



# About the Music

November 9, 2010

## JOHN ADAMS

### Fanfare for Orchestra: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*

John Adams was born in Massachusetts in 1947. He composed this work in 1986 on a commission from the Pittsburgh Symphony and it was first performed at Great Woods in Mansfield, Massachusetts by the Pittsburgh Symphony under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas the same year. The score calls for 2 flutes, 2 piccolos, 2 oboes, English horn, 4 clarinets, 4 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 optional synthesizers, and strings.

Worcester-native John Adams graduated from Harvard in 1971, then joined the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory for ten years. He has had a long relationship with the San Francisco Symphony, where he was composer-in-residence for much of that time. He is perhaps best known for his operas *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, but he has also contributed major instrumental pieces such as his Chamber Symphony, Violin Concerto, and the present work. The minimalism of his earliest pieces has gradually expanded with more romantic colors and harmonies.

Adams describes the persistent woodblock of *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* as “almost sadistic,” a kind of gauntlet through which the rest of the music must pass. As for the title and the manic music of the work, Adams said, “You know how it is when someone asks you to ride in a terrific sports car, and then you wish you hadn’t?”

## JOHN WILLIAMS

### Suite from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

John Williams was born in New York in 1932. He began composing his film score for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1975 based only on his conversations with Steven Spielberg and a preliminary script; the score was completed in 1977. The Suite calls for off-stage mixed chorus, 2 flutes, 2 piccolos, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba,

timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celeste, and strings.

Strange things are happening: a lost squadron of WWII aircraft are found intact in the Sonoran desert; airline pilots are seeing UFOs in the sky; three yearold Barry Guiler is awakened by his toys noisily coming to life; and electrical lineman Roy Neary is becoming obsessed with a mysterious mountain. The human race is about to have a close encounter of the third kind.

1977 was a year for sci-fi films. George Lucas’ *Star Wars* was an actionpacked western serial set in space, and it carried away most of the year’s Oscars. Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* brought the aliens home.

Spielberg was inspired by many things when he made *Close Encounters*—some say too many—but he has often said that his chief influence when writing the script was the song “When You Wish Upon a Star” from Disney’s *Pinocchio*: “I hung my story on the mood the song created, the way it affected me personally.” Spielberg even wanted to use the song during the film’s end credits but was denied permission.

It’s fitting, then, that the most important plot device in *Close Encounters* is the musical theme used to communicate with the aliens. John Williams tried over 250 permutations of a five-note theme before Spielberg settled on the one used in the film: D-E-C-C-G.

This theme is also a plot device in the music of both the film score and the Suite. As the film moves from the uncertainty and fear of the first alien encounters to the awe-inspiring meeting with the aliens themselves, so does the music move from dissonance to tonality; meanwhile, the five-note theme grows from mere fragments to a joyous (and boisterous) whole. Attentive listeners will also hear, unmistakably, bits of melody and chord progressions from “When You Wish Upon a Star.”

John Williams was nominated for an Academy Award for his film score to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, but he lost—to himself. His score to *Star Wars* was nominated the same year and took the Oscar.

**GUSTAV HOLST**  
*The Planets, Op. 32*

Gustav Holst was born in Cheltenham, England in 1874 and died in London in 1934. He completed *The Planets* in 1916, and it was first performed in London in 1918 by the New Queen's Hall Orchestra, Adrian Boult conducting. The work is scored for offstage female chorus, 4 flutes, 2 piccolos, alto flute, 4 oboes, English horn, bass oboe, 4 clarinets, bass clarinet, 4 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, tenor tuba, timpani (2 players), percussion, 2 harps, celeste, organ, and strings.

Gustav Holst had intriguingly diverse interests. On the one hand he was devoted to the rich tradition of English folk music; he collected and catalogued authentic folk tunes with his lifelong friend Vaughan Williams, and used them frequently in his own music. On the other, he was fascinated by Eastern religions; he even learned Sanskrit in order to translate and set to music parts of the Hindu *Rig Veda*. With his head in the cosmos—but with his feet firmly planted in his folk heritage—you could say he was uniquely prepared to compose *The Planets*.

Holst had wanted to compose a largescale piece for some time. He even had a title: *Seven Pieces for Large Orchestra*. But it was not until a friend had introduced him to astrology that Holst found a ruling metaphor. He would call his work *The Planets*, but he would treat them in the astrological sense, not the astronomical.

*The Planets* has no program as such. “These pieces were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets,” Holst wrote. “There is no program music in them, neither have they any connection with the deities of classical mythology bearing the same names. If any guide to the music is required, the subtitles to each piece will be found sufficient, especially if they are used in a broad sense.” Each movement is a character piece, a musical metaphor for the influence of each ruling planet. *The Planets*, then, is a work about the human experience, not the cosmic.

So ominous is *Mars, the Bringer of War* that many have taken it as Holst's reaction to the bloody madness that was World War I; actually, Holst had sketched the movement prior to the war's outbreak. Nevertheless, the sounds of strings being struck with the wood of the bow, the relentless drums, and the boiling harmonies

together paint a sonic likeness of evil.

The static backgrounds of *Venus, the Bringer of Peace* appear frozen in a luminous serenity. Against them, the sweet melody first given by the solo violin and the response introduced by the oboe weave a layer of depth that sounds deceptively simple.

*Mercury, the Winged Messenger* takes flight as the work's nominal scherzo, with the musical line deftly flying back and forth among the instruments. The destination is a flowing, restless melody of uncommon grace.

The composer's intentions aside, it is hard to avoid the astronomical implications of the opening of *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*. This music is big, and big-hearted, as if celebrating a bold frontier of unimaginable scale. Holst wrote: “*Jupiter* brings jollity in the ordinary sense, and also the more ceremonial kind of rejoicing associated with religious or national festivities.” The joyous celebration is most poignant in a central hymn tune of noble beauty.

According to Holst, “*Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age* brings not only physical decay, but also a vision of fulfillment.” Accordingly, the music's fateful gait inspires dread and wonder in equal measure.

The ominous opening of *Uranus, the Magician* reminds us of the sorcerer's dark side, even as the music turns more playful. Holst performs his own musical sleight-of-hand with orchestration that simply sparkles.

The ethereal opening of *Neptune, the Mystic* brings us to the outer reaches of Holst's astrological cosmos, and the destination of the suite: the physical world is left behind and we reach the inner workings of the mind. Holst's portrayal is unsettled, ever searching; the contradictory aspects of human nature are not reconciled here. But perhaps, as the gossamer strands of the wordless chorus drift back into the infinite silence from which they came, they are transcended.

—Mark Rohr is the bass trombonist for the PSO.  
Questions or comments? [mrohr@comcast.net](mailto:mrohr@comcast.net)



Visit Online Insights at [PortlandSymphony.org](http://PortlandSymphony.org)  
to learn more about this concert.