

Leopold Stokowski was one of the greatest conductors of all time. Born in London on April 18, 1882, he started his musical career as an organist. In 1903, he took the post of principal organist at St. James' Church in London, situated in a small side off the famous Piccadilly. Although only 21 years old, he became soon well-known and after two years received an offer from St. Bartholomew's Church in New York, which he accepted enthusiastically. The congregation loved him, particularly for his uncommon musical repertoire.

In 1909, the famous pianist Olga Samaroff made it possible for him to conduct a concert with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra on May 12, in which she was the soloist. The concert was a great success and Stokowski was instantly engaged for the next season. Despite triumphal successes, however, he left Cincinnati in 1911, due to internal quarrels. Back in Europe, he married Olga. In 1912, he returned to the United States, this time to the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he conducted his first concert on October 11. The Philadelphia Orchestra was then rather a middle-class orchestra but Stokowski improved its sound within short time. The result became later known as the Philadelphia Sound and was achieved with some unusual innovations. First, he allowed the strings free bowing, which means the string players were free to move their bows up and down as they pleased, rather than in unison. This produces a very warm, silky and vivid sound, as it had never been heard before. Stokowski also made several changes to the orchestra's seating arrangement to improve the transparency and clarity of the sound. But it was not only this what made him popular. He sometimes produced his concerts like a stage-play by placing light spots on him or his always baton-less conducting hands, by speeches to the audience and even once by hiding the orchestra behind a curtain. Stokowski always made a mystery of himself. Asked about his age, he would give 1887 as his year of birth instead of 1882. Throughout his whole life he spoke with a strange pseudo-east-European accent of which nobody ever had an idea where he, as a born Lodoner, could have it from.

In 1940, Stokowski made the famous film *Fantasia* together with Walt Disney, in which cartoon figures move in ballet-like sequences to classical music. The music for the film was recorded in eight-channel stereophony and surprised its spectators for both its visual and acoustical achievements. Stokowski also appeared in some other, rather slushy films, which are listed here.

His private life also brought him into the newspapers. He was married several times - once to the million heiress Gloria Vanderbilt - and had a well-publicized affair with Greta Garbo.

Musically, he provoked a still-lasting controversy over his bombastic symphonic transcriptions of Bach works, which are considered sacrilege by baroque purists. He also had no inhibitions about making changes to the scores of other great masters, such as Beethoven or Tchaikovsky, if this served the work in any way. He also made his own orchestral arrangements of other works, such as Mussorgski's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and *A Night on the Bare Mountain* or Debussy's *La cathédrale engloutie*. Stokowski left Philadelphia in 1941, turning to various musical projects. He had many engagements as guest conductor all over the world and founded several orchestras, such as The All-American Youth Orchestra, The American Symphony Orchestra, The Symphony of the Air and "His" Symphony Orchestra (for recording sessions with Capitol Records).

With a legendary concert on June 14, 1972, Stokowski celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his first appearance with the London Symphony Orchestra. Stokowski was always very interested in improving the sound quality of recording media. Therefore, it is a great luck for the record lover that he became so old. He made still excellent (perhaps even his best) stereo recordings in his higher age. The difference between his recordings and those of other conductors is simply that he is a magician. When you hear Stokowski, suddenly the music begins to develop its own life. The sound is usually richer than everywhere else and so intense that you can't believe it is produced by a hundred people and not by only one. It is said that Stokowski kept on playing the organ his whole life: through the orchestra.

At 94, he was optimistic enough to sign a five years contract with Columbia Records. Unfortunately, this could not avert his destiny. He died on September 13, 1977, at the age of 95 in his house in Nether Wallop, Hampshire, England. It was the day on which he was to record Rachmaninov's Second Symphony, a wonderful work he never recorded commercially. Stokowski was buried at Marylebone Cemetery, East Finchley, in north London. Should you wish to visit his grave, you will find it at position D 10 147.



## HIGH DEFINITION TAPE TRANSFERS



# HOLST: THE PLANETS

# STOKOWSKI

LOS ANGELES

PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

WOMEN'S VOICES OF THE ROGER WAGNER CHORALE

The Planets, composed between 1914 and 1916, is a suite of seven movements. Holst's starting point for the music was the astrological character of each planet, though his interest in astrology went no deeper than its musical suggestiveness. His daughter wrote that once the underlying idea had been formulated 'he let the music have its way with him'. There was, therefore, no programme for the suite, and the composer himself pointed out that it has no connection with the deities of classical mythology. The many clues to the meaning of the music are the subjects of the individual movements.

MARS, the bringer of war. Three musical ideas are used to create this martial piece: (1) a brutally rhythmic figure of five beats relentlessly hammered out, (2) a principal theme in triads moving by chromatic steps with no true harmonic purpose; (3) a second theme consisting of a tattoo in the tenor tuba answered by a flourish of trumpets. There is no glory, no heroism, no tragedy in this music. It is entirely inhuman. Not even death is in it, for Mars is as insensitive to death as to life. War is a senseless, mechanised horror is Holst's real subject here.

VENUS, the bringer of peace. She is announced by four ascending notes in the solo horn and a sequence of converging chords in the flutes and oboes. Most of her music lies, symbolically, in the middle and upper registers of the instruments; and harps, celestes, and glockenspiel further characterise her heavenly nature. In addition there are beautiful melodies for her in the solo violin and oboe. Though this is music of surpassing serenity it is not simple in harmony, texture or orchestral sonority. One cannot help but observe how fitting it is that the state of peace be described in complex terms, in contrast to the complicity of the depiction of war.

MERCURY, the winged messenger. This is the quickest and, in duration, the shortest movement of the suite. Aside from its speed, however, its particular quality comes from the opposition of two simultaneous keys and two simultaneous rhythms. The two keys, which are sounded in the very first bar, are B-flat and E (which, being separated from one another by the interval of the tritone, have no note in common). The two rhythms arise out of different groupings of six beats, the first being ONE-two-three-FOUR-five-six, the second being ONE-two-THREE-four-FIVE-six. This opposition of contrasting patterns is one of Holst's principal characteristics, and other examples of it can be found not only in The Planets but abundantly throughout his works.

JUPITER, the bringer of jollity. The exuberance of this movement shows itself not only in its tempo and rhythm but also in the multiplicity of subjects. You can count four, five or six of them, depending on whether you divide the first two into their component parts – they do behave like independent themes. Jupiter might well be designated as 'the English movement' because it shows how profoundly Holst was influenced by the folk music of his country. Certainly this is rustic English, music for a fair; there are crowds of people in it and infinite good spirits. The grand tune that ends the parade of themes has become the setting for a patriotic hymn with the words 'I vow to thee my country'.

SATURN, the bringer of old age. Unlike the previous movements, which are static in the sense that each depicts various aspects of a single trait, this one moves through a series of 'events' that bring the music to conclusions not envisioned at the beginning. There is a profound hollowness and sense of defeat in the harmony of the opening chords, and an even deeper despair in the motif sounded beneath them by the double basses. But the elderly voice of wisdom is soon heard in the B-minor theme for the trombones, and at the end the mood is one of acceptance, reconciliation and consequent serenity.

URANUS, the magician. You can take as the figure of Uranus almost any magician you have ever seen in opera, drama or vaudeville – preferably one with the tall pointed hat studded with stars, the flowing blue robe with voluminous sleeves, and the silver wand. He is invoked by Holst with a triple invocation, and he begins to show his tricks immediately. His repertoire is vast and astonishing and at the climax of his demonstration he struts around pompously to a pompous tune. By way of encore he makes some mysterious incantations, suddenly (one guesses from the music) envelops himself in flames – and disappears.

NEPTUNE, the mystic. This movement is, if any music can be, the disembodied spirit of sound. Themes are practically non-existent; in their place are fragments of melody and harmony, all manipulated at the very lowest dynamic level and in the most attenuated orchestral sonorities. Almost imperceptibly a double chorus of women's voices enters on a high G, sustained through a dozen bars. The singing continues, without words, embedded in a diaphanous veil of orchestral sound. Even this dies away, and the voices are left alone to intone a cadence over and over again with ever diminishing tone, until it is consumed in silence.

# Gustav Holst The Planets

Leopold Stokowski Conducting

The Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra  
And Women's Voices Of The Roger Wagner Chorale

- 1 Mars, the Bringer of War
- 2 Venus, the Bringer of Peace
- 3 Mercury, the Winged Messenger
- 4 Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity
- 5 Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age
- 6 Uranus, the Magician
- 7 Neptune, the Mystic



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