

## **Discuss how Holst depicts war in 'Mars, the Bringer of War' from his planet suite.**

Holst's music is influenced not only by English folk song but also by Hindu mysticism, he has the habit of practical, direct musical expression and fine imaginative sensitiveness and this is shown very clearly in all of his movements of his orchestral suite 'The Planets.'

Mars is a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Orchestral Suite scored for a very large orchestra including; sixteen woodwind; fifteen brass; six timpani; three other percussionists; celesta; xylophone; two harps; organ and strings. With all these instruments it gives the impression of war, as war is seemed as being loud, and this is certainly shown in this piece.

Mars is the opening movement and is in 5/4 time but it sounds march-like in spite of its time signature. This can give the impression of soldiers marching into battle. Its chief characteristic is the relentless, barbaric rhythmic, often consisting of an incessant repeated note, but with the opposing dotted or syncopated rhythms frequently heard against it. Holst said that it represented the stupidity of war.

At the start of the piece the repeated rhythmic ostinato can be heard in the timpani, harps and strings on a unison G. The strings are playing col legno, which produces a percussive sound which adds extra impact to the ostinato and again gives the impression of soldiers marching into battle.

Two bars later a slow moving motif can be heard initially in unison on bassoons and horns rising a fifth and falling a semitone, using a dotted minim - minim rhythm. This gives the sense that war is coming. It gradually builds up with imitation adding more woodwind

instruments and harmony. It cadences with hand stopped horns and trumpets.

In Figure I the tenor and trombone take over with a rising sixth motif, similar to the main theme, against the ongoing ostinato figure which is still on a G pedal. This time Holst uses imitation which rises through the brass instruments and reaches swelling dynamics on a descending tone. Which gives the feeling that war is defiantly coming. A two note motif in the form of an octave leap can be heard antiphonally in the brass and woodwind, particularly between the horns and trumpets which grows in intensity, creating a fanfare-like effect building to a huge fff full orchestral climax at Figure II.

Which gives the thought of war as war is seen as being loud.

In Figure II there are a lot of dissonance chords being played which is found throughout the Planets Suite. In Figure II a new dotted chordal theme can be heard in the trombones and tuba against the ostinato figure which is still in the strings and timpani. The horns and some trumpets join in with this theme two bars after which feels like the main part of a battle in war.

Just before Figure III a new syncopated motif appears in the upper woodwind and violins with yet another dotted chordal theme continuing in the brass, lower woodwind, violas and cellos. While the double basses, trumpets and timpani play the opening ostinato on a C pedal which again adds to the atmosphere of war.

In Figure III the original ostinato theme is replaced by the dotted rhythm chordal theme, the orchestral texture thickens with the addition of an organ, which adds to the noise again bringing a war feeling into the piece. The organ, along with the trumpet plays a three note theme which is played over crescendos. The section rests on a fff E flat minor chord. It has a side and bass drum

adding to the dramatic end of the section. Following this chord the texture moves to homophonic repeated crotchets.

In Figure IV there is a steady crotchet pulse in the stings and against this a euphonium starts a new military call-like theme using a triplet figuration. Which as it states sounds military adding to war. This is answered two bars later by a trumpet, and trumpets where used in war a lot for battle calls.

In Figure V once again the euphonium begins the military call-like theme from Figure IV followed this time in a canon one bar later. Against this the side drum plays and the cymbal has rolls. Sounding again like a military call.

The piece then enters section B, Figure VI in which there is a change of time signature to 5/2 and the music becomes calmer almost like the calm in a storm, but we know that after the calm in a storm the storm is always bigger, so this suggests that the battle will be worse after this section. This Figure is based on the dotted chordal theme first heard four bars after figure II. There is a fragmented variation of the opening ostinato played initially on the side drum, again adding to the impact of war. The violins and violas play tremolo while the horns play a sustained note with timpani rolls which adds to the anticipation.

Then there is a reprise of section A, in Figure VII the music returns to 5/4 and there is a three bar orchestral tutti on the opening ostinato from bar 1 played in unison fff on a pedal G which is followed by a passage based on the opening melodic motif this is accompanied by the ostinato throughout. This again brings more anticipation.

In Figure VIII the ostinato theme continues in the strings whilst the trombones begin the military-like theme first heard at Figure

IV. This is followed by a passage of imitation between tenor tuba and trumpets based on this military-call theme. In this section the chordal theme returns in the oboes, clarinets and horns. In this reprise of A Holst combines his main themes rather than presents them separately.

In Figure IX the material from Figure II is repeated with slight changes in the orchestration.

In Figure X the ostinato from the opening drops out whilst the dotted choral theme continues which builds up the anticipation even more.

Then in the Climax of the piece the full orchestral texture continues, reaching a ffff climax on a discord reinforced by the organ with timpani and gong making their presences felt, it is almost like the sound of a bomb going off. After this the metre changes to 5/2 and three repeated cadences occur based on the descending semitone idea. For each of these cadences Holst uses different instruments. This suggests that the battle is over.

In Figure XI the coda begins in 3/4 time with semiquaver figurations on strings which is joined by woodwind providing a contrast to the previous section this leads into Figure XII in which the opening ostinato figure returns ffff played by brass, percussion and strings but distorted by the addition of rests with harsh discords which is formed by superimposing two fifths a semitone apart. The movement concludes with a bare fifth chord on C with loud timpani rolls which tell us the war is over for now.