

*Saturn* from Holst's *The Planets*:

a transcription and critical commentary for wind ensemble

By

Benjamin James Hogan

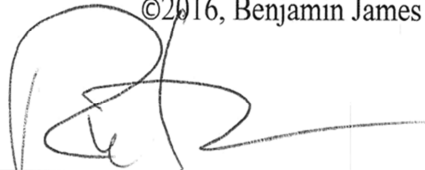
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis was to create a new transcription of Gustav Holst's *Saturn* from *The Planets*. Through the study of techniques used by George Smith in his transcriptions of *Mars* and *Jupiter*, as well as techniques developed through the standard process of transcribing for wind bands a new transcription has been written.

Although Holst himself was discouraged by the popular success of *The Planets*, and did not consider it to be one of his best works, he did consider *Saturn* his favorite movement. Musicians have had access to the *Mars* and *Jupiter* wind band transcriptions for decades, but have not had access to Holst's favorite movement.

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## Chapter 1: The History of *Saturn* and George Smith

*The Planets Suite for Large Orchestra* is a seven movement orchestral suite.

Its movements are:

- *Mars*
- *Venus*
- *Mercury*
- *Jupiter*
- *Saturn*
- *Uranus*
- *Neptune*

Before the premier of *The Planets*, there had been little precedent for a large seven movement orchestral work. Works of Richard Wagner helped set the stage for a large multi-movement work such as this, but Holst was on his own with many of the ideas he explored as he composed the suite.

### The Premier

A few weeks before he had left England for the Middle East, Holst was able to hear a private performance of the biggest work he had yet written. This was *The Planets*. The performance was a present from his rich friend Balfour Gardiner, a generous patron who had already helped him on many occasions, paying for his unknown works to be performed at Queen's Hall, commissioning him to orchestrate music when he was short of money, and inviting him for holidays when he was feeling tired and discouraged.<sup>1</sup>

With this gift, Holst invited a small audience of close friends and colleagues. As Holst's daughter Imogen recalls,

In some ways it was to be the best performance of all, though the strings had not yet achieved the technical ease with which they now flutter their way through *Mercury*.

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<sup>1</sup> Holst, Imogen. *Great Composer Holst*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. BAS Printers Limited, 1981.

Even those listeners who had studied the score for months were taken aback by the unexpected clamour of *Mars*. During *Jupiter* the charwomen working in the corridors put down their scrubbing-brushes and began to dance. In *Saturn* the isolated listeners in the dark, half-empty hall felt themselves growing older at every bar. But it was the end of *Neptune* that was unforgettable, with its hidden chorus of women's voices growing fainter and fainter in the distance, until the imagination knew no difference between sound and silence.<sup>2</sup>

When Gustav Holst premiered *The Planets* it was met with wide acclaim. The multi-movement piece is considered by many to be Holst's greatest achievement; however, the popularity of the suite bothered Holst a great deal, as he did not consider it his finest work.

He hated incomplete performances, though on several occasions he had to agree to conduct shortened versions of only three or four movements. He particularly disliked having to finish with *Jupiter*, to make 'a happy ending', for, as he said, 'in the real work the end is not happy at all.'<sup>3</sup>

### ***Saturn***

While the popularity of *The Planets* plagued Holst, he did on many occasions mention that *Saturn* was his favorite movement. Holst's daughter Imogen wrote in her book *The Music of Gustav Holst*,

[*Saturn*] is Holst's own sort of music. He is so completely immersed in its mood that all problems of technique vanish and the form unfolds with the unhurried inevitability of approaching old age, each note changing place with the last and tirelessly counting out the minutes as they pass by.<sup>4</sup>

The slow plodding motion at the beginning, the steady trudge forward to inevitable death, and content ending show a side of Holst not many people ever got to see.

Growing up a frail child suffering from physical limitations gave Holst a respect for life and death that, in the case of *Saturn*, he played out in his music.

[The] description [of *Saturn*] is so close to the composer's personality, as depicted by his biographers, that we might easily assume this was his own ruling planet. He said that this was his favorite movement of the suite, and perhaps this was a preference

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<sup>2</sup> Holst, Imogen. *Gustav Holst a Biography*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford University Press, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Holst, Imogen. *Great Composer Holst*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. BAS Printers Limited, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Holst, Imogen. *The Music of Gustav Holst*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

based on emotional as well as technical grounds. The hold it had on him extended well into the future, for its B minor theme was to be the basis of the processional theme in *Egdon Heath* (1927), his favorite among his own works, and his acknowledged 'masterpiece'.<sup>5</sup>

Richard Greene also speaks of Holst's inspiration for much of the thematic material of *Saturn* as well.

Just as interesting is the *Dirge and Hymeneal* of 1915. The text of this work focuses on the contrast between death and the joy of life, all cast within a single musical characterization, stoic and dutiful, with a buoyancy held gently in check by an overall serenity. That this small choral piece should have been the model for *Saturn* is of crucial significance for an understanding of *The Planets* as a whole."<sup>6</sup> As Richard Short said in his book *Gustav Holst: The Man and His Music*, "Holst considered *Saturn* to be the best movement of *The Planets*, and there is no doubt that it is a powerful expression of desolate and piercing emotion, carefully controlled at first, building up to a climax of violent intensity."<sup>7</sup>

### **George Smith**

Aside from him being a student at the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall, very little is known about George Smith. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1923, transcriptions of *Mars* and *Venus* prepared by Smith were premiered along with other works. At the "Recapitulatory Concert of New Works and Arrangements for the Military Band," *Mars* was again performed and was also joined by *Jupiter*; "It is not known whether or not this was its first performance." Both of these transcriptions were completed by Smith under the direction of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Vaughan Williams was a longtime friend and colleague of Holst. It is possible that Holst could have heard these transcriptions at one of these concerts. Boosey and Hawkes published both *Mars* and *Jupiter* in 1924.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Green, Richard. *Holst The Planets*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Green, Richard. *Holst The Planets*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Short, Michael. *Gustav Holst The Man and his Music*. Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, Jon C. *Ralph Vaughan Williams' Wind Works*

## Chapter 2: The Process

In the beginning of this project, my original intention was to study the methods used by George Smith in the transcriptions of *Mars* and *Jupiter*. Holst never did transcriptions, only original works. I felt that the importance of these transcriptions was strong, as they have been published since 1924. Musicians in the wind band setting have since had access to *The Planets* through these two movements and I felt that giving them attainable access to *Saturn* was a worthy goal.

### Other Transcriptions

There have been other arrangements and transcriptions of different movements of *The Planets*. Most are simplified to be accessible to young groups, but there are at least two arrangers who did transcriptions. James Curnow has a transcription of *Jupiter* that some believe is even better than Smith's. Merlin Patterson has the only full transcription of the entire suite. While Patterson has transcribed the suite in its entirety, he made several strange instrumentation choices which I felt made the pieces less accessible to even seasoned wind groups. For example, the instrumentation calls in some spots for eight separate clarinet players; most wind ensembles have six clarinets but technically only three parts with two players each. When preparing this transcription, the traditional wind ensemble was kept in mind for accessibility.

### Getting Started

When first starting into the long process of this transcription, I found that breaking instruments up into smaller groups was best. Also, if a certain section or set of instruments was going to be directly transcribed, those instruments would be transcribed first, working in other instruments around them. I learned that Holst's score had several idiosyncrasies that



made transcribing more difficult. For example, instruments such as clarinet and French horn, which are transposed instruments, did not have their proper key signature in the score but were transposed in the notes. Instead, Holst added accidentals to the score to make up for the difference of key. This took several trial and error moments to figure out; at first glance the entire score seems to be in concert pitch by the key signature.

### **Instrument Decisions**

George Smith made extensive use of the clarinet section to replace strings in both *Mars* and *Jupiter*. While I could have done the same, I felt the purpose of the strings in *Saturn* is to be more textural or chordal than melodic. For this reason I made a larger use of saxophones to replace strings, freeing the clarinets. However there are two sections where clarinets replace strings. This was done due to timbral differences between clarinet and saxophone at a piano dynamic. The softer, warmer tone of clarinet was closer to the original tone of strings in those sections.

At the beginning of *Mars* there is a small section of two harps. They are rhythmic along with strings and woodwinds. Smith in his transcription left harp out, as it played a very small role. In *Saturn* there are two harps, with a much more important part to fill. For this reason, it was a great challenge to find the right mixture of instruments to fill both harp parts. A collection of piano, bells, vibraphone, and two marimbas are used throughout to fill in, something that Smith did not have to consider in his transcriptions.

### **Chapter 3: Treatment of Instrument Groups in *Mars* and *Jupiter***

In his transcriptions of *Mars* and *Jupiter*, George Smith had several obstacles to overcome with regard to orchestration. For example, in *Mars*, the beginning has two harps. Smith simply decided to not include them at all, as it is not necessary for either the timbre or chordal structure of the piece. Throughout both movements, Smith uses B<sup>b</sup> clarinets to help cover sections originally for strings. He also makes some use of saxophones for support of clarinets when they are covering both the original clarinet line as well as strings.

When it comes to the rest of the instruments shared between both the orchestra and wind ensemble, Smith left most of their parts alone. The largest difference between the two orchestrations is the overall key. Holst wrote both movements in C major and Smith decided to write both movements in B<sup>b</sup>. While this is only a whole step apart, it does make for more accessible playing ranges in many of the instruments, and B<sup>b</sup> concert falls more comfortably across most of the winds.

## Chapter 4: The Treatment of Instrument Groups in *Saturn*

There were many variables to consider while preparing this transcription. What should be done with certain instrument groups? Should the original key signature remain? Should the instrumentation remain the same as in the George Smith transcriptions of *Mars* and *Jupiter*? These answers were part of the journey in this project, and posed most of the larger problems that had to be resolved.

### Key Signature, Markings, and Techniques

With the transcriptions of *Mars* and *Jupiter*, the original key was not retained. Both movements were originally in C major (see Figure 1) but were instead transcribed into B<sup>b</sup> major for the wind band transcriptions (see Figure 2).

**2 Piccolos**

**2 Flutes**

**Allegro giocoso**



Figure 1. Gustav Holst, *Jupiter*. m. 1<sup>9</sup>

**Allegro giocoso**

Piccolo

Flute



Figure 2. George Smith, *Jupiter*. mm. 1-2<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Jupiter*. 1996

<sup>10</sup> Smith, George. *Jupiter*. 1924

In my transcription of *Saturn*, the key could have been changed but was kept in C major. This decision was made due to the difference of timbre between different key signatures.

Throughout the piece, there are markings that either directly mirror Holst, or are the modern equivalent. Playing technique markings are also retained as best as possible. This is clearly indicated in the Tuba at rehearsal 1 with the pizzicato in the string bass being articulated by staccato markings for the tuba (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

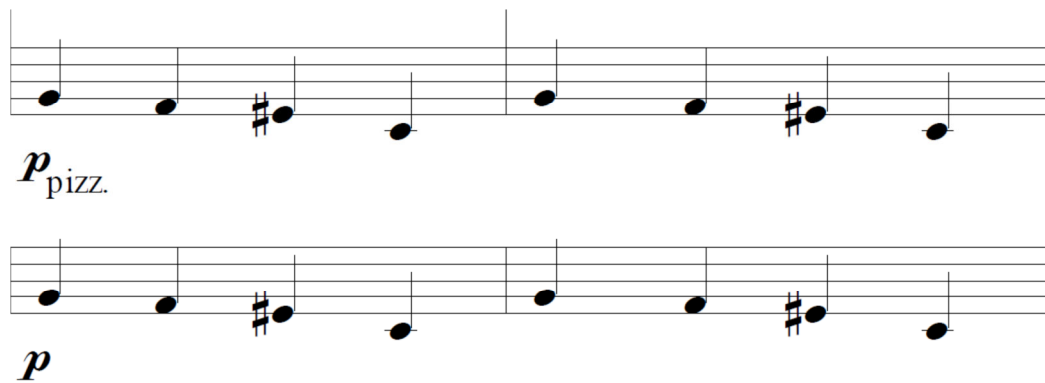


Figure 3. Benjamin Hogan, *Saturn*. mm. 28-29<sup>11</sup>



Figure 4. Gustav Holst, *Saturn*. mm. 28-30<sup>12</sup>

## Strings

The Smith transcriptions make large use of the clarinet section to replace the strings. For example, the percussive strings at the beginning of *Mars* (see Figure 5 and Figure 6).

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Hogan, *Saturn*. 2016

<sup>12</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Saturn*. 1996

Figure 5. Gustav Holst, Mars. mm. 1-2<sup>13</sup>

Figure 6. George Smith. Mars. mm. 1-2<sup>14</sup>

In this transcription of *Saturn*, clarinets have too many critical sections to be replaced; however, saxophones are free to cover the strings, as they are not used in orchestra. Making use of first and second alto saxophone to replace violin, tenor saxophone to replace viola, and baritone saxophone to replace the cello makes for a better use of the instruments given in a wind ensemble (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Figure 7. Benjamin Hogan, Saturn. mm. 41-42<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Smith, George. *Mars*. 1924

<sup>14</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Mars*. 1996

<sup>15</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016



Figure 8. Gustav Holst, *Saturn*. mm. 41-42<sup>16</sup>

Throughout *Saturn*, strings are used as chordal accompaniment, never having the main melody. However there are two examples in this transcription where strings are covered by clarinets. This is done for the timbral difference of sustained clarinet versus saxophone at the piano dynamic (see Figure 9 and Figure 10).

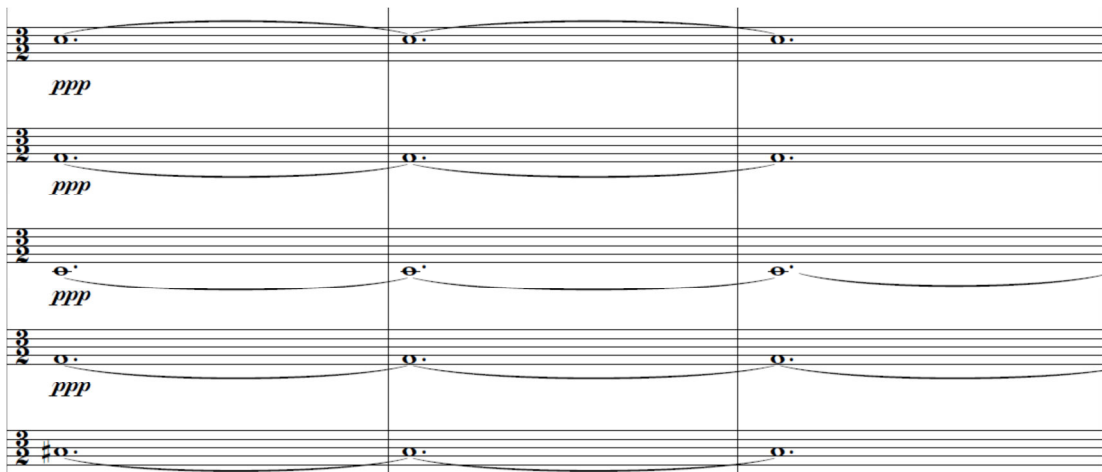


Figure 9. Benjamin Hogan, *Saturn*. mm. 107-109<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Saturn*. 1996

<sup>17</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

Figure 10. Gustav Holst, Saturn. mm. 107-109<sup>18</sup>

The string bass is handled differently within this transcription. As string bass is common in a wind ensemble, its part was left as is. It is, however, joined by the tuba in key sections, such as from the beginning of the piece (see Figure 11 and Figure 12). This is done to give string bass support in key sections. The tuba joins string bass at the ending of the piece from m. 110 through to the end (see Figure 13 and Figure 14).

Figure 11. Benjamin Hogan, Saturn. mm. 4-7<sup>19</sup>

Figure 12. Gustav Holst, Saturn. mm. 4-7<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Saturn*. 1996

<sup>19</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

<sup>20</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Saturn*. 1996



Figure 13. Benjamin Hogan, Saturn. mm. 114-116<sup>21</sup>



Figure 14. Gustav Holst, Saturn. mm. 114-116<sup>22</sup>

The addition of the tuba to these string bass moments was necessary, as only one string bass is traditional in a wind band setting, as opposed to several within an orchestral setting.

### Woodwinds

There are changes in the instrumentation of this transcription that aid in accessibility, such as the ‘bass flute’ part, technically alto flute, which is essential to create the proper chords. Holst has cues throughout the orchestral piece in case an alto flute is not available. Doing the same within this transcription, there are cues for the bass flute in English horn, bassoon and clarinet. There are also two parts available for both bass flute and alto flute, depending on the availability of either instrument.

The woodwind section includes:

- Piccolo
- 3 Flutes

<sup>21</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

<sup>22</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Saturn*. 1996



- Bass Flute/ Alto Flute
- 2 Oboes
- English Horn
- 3 Bassoons
- 3 Clarinets in Bb
- Bass Clarinet
- Optional Contrabass Clarinet
- 2 Alto Saxophones
- Tenor Saxophone
- Baritone Saxophone

The bass oboe also had considerations to be made. While its part is considerably less essential compared to bass flute it is still needed in several key moments. Bassoon covers bass oboe at the beginning, where it is the most exposed. Holst had bass oboe cued for English horn; however, in this transcription at the beginning, English horn is already cued for bass flue. The timbre is closer to a high bassoon than a low English horn.

## **Brass**

A large portion of the brass ensemble remains exactly how Holst wrote it. Several exceptions are made in my transcription to assist in the accessibility in the traditional wind ensemble.

The brass section includes:

- 4 Trumpets in C
- 4 French Horns
- 2 Trombones

- Bass Trombone
- 2 Euphoniums
- Tuba

The original orchestral score calls for six French horns, all playing independently. This was accomplished by treating euphoniums one and two as French horns five and six. This decision was made as euphonium playing in its higher register matches timbre with a french horn in its lower register (see Figure 15 and Figure 16).



Figure 15. Benjamin Hogan, Saturn. mm 73-75<sup>23</sup>



Figure 16. Gustav Holst, Saturn. mm. 73-76<sup>24</sup>

The tuba part is mostly as Holst wrote it with a few exceptions. As mentioned earlier, tuba follows string bass in crucial sections to give much needed support. Tuba is also divided at some spots as most wind ensembles have two tuba performers (see Figure 17).



Figure 17. Benjamin Hogan, Saturn. mm. 51-52<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

<sup>24</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Saturn*. 1996

<sup>25</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

## **Harp**

Holst wrote for two harps in his orchestral setting. This caused many challenges within this transcription, as harp is not a common instrument in the wind ensemble. Wanting to keep this transcription accessible meant replacing harp with instruments more common to wind band. At many key sections, such as the beginning, a single harp is replaced with piano.

While the timbre is different than harp in these sections, it is being used as a chordal instrument and therefore does not need to make use of the plucked nature of strings. There are sections where the harp does have the percussive sound of a plucked string. In these sections, mallet percussion is used to keep the same effect on the ear.

## **Percussion**

While the original score made use of several percussion instruments, such as timpani and chimes, this transcription has made extensive use of the entire section.

The percussion section includes:

- 6 timpani, two players of 3 drums each
- Bells
- Xylophone
- Vibraphone
- 2 Marimbas, two players per marimba
- Chimes

While this transcription was meant to be accessible, the percussion parts can be very challenging. For example the timpani are to be set for six different notes. If an ensemble does not have six different drums, they can be tuned back and forth from note to note during the performance. This practice requires skilled performers, but is not unattainable.

This transcription makes extensive use of mallet percussion to replace the two harps. This is most notable at m. 107, where both harps are replaced with bells and vibraphone. Again, the timbre is different, but in this particular section, the sound cloud that Holst was trying to create remains with the use of the different instruments (see Figure 18 and Figure 19).



Figure 18. Benjamin Hogan, Saturn. mm. 107-108<sup>26</sup>

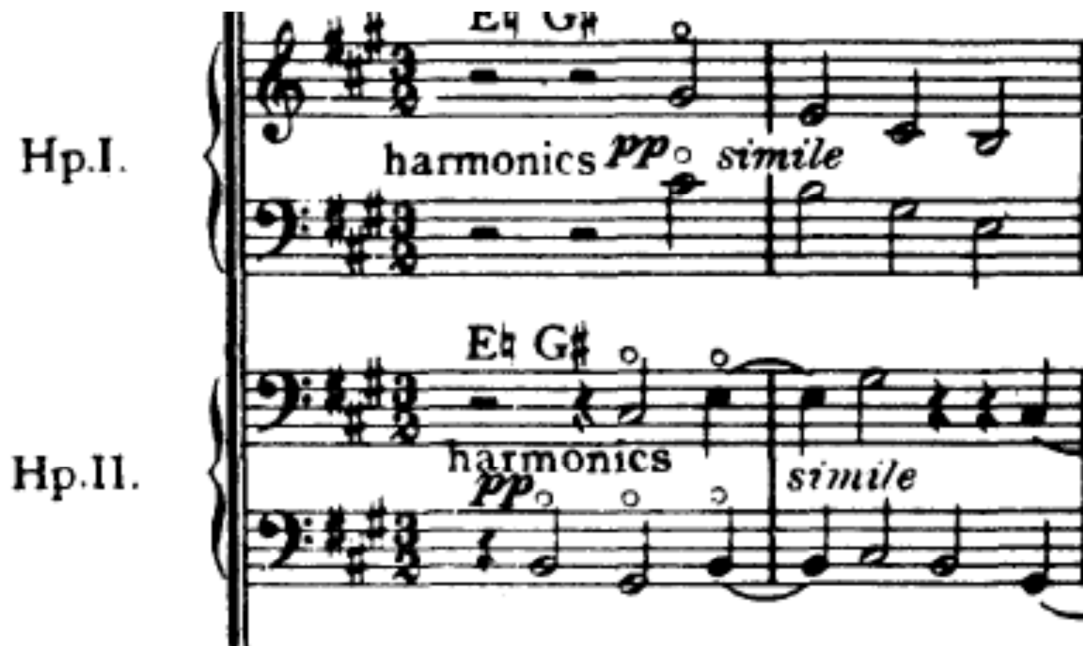


Figure 19. Gustav Holst, Saturn. mm. 107-108<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

<sup>27</sup> Holst, Gustav. *Saturn*. 1996

At rehearsal 6, the piano is replaced by two marimba with two players each to fill out the two harp parts.

This union makes for a difference in tone quality that enriches mimics the original timbre of the harp.



Figure 20. Benjamin Hogan, *Saturn*. mm. 127-128<sup>28</sup>

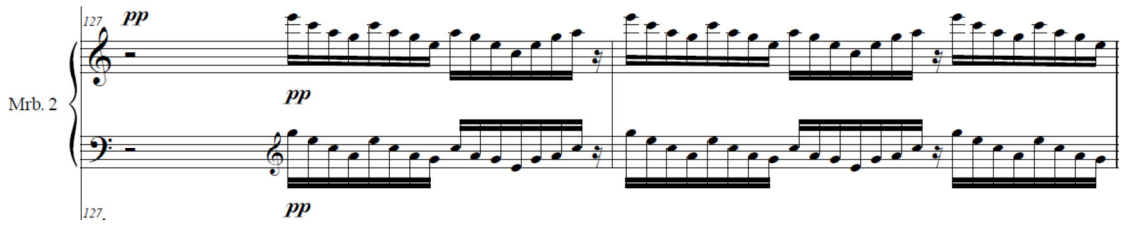


Figure 21. Benjamin Hogan, *Saturn*. mm. 127-128<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

<sup>29</sup> Hogan, Benjamin. *Saturn*. 2016

## **Chapter 5: Nearing Completion**

As this transcription was nearing completion, I was approached by Dr. R. Wayne Gallops to see if the piece would be performance ready by August of 2015. The original completion date was to be in October of that year and would be performed by the Radford University Symphonic Band. However, Dr. Gallops wanted to program the entire *Planets Suite* for the combined Radford University Wind Symphony starting in August. This transcription was finished in time and along with the original George Smith transcriptions, and the remaining movements arranged by Merlin Patterson, the RU Wind Symphony performed *The Planets Suite*. It was a great honor to have my transcription performed in this way.

### **Final Touches**

Within the rehearsal cycle, several playing problems and issues arose. While it was nothing that changed the piece entirely, lots of little issues came up that were able to be adjusted. Having this rehearsal and performance of the piece was invaluable to see what worked and what didn't. While Finale is a wonderful program, it can also be a curse; when you press play it simply plays what it sees. It does not have to think about the difficulty or technical aspects of the music. The several little corrections were made and the piece was a success on performance day.

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