

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

The Planets

Feb 15 - 17

BALJINDER SEKHON (b. 1980)

STARS

Duration: ca. 15 minutes

Last summer, Baljinder Sekhon got a call from The Florida Orchestra with a cosmic assignment: Create a large work for the group, keep it to 15 minutes, and have it ready for launch by February.

“They said to do whatever I want,” said Sekhon, assistant professor of composition at the University of South Florida in Tampa. “So when I saw what else was on the program, I had this idea in mind and decided to run with it.”

Sekhon’s idea spans millions of light years, zipping through galaxies and nebula in the deepest regions of the universe. In its latest masterworks program this weekend, the orchestra and Music Director Michael Francis offer the premiere of *Stars*, taking listeners on a celestial voyage that includes *The Planets* by Gustav Holst and the *Nocturnes* of Claude Debussy.

Sekhon, whose works have been presented in more than 500 concerts in 20 countries, calls his piece a “sonic exploration of stars” from different perspectives. The music depicts how stars are born out of swirling gas, the community of stars that make up a constellation, and how they spark our imagination in the night sky. The musical narrative includes different pitches that reflect individual stars, chords that make up galaxies, and the twinkle of their light through the atmosphere. Sekhon devoted himself to studying astronomy and cosmology, and found that science can lend itself well to musical analogy.

“I’ve done a lot of reading about stars and my research changed drastically what I thought this piece would be,” he said. “As I learned about the complexity of astronomy, the work became complex. Then I realized this is a huge thing to tackle.”

Stars opens with the orchestra suggesting the pull of gravity that brings the elemental gases together, then depicts fusion with a percussive explosion that sends light across space. Musical pitches intensify and overlap, and galaxies take on their own distinct harmonies through a flutter of solo instruments. Cast in a single movement, *Stars* ends with a night sky teeming with tiny points of light that symbolize our fascination with the cosmos.

“I wanted to create a musical system that acts like the stars, but metaphorically,” Sekhon said. “As a whole, the work presents a range of characters, from heavily percussive moments to a distant twinkling of sound.”

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

NOCTURNES

Duration: ca. 25 minutes

Debussy was first labeled an *Impressionist* in 1887, and as much as he disliked being associated with the movement in visual art, he never shed the stereotype. He once wrote to his publisher about a new work: "I'm attempting something different ... what imbeciles call *Impressionism* -- just about the least appropriate term possible."

In truth, Debussy was more in line with the Symbolists than a band of painters who experimented with the interplay of light on the canvas. The Symbolists used vague syntax and metaphor to evoke elusive meanings that nonetheless struck the emotions. Debussy found inspiration for his groundbreaking *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* from a voluptuous and erotic poem by the influential Symbolist Stephane Mallarme. It unfolds on the edges of tonality, and in some ways throws the concept of form out the window. With this music, Debussy freed himself from traditional classical development for a more spontaneous expression. It would, in short, change music forever.

In a pivotal work that follows, *Nocturnes*, his free floating, abstract sound world is in full bloom. Debussy composed it as a musical triptych completed in 1900 and inspired by a painting of the same name by James McNeill Whistler. With its ever-changing textures, shifting shapes, novel brass procession and wordless women's chorus, *Nocturnes* serves as a prelude to another Debussy masterpiece, *Le Mer (The Sea)*.

In the program notes for the first performance, Debussy offered his own thoughts on each movement: "*Nuages (Clouds)* portrays the unchanging aspect of the sky, with the slow, melancholy motion of the clouds, dying away in shades of grey softly tinged with white. *Fetes (Festivals)* represents the movement and dancing rhythm of the atmosphere, with sudden flashes of light; then an episode of a procession passing through and merging with the festivities. *Sirenes (Sirens)* evokes the sea and its innumerable rhythms; then, among the silver of the moonlit waves, the mysterious song of the Sirens before they laugh and pass on."

Nocturnes helped launch the radical in Debussy, although his was a quiet rebellion, wrote Alex Ross, the *New Yorker's* classical music critic, in a 2018 retrospective for the 100th year of Debussy's death. "Debussy accomplished something that happens very rarely, and not in every lifetime: He brought a new kind of beauty into the world. Debussy engineered a velvet revolution, overturning the extant order without upheaval."

GUSTAV HOLST (1874-1934)

THE PLANETS

Duration: ca. 51 minutes

The Florida Orchestra 20 years ago offered a multidimensional performance of *The Planets*, complete with NASA imagery projected above the stage and a narrator describing stops along the way. Audiences were enthralled as much by Holst's popular score as they were of video pieced together from the Viking, Voyager and Magellan space missions.

It was a gamble to be so overtly descriptive with a suite inspired more by mysticism and astrology than astronomy, but audiences enjoyed the ride. Other orchestras around the country have had similar success with the mosaic, and this week TFO continues the trend. *The Planets*, however, is less a

depiction of the solar system than a suite of miniature, often turbulent tone poems of varying moods and colors. Holst, who died in 1934, wanted to create an emotional experience rather than a postcard tour, and he delivered his one-hit wonder with a dramatic punch.

“There’s just a powerful juxtaposition of the different sections, especially between Venus and Mars,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “And it was an absolutely radical piece of orchestration for its time and utterly modern in its language.”

Originally titled *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*, the suite is remarkably diverse, with each movement in complete contrast to those around it. Here's a brief listener's guide:

1. *Mars, the Bringer of War* – The first section to be composed, in 1914, opens with a menacing ostinato in 5/4 rhythm that quickly turns into a brassy, barbaric masterpiece of rhythm designed to unsettle listeners from the get-go.
2. *Venus, the Bringer of Peace* – Relaxed and ethereal, this portrayal of the Roman goddess offers relief from the prior turmoil in a luminous blend of strings and harp.
3. *Mercury, the Winged Messenger* – The last section to be completed, in 1916, this scherzo exchanges quicksilver themes in a delicate dance that ends almost as soon as it begins.
4. *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity* – A Jovian celebration and the most extroverted of the bunch, its main theme later used in the hymn *I vow to thee, my country*.
5. *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age* – Solemn and dignified, the music for the ringed planet unfolds as an expansive march of time, first grim, then peaceful, with tolling bells suggesting a release from life.
6. *Uranus, the Magician* – Four notes from the brass introduce the god of the skies and heaven, the music transformed into a macabre march that seems to represent spent souls.
7. *Neptune, the Mystic* – A melismatic women's chorus sings a wordless hymn that evaporates into silence, which might be viewed as eternity or the celestial void beyond our solar system. This section, entirely in pianissimo, is arguably the first piece of classical music to end with a “fade out.” Note how similar this music is to *Sirens*, the third movement of Debussy's *Nocturnes*, also for woman's chorus.

Some listeners might be wonder why Holst's solar system has just seven planets. He decided not to include Earth, which lacked the astrological mysticism attached to the other planets. As for Pluto, it had yet to be discovered at the time. However, in 2000 the British composer Colin Matthews wrote an addendum to *The Planets*, and today many performances include the outer-most orb as a coda to this famous suite.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.