

# National Youth Orchestra with Dalia Stasevska

**The National Youth Orchestra**  
**Dalia Stasevska** conductor

**John Williams** (b.1932)

Star Wars (selection) (1977–2019)

27'

1. Main title
2. Across the Stars
3. Psalm of the Sith
4. Scherzo for X-Wings
5. The Jedi Steps & Finale

**Caroline Shaw** (b.1982)

The Observatory (2019)

14'

INTERVAL

**Gustav Holst** (1874–1934)

The Planets, Op.32 (1914–17)

50'

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

Of her 2019 work *The Observatory*, Caroline Shaw wrote that ‘there was something about writing for a full symphony orchestra that had made me think about sci-fi films’. She was drawn to the orchestra’s ‘epic’ potential: its seemingly endless variety of textures and instrumental combinations, and how they might portray the mysteries and immense scale of the universe. She is, as this programme amply demonstrates, not the only composer to feel this way. Gustav Holst’s visionary *The Planets*, composed between 1914 and 1916, was not only a fresh and surprising piece in its own time, but became a source of inspiration for film scores in decades to come. Such scores include John Williams’ music for the original *Star Wars* films: the ‘Imperial March’ theme surely pays homage to Holst’s ‘Mars’ movement; while his more optimistic, air-bound themes seem to draw on the playful ‘Jupiter’. All three works in this programme suggest or directly illustrate something beyond our earthbound experience. They depict the mysterious nature of the planets (their spiritual as well as physical associations), probe deeply into outer space, or conjure up an entirely new world in a galaxy far, far away.



The conductor Leonard Slatkin, provocatively perhaps, once claimed that **John Williams** was the most important musical figure of the 20th century: ‘Look,’ said Slatkin, ‘can you name seven people on the planet who haven’t heard something by John Williams?’ He has composed more than 100 scores since the 1950s, and has been attached to some of the most famous franchises in recent history. His ‘Main Title’ theme to *Star Wars*, with its stirring principal melody periodically threatened by militaristic brass, is perhaps one of his most well-known scores, and he has continued to compose for the *Star Wars* series from its revival in the 1990 to its continuation in the following two decades.

‘Across the Stars’ is the love theme from 2002’s *Attack of the Clones*; relating to the relationship between Padmé and Anakin Skywalker (before he became Darth Vader) it is soaringly romantic, yet undercut with a kind of doomed melancholy. ‘Psalm of the Sith’ features in the soundtrack to *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), the last instalment of the nine-part film series. The Sith are the antagonists of the Jedi in the *Star Wars* universe and their theme accordingly represents the ‘dark side of the force’: cultish, brooding, and deeply menacing. For part seven of the series, *The Force Awakens*, Williams returned to themes from the main title in his ‘Scherzo for X-Wings’, the iconic fighter-craft of the Rebel Alliance. ‘The Jedi Steps’ is not, as one disappointed Reddit user put it, a new dance craze, but rather a significant plot point at the close of *The Force Awakens*. Williams creates, as ever, a memorable and emotive theme, interspersed with call-backs to motifs from the earlier films. Williams’ contribution to the remarkable world-building of the *Star Wars* franchise cannot be overstated. Even the online warriors who fiercely disagree about the plotting and consistency of the movies agree (mostly) that Williams’ scores are sublime.

Though inspired by the sci-fi genre, **Caroline Shaw**’s *The Observatory* is not attached to a film, but rather to her experiences of stargazing in Los Angeles. The structure of the piece does, however, resemble a soundtrack: its assemblage of motifs and themes suggesting montage, suitable to the idiosyncratic orbital dance of the planets. It’s possible to imagine the film it might accompany: the mighty opening chords (which return in altered form at the end) bringing to mind the vastness of a universe; the fragments of Bach, Brahms, Strauss and Sibelius drifting in and out of focus, as if catching a frequency from an earth-based transmission; the mesmeric figure drawn from Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata, evoking either an unfathomably long journey into space, or its limitlessness. The latter, as it builds in intensity, also has a touch of Justin Hurwitz’s lyrical score to the 2018 film *First Man*, both catching the heart-stopping experience of witnessing the indescribable.

**Gustav Holst** was initially a little reluctant to describe the ‘programme’ of *The Planets*. He originally termed it a series of ‘mood pictures’ but later revealed that it evoked ‘the seven influences of destiny and constituents of our spirit’. For *The Planets* is not concerned with the astronomical qualities of planets but the astrological. Holst developed a great interest in astrology during a holiday in 1913 and was given to preparing charts for friends and family. The order of the movements, as Holst scholar Raymond Head has noted, is according to astrological principles. Mars, for example, is the ruler of Aries, the first sign in the Zodiac; Venus the ruler of Taurus, the second sign – and so on. The movements progress through the ‘constituents’ of the spirit from the reckless youth of Mars to the acquisition of Neptune’s transcendental state which, as Richard Capell puts it, ‘swims in mystery’.

As well as ambitiously exploring the human condition, Holst revels – like Shaw – in the enormity of the orchestra. Each movement explores a different mood or sonority, often underpinned by a rhythmic surprise or displacement. ‘Mars’ combines an ominously militaristic drum and string rhythm (in a disturbing five-beats to a bar), with chromatically moving triads, interrupted by a clashing theme on the tenor tuba. Venus plays itself out mostly in the higher reaches of the orchestra, including harp, celeste and glockenspiel. The third movement, Mercury, interweaves a tricky opposition of rhythms, while the most upbeat – Jupiter – dances exuberantly across an abundance of themes. Uranus is similarly virtuosic, and Saturn is perhaps the most disconcerting and melancholic with its predominance of double basses and low brass and a ‘ticking clock’ in the woodwind. Holst’s daughter Imogen described the unconventional last movement ‘Neptune’ (the planet that rules Pisces, the final sign of the Zodiac) as ‘unforgettable, with its hidden chorus of women’s voices growing fainter and fainter ... until the imagination knew no difference between sound and silence.’