

Holst – Extracts from ‘The Planets’

Listening

The full recording of The Planets can be found on the link below, recorded by the Philharmonia Orchestra.

Full piece ▶

The Philharmonia produced a listening guide to the different movements which can be found here – these provide a great overview of the piece.

Mars ▶

Venus ▶

Jupiter ▶

This resource has three different medium tasks to allow pupils to hear each of the three different pieces.

Context

About the composer: Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Gustav Holst (1874–1934) was an English composer and music teacher. He is best known for his orchestral suite The Planets, composed between 1914 and 1917. Holst was fascinated by astronomy, mythology and astrology, and each movement in The Planets represents the character traditionally associated with a planet.

About the piece: The Planets – Mars, Venus and Jupiter (1914-17)

These three movements show tremendous contrast in approach to depicting three different planets.

Mars – The Bringer of War

- Powerful, aggressive and dramatic
- Features a relentless marching ostinato rhythm
- Uses brass and percussion to create tension and excitement

Venus – The Bringer of Peace

- Calm, gentle and reflective
- Features flowing melodies and delicate orchestration

Jupiter – The Bringer of Jollity

- Energetic, joyful and celebratory
- Contains lively dance-like melodies
- Includes the famous melody later used for the hymn “I Vow to Thee, My Country”

Short 5-minute task: colour challenge

Set up 3 different colour areas in your classroom – for example:

- The colour Red – to the right of the classroom
- The colour Blue – to the left of the classroom
- The colour Yellow – to the back of the classroom

You could use different coloured objects (e.g. paper or pens) if required.

Play a short 10 second extract from each of the three pieces, asking pupils to move to the colour area they think the music best represents. As they do this, ask them to explain their thinking, encouraging the use of musical vocabulary to support their answers.

Think about why we might associate these colours in this way:

- Red = Exciting/Dangerous
- Blue = Calm/Peaceful
- Yellow = Happy/Celebratory

Extend thinking by asking:

- Why did you choose this colour?
- What instruments can you hear?
- Which words describe the music?
- Which planet do you think it represents?

Some possible words are below to help:

- **Mars:** fierce, battle, march, powerful, threatening, brass, loud, menacing
- **Venus:** peaceful, floating, gentle, dreamy, relaxing
- **Jupiter:** joyful, energetic, triumphant, festive, cheerful

Stretch and Challenge

- Explain musical reasons for their answers
- Identify changes in dynamics or tempo
- Compare two extracts using musical vocabulary

Support and Scaffold

- Provide picture prompts
- Use sentence stems:
 - “The music sounds...”
 - “I imagine...”
- Limit vocabulary choices to three options

Medium 20-minute task: Rhythm Challenge (Mars)

This challenge looks at the repeated **ostinato** used in Mars to help invoke fear and a war-like atmosphere. Pupils may wish to do this in small groups or in pairs.

The challenge is to ask pupils to perform the ostinato, using only this music to help create contrasting scenes. For example:

- Whispered, ominously
- Tapped using body percussion

- Using a mnemonic – ‘*re-lent-less feet march in-to war*’ works really well
- Using **crescendo** and **diminuendo**
- Using **accents** to make certain syllables stand out



Once you have done this, have a listen to the piece to hear how Holst uses the repeated ostinato. Some things to notice:

- The unusual 5/4 time signature – 5 crotchet beats in a bar
- The use of a **triplet** on the first beat – three notes squeezed into 1 beat
- Use of **col legno** (‘with wood’) on the strings at the start – where the string players turn their bows over to hit the strings with the wood of their bow, creating a scary, out of this world, sound effect

Stretch and Challenge

- Consider if this piece would be as successful if it was written in a standard time signature (e.g. 4/4) and in a major key. What do your pupils think?
- How might you conduct in 5/4?

Support and Scaffold

- Consider pairing more and less able pupils together to support peer to peer learning and confidence
- Use the given mnemonic

Medium 20-minute task: Peace and War Challenge (Venus)

While Mars is all about war, Venus is all about peace. This challenge looks for pupils to make musical comparisons about both pieces using the opening 30-40 seconds of each piece to make comparisons. The table below is designed to help your thinking.

	Mars	Venus
Instruments	Percussion, Brass and percussive strings – full orchestra	Solo instruments – horn, woodwind – feels like a much smaller orchestra
Rhythm	5 beats in a bar – unnerving. Use of ostinato and triplets	Slow notes, 4/4 time signature, some ostinatos but very different effect
Tonality	Minor key	Major key
Dynamics	Sudden changes, often very loud (fortissimo)	Very quiet (pianissimo) with gradual changes
Tempo	Fast	Slow

Stretch and Challenge

- Use comparison language ‘while Mars does this, Venus does this’ – similarities, differences and justifications

Support and Scaffold

- Give choices between the two pieces based on the information on the table – e.g. Fast or Slow?

Medium 20-minute task: Story Builder (Jupiter)

This task encourages pupils to listen to the whole movement and to then respond, making a short silent drama or tableau inspired by the music. Given Jupiter is the ‘bringer of jollity’ it is a good idea to focus your pupils on a jolly scene like a village celebration, festival or fete, or a similar scene.

In their scene, pupils should look to include:

- Three frozen pictures
- One movement sequence
- No narration or voiceover

As pupils perform, play the track to help bring their scene to life. Then discuss as a class to understand how the music influenced the movement, encouraging pupils to use musical vocabulary to support their answers.

Some areas to consider:

	Jupiter
Instruments	Full orchestra, fast strings – exciting
Rhythm	Fast rhythms, syncopation – excitement
Tonality	Major key
Dynamics	Sudden changes, often very loud (fortissimo)
Tempo	Fast

Stretch and Challenge

- Encourage pupils to plan a contrasting middle scene to have a second movement sequence linking the 3 freeze frames

Support and Scaffold

- Scaffold the task to a single freeze frame, then add others if able
- Use a teacher-devised plot

Longer 45-minute task: What about Pluto?

In the 1930s, Pluto was discovered and was considered the ninth planet. This happened after Holst had finished writing his piece for the Planets, and is why Pluto does not have a movement of music written by Holst. However, in 2006, Pluto was reclassified when astronomers reclassified the term planet, and now it is not seen as being a planet because it has not cleared the neighbourhood around its orbit. As such, Pluto is now seen as being a dwarf planet.

This challenge looks to imagine what the music for Pluto might have sounded like. Pluto is very far away from the sun – dark, cold, and it takes an amazing 248 Earth years to do just one orbit of the sun! One day on Pluto lasts for 153 hours. Pluto is smaller than our Moon.

Step 1: Listen and Analyse

Revisit short extracts from Mars, Venus and Jupiter:

- How does Mars sound powerful?
- How does Venus sound peaceful?
- What makes Jupiter sound joyful?

Discuss the elements outlined in the medium task.

Step 2: What is Pluto like?

In small groups, consider what Pluto is like – the colours, the temperature, the landscape, the weather, who or what lives there... Respond to this by writing key words, a drawing, a table...

Step 3: Compose

Using body percussion, classroom instruments and voices, ask groups to perform music for Pluto. Their composition should include:

- A beginning, middle and end
- At least two contrasting dynamics
- An ostinato that is repeated
- A clear mood

Encourage pupils to borrow compositional ideas from Holst, for example:

- Repeated rhythms like Mars
- Flowing melodies like Venus
- Celebratory patterns like Jupiter

Step 4: Perform and Appraise

Ask groups to perform with the audience identifying if the 4 points above have been included in the composition to appraise the work.

Stretch and Challenge

- Create contrasting sections representing different areas of the planet
- Add notated rhythms or graphic scores
- Justify compositional decisions using musical vocabulary

Support and Scaffold

- Provide rhythmic patterns to copy
- Use picture prompts
- Restrict choices to loud/quiet and fast/slow
- Allow teacher-led composition
- Use body percussion rather than pitched instruments

Links to other subjects

This piece can link well to these other areas of the school curriculum:

Subject	Links
Art	Design and illustrate Pluto
English	Using subject-specific vocabulary, creative writing tasks and using descriptive language
Science	Space and the solar system, classification of a planet, planetary environments and conditions needed for life
Drama	Creating a scene to match the music

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Accent	A way of playing a note to make it stand out – represented with this symbol >
Crescendo	A dynamic marking meaning getting louder
Diminuendo	A dynamic marking meaning getting quieter
Ostinato	A repeated rhythm, melody or pattern
Major chord	For example CEG – major chords often sound happy
Minor chord	For example CEbG – minor chords often sound sad
Triplet	Three notes in 1 beat
Col Legno	To play a stringed instrument with the wood of the bow (literally means ‘with wood’)
Pianissimo	Very quiet
Fortissimo	Very loud
Syncopation	Off beat

Sensory activities for all

Holst – excerpts from ‘The Planets’

Mars

Medium task: Feel the Beat

Sensory focus: Vibration, touch, rhythm

Resources

- Drum
- Resonance board
- Therapy ball
- Large floor drum (if available)

Activity: Invite pupils to place their hands on the drum or resonance board while Mars plays.

During the louder sections:

- Tap the drum in time with the pulse so pupils can physically feel the vibrations

During the quieter melody:

- Use gentle rolling motions on a therapy ball or soft tapping

Musical link: Develop awareness of pulse through touch rather than hearing alone.

Venus

Medium task: Space Textures

Sensory focus: Tactile exploration

Resources:

Sensory tray containing:

- Foil
- Bubble wrap
- Cotton wool
- Organza
- Soft pom-poms
- Textured fabric

Activity: Invite pupils to explore different textures while listening.

Ask simple prompts:

Which texture feels like the stormy music?

Which feels soft and calm?

There are no right answers.

Musical link: Develop deeper understanding of descriptive nature of music through touch.

Jupiter

Medium task: Orbit Walk

Sensory focus: Gross motor movement

Resources

- Floor spots
- Planet pictures

Activity: Create a giant orbit around the room.

As Jupiter plays:

- Walk
- Wheel
- Crawl
- Move with walkers

Encourage movement that matches the music:

- Big, confident steps
- Slow floating during the middle section

Musical link: Encourages awareness of pulse, rhythm and musical contrasts through movement.

All excerpts

Longer task: Space Sound Makers

Sensory focus: Listening and cause/effect

Resources:

- Rainmaker
- Ocean drum
- Chime bars
- Bells
- Cabasa
- Tambourine

Activity

Pause the music between sections.

Ask: Which instrument sounds most like Mars/Venus/Jupiter?

Allow pupils to choose and explore freely.

Musical link: Develops knowledge of timbre (unique sound of an instrument) and how it relates to the mood of the music.