



Ferde Grofé, *Grand Canyon Suite*

Gustav Holst, *The Planets*

Few art forms possess the power to transport us as completely as music. And tonight, without leaving our seats, we can ride winding trails into the depths of the Grand Canyon and then leave Earth behind altogether to explore the vast reaches of the cosmos. The Savannah Philharmonic will paint landscapes, tell stories, and awaken the imagination through sound, inviting us on two unforgettable journeys—one across America's greatest natural wonder and the other among the celestial bodies that have fascinated humanity for millennia.

Ferde Grofé (1892-1972) was one of the most influential figures in American music during the first half of the twentieth century, forging a remarkable career as a composer, arranger, conductor, and pianist. Raised in a deeply musical family and trained in both Europe and the United States, he joined “King of Jazz” Paul Whiteman’s orchestra in 1920. There, his imaginative orchestrations helped transform the ensemble into the defining dance band of the Jazz Age. His groundbreaking orchestration of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) helped launch the symphonic jazz movement by combining the vitality of jazz with the rich colors of the concert orchestra. Grofé's own orchestral works, culminating in the immensely popular *Grand Canyon Suite* (1931), established him as America's foremost composer of vivid musical landscapes. After leaving Whiteman, he enjoyed a distinguished career as an arranger and conductor for radio orchestras and Radio City Music Hall, taught orchestration, and continued composing colorful programmatic works inspired by American scenery and history. His enduring legacy lies in elevating jazz and dance-band arranging through sophisticated orchestral techniques while helping to forge a distinctly American concert style that reached audiences far beyond the traditions of European classical music.

Grofé takes us on our first journey of the evening, transporting us to the American southwest with his *Grand Canyon Suite*. Across its five movements, he portrays a single day at one of the world's great natural wonders, using the orchestra to capture its changing landscapes, colors, and moods.

- “Sunrise” depicts the gradual awakening of the canyon, opening quietly with dark, mysterious harmonies before blossoming into a majestic sunrise. Broad brass chorales, shimmering strings, and colorful woodwinds suggest the first rays of sunlight illuminating the canyon walls.
- "The Painted Desert" offers a lyrical portrait of the vast desert landscape surrounding the canyon. Long, flowing melodies and luminous orchestral colors create an atmosphere of warmth, serenity, and quiet wonder, inviting listeners to linger in the landscape rather than journey through it.

- "On the Trail," the suite's most famous movement, follows the "clip-clop" of a mule ride down the canyon's winding paths. (In the original orchestral score, Grofé calls for coconut shells to create this sound, but orchestras today will save a trip to the grocery store by using temple blocks.) Along the way, listeners encounter moments of humor, including a solo violin that amusingly imitates the mule's bray, as well as a relaxed cowboy-style tune before the lively trail rhythm returns.
- "Sunset" bathes the canyon in the warm glow of evening. Expansive melodies, glowing brass, and gradually darkening orchestral colors evoke a mood of reflection, tranquility, and quiet majesty as daylight fades.
- "Cloudburst" brings the suite to a thrilling conclusion with a violent thunderstorm sweeping across the canyon. With the full orchestra unleashed, Grofé conjures a tempest of thunder, lightning, howling winds, and torrential rain. As the storm gathers force, erupts in a dazzling climax, and finally melts into stillness, Grofé demonstrates his remarkable command of orchestral color and cinematic storytelling.

The second part of tonight's journey ventures beyond Earth and into the cosmos, guided by the music of **Gustav Holst** (1874-1934), one of Britain's most original composers. After early training with his father, a professional musician, and later at the Royal College of Music, Holst formed a lifelong friendship with Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose influence gradually replaced his earlier fascination with Wagner. To earn a living, Holst worked as a professional trombonist with leading orchestras and opera companies, gaining invaluable firsthand knowledge of orchestration that later shaped his compositions. Although recognition as a composer came slowly, his career found stability and fulfillment through teaching, serving for decades as head of music at St. Paul's Girls' School and director of music at Morley College. His disciplined, unassuming lifestyle allowed him to devote weekends and holidays to writing music in the quiet of St. Paul's or at his peaceful countryside cottage. By the late 1910s, Holst's reputation had been steadily growing, but it was the triumphant premiere of *The Planets* (1917) that revealed the full originality of his musical voice, captivated audiences around the world, and secured his place as one of the twentieth century's most celebrated composers.

Holst did not conceive *The Planets* as a musical tour of the solar system. Instead, he drew inspiration from astrology, portraying the symbolic personalities traditionally associated with each planet. Consequently, the order of the movements has nothing to do with the planets' distance from the sun. Rather, Holst leads the listener on an emotional and spiritual journey, moving through various states of human experience—from youthful energy and conflict to wisdom, mystery, and transcendence. You may also notice that two planets are absent, each for a good reason: Earth has no astrological significance because it is our point of reference, and Pluto wasn't discovered until 1930 (and then later kicked out of the planet club in 2006.)

- "Mars, the Bringer of War" is the best-known movement, opening the suite with relentless power. To create a feeling of unstoppable momentum Holst abandons the regular pulse of a

traditional march in favor of an unsettling 5/4 meter. Rather than depicting a battle scene, “Mars” evokes the terror of war with pounding repeated motifs, aggressive brass fanfares, and jarring sonorities. If you have never heard it before, the music will likely sound familiar, having inspired countless film composers, including John Williams, Jerry Goldsmith, and Hans Zimmer.

- “Venus, the Bringer of Peace” serves as the perfect antidote to “Mars.” Calm, lyrical, and deeply serene, it features graceful solos for horn, violin, woodwinds, and celesta, whose delicate colors create an atmosphere of healing and quiet beauty. The soft transparency of the orchestra offers welcome consolation to the violence of “Mars.”
- “Mercury, the Winged Messenger” is the shortest and lightest movement of the suite. Holst playfully tosses melodic fragments from one instrument to another, creating music that seems to dart effortlessly through the air. Much like a *scherzo* movement from a symphony, “Mercury” provides a light counterpoint to the weightier sections in *The Planets* with its frisky changes of meter and key.
- “Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity” is the suite’s most exuberant movement, with its celebratory energy and good humor. Holst treats the listener to dancing rhythms, brilliant brass, and colorful orchestration. Midway through, the music takes a noble turn with the appearance of one of Holst’s most beloved melodies, later adapted as the hymn “I Vow to Thee, My Country,” which has been heard at many significant British state occasions, including the funerals of Winston Churchill and Queen Elizabeth II.
- Most listeners of *The Planets* have a favorite movement. There is no right or wrong choice—for the record, mine is “Jupiter.” Holst’s own favorite, however, was “Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age.” In astrology, Saturn is the planet of boundaries, discipline, and karma. Known as the “Taskmaster,” it governs tangible progress, reality, and long-term goals. Saturn demands that you confront limits, take responsibility, and put in the hard work necessary to build a lasting foundation for your life. Saturn acts as the ultimate teacher, rewarding patience, commitment, and maturity. My suggestion to you, dear listener, is to contemplate these ideas as you experience the musical wisdom of “Saturn.”
- “Uranus, the Magician” may remind you of Paul Dukas’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (immortalized in Disney’s *Fantasia*), and this is no accident: both works use the bassoons to introduce their mischievous, dancelike themes; both have a lively rhythmic drive that propels the chaotic energy forward; and both are full of surprising orchestral effects, sudden contrasts, and other humorous musical tricks. As the boisterous, gladiatorial march of “Uranus” builds to a thunderous climax, the wizard’s spell is broken in an instant, and the music abruptly vanishes.
- “Neptune, the Mystic” concludes the suite with one of the most extraordinary endings in orchestral music. Soft dynamics, ambiguous harmonies, and shimmering orchestral textures create an atmosphere of mystery and infinite distance, as though the listener is drifting through

the vastness of space. At the close, an unseen women's chorus enters, singing wordlessly from offstage. As the orchestra falls silent, the chorus gradually fades into the distance as the door between the singers and the audience is slowly closed, leaving the music to disappear beyond the reach of human ears.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.