

SYDNEY  
SYMPHONY  
ORCHESTRA

2026  
SEASON

Teachers  
Resource Kit



# PHILHARMONIA FANTASTIQUE

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SCHOOLS CONCERT

Stages 1–3

# **The Planets, Op.32**

## **by Gustav Holst**

Stages 1 - 3 Teaching Resource  
Sydney Symphony Orchestra

## Acknowledgements

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*“Your life can be changed and enriched through all sorts of music; music from now, music from the past, music from the very distant past and music from as recently as yesterday.*

*Through intensive listening students become involved in one of the highest orders of thinking.*

*As a teacher, by bringing students to a concert and studying music in the classroom, you are providing your students with a special pathway to musical knowledge through direct experience of and contact with live music.”*

Richard Gill AO

(1941-2018)

Conductor, notable educator and advocate. Richard was the founding Artistic Director of Education at the Sydney Symphony. He has inspired generation of musicians through his work and continues to inspire new generations through his legacy.

# Background

## The purpose of this resource

This Teaching and Learning Kit has been designed by Sydney Symphony Orchestra, in collaboration with registered educators, to assist you in building meaningful learning experiences around your concert attendance.

You may choose to use the existing lesson plans as they appear, or - using our handy differentiation hints - adapt them to align with the needs and interests of a particular group of students. Alternatively, go above and beyond and use the Resource Library to extend the students who really love to deep dive into the world of orchestral music.

How will you use these flexible and adaptable resources? The choice is yours!

As always, we welcome all feedback and suggestions regarding the nature of our Teaching and Learning Kits. Please feel free to be in touch with our friendly Learning & Engagement team at [schools@sydneyorchestra.com](mailto:schools@sydneyorchestra.com).

## How curriculum is referenced in this resource

This resource is mapped to the NSW Curriculum.

Each Lesson includes learning activities for students Stage 1-5 aligned to the outcomes of the new Creative Arts K – 6 Syllabus (2024) and the NSW Music Curriculum Stage 4 and 5 (2024)

Each lesson focuses upon a work from the regional tour concert and includes several activities in performing, organising sounds, responding and listening. Each of the learning experiences is integrated into the lesson.

Each activity suggests an indicative age group, however teachers should use their knowledge of their class to select activities relevant to their stages of development and music learning.

## Resource Library

Below is a curated selection of additional third-party resources you might choose to use in supporting your students to engage in concert preparation. The lesson plans in this resource will suggest you select from these to plan and deliver your lessons - alternatively, these resources may also be used for differentiation and extension.

### Things to listen to

This Teaching and Learning Kit has been designed by Sydney Symphony Orchestra, in collaboration with registered educators, to assist you in building meaningful learning experiences around your concert attendance.

Discover this Spotify playlist featuring concert repertoire audio recordings where available.

[Spotify Playlist](#)

### Things to watch

*The Planets* in ABC's *Bluey* cartoon:

<https://iview.abc.net.au/video/CH1903Q026S00>

An introduction to *The Planets* by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra for young students.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZh7cgD1Alc>

### Things to Explore

- [The Layout of The Orchestra](#)
- [Learn & Listen by Instrument](#)
- [Inside the Orchestra](#)
- [How to create a graphic score](#)

## Introduction to the Concert Theme

The theme of this concert is to explore three contrasting pieces of program music, which come from the same larger work, *The Planets* by Gustav Holst. Each piece uses the colours of the full orchestra in a different way to create three very contrasting pieces. Space is topical at the moment with the recent record set by Artemis II as the astronauts travelled farther from earth than ever before and always part of the Primary School curriculum, so easy to add these lessons to your space unit.

## Work: *The Planets* by Gustav Holst

Gustav Holst was a British composer who lived and composed in England one hundred years ago. He was fascinated by space and astrology. Despite coming from three generations of professional musicians, Holst's path towards becoming a professional musician was a rocky one. He suffered with the nervous condition which prevented him from becoming a concert pianist and was taught the trombone as a treatment for asthma. He is known as a composer, arranger and teacher.

He finished the suite of pieces called *The Planets* in 1918 after coming up with the idea in 1913 and tried in music to capture their mood or character rather than their scientific properties. Interestingly, Holst did not write music for Earth or Pluto which was not discovered until many years later. However all the other planets can be found in this piece.

While *The Planets* is his best-known work, he composed many other works across a range of genres, although none achieved comparable success. His distinctive compositional style was the product of many influences including Wagner and Richard Strauss. The English folksong revival of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and modern composers such as Ravel also influenced him as a composer, inspiring Holst to develop and refine an individual style.

The concert will feature three movements from *The Planets*:

**Mars, the Bringer of War:** Represents destruction, aggression, and military power. The piece features a relentless 5/4 rhythm intended to create a brutal, mechanized, and march-like soundscape. Unlikely to be inspired by World War I, which broke out just as he had finished sketching the movement; as his daughter pointed out, Holst 'had never heard of a machine gun and the tank had not yet been invented'.

**Mercury, the Winged Messenger:** Represents agility, speed, ingenuity, and communication. The music is a fast-paced, featuring flutes and glockenspiel to depict a fleeting, mercurial spirit. Carried along on the lightest of currents, this quicksilver spirit vanishes as quickly as he appears

**Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity:** Symbolizes abundance, generosity, and life-affirming vitality. It is often seen as a musical representation of the "cheery uncle" or a festive, majestic spirit, famous for the hymn-like theme that later became "I Vow to Thee, My Country" and in the late 90s revived again as the theme for the World Cup.

## NSW Curriculum Links

The activities in this resource are mapped to the outcomes of the new K - 6 Creative Arts Syllabus (2024) and the Music 7-10 Syllabus (2024).

Stage	Outcomes
Early Stage 1 <i>Kindergarten</i>	CAE-MUS-01 experiments with and identifies ways sound is organised in music through singing, moving, playing instruments and using listening skills
Stage 1 <i>Year 1 and 2</i>	CA1-MUS-01 experiments with and identifies ways sound is organised in music through singing, moving, playing instruments and using listening skills
Stage 2 <i>Years 3 and 4</i>	MUS2.4 Identifies the use of musical concepts and musical symbols in a range of repertoire.
Stage 3 <i>Years 5 and 6</i>	MUS3.4 Identifies the use of musical concepts and symbols in a range of musical styles.

### Assessment Ideas

A range of possible assessment tasks for various grade level have been identified throughout the resource with an \*\*

# Lesson 1: Introducing *The Planets*

## Intended Learning Outcome

### Students will:

- Understand Holst's attribution of character to the planets Mars, Jupiter and Mercury
- Discuss how the characters are created through music using concepts of music
- Recognise these features through listening activities.
- Perform rhythm patterns in 5/4 time
- Recognise and perform the ostinato from *Mars*

### Materials

- SSO Spotify playlist of *The Planets*
- Space for movement activity
- Play along percussion video  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvZfd24JFhY&list=RDnvZfd24JFhY&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvZfd24JFhY&list=RDnvZfd24JFhY&start_radio=1)

## Lesson Plan

### 1. Listen

- a) Without telling the students any of the background to this piece, listen to the opening of *Mars* (suggest the first minute of music) and ask the following questions:
  - Can you keep the beat quietly on your lap as you listen?
  - What percussion instruments can you identify?
  - What other instruments do you hear?
  - What type of music is this? Why do you think that?
- b) Listen again to the excerpt the discuss:
  - What is the mood or the music?
  - What can you hear in the music to create that impression?
- c) Listen again to the excerpt instructing students to close their eyes. If this music was used to accompany a film – what sort of action might be happening on the screen? Students can respond with prose or drawing images or patterns.
- d) Read to the students the information about the intent and inspiration behind the piece. As a class discuss how Harrison has done this in the listening excerpt. What specific sounds can you identify in this excerpt that suggest night road works?

## 2. Move

In an open space:

- a) Tell the class they are soldiers marching around a parade ground. Teacher keeps a steady beat on a hand drum, other percussion instrument or even using a ruler on the table and asked the students to march in time to the beat.
- b) Teacher asks the class to march counting four in their head, and on every 4<sup>th</sup> beat change direction
- c) Repeat using a 3-count pattern and then a 2-count pattern.
- d) Now ask them to count to 5 and repeat the activity. Does this feel tricky?

## 3. Read and Perform

- a) Divide the students into 4 groups and have each group play a similar type of percussion instrument.

The play along video (link below) uses egg shakers as Group 1, claves, as Group 2, drums as Group 3 and triangles as Group 4.

If there are not enough for those instruments only to be used, try:

- Group 1 – shakers
- Group 2 – wood (claves, wood blocks etc)
- Group 3 – drums
- Group 4 – metal (bells and triangles)

Using the play along YouTube video, perform the 5 beats per bar pattern following the instructions. Note there is always a bar of count in before they students need to play:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvZfd24JFhY&list=RDnvZfd24JFhY&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvZfd24JFhY&list=RDnvZfd24JFhY&start_radio=1)

## 4. Perform

Seated on the floor in a circle.

- a) Teach the students the Mars rhyme while patsching the beat quietly on their knees:

**Here is a strange jive  
Its count is in five  
Mars: Bring - er of war  
Let's find out some more**

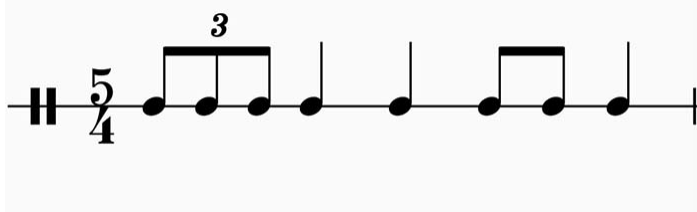
- b) Once the class can repeat from memory, change the patsching rhythms after playing each one twice, moving through the patterns below:



c) Listen to the start of *Mars* and ask the students which of the patterns is used (No. 5).

- Play rhythm No. 5 with the opening of the music so that every child can feel the pattern
- Ask: What is missing from our pattern that you can hear in the music?
- Answer is the fast 3 notes on the first beat. This is called a triplet which is a rhythm pattern that divides a beat evenly into 3 sounds.

d) Now add the triplet to the pattern. It might be easier to use alternate hands for the triplet. Once comfortable, show the students the rhythm they are patching.



Perform the pattern with the recording.

Ask what do we call a pattern that repeats over and over? Ostinato.

Now add the ostinato patsching to the poem learnt above.

e) While keeping a count of 5, ask students to improvise their own 5 beat patterns.

# Lesson 2: More on Mars

## Intended Learning Outcome

### Students will:

- Be able to identify the musical and physical features of *Mars* by Holst.
- Have created their own short composition inspired by words about Mars.
- Be able to discuss how Holst's music suits the character of the planet.
- As a class perform a group composition about *Mars*.

### Materials

- Mars exploration movement activity:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdUTBFUwmyQ&t=132s>
- Classroom percussion instruments
- National Geographic Footage:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8pnmwOXhoY&t=33s>
- Spotify recording of *Mars* from SSO playlist
- YouTube *Imperial March* by John Williams:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3SZ5sIMY6o&t=30s>

## Lesson Plan

### 1. Movement Warm-Up

Tell the class they are astronauts who have landed on Mars and are exploring the planet. Use the Mars exploration movement activity YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdUTBFUwmyQ&t=132s>

and follow the directions on the screen. Some of the actions they need to do are:

- Searching, slowly moving and looking at what is around the planet.
- Freeze and check there is no danger around
- Dodge meteors
- Do a body percussion to Mars the red planet

### 2. Compose

a) Revise the poem learnt in the previous lesson:

**Here is a strange jive  
Its count is in five  
Mars: Bring - er of war  
Let's find out some more**

- b) In groups research some facts and descriptive words about Mars and write them on the board.
- c) In groups of 4-5 ask students to use words about Mars to create 5 syllable patterns. Then try creating 5 beat patterns that might divide some beat into 2 syllables e.g.

*Mars cold roc-ky red des-ert*

- d) Students then choose 2 of their 5 beat patterns to create a couplet (2 x beats).
- e) If students are able, ask them to try to have their couplets rhyme, like our poem did.
- f) Have the students practice saying their patterns in time to the beat.
- g) Transfer these rhythm patterns onto body percussion sounds.

### 3. Perform\*\*

Write the structure of the piece on the whiteboard using the following plan:

MARS  
Spoken pattern with patsching  
Body percussion couplet  
Group 1 couplet  
Body percussion couplet  
Group 2 couplet  
Body percussion couplet etc. until all groups have said their couplet  
Spoken pattern with patsching

Rehearse and perform your piece and perform it in assembly or for another class.

### 4. Listen and Imagine

- a) In a darkened room, with the music up quite loudly watch the footage of Mars by National Geographic **without sound**, while playing Holst's music for *Mars* from *The Planets*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8pnmwOXhoY&t=33s>
- b) Discuss whether you think Holst's music was a good accompaniment to the footage and what things they especially liked.
- c) Ask students what they learnt about Mars from this footage.
- d) Why do you think the Romans thought Mars as a planet was angry and warlike?

### 5. Who is a Copycat?

Holst's *Planets* has had a strong influence in film and TV music. It has featured in several movies and even cartoons like *The Simpsons*, *Wallace and Gromit* and *Bluey*.

The musical ideas in this piece have been copied by composers in film music, because the ideas Holst had were so powerful.

- a) Listen to the *Imperial March* by John Williams  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3SZ5sIMY6o&t=30s>
- b) Ask students to describe the musical features that were similar.

- c) Why do you think John Williams thought this piece was a good model for his own film score?

# Lesson 3: Jupiter

## Intended Learning Outcomes

### Students will:

- Demonstrate a 3-beat pattern as a conductor.
- Perform three beat rhythm groupings.
- Read a percussion score to perform with the *Jupiter* theme.

### Materials

- <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/lZDbanZUox0> *Jupiter* theme
- Rhythms patterns displayed on whiteboard.

## Lesson Plan

### 1. Movement

- a) Learn to conduct three beats in a bar. It is a triangle shape

Start with right hand held in front of you at nose height

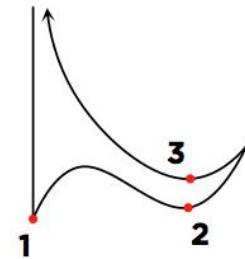
On ONE move hand straight down to about belly button height

Don't let hand flop, imagine you are drawing in the air from one point to the next

Then move hand away from your body out to the right on beat TWO

Finish the triangle shape by moving to the starting point on THREE

- b) Use the *Jupiter* theme YouTube clip above or the Spotify track from 3.18" and practice conducting. As students become more confident have them reflect the dynamics (volume) with smaller actions for softer and larger actions as the music becomes louder towards the end.



### 2. Read and Perform

- a) One of the most well-known tunes from the Planets is what is known as the Jupiter Hymn which begins at 3'18" in the movement. We know that this piece has three counts per bar.
- b) The theme was also made famous in recent years as the theme song for the World Cup football as well as featuring in an episode of *Bluey*.
- c) Practice the following 3 beat patterns as a class in a slow steady beat. Once the children can clap each one test them by clapping a pattern and asking them to identify which one you clapped.



# Lesson 4: Mercury, The Winged Messenger

## Intended Learning Outcomes

### Students will:

- Be familiar with the musical features of Holst's *Mercury*
- Be able to describe the different sections of this piece and what they programmatically depict
- Read and perform compound meter patterns using word rhythms and body percussion
- Discuss what a celeste is and how it is played

### Materials

- Spotify track *Mercury*
- Access to internet for researching the celeste
- Rhythm patterns on the board for class reading and performance

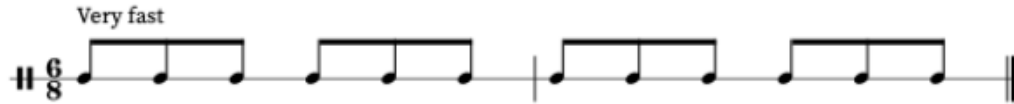
## Lesson Plan

1. Explain to the class that Mercury is known as the winged messenger. Flying around delivering important messages, dropping them down to their readers and then sitting and waiting for the next message to deliver. We can hear the 3 different stages of Mercury's work in the music.
2. Listen to the different sections of the piece as indicated by the timings given.
  - a) Act out the story either flying, the slowly floating down letter (think a falling feather) and sitting waiting for the next delivery and explain how the music shows the action described.
  - b) Listen to the excerpts again and describe what the music does to show the actions\*\*

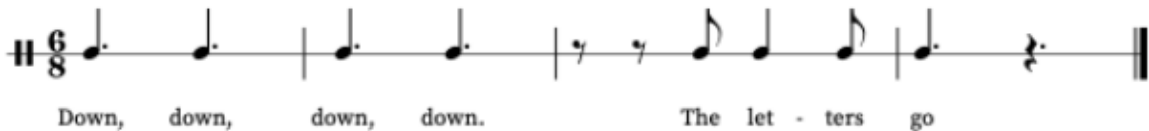
Cue	Action	What do you hear in the music?
0.00-0.30	Mercury speeding around to deliver important messages	
0.37 – 1.00	Slowly the messages float down to their right place for reading	
1.08 - 1.20	Mercury is sitting and waiting for the next message	

3. Below are the three rhythm patterns which show these three stages of Mercury delivering letters. Learn to say the words while clapping the rhythms

a) Firstly, you hear even notes as fast as the speed of light as Mercury flies quickly around to delivering messages.



b) Next the letter is dropped and slowly floats to the ground



c) Mercury sits still and waits for the next message



d) Listen to the entire track of Mercury and identify each of the patterns when it occurs.

e) Clap these rhythms using the words to help.\*\*

## 1. Investigate

An unusual instrument called the celeste is used in this piece.

Watch this video to learn more about the celesta and the answer the questions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw7HAyq54rw&t=51s>

- Which instrument does the celeste look like?
- How is the sound made?
- What does the pedal do to the sound?
- What piece of music is the celeste known for?
- The word celeste in French means what?

## 2. Move

Finish the lesson by playing *Mercury* again and having the children recognise each part of *Mercury* by either acting out what *Mercury* is doing as the piece progresses (younger children) or tapping the rhythms of each section (older students).

# Lesson 5: Compose Your Own Planet Music

## Intended Learning Outcome

### Students will:

- Be able to discuss the astrological character of either Saturn or Uranus
- Explain how they used musical sounds to create a sound image of that character
- Demonstrate learning via a group composition exercise
- Create, read from and perform a graphic score of their own group composition

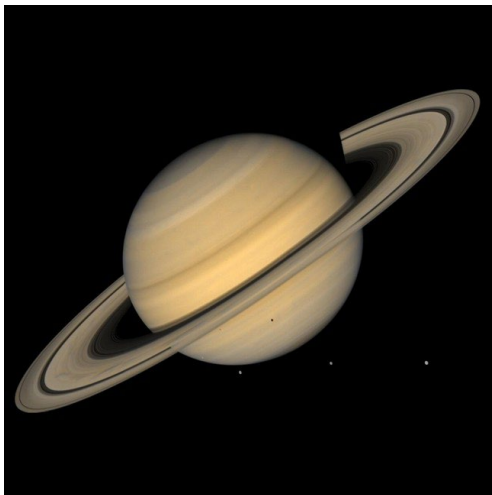
### Materials

- Information about Saturn and Uranus
- Group planning sheet for ideas
- Spotify recording of *Uranus* or *Saturn* by Holst

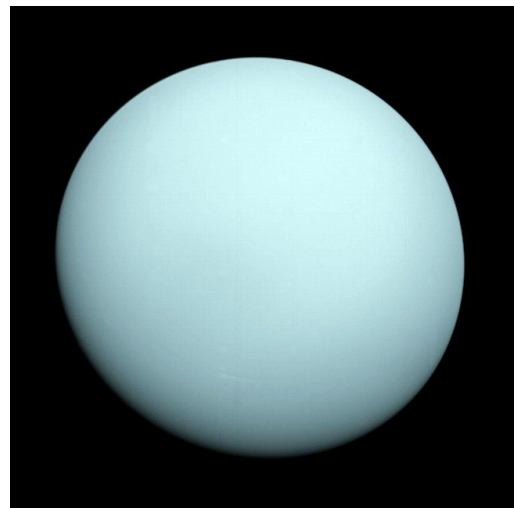
## Lesson Plan

Remind the class that the planets were given these characteristics by the Romans many years ago and that Holst's music was written to capture the unique character of each planet.

Two planets we have not investigated are:



Saturn: Bringer of Old Age



Uranus: The Magician

### 1. Imagine

- a) Choose ONE of these characters to focus on for this lesson. Will it be a creature who brings old age or a magician full of surprises?
- b) Once you have done this draw the character you have chosen and write 5 descriptive words or sentences that tell us about his character.

- c) When completed form groups of the same character and share the features and drawing s with the other member of the groups.

**2. Create\*\***

- a) Hand each group an ideas collection sheet and have each group discuss how they might use sounds to create their own planet music. Remember to think of how you can show actions with sound.

Planet Ideas Collection Sheet for _____ (Name of planet)	
Rhythms	Useful instruments
Speed	Volume
Additional sounds from the classroom	Pitch ideas. (high and low, tunes)
Plan of the piece	Symbols drawn to show actions
Other information	

What is the special theme of tune for your planet? How does it look written down?

- b) Once this have been completed, start writing a piece of music that everyone in the groups is needed to play or to use their voices or body percussion. Tell students they can use a mixture of found, real and body instruments and voices to create their music.
- c) Ask students to record their ideas on a large piece of paper. Students may need to invent some ways to show different musical sounds using graphic images.
- d) When complete rehearse pieces as a group and then perform it for the class.
- e) After each performance ask the class to identify which planet it was and the sounds, they heard which gave them this clue.

### **3. Reflect**

When all groups have performed their version, turn off the lights and have the children rest their heads on their desks and just listen to each of these movements in the way that Holst imaged them.

Note you will need to search for Holst Planets or hunt on Spotify as these movements as they are not in the SSO playlist.

Ask the groups if their own compositions had anything in common with Holst's interpretation of the characters. Some easy thigs might be volume (dynamics), speed (tempo), density of sound (texture), tone colour (types of sounds and sound qualities).