

The Silent Planet Programme Note

“The enormity of the universe revealed by science cannot readily be grasped by the human brain, but the music of The Planets enables the mind to acquire some comprehension of the vastness of space where rational understanding fails.”

Gustav Holst

Space is silent. A vacuum with almost no molecules for sound waves to travel through. Yet, we have a collective interstellar imagination of the sound of space; the legacy of Holst’s groundbreaking work *The Planets*.

Alongside orchestrator Ian Gardiner, Stevens & Pound recompose four of Holst’s original movements: Mars *Bringer of War*, Venus *Bringer of Peace*, Mercury *The Winged Messenger* and Jupiter *Bringer of Jollity* for symphony orchestra and solo percussion, harmonica and melodeon. *The Silent Planet* was written in 2024, commemorating the 150th anniversary of Holst’s birth. It was premiered by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal Northern College of Music in collaboration with the youth-led activist non-profit Force of Nature.

As a composer, Holst drew inspiration from the English Folk Revival of the early 20th century, when classical composers collected, transcribed, and reimagined traditional music. Most famously the hymn *Thaxted* (named after Holst’s village) - *I vow to thee my country* - appears as a key theme in *Jupiter*. Once a melody is notated, it becomes frozen in time; yet folk music continuously evolves, a tradition shaped by region, community, and individual voice. It lives on as a kaleidoscopic constellation of sound - continually rediscovered depending on whose hands the music falls into.

Stevens & Pound is a meeting of their respective thousand-year old musical worlds. Delia Stevens is a classically trained percussionist, fluent in notation. Will Pound is a harmonica and melodeon player shaped by the folk tradition, learning entirely by ear. From the outset, neither wished to create a project that placed classical and folk music side by side. They set out to forge a genuinely new shared language - a Stevens & Pound genre - built on mutual curiosity, following in the footsteps of the classical composers influenced by folk.

The creative process behind their recomposition of *The Planets* saw the duo distill each movement into identifiable motifs, committing them to memory. They then spent months shapeshifting the bones of Holst’s ideas, drawing on their combined musical background and

unique soundworld - from conch shells to toy pianos and spinning bells. These new reimaginings were then recorded as demos and expanded back into the symphonic world in collaboration with orchestrator Ian Gardiner:

“What they had created was both respectful and irreverent, with its folk-influenced melodies singing through with authentic poignancy and vigour, an extraordinary palette of sounds, textures and dynamics from just two players, and instantaneous changes of style and register from section to section, rather like very rapid costume changes.”

Ian Gardiner

Holst was future-facing - forever writing horoscopes for his friends and delving into astrology. He used this interest as a creative catalyst, titling planets with their astrological character. Holst however omitted Earth as “astrologically insignificant” from the perspective of the forecasting stargazer. Stevens & Pound have written an additional planet for their suite, subtitled “The Silent Planet”, inviting writer Robert Macfarlane as a collaborator to manifest a new sonic future for our own planet:

“Earth’s vast, miraculous sound-world mustn’t dim to become a silent — or silenced — planet. In music, word and performance, we want to communicate the wonder, awe and fragility of the planet we inhabit.”

Robert Macfarlane

Each planet is prefaced by adjoining segues, written and narrated by Macfarlane and accompanied by musical improvisations, exploring its astrological character through the lens of the 21st century.

The new text was commissioned by and premiered at FolkEast Festival in August 2025. Stevens & Pound are thrilled to be premiering the orchestral debut of The Silent Planet with Robert Macfarlane and the Britten Sinfonia for you tonight.