

# The Planets Schools' Matinee

Key Stage 3 Teachers' Pack



Royal Albert Hall



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## Introduction

This pack is designed to help you and your class prepare for your visit to the Royal Albert Hall to experience our special schools' matinee featuring Holst's Planets Suite, performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra alongside incredible images and footage from NASA. It will really help your students' understanding and enjoyment if you explore the music a little before you visit the Royal Albert Hall. This pack is designed to help you do this and features some ideas for creative work and listening activities that we strongly urge you to undertake in the run up to the concert.

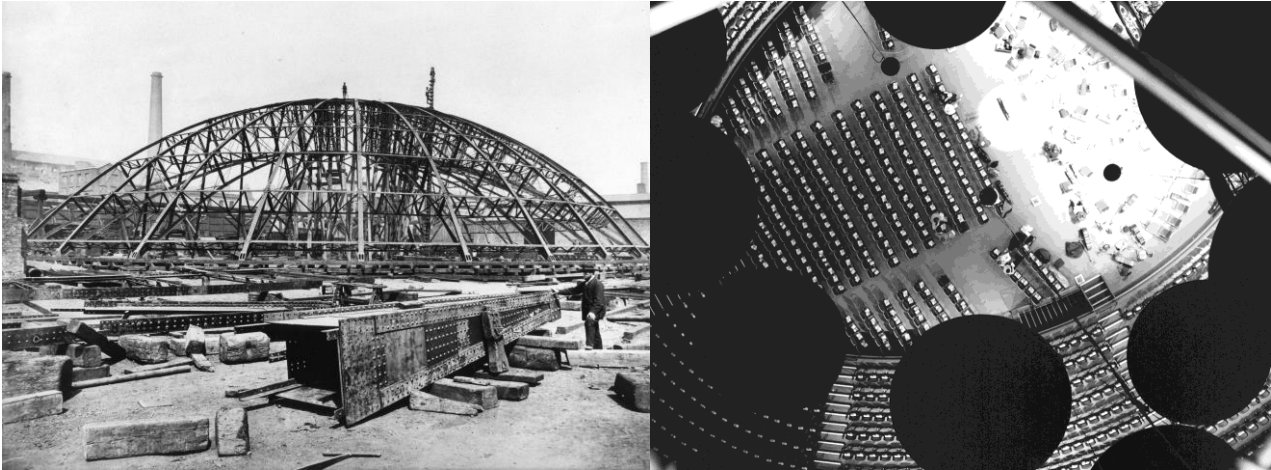
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## Key Stage 3 Teachers' Pack

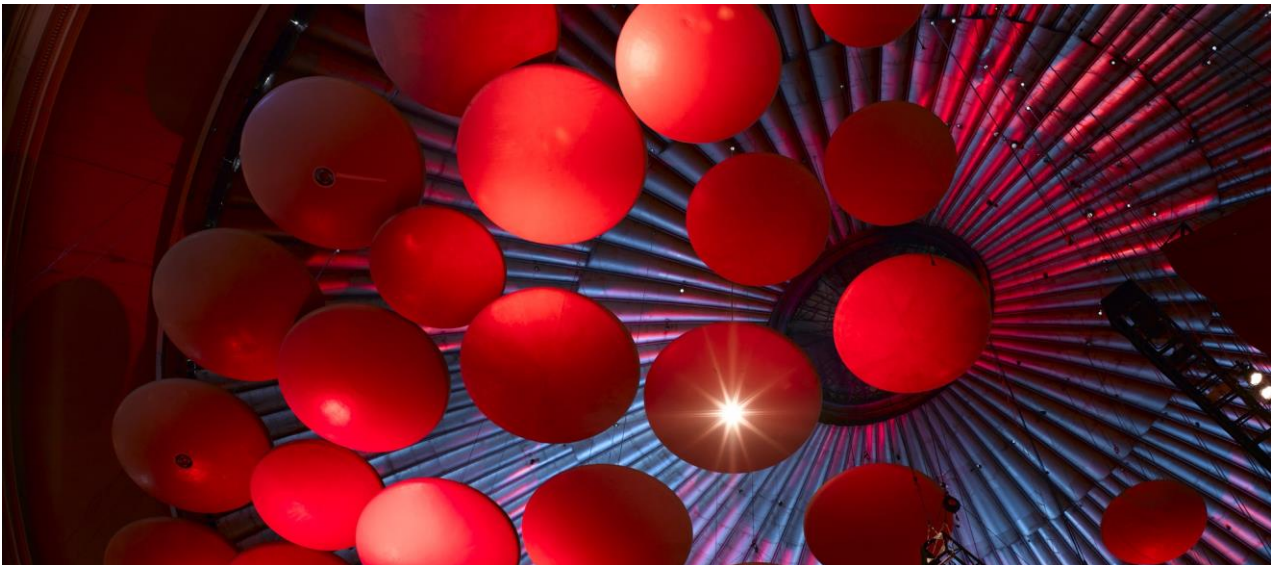


### About the Royal Albert Hall

The Royal Albert Hall was opened in 1871 and is a testament to the vision of Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert. Its design was extremely innovative for the time and included a glass-domed roof, which when built was the largest in the world to stand without internal supports.



It is 41 metres from the top of the dome to the Arena floor. In order to improve the acoustics of the Hall 135 disc shaped 'mushrooms' filled with glass fibre wool were hung from the ceiling in 1969.



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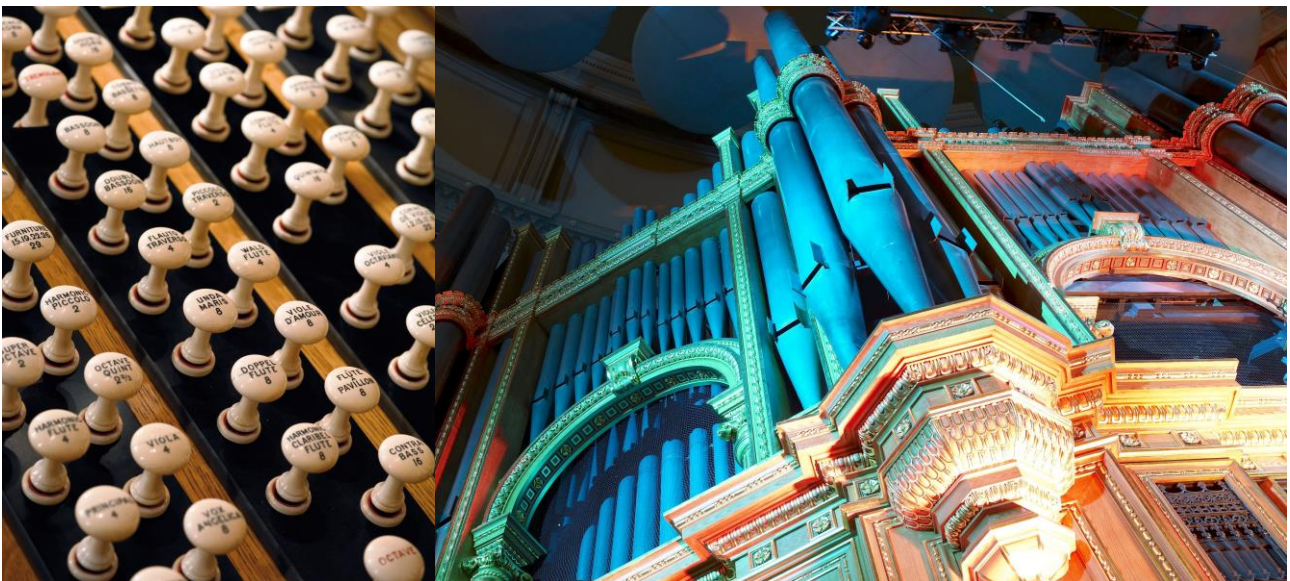


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Built between 1867 and 1871, the Royal Albert Hall comprises of 6 million bricks, 80,000 terracotta blocks and has 12 doors for the general public.



The Royal Albert Hall Organ is one of the largest in the world with 9,999 pipes! Originally the Hall was supposed to seat 30,000 but the design had to be scaled down and it now seats 5,222.



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### About Royal Albert Hall Education & Outreach

The Royal Albert Hall's Education & Outreach programme delivers a range of stimulating learning opportunities linked to the Hall's calendar of events and the unique characteristics of the building.



We work with children, teachers, young people, families and elderly people and aim to spark imagination, inspire creativity and open doors to new experiences and audiences. These include specially created tours, exhibitions, workshops projects and schools' matinees.



For more information about the Education & Outreach work of the Royal Albert Hall, please contact us:

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### The Music

#### **Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949) Also Sprach Zarathustra**

Richard Strauss (not related to the waltzing Strauss's!) belongs to the same musical school of thought as Wagner and Mahler. All three were 'late-Romantics' writing epic pieces and pushing the boundaries of harmony to their limits. Strauss' father was a famous horn player and Richard's first teacher. He was careful to steer his young pupil away from 'dangerous' new music and toward the earlier classics, Mozart, Mendelssohn and Schumann. In the 1880s Strauss became famous for his epic **tone poems** - single movement symphonic pieces that illustrate a story or other non-musical source. *Also Sprach Zarathustra* is one of these and, because of its inclusion in many movies, has the most famous introduction in all of orchestral music. This concert will feature just that opening 'Sunrise' moment.

#### **John Adams (1947 - ) Short Ride in a Fast Machine**

John Adams is one of the most famous composers working today. It is estimated that this piece, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, is performed somewhere in the world at least once every day and that fact alone makes him also a very rich man. Adams began his composing career in the 1970s after becoming interested in the minimalist music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Adams is a second-generation minimalist as his music greatly develops the original ideas of his older contemporaries and features greater harmonic development and structure. *Short Ride* is a classic piece of **minimalism**. It describes a car journey Adams took with his brother when they were both teenagers and new to driving. John's brother was showing off and driving extremely fast in his new sports car and all the excitement and fear of that ride is neatly summed up here in less than five minutes of music.

#### **Gustav Holst (1874 – 1934) The Planets Suite**

Gustav Holst was a British composer living and working in London 100 years ago. He was a very interesting man fascinated by space, astrology, alternative faiths, meditation and vegetarianism - in many ways he was completely ahead of his time.

The *Planets Suite* from 1918 describes seven planets in music but looks at their influence on the psyche rather than their scientific properties. Each one has a subtitle that further explains the character of the music.

#### **Holst's Planets are:**

##### **Mars, the bringer of War**

- In 5/4 time throughout with three epic climaxes. This movement greatly inspired the original music of *Star Wars*.

##### **Venus, the bringer of Peace**

- Serene and beautiful with many orchestral solos and gentle chordal accompaniment.

##### **Mercury, the winged messenger**

- Flickering and flighty. Ideas dance around the orchestra pinned down only by some fiendishly syncopated rhythms.

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### **Jupiter, the bringer of Jollity**

- The emotional centre of the suite with a very famous tune that has been set as a hymn and a rugby anthem!

### **Saturn, the bringer of Old Age**

- Holst's favourite. Two spooky chords alternating back and forth like plodding footsteps. Mysterious and gloomy.

### **Uranus, the magician**

- Brass and timpani herald the arrival of 'The Magician' before a skipping, jerky dance takes over, very much in the style of Dukas' 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' from 20 years earlier.

### **Neptune, the mystic**

- Back in 5/4, this piece has shimmery, watery sounds and a magical ending with off-stage female chorus fading away to silence. If your students are hearing the piece for the time, please try to keep the ending as a wonderful surprise!

Holst's piece features an enormous orchestra with quadruple winds, six horns, large percussion section, celeste and organ, and despite Holst's worries that it was too modern for the first audiences; it was an immediate hit and remains one of the most popular orchestral pieces of all time.

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### Classroom Activities

#### Also Sprach Zarathustra – Listen and create a graphic score

This exceptionally famous introduction lasts just 90 seconds and is made up of very few ideas.

1. Give each of your students a sheet of A4 (or, better, A3) paper and ask them to place it landscape on their desk. Explain that you would like them to create a graphic score of a very famous piece of music. Explain further that there are only three types of sound in the clip that they are about to hear –

**A rumble** could be represented by dark shading at the bottom of the page\*

**Brass reaching upwards** could be represented by rising horizontal lines\*

**Timpani** could be represented by dots\*

*\*these are just suggestions, you might like to ask your class to come up with their own symbols or use Western Classical symbols such as semibreves with tremolo markings, crotchets and quavers.*

2. Play a recording of the opening 90 seconds of Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and ask the class to simply draw what they hear, either using the symbols outlined above, or their own. Play it several times back to back until everyone has finished his or her 'graphic score'.
3. Now take some time to explore what they have produced, you might like to ask the following questions -
  - When does the rumble stop?  
(it stops each time the timps play, but then starts again)
  - How many times do you hear the iconic C-G-C?  
(three, with a different ending each time)
  - How many timpani notes are there each time?  
(13)
  - How would you describe the ending?  
(a big upward scale, a climax?)

*By drawing as they listen your students are actually analysing the piece and becoming more and more familiar with its structure.*

4. Encourage your class to choose their favourite 'score' from all the diagrams created and challenge them to make their own piece of music using the symbols on the page. This doesn't have to sound anything like Strauss's; the performers may invent new sounds to represent what they see on the score.

*At this point you could split your class into smaller working groups and use several of the 'scores' and then join the group pieces together to make one bigger piece.*

5. Finish your exploration of *Zarathustra* by having a discussion about what the music represents. Ask them what they think it's all about and discuss their ideas before explaining that it actually represents the dawn of mankind, the first sunrise, the birth of man.



### Classroom Activities

#### Short Ride in a Fast Machine – Make a minimalist masterpiece

Minimalist music is a type of music popularised in the US in the 1970s, whereby a small number of ideas are processed in certain ways to create an enormous amount of highly repetitive music. Rather than re-creating *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, this project outlines how to make your own minimalist pieces.

1. Split your class into groups of about six. Ask each student to choose an instrument and make sure that each group has at least two pitched instruments in it (the more pitched instruments used in this task, the better)
2. Ask each group to choose a limited number of pitches to work with – five is the maximum number of pitches that they need. They may want to choose a pentatonic scale



or use the notes Adams focuses on at the beginning of his piece –



*If you envisage putting all the groups together at the end to make one piece decide on the pitches as a class so that everyone is working with the same limited scale*

3. Ask each group to appoint a pulse person who will play a steady crotchet pulse throughout the piece. Initially this pulse should be played on an unpitched instrument such as a woodblock or small drum (*again if working towards a class piece, fix the speed of this pulse together*).
4. Ask each group to invent three **ostinatos**\* and be able to play them over and over on their instruments.

*\*an ostinato is a repeated rhythmic pattern. One quick way to invent a new ostinato is to ask a simple question such as 'what did you have for lunch?' Encourage your students to answer with a full sentence then simply speak this sentence to a pulse. Next trying clapping each syllable, then finally transfer the clapped pattern onto instruments -*



*I had chick-en and chips and coke*



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5. Ask each group to make a minimalist piece that features the following three ingredients –
  - a. Constant, steady crotchet pulse (unpitched).
  - b. Up to three ostinatos pitched (within their limited scale) or un-pitched.
  - c. A neat beginning and ending – ideally everyone starting and stopping completely together.
6. When this is achieved, hear each group and give feedback. Minimalist music sounds much less predictable if the ostinatos start on different beats of the bar rather than all starting at the beginning of the bar. At this stage you may want to tweak some of the pieces by encouraging at least one ostinato in each group to begin on beat 2 or 3 of the bar (this just means the player waiting a couple of beats before beginning). This technique is called **Staggering**.
7. Next, explain the following techniques to your class –

- **Subtraction** – over many, many repetitions notes are gradually removed from the ostinato until nothing is left. This can be done in two ways, either by replacing the note with a rest -



- or by squashing the notes up instead of a rest (much harder, although using the words does help!) –



- **Addition** – over many, many repetitions notes are added to the ostinato to either create it from silence



- or to transform it into something else



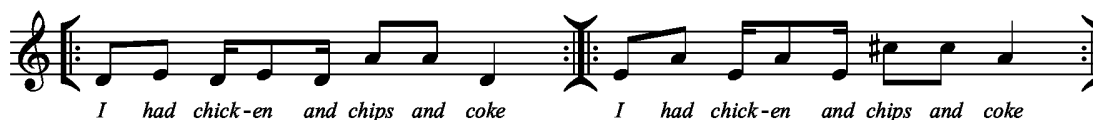
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- **Transposition** – after many, many repetitions, ostinatos are moved up or down onto different pitches and remain at their new pitch for several repetitions before moving back again. (This is particularly effective if all the ostinatos move at the same time and in the same direction). The easiest way to achieve this is to ask everyone to move their ostinato onto random notes (any pitches) on a clear signal such as a cymbal crash and then move back again on the same signal. E.g. -



- **Phasing** – one ostinato is lengthened by **one whole beat** to create a mismatch with the others and therefore create a phase



8. Stress to your class that these techniques are designed to create a GRADUAL change in the music and therefore take place gradually over many, many repeats. I.e. If using subtraction, notes are subtracted slowly one note per several repeats not one note each repeat -



9. Split your class back into its working groups and ask each group to choose a process from the ones outlined above to apply it to their piece.
10. When this is achieved, listen to all the pieces and comment. Are the transformations gradual enough? Are they successfully executed?
11. At this stage you may want to put all the groups together to make one big minimalist piece. Decide as a class how to structure the groups – do they all play at the same time or is there any structure to their entrances/exits? Can two or three processes be lined up or is it more effective if they stay separate? The effect you are aiming for is gradual transformation of ideas and a lot of repetition but be careful that all your lines can be heard and you don't just create a big minimalist 'fog'.

*You may want to encourage your class to use a structure such as TERNARY or RONDO to order their pieces. This will also help with their understanding of these terms.*

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### Classroom Activities

#### Mars from the Planets – Composing in five

It is possible to break down many famous pieces to just three crucial ideas. By then working with these ideas to create new pieces, students are able to understand them from the inside out as they compose using the exact same ideas as the original composer.

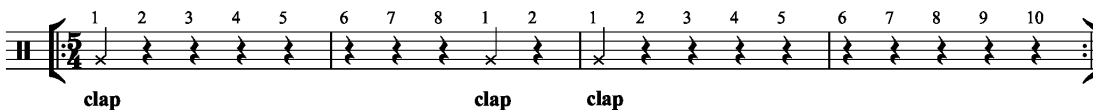
Here's how to do that with Mars.

1. Stand your class in a circle and teach everyone the following rhythm –



Use the words for memory and encourage your students to keep thinking them over and over as they progress onto clapping and they playing the rhythm on the pitch G.

2. Now practice counting to 8, 2 and 10 and clapping on number 1 of each count, like this



3. Finally demonstrate this uneven rhythm, again use the words to help keep things together



Split your circle into three quick groups, start each group on one of the above ideas and try to get all three rhythms going at once!

4. Demonstrate how these patterns work on instruments:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> idea should be unpitched, or stick to one pitch – G
- 8, 2, 10 should leap up and then down as follows –



- the 3<sup>rd</sup> idea moves only stepwise up and down from G.

...and encourage your students to choose a different set of instruments for each one.

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5. Again quickly split into three groups and try putting these patterns together on instruments to make the beginning of your piece. Discuss how you might order the ideas (Holst creates a crescendo), and how you will signal the ending.
6. After this Holst creates a march, still in 5/4 time. It is made up for the following three ingredients:
  1. Steady crotchet pulse
  2. Rhythmic ostinatos split between two or more players - the term for this is '**hocketting**'.  
(You can use the questions-to-rhythms idea outlined above in the Adams task to achieve this).
  3. Another crescendo

Challenge your class to create their own Holstian march.

7. Holst follows this climax with a return to the opening ideas but this time everything is more extreme: bigger, louder, thicker orchestration – terrifying! In doing so he has created a massive **ternary form piece ABA**. By manipulating your pieces into this shape you are using Holst's motifs and structure whilst learning about re-orchestration, pacing and climax.
8. The final 30 seconds of Holst's piece are the **Coda (ending)**. Listen to this section with your class and ask them to figure out what's going on and add it to their piece.
9. Finally, fix your piece so that it is the same every time and when it is, make a large class graphic score of it either using your own symbols or Western Classical Notation.

### Holst's other planets and your own

You can use this three ideas method with all of Holst's movements. Begin by listening to the music with the class and define what the three most important (or useable) ideas are. You might want to simplify things by just listening to the opening minute or a short section within. You could even split up your chosen movement into sections and give each section to a different group.

Once you have agreed on the three ideas work with them, using the instruments and resources you have available, to build up your own compositions as above.

Here are my favourite three ideas from each 'Planet'

- VENUS**
- i. Two chords slowly alternating as if saying 'calm down'.
  - ii. Solos, conversations between instruments.
  - iii. Magical, shimmering ending.

- MERCURY**
- i. Three fast notes passed between instruments at speed.
  - ii. Heavily syncopated rhythm on one pitch.
  - iii. Dance with um-pa accompaniment.

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- JUPITER**
- i. Three note upward phasing pattern (sounds like laughter).
  - ii. Strident section with heavy downward bass.
  - iii. Big tune.
- SATURN**
- i. Plodding footsteps – two chords alternating.
  - ii. Solos.
  - iii. Grows to climax and then fades away (arch shaped).
- URANUS**
- i. Four big brass notes echoed at different speeds.
  - ii. Uneven, jerky rhythm.
  - iii. Dance with upside down um-pa (i.e. 'pa' is stronger than 'um').
- NEPTUNE**
- i. Soft parallel tune in five.
  - ii. Shimmery, watery sounds.
  - iii. The secret off-stage wordless singing.

### **EARTH and PLUTO**

Holst didn't make a musical movement for Earth or Pluto (which wasn't discovered until many years after his piece was written and now has been downgraded to 'dwarf-planet' status). To make your own version of Earth or Pluto, simply ask your class, working in groups, to define the three most relevant factors about that planet be they scientific facts or descriptions of life on that planet (i.e. for Earth they could have a scientific fact - it is 71% water, or describe life here – i.e. busy, bustling cities full of traffic and people).

When three ideas have been chosen, make a musical motif for each idea – keep these short and malleable – and then structure these ideas into a larger piece just as Holst did with Mars.

Throughout this much freer task, encourage your students to think clearly about structure, and the development of ideas rather than constantly creating new ideas. Remind them that very often Holst sets up his ideas at the very beginning of his music and then works with these ideas in different guises until the end rather than baffling the listener with new sounds throughout.

### **Finally...**

Enjoy the concert and your Royal Albert Hall experience. Remember, the more preparation you do in the classroom before your visit, the better your students will enjoy the day too!