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Mars: The Bringer of War

During the early years of the twentieth century, an English composer named Gustav Holst would pen a manuscript during breaks while working at St. Paul's Girl School in London. This manuscript would contain music that would shatter the English and European music scene for years to come through its daring nature and overall triumph as a large orchestral composition.

Holst was not too keen on becoming a composer forthright, as he had aspirations to be a trombone player with the some of the great orchestras of London. However, it was during his time before his years at the Royal College of Music that he would develop neuritis in his right arm and force him onto a route of composition. While at the Royal College of Music, Holst would use his private time to study classical north Indian music and Hindu mythology as a break away from his rigid conservatory education. During a summer trip to Spain, it would be an estranged friend of Holst's, Clifford Bax, who would give him a book by Alan Leo, the father of modern astrology. Thus, Holst's fascination with the heavens was initiated.

The Planets would be composed between 1914-1916, starting as only a sketch for two pianos. After his time at the Royal College of Music, Holst would find employment in London at the St. Paul's Girl School where his daughter Imogen was attending at the time. It was here during breaks between classes that Holst would use Alan Leo's book as the groundwork for the characters of each movement for his large orchestral master work in the making. There is no indication that Holst would do the orchestration himself, as there are many accounts of both his

friends and students writing the orchestration in their own pen under his guidance, making for a heavily disjunct manuscript in terms of penmanship. When Clifford Bax heard the two-piano version of *The Planets* in Holst's home in late 1917, he was enthusiastic to put on a performance of the work. Bax did not know at the time that Holst had already committed to another job post outside of the United Kingdom, the first full production of the orchestral version of *The Planets* was a rushed one. The first performance would be arranged and funded in only two weeks and up to two hours before the downbeat in Queen's Hall, London players were still trying to write out their parts from the orchestral manuscript.

Mars, the first movement of *The Planets*, was composed not long after the premier of the Rite of Spring by Igor Stravinsky. The true backdrop of its composition, however, would be the onset of the first world war. Mars is also the God of war in Roman mythology, thus lending to the militaristic and heavily rhythmic based nature of the movement. Alan Leo also explains that this horoscope is based around conflict, so it is clear to see how Holst could be so easily inspire to compose such an aggressive piece of music to start *The Planets* suite.

There is a formal skeleton that lies within the greater structure of Mars, it is one that can be clearly seen and defined through the usage of this chart below.

Formal Skeleton

↑ = Transitions

A	B	C	B'	A	C'	B	Coda (A)
m. 1 - 39	m. 43 - 65	m. 68 - 92	m. 96 - 108	m. 110 - 133	m. 134 - 142	m. 143 - 166	m. 167 - 185

As is illustrated in the graphic chart, there is a structure of three main sections: A, B, and C, that are interwoven in different manners to create the larger form of the movement. The transitions that are not listed formally in the skeleton are simply due to the fact that they are insignificant both in content and nature. Each of the transitions only poses as a section of cadence or of dynamic punctuation or release so as to prepare for the next section of music to begin in a way that can seem fluid. What is most interesting in regard to this formal skeleton, is that there are two basic ways that the skeleton can be interpreted so as to have different formal results of the music.

The first way that the formal skeleton can be interpreted is as an irregular eight-part form, [ABCB'AC'BA]. Naturally, there is nothing special to this form, however, it is what can be derived from this irregular eight-part form that is of interest. There are inherently two patterns within the form. The first pattern being [ABCB'A] and the second pattern being [CB'AC'BA]. The first pattern is a palindromic arch form which can be considered a valid interpretation due to the fact that *The Planets* as a whole is a palindromic piece. If Jupiter is considered the focal point of the piece, then each piece in relation to this focal point is like a mirror image. This is also similar in nature to the idea of balance in the horoscope. The second pattern can also be considered a valid interpretation due to the fact that it can be considered a macro representation of the movement's rhythmic ostinato. This is so due to the fact that the repeating [CBA] could in theory go on for eternity, much like the rhythmic ostinato.

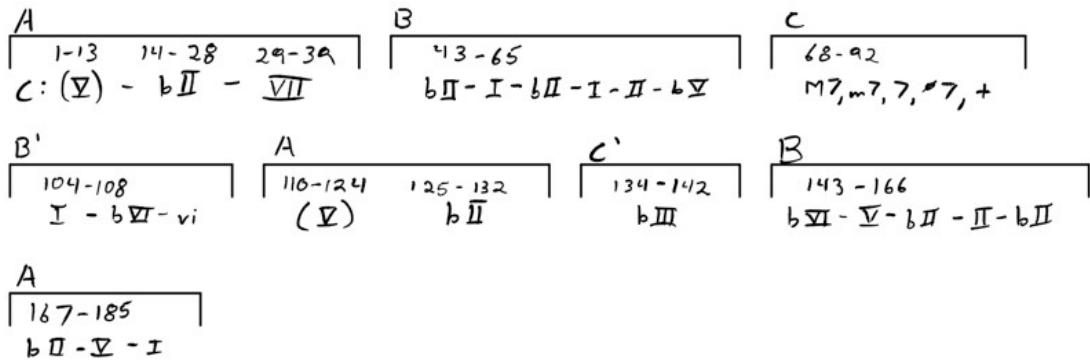
The second way that the formal skeleton can be interpreted is as an irregular seven-part form, [ABCB'AC'B]. The main differentiation from the idea of the irregular eight-part form is the fact that the last [A] is not included. If looking to the chart of the formal skeleton, it can be seen that the final [A], if a coda, should be included into the general formal landscape much like

an introduction. However, there are still two patterns that arise from this irregular seven-part form. The first pattern is [ABCB'] and the second pattern being [AC'B]. These two patterns are derived from the formal skeleton with a single idea in mind, that together they form a larger binary form that cannot be heard directly from the formal skeleton. Unlike a traditional binary form, this does not use contrasting material as the basis of the [B] section, but rather uses the orchestration and dynamic to delineate the separation.

It is my belief that the first way of interpreting the formal skeleton of the piece into an irregular eight-part form is the more correct interpretation. This is so due to the fact that the two patterns that arise from the irregular eight-part form make up macro ideas of not only the movement Mars but *The Planets* as a whole.

To look beyond the form to the harmonic analysis of the piece, there is a great deal to be said about how Holst chooses to use the harmonies at his disposal. A larger concept map of how he does this is provided below.

Harmonic Analysis



The intervals that are of the greatest significance for not only the harmonies, but the entirety of the work, are that of the perfect fifth and the minor second. The harmonic and melodic content are further discussed this fact will become more evident.

In the [A] section of the work, there are five complete triads that are used: Db major, A major, Bb minor, Ab major, and B major. It can be seen even here in these five harmonies the clear relations of perfect fifth (Db major and Ab major) and semitone (A major and Ab major; Bb minor and B major). Though the first chord that is heard in *The Planets* is that of Db major, the first pitch that is heard in a rhythmic ostinato is that of G. So, it is difficult to get the type of tonal implication that Holst was trying to achieve. One way to look at this is that Holst was trying to achieve some form of bitonality at the onset of Mars. Another way to formulate this, and the perspective that I more closely align with, is the idea that both the Db major chord and the G pitched ostinato are focusing primarily on a pitch center of C. This can be seen as a dominant of G and a Neapolitan of Db major focusing solely on somehow arriving at C.

The [B] section then continues with the pitch center idea of C but uses diatonic triads in parallel chordal progressions in root position to outline this. As the [B] section reappears in the piece, the chords are still used in the same fashion, but they are transposed to add more harmony to the work. The transpositions that are used are that of the minor second and the perfect fifth. Holst is cleverly using the intervals from the onset of the piece in the harmonies of the work, not only in chordal relation but at their transpositions as well.

The [C] section has the most harmonic content as the harmonic rhythmic speeds from one to five bars before a chord change to each bar having two to four chords. It is also in these sections alone that Holst uses any seventh chord in the entirety of the work. But since he now frees himself from his former harmonic constraints he uses all available seventh chords with the

exception of the fully diminished seventh. Why this is so, I am not sure, but perhaps it is due to the fact that he uses a substitute of an augmented triad in conjunction with his plethora of other seventh chords. Also, when Holst uses the [C] section again, he does so at the same transpositions as the [B] section, at the perfect fifth or minor second. Regardless, these [C] sections becoming the most harmonically dynamic portions of the piece make clear markers between the combinations of both the [A] and [B] sections.

The melodic and rhythmic skeleton of Mars can be broken down into three main items shown below.

Melodic & Rhythmic Skeleton

Melodic Themes

1) m.43-44

Tenor tuba



2) m.68-70

Tenor tuba

Trumpets



Rhythmic Ostinato



The two melodic themes that are illustrated are indicative of the [A] and [B] sections respectively, though they are both underpinned by the rhythmic ostinato illustrated, the foundation of the entirety of the Mars. The first theme of the piece is made entirely of conjunction motion between a major or minor second. This illustrated how Holst wanted even the melodic content of the world to be based off of the intervals that the harmonic content has been based on as well. There is also a way to look at the first melody and see that the pitches A

and E create a perfect fifth and are surrounded by the minor second, much like the movement of the harmonies previously discussed. The second theme seems to be constructed from fragments of the first theme and the rhythmic ostinato, making it clear that [B] sections of the piece are intricately formed so that they form the most compositional continuity to navigate from the primary [A] sections to the complexity of the [C] sections. The construction of the fragments can be seen by the borrowing of the triplet from the rhythmic ostinato and the usage of minor seconds in the soli shown in third measure. Also, of note in this second theme is the fact that the entirety of the second measure is used in the formal landscape as a sequence for the work to navigate at times between larger formal sections. Since Holst imbedded this so masterfully, only an analysis could bring this to the attention of the listener.

Salient to Mars and the entirety of *The Planets* is the orchestration that Holst creates. Holst uses a much larger orchestra than would be expected for the time; not only in numbers, but also in the usage of auxiliary instruments for orchestral families. Most of note include: bass flute, bass oboe, expanded percussion for three players, and six timpanis. More can be discussed in regard to the expanded instrumentation of the work, but perhaps more impressive in Mars itself is the usage of specific orchestral techniques shown below.

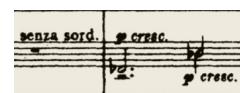
Orchestral Techniques



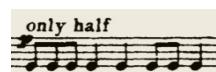
Played by hitting the strings with the back of the bow (m.1)



Section played with mute (m.14)



Mute off (m.23)



Only half the cellos and basses play (m.17)



Ordinary bowing for only half the cellos and basses (m.25)



(m.1)



(m.37) (m.57)

The techniques though used for the timbre of sound desired, are primarily issued to instruments to meet a dynamic that Holst was trying to achieve in each portion of Mars. Other compositional and orchestral techniques that Holst would use to achieve this effect would be low brass in a specific tessitura, strings and winds doubling in specific ranges, and winds and brass doubling in the central tessitura. Holst would also become an expert in having exceptional tutti sections and unmatched usage of orchestrated chordal parallelism. In Mars specifically, there are scaled passages that are unmatched in effect and Holst's usage of the auxiliary instruments for timbral effects is what sets each movement of *The Planets* apart.

Overall Mars can be considered a masterwork of planetary proportions through Holst's usage of intricate harmonic structures based on interval relations, and melodic themes based off of the same premise. As well it can be considered formally ambiguous, but the patterns derived from formal interpretations can shed light onto the macro ideas of a movement or the micro ideas of the suite itself.