile. My poor child was really presenting itself badly. ... I didn't say a word before the interval but then I explained everything. Mr. Patterson, hearing me demonstrate, said: 'Oh! so they have to sing like Maurice Chevalier.' 'Exactly!' When we started again, I played the piano, the soloist sang no more, Munch calmed down, and the thing was *perfect.* Ouf!!!"

The text of the *Gloria*, set for soprano solo, chorus and orchestra, comes from the Roman Catholic Mass. Poulenc divided the text into six sections. The first and last serve as bookends for the work, enclosing two movements of great emotional weight (the third and fifth) and two of mirth (the second and fourth). Of these, Poulenc wrote to a friend: "[They] caused a scandal; I wonder why? I was simply thinking, in writing it, of the Gozzoli frescoes in which the angels stick out their tongues; I was thinking also of the serious Benedictines whom I saw playing soccer one day." In terms of communication religious ideas, he said, "I try to create a feeling of fervor and, especially, of humility, for me the most beautiful quality of prayer. ... My conception of religious music is essentially direct, and, I dare say, intimate."

MasterWorks 2: Into the Heavens Program Notes

***The Planets*, Op. 32**
Gustav Holst (1874 – 1934)
Written: 1914 – 1916
Movements: Seven
Style: Early 20th Century
Duration: 51 minutes

"Every artist ought to pray that he may not be a success: if he's a failure, he stands a good chance of concentrating upon the best work of which he's capable. ... 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." Such was the advice of Gustav Holst to a student *after* his immediate and startling success with *The Planets*. That work remains Holst's most popular work. In this country, besides a few works that are an essential part of every high school and college band's repertoire, *The Planets* may be the *only* work by Holst that the concert-going public knows and recognizes. However, he never considered it his best. *The Planets* brought Holst immediate fame, but it also paralyzed him. The public wanted more of the same. Only after the initial furor died down could Holst continue his composing.

Fame and money meant little to this ascetic composer who only wanted solitude and silence. He grew up practicing piano every day for his stern father, himself a pianist and organist. Holst began composing when he was in grammar school. In his teenage years, he began conducting local amateur choirs. He studied composition in London at the Royal College of Music. He also studied the trombone and later played in an orchestra. (At the end of his life, he expressed gratitude for having known the impersonality of orchestral playing!)

It is as a teacher that Holst probably had his most profound impact. He worked his entire career at two girls' schools—most notably St. Paul's—and at an evening institute for adults. His teaching method was unorthodox. He avoided textbooks and examinations, insisting instead on learning by doing. In the words of the critic and composer Bayan Northcott, "No matter how rudimentary the techniques of his singers and players, they were to be drawn into performing as

soon as possible. If suitable pieces couldn't be found, he would write some himself or get them to write their own. Today, such ideas lie at the heart of enlightened music teaching. It is salutary to realize that they were virtually pioneered by one man 90 years ago."

Holst began work on *The Planets* after a friend introduced him to astrology. He was careful to point out that the work had very little to do with the astronomical aspects of the planets: "These pieces were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets. There is no program music in them, neither have they any connection with the deities of classical mythology bearing the same names. If any guide to the music is required, the subtitle to each piece will be found sufficient, especially if it be used in a broad sense." So, each of the seven planets—astronomers and astrologers had not yet discovered Pluto, much less classified it and de-classified it as a planet—is a character sketch. Holst arranged the movements to provide the best contrast and to plot out a psychological journey from an initial horror to a final, mysterious fading away.

"Mars, the Bringer of War" begins with a distant military drumbeat, reinforced by the unusual technique of string players hitting their strings with the wood of their bow. Ominous chords increase in intensity and bring in the main tune, played by a tenor tuba. A slower central section, dark and foreboding, leads directly into a very loud restatement of the military tattoo from the beginning. The movement ends with crashing, dissonant chords. What a contrast, then, with "Venus, the Bringer of Peace." Its beautiful horn solo along with lush strings and woodwinds provide a still tranquility. "Mercury, the Winged Messenger" is, indeed, fast. However, it is the way Holst plays with the internal rhythm of each measure that makes the movement sound, well, mercurial. "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity" has three distinct sections. The outer ones are fast and vivacious; the inner section is a beautiful melody, evocative of a noble English folk-song.

"Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age" begins with ethereal, almost disembodied chords. The double basses begin a dignified march that becomes more worrisome and ominous until short,

almost demented insertions interrupt it. The movement finally winds down with the same ethereal chords from the beginning. A four-note motive played by the brass and timpani begins "Uranus, the Magician." The bassoons then set up the background rhythm for a macabre sort of dance. The brass introduce an inexorable march that builds to a terrifying climax and then a sudden quiet. The quiet extends through the entire final movement, "Neptune, the Mystic." It is disembodied music, lacking almost any theme at all. The entire orchestral suite ends with a women's choir, singing offstage, without words. Holst's instructions are for the women to keep repeating their final measure until "they are lost in the distance."

©2009 John P. Varineau