



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2024/25 SEASON

The Planets

March 21-22, 2025 | 7:30 p.m.

Holland Performing Arts Center

Ankush Kumar Bahl, conductor | Résonance, chorus

AARON JAY KERNIS

Musica Celestis

KEVIN PUTS

Concerto for Orchestra

INTERMISSION

GUSTAV HOLST

The Planets

I. Mars, the Bringer of War

II. Venus, the Bringer of Peace

III. Mercury, the Winged Messenger

IV. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

V. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

VI. Uranus, the Magician

VII. Neptune, the Mystic

This printed program is a condensed version.

For more info about the orchestra, guest artists, and the full program notes, download the Omaha Symphony app or scan this QR code with your mobile device.

*program subject to change



Featured Artists



Currently in his fourth season as Music Director of the Omaha Symphony, **Ankush Kumar Bahl** has delivered resonant performances of masterworks (new and old) and continues to champion American composers and artists while pursuing innovative, community-based concert design. Committed to expanding the American repertoire, the Omaha Symphony and Maestro Bahl have commissioned seven new works in their first four seasons together and in 2023, their live recording of Andy Akiho's *Sculptures* garnered the Omaha Symphony its first GRAMMY nominations in the orchestra's history. On the podium, Bahl is recognized by orchestras and audiences alike for his impressive conducting technique, thoughtful interpretations, innovative concert experiences, and engaging presence.

Highlights of previous classical series guest engagements include performances with the New York Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, Houston Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, Florida Orchestra, Phoenix Symphony, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestre National de France, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México, Orquesta Sinfonica Municipal (São Paulo), Richmond Symphony, Virginia Symphony, Louisiana Philharmonic, and the National Symphony Orchestra (Washington, D.C.). Summer festival appearances engagements include the Copenhagen Philharmonic at Tivoli, Sun Valley Summer Symphony, Wintergreen Summer Music Festival, Chautauqua Institute, Wolf Trap with the NSO, the Brevard Music Center, and the Mostly Modern Festival. An experienced collaborator, Bahl has worked with many prominent soloists, among them Daniil Trifonov, Lang Lang, Emanuel Ax, Sarah Chang, Lara St. John, Karen Gomyo, Stella Chen, Aaron Diehl, Bhezod Abduraimov, Benjamin Grosvenor, Orion Weiss, Conrad Tao, Charlie Albright, Anthony McGill, Kelley O'Connor, Philadelphia Orchestra Concertmaster David Kim, and Vesko Eschkenazy, concertmaster of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

A protégé of former New York Philharmonic Music Director Kurt Masur, he served as his assistant conductor at the Orchestre National de France, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. From 2011 to 2015, he was assistant conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra under Christoph Eschenbach, leading a variety of concerts with the orchestra in over 100 performances. Bahl has been fortunate to also count Maestros Jaap van Zweden, Zdenek Macal, David Zinman, and Gianandrea Noseda among his mentors.

Résonance is a premier vocal ensemble comprising multi-talented, professional singers based in Omaha, Nebraska, whose mission is to engage, inspire and challenge those engaged through eclectic and innovative vocal music performances and compelling collaborations. The ensemble believes that all vocal and choral music is, at its heart, about sharing stories. It undertakes all repertoire—regardless of genre or content—to provide unlimited, unmatched and unforgettable experiences for its audiences. Since its founding in 2012, the professional voices have performed with GRAMMY and Emmy award-winners, Broadway directors and artists, Nebraska Choral Directors Association and appear frequently with the Omaha Symphony and the Gallup at Work Summit. Résonance offers a variety of programs for youth, including a season-long immersion program for high school students. In 2022, Résonance premiered the Festival Choir, a choir of singers from around the community who specialize in performing choral-orchestral works, and in 2023 the Youth Ensemble was born out of a need to further share learning the skills needed to succeed in the performing arts. Résonance released its debut album *Pilgrimage – A Journey in Choral Music* (2020) by MSR Classics, available now on all major streaming services.

Program Notes

by Mathew Fuerst

Musica Celestis

Aaron Jay Kernis

Born: January 15, 1960 – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Piece Length: Approximately 11 minutes.

Notes by the composer.

Musica Celestis is inspired by the medieval conception of that phrase which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end. “The office of singing pleases God if it is performed with an attentive mind, when in this way we imitate the choirs of angels who are said to sing the Lord’s praises without ceasing.” (Aurelian of Réôme, translated by Barbara Newman) I don’t particularly believe in angels, but found this to be a potent image that has been reinforced by listening to a good deal of medieval music, especially the soaring work of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). This movement follows a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern through a number of variations (like a passacaglia) and modulations, and is framed by an introduction and coda.

– Aaron Jay Kernis

Concerto for Orchestra

Kevin Puts

Born: January 3, 1972 – St. Louis, Missouri

Piece Length: Approximately 25 minutes.

Notes by the composer.

Concerto for Orchestra grew out of my friendship with conductor Stéphane Denève. It is dedicated both to him and to the musicians of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, for whom I have developed great admiration since their first performance of my music in 2004. The creative entry point for me was the discovery of young Amanda Gorman’s beautiful poem “Hymn for the Hurting” written in response to the horrific school shooting—an occurrence now routine in our country—in Uvalde, Texas in May 2022. The music at the concerto’s opening—recalled briefly at various places throughout the piece—is my immediate musical reaction to it. The title of the second movement, “Caccia,” is a reference to the 14th century musical form depicting the hunt or the chase and flows directly from this opening hymn. It continues the opening movement’s focus on the various groups of instruments in the orchestra beginning with the oboes and punctuated at all times by the orchestra’s three percussionists who play identical collections of six drums. “Music Box with Arietta,” by contrast, explores the gentler side of the percussion section, led here by cascading gestures played by the harp and celesta, giving way to a lyrical counterpoint of woodwinds. “Toccata” is a quick exchange between the strings, the winds, and the percussion. Eventually the brass section asserts itself, cutting across these exchanges with brash, angular lines. A brief refrain of the opening movement leads to a gentle “Siciliana” featuring nearly all instruments in the orchestra in lyrical ways, perhaps most prominently the piano. Another refrain introduces the final movement, another “Caccia,” this one containing a brief quotation from the Mozart opera which inspired it.

– Kevin Puts

The Planets

Gustav Holst

Born: September 21, 1874 – Cheltenham, United Kingdom

Died: May 25, 1934 – London, United Kingdom

Piece Length: Approximately 50 minutes.

The genesis of *The Planets* occurred during a trip Holst took to Spain with a few friends in March 1913. On this trip, a discussion about astrology piqued his interest; Holst soon dug into the work of Alan Leo, known as the “father of modern astrology.” This rabbit hole would lead to the starting point of a set of movements – the future *The Planets* – and Holst confirmed that the inspirations “... were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets and not by classical mythology.”

So Holst says – but not all of his musical pictures match Leo’s descriptions of the astrological signs. For example, Leo’s Mars has a very optimistic description, yet Holst leans toward the aggressive nature one might associate with Mars’ mythological representation, especially with a title like “The Bringer of War.” Regardless, each movement in *The Planets* centers on a single musical character. As one writer explains: “Holst spoke of the movements as being a series of mood pictures, each acting as a foil to the others.” Indeed, while there are multiple themes in each movement as one would expect with larger orchestral works, they generally focus on one mood, the contrasts exposed as you move throughout. The brutality inherent in “Mars, the Bringer of War” is balanced by the gentleness of “Venus, the Bringer of Peace.” These conscientious contrasts create an overall structure that many have noted move the music from the physical to the metaphysical: transcending what feels known as we float away with his final movement, “Neptune, the Mystic.”

Contrasts also create a logical balance for the overall suite of seven movements. Consider the suite as an arch structure. The first movement, “Mars,” is in the asymmetric meter of 5/4 – a trait it shares with the final movement, “Neptune.” The similarities, however, end there. “Mars” is earthbound, heavy, and aggressive; “Neptune” is impressionistic, with gentle musical contours. Similarly, the bright adoration of movement two, “Venus,” is the polar opposite of the wild, chaotic “Uranus, the Magician.” “Mercury, the Winged Messenger” – the title tells you everything – is the perfect opposite to “Saturn’s” slow menace. And, at the center of it all? The magnificent “Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity,” the only movement that has contrasting movements within itself.

© Mathew Fuerst, 2025

A note about the visuals you’re about to see:

Our ability to “see” the outer ranges of the universe, even with our feet squarely on Earth, has grown exponentially over the last fifty years. Curated by Director of Digital Initiatives and Production Erik Thorstensen, these images come from myriad programs and space explorations; the new James Webb and Hubble Space Telescopes, the Voyager, Galileo, Cassini and Juno probes, and numerous space rovers, among others. When Holst wrote *The Planets*, he focused on the orbs that were visible from Earth at the time, combining their existence with the work of astrologer Alan Leo. Over the last year, Erik traversed the photo archives of every brave crew – or probe – that left our orbit, stitching their work effortlessly into Holst’s narrative. We hope it gives you the same sense of wonder Holst must have felt when he first pondered the stars. Enjoy.