

Rockford Symphony Orchestra
Steven Larsen, Music Director

ComEd Classics Series

“Celestial Inspirations”

February 17, 2007

Josef Strauss

Music of the Spheres Waltz (*Sphären-Klänge*)

Arrigo Boíto

Prologue in Heaven from the opera, *Mefistofele*

Mephistopheles

Ronald Hedlund, baritone

Mystic Choir, Spirits, Penitents

Mendelssohn Chorale

Martha Bein, Director

Cherubs

Kantorei, The Singing Boys of Rockford

Joel Ross, Director

INTERMISSION

Gustav Holst

The Planets, Suite for Large Orchestra

Mars, the Bringer of War

Venus, the Bringer of Peace

Mercury, the Winged Messenger

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

Uranus, the Magician

Neptune, the Mystic

Women of the Mendelssohn Chorale

Martha Bein, Director

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The performance will be broadcast by WNIU/105.7 on March 26, 2007.

Program Notes

By Steven Larsen

Music of the Spheres (Sphären-Klänge), op. 235

Josef Strauss (b. Vienna, 1827; d. Vienna, 1870)

For most of the 19th century the greatest name in popular music was Strauss. The dynasty began in 1804 with the birth of Johann Sr. who (inaccurately) was proclaimed “Father of the Waltz.” Although his firstborn son, Johann Jr. (1825 – 1899) would garner international fame and the title of “The Waltz King,” his other two sons, Josef (1827 – 1870) and Eduard (1835 – 1916), would also stake out a place in the history of “light” music.

Josef was reluctant to follow the “family business” and became an architect, but was not averse to using his musical talents to cash in on the Viennese craze for waltzes and polkas. His works are generally of a more serious nature than those of his brother, and many are still in the repertory today. Unquestionably, his most famous work is the humorous “Pizzicato Polka”.

“Music of the Spheres” is more a decorative title than a descriptive one, but begs for an explanation. The concept comes to us first from Pythagoras, as recounted by Plato in his *Republic*. After accurately defining the overtone series in concise mathematical terms, Pythagoras extrapolated the harmonious ratio of these numbers to the actions of the universe. With the earth at the center, Plato theorized that the sun, moon and planets revolved around us in their proper orbits, created in proportional relations that reflected the whole-number relations of the pure musical intervals: “Upon each of its circles stood a Siren who was carried round with its movements, uttering the concords of a single scale.”

Fast forward to the Middle Ages, when philosophers postulated three types of music, *Musica universalis* or *musica mundana* (universal music, or music of the world) described Plato’s celestial harmonies. Also unheard was *musica humana* (the internal music of the human body in balance), while what we commonly think of as music was *musica instrumentalis*, vocal or instrumental music performed by humans.

Twenty centuries after Plato, the father of modern astronomy, Johannes Kepler, wrote in his *Harmonice Munde* (1619) said that he wished “to erect the magnificent edifice of the harmonic system of the musical scale . . . as God, the Creator Himself, has expressed it in harmonizing the heavenly motions.” Lack of evidence didn’t faze him: “I grant you that no sounds are given forth, but I affirm . . . that the movements of the planets are modulated according to harmonic proportions.”

Scientific conjecture about cosmic music came to an end with Isaac Newton. But future generations of mystics, occultists, philosophers and such have clung to the comforting idea of a state of utopia achieved by harmonious alignments of the heavenly bodies.

Prologue in Heaven from the opera, *Mefistofele*

Arrigo Boíto (b. Padua, 1842; d. Milan, 1918)

Nicolas Slonimksy, the famed lexicographer and long-time editor of *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, lauded Arrigo Boíto (ah-REE-go bo-EE-to) “an

important Italian poet and opera composer.” What? You’ve never heard of Arrigo Boíto? Perhaps it would be more surprising if you had, since he never wrote any music for the concert hall. But how “important” can a composer be, if in seventy-six years of life he wrote only two operas – and never finished the second?

The answer lies in his only complete opera, *Mefistofele* (Mephistopheles), that premiered in 1868 at Milan’s La Scala. A bloated, six-hour-long behemoth badly sung and ineptly conducted, it collapsed with such finality that it seemed destined to drag its author into perpetual obscurity. But Boíto was twenty-six; young enough to have been led astray by callow arrogance and hubris, but old enough to have developed a vision of opera’s future. Moreover, he enjoyed a growing reputation as an excellent poet, sought out by composers to provide them with librettos for their operas.

Boíto attended the Milan Conservatory of Music. In 1862 at age twenty he won a stipend for a year’s travel abroad. The first six months was spent in Paris, where he met Berlioz, Victor Hugo, Rossini and Verdi. Verdi was the pre-eminent composer of Italian opera, a hero to all Italians, musicians or otherwise. He was impressed by the young man and asked him to write the libretto for a new cantata, *Inno delle nazione* (Hymn of the Nations), which premiered in London that year. Mid-century Paris was the nexus of every style, movement, controversy and trend in opera. Boíto was dazzled. After France and England, he went on to Belgium, Poland and Germany, where he came under the spell of Wagner and his operas.

These were heady times for young Arrigo, who began to see himself as the means of transforming Italian opera. The grand spectacle of French opera and the radical ostentation of Wagner’s “music dramas” convinced him that his countrymen needed a new direction. At a banquet in 1863 he read a provocative ode, *All’arte Italiana*, in which he implied that Italian music was “stained like a brothel wall”. Verdi, who was in attendance, took it as a personal attack and swore never to deal with Boíto again. Although the two would later reconcile (Boíto wrote the librettos for Verdi’s great final operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*), incurring Verdi’s wrath did not help his career ambitions.

Boíto had begun writing *Mefistofele* while still a student. The success of Gounod’s *Faust* at La Scala in 1862 forced him to delay his own version of the story, but also made him determined to surpass it. His principal teacher at the conservatory was Alberto Mazzucato, principal conductor at La Scala, who arranged for the first production of the new opera. Mazzucato was to conduct the premiere, but was quite sensibly frightened by the score’s enormity. He suggested large cuts; Boíto haughtily spurned his advice, and he withdrew. Boíto himself gamely assumed the conducting duties, for which he had little training or ability. A perfect storm of mediocre voices, inept conducting and a six-hour running time guaranteed the opening-night fiasco. The only bright spot was the opera’s Prologue, which was cheered.

Crushed by the failure of eight years of work, Boíto found his life changed in two ways. First, he decided to more vigorously follow his poetic muse, and thus became one of history’s greatest librettists. Second, he developed the lifelong habit of constantly

tinkering with his music, dooming his second opera, *Nerone*, on which he labored for over fifty years, to incompleteness. But the tinkering paid off for *Mefistofele*, when a svelte, two hour twenty minute version was reborn to great critical and public acclaim. Its frequent revivals have assured his place in posterity.

The Faust legend is both simple and bottomless. What would happen if a man were to sell his soul to the devil in return for power, youth, or wisdom? The two-part tragic play by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is not only the most famous literary setting; it is considered the greatest work of German literature. Gounod's opera, though enduringly popular, pushed aside philosophical depth in favor of highlighting the love story. Boito confronted the whole of Goethe's *magnum opus*. His greatest success is probably the Prologue, a fantastic vision of heaven's vastness and grandeur. The plot is simple: while Heavenly Hosts sing the praises of God, the Devil pays a visit to mock them, engaging God (through his choral intermediaries) in a bet that he can corrupt the soul of one Johann Faust.

The Prologue in Heaven

The cloudy regions of space. Flourish of trumpets. Thunder.

The Celestial Host invisible behind the screens of clouds.

Mystic Chorus, Cherubim, Penitents. Then Mephistopheles, alone, in the shadows.

FIRST CELESTIAL HOST

<i>Ave, Signor degli angeli e dei santi</i>	Hail, Lord of angels and saints,
<i>E delle sfere erranti</i>	And of the errant spheres
<i>E dei volanti — cherubini d'ôr.</i>	And of the flying, golden cherubim.
<i>Dall'eterna armonia dell'Universo</i>	From the eternal harmony of the universe
<i>Nel glauco spazio immerso</i>	Immersed in the vastness of space,
<i>Emana un verso — di supremo amor:</i>	Springs a strain of supreme love.
<i>E s'erge a Te per l'aure azzurre e cave</i>	And rises to Thee through the azure and hollow air
<i>In suon soave.</i>	In a sweet swell of sound.

ECHOES

<i>Ave!</i>	Hail!
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MEPHISTOPHELES

(standing self-assuredly on his coat-tails)

<i>Ave, Signor, perdona se il mio gergo</i>	Hail, Lord, pardon me if my jargon
<i>Sia lascia un po' da tergo</i>	Falls a mite behind
<i>Le superne teodie del paradiso;</i>	The divine anthems of paradise;
<i>Perdona se il mio viso</i>	Forgive me if my countenance

<i>Non porta il raggio che inghirlanda i crini</i>	Does not wear the halo which wreathes the locks
<i>Degli alti cherubini:</i>	Of the elect cherubim;
<i>Perdona se dicendo io corro rischio</i>	Pardon me if, by speaking frankly, I run the risk
<i>Di buscar qualche fischio.</i>	Of getting a hiss or two.
<i>Il dio piccin della piccina terra</i>	The tiny God of the tiny earth
<i>Ognor traligna ed erra</i>	Degenerates steadily and strays
<i>E, al par di grillo saltellante, a caso</i>	And, hopping like a cricket, by chance
<i>Spinge fra gli astri il naso.</i>	Pokes his nose among the stars,
<i>Poi con tenace fatuità superba</i>	Then with arrogant and tenacious fatuity
<i>Fa il suo trillo nell'erba.</i>	Chirps away again in the grass.
<i>Boriosa polve! tracotato atòmo!</i>	Conceited dust! Haughty atom!
<i>Fantasima dell'uomo!</i>	Phantom of man!
<i>E tale il fa quell'ebra illusione</i>	And he is made so by that drunken illusion
<i>Ch'egli chiama Ragione.</i>	Which he calls — Reason.
<i>Si, Maestro divino, in buio fondo</i>	Yes, divine Master, in pitch dark
<i>Crolla il padron del mondo.</i>	The lord of the world is crumbling.
<i>E non mi dà più il cuor, tant'è fiaccato,</i>	And I no longer have the heart, so worn out is it,
<i>Di tentarlo al mal.</i>	To tempt him to evil

MYSTIC CHORUS

<i>T'è noto Faust?</i>	Do you know Faust?
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MEPHISTOPHELES

<i>Il più bizzarro pazzo</i>	The most fantastic madman
<i>Ch'io mi conosca, in curiosa forma</i>	I know; in his own curious way
<i>Ei ti serve da senno. Inassopita</i>	He serves you in earnest. An insatiable
<i>Bramosia di saper il fa tapino</i>	Lust for knowledge makes him a poor
<i>Ed anelante; egli vorrebbe quasi</i>	Panting wretch; he would wish to be almost
<i>Trasumanar e nulla scienza al cupo</i>	Superhuman and no learning can satisfy his
<i>Suo delirio è confine. Io mi sobbarco</i>	Somber mania. I am preparing
<i>Ad aescarlo per modo ch'ei si trovi</i>	To lure him and ensnare him in my toils.
<i>Nelle mie reti; or vuoi farne scommessa?</i>	Now will you wager on it?

MYSTIC CHORUS

<i>E sia.</i>	So be it.
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MEPHISTOPHELES

<i>Sia! vecchio Padre, a un rude gioco t'avventurasti.</i>	Amen! Aged Father, you have ventured into a rough game.
<i>Ei morderà nel dolce pomo de' vizi</i>	He will bite the sweet apple of sin
<i>E sovra il Re del ciel avrò vittoria!</i>	And I shall triumph over the King of Heaven!

THE CELESTIAL HOST

<i>Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!</i>	Holy! Holy! Holy!
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MEPHISTOPHELES

<i>(Di tratto in tratto m'è piacevol cosa</i>	(From time to time I find it pleasant
<i>Vedere il Vecchio e dal guastarmi seco</i>	To see the Old Man and I take good care
<i>Molto mi guardo: è bello udir l'Eterno</i> <i>Col diavolo parlar si umanamente.)</i>	Not to fall out with Him: it is great to hear the Eternal Father speaking so humanly to the devil.)

CHERUBIM (*behind the clouds, approaching in a flurry of stars*)

<i>Siam nimbi — volanti — dai limbi,</i>	We are clouds flying from limbo,
<i>Nei santi — splendori — vaganti,</i>	Roving amid holy splendors,
<i>Siam cori — di bimbi, — d'amori.</i>	We are choirs of children of cupids.
<i>Siam nimbi — volanti — dai limbi,</i>	We are clouds flying from limbo,
<i>Nei santi, etc.</i>	Roving amid, etc.

(repeating their song, they fade away)

MEPHISTOPHELES

<i>È lo sciame legger degli angioletti;</i>	It is the nimble swarm of little angels;
<i>Come dell'api n'ho ribrezzo e noia.</i>	Like bees they fill me with loathing

(he vanishes)

CHERUBIM

<i>Fratelli, teniamci per mano;</i>	Brothers, let us hold hands;
<i>Fin l'ultimo cielo lontano</i>	As far as the furthest heavens
<i>Noi sempre dobbiamo danzar:</i>	We must always dance:
<i>Fratelli, le morbide penne</i>	Brothers, let our soft wings
<i>Non cessino il volo perenne</i>	Never cease their eternal flight
<i>Che intorno al Santissimo Altar.</i>	Till we circle the Holiest altar.
<i>La danza in angelica spira</i>	The dance in an angelical spiral
<i>Si gira, si gira, si gira.</i>	Turns, spins and whirls.
<i>Siam nimbi — volanti — dai limbi,</i>	We are clouds flying from limbo,
<i>Nei santi — splendori — vaganti,</i>	Roving amid holy splendors,
<i>Siam cori — di bimbi, — d'amori.</i>	We are choirs of children of cupids.
<i>Siam nimbi — volanti — dai limbi,</i>	We are clouds flying from limbo,
<i>Nei santi, etc.</i>	Roving amid, etc.

(circling again and again, then disappearing)

PENITENT WOMEN (*from Earth*)

<i>Salve Regina! — S'innalzi un'eco</i>	Hail, Queen of Heaven! Let an echo rise
<i>Dal mondo cieco — alla divina</i>	From the dark world to the divine
<i>Reggia del ciel.</i>	Palace of Heaven.
<i>Col nostro canto, — col nostro pianto</i>	With our singing, with our tears
<i>Domiam l'intenso — foco del senso,</i>	Let us quell the fierce fire of the senses
<i>Col nostro canto mite e fedel.</i>	With our meek and faithful song.
<i>Odi la pia — prece serena:</i>	Hear our pious, serene prayer:
<i>Ave Maria, gratia plena.</i>	Hail Mary, full of grace.

CHERUBIM

<i>Su gli astri, sui venti, sui mondi,</i>	On the stars, the winds, the worlds,
<i>Sui limpidi azzurri profondi,</i>	On the limpid blue depths,
<i>Sui raggi del sol . . .</i>	On the rays of the sun . . .
<i>La danza in angelica spira</i>	The dance in an angelical spiral
<i>Si gira, si gira, si gira.</i>	Turns, twists and whirls.

THE CELESTIAL HOST

<i>Oriam per quelle di morienti ignave</i>	Let us pray for those timorous,
<i>Anime schiave.</i>	Enslaved souls of the dying.

ECHOES

<i>Ave.</i>	Hail!
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PENITENT WOMEN

<i>Il pentimento — lacrime spande.</i>	The penitent sheds his tears.
<i>Di queste blande — turbe il lamento</i>	May Heaven accept the lament
<i>Accolga il ciel.</i>	Of these frail multitudes!
<i>Odi la pia — prece serena:</i>	Hear our pious, serene prayer:
<i>Ave Maria, gratia plena.</i>	Hail Mary, full of grace.

ECHOES

<i>Ave! Ave! Ave!</i>	Hail! Hail! Hail!
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ALL THE CELESTIAL HOST

<i>Ave, Signor degli angeli e dei santi</i>	Hail, Lord of angels and saints,
<i>E delle sfere errant</i>	And of the errant spheres
<i>E dei volanti — cherubini d'ôr.</i>	And of the flying, golden cherubim.
<i>Dall'eterna armonia dell'Universo</i>	From the eternal harmony of the universe
<i>Nel glauco spazio immerso</i>	Immersed in the vastness of space
<i>Emana un verso — di supremo amor.</i>	Springs a strain of supreme love.
<i>E s'erge a Te per l'aure azzurre e cave</i>	And rises to Thee through the azure and hollow air
<i>In suon soave.</i>	In a sweet swell of sound.

ECHOES

<i>Ave!</i>	Hail!
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The Planets, op. 32, Orchestra Suite in Seven Movements

Gustav Holst (b. Cheltenham, 1874; d. London, 1934)

As certain as death and taxes, every audience member making a first-time acquaintance with *The Planets*, asks the question: Where's Pluto? Fourteen years would elapse

between the work's premiere and the erstwhile Ninth Planet's discovery in 1930. In the seventy-six years since, various composers tried to rectify this perceived injustice by writing addendum movements bearing that planet's name. Now that Pluto has been officially and ingloriously removed from the pantheon of planets, that perennial puzzlement may gradually fade into the ethers, like the eerie chorus at the end of *Neptune*.

Despite his name, Gustavus Theodore von Holst was as English as fish and chips or cricket. Born into a musical family of a Swedish father and an English mother, he first studied piano and violin, later becoming a professional trombonist. While attending the Royal College of Music he became close friends with Ralph Vaughan Williams. This lifelong bond provided endless intellectual stimulation for each composer, discussing, in the words of Vaughan Williams, "every subject under the sun from the lowest note of the double bassoon to ... Thomas Hardy's 'Jude the Obscure.'"

After graduation Holst became music master at St. Paul Girls' School; two years later he was named music director at Morley College in London. He supplemented his income by playing trombone in several orchestras. The onset of World War I prompted him to drop the Germanic article from his name; his pre-war compositions are published under the name "Gustav von Holst."

His most famous work, *The Planets*, is ninety-one years old and still rides near the top of the charts measuring popularity. Completed between 1913 and 1916, it is one of the last works of the early century conceived for a very large orchestra. Ever since Haydn, orchestras had grown steadily in size and instrumentation. Post-Romantic composers such as Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg favored huge ensembles. Then "The Great War", the "War to End All Wars" began which impoverished and decimated the population of all of Europe, not just the war's "losers." In the post-war wreckage, no one could afford to perform works demanded 90+ players, even if the musicians could actually be found. The work's debut had to be delayed until after the war's conclusion, since Holst couldn't find enough musicians to play it.

Why has *The Planets* remained so enduringly popular? Few would argue that this was Holst's most inspired work, and its sonic splendor is thrilling. But not to be denied is the seductiveness of the programmatic titles. Would *Mars, the Bringer of War* have captured fancies if it had been named *Allegro con brio*?

By the end of music's Romantic era, music with programmatic, extra-musical aspirations and descriptive titles had eclipsed "absolute music" in popularity. Even Mahler, the last great symphonist, had infused his symphonies with programmatic titles, narratives and meanings. Yes, the purists are correct that good music can always be understood and appreciated as music alone – *prima la musica, poi le parole* (first the music, then the words). But our brains process music through a variety of life experiences, cultural awareness, musical training and the like. Understanding may come from many paths – some paths will get us there more quickly, but each has interesting scenery along the way.

Holst didn't intend his suite to be a travelogue of our solar system, however, Astronomy's ancient ancestor, astrology, was Holst's avocation. Studying the planets and stars excited his musical imagination. "As a rule I only study things that suggest music to me," he wrote. "Recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me."

Astrology was consistent with his attraction to exotic mysticism. He had immersed himself in Indian philosophy and religion, even teaching himself Sanskrit in order to make his own translation of the *Rig Veda*. It seems odd that astrology should see a revival of interest in the 20th century, even as astronomy was systematically debunking its basic assumptions. But Holst and others, including Carl Jung, looked to this ancient "science" as a means of exploring the unconscious mind.

Many composers of program music later found themselves feeling trapped by their own works. Holst was painstakingly specific in explaining what his work *was not*: "These pieces were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets; there is no programme music, neither have they any connection with the deities of classical mythology bearing the same names. If any guide to the music is required the subtitle to each piece will be found sufficient, especially if it be used in the broad sense. For instance, Jupiter brings jollity in the ordinary sense, and also the more ceremonial type of rejoicing associated with religions or national festivities. Saturn brings not only physical decay, but also a vision of fulfillment. Mercury is the symbol of mind."

The suite opens with the riveting *Mars, the Bringer of War*. It is easy to hear the clank of tanks and mechanized warfare in this hair-raising movement, and you could be expected to infer that it was inspired by the horrors of World War I. But *Mars* was completed several months before the onset of hostilities, and even if Holst had anticipated the war, he had no way of predicting the carnage that would be caused by tanks, airplanes and poison gas. Sir Adrian Boult, however, quoted Holst as saying that *Mars* was an indictment of war's stupidity.

Mars, the Bringer of War. The association of the red planet Mars and war goes back as far as history records. The planet's satellites are Phobos (fear) and Deimos (terror), and its symbol combines shield and spear. Holst represents this by a fierce, remorseless Allegro in the unsettling, unbalanced 5/4 time signature. The movement ends in a crashing climax of utmost sonic violence.

Venus, the Bringer of Peace. Aside from the moon, Venus is the brightest object in our night sky. In *The Principles and Practices of Astrology*, Noel Tyl writes that to astrologers, "when the disorder of Mars is past, Venus restores peace and harmony." The rhythmic violence and searing brass are gone, and the dominant colors are the cool ones of flutes, harps, and celesta.

Mercury, the Winged Messenger. Known to the Greeks as Hermes, this son of Zeus and Maia assumes the role of messenger in Homer's *Odyssey*. To the Romans he was Mercury, and his winged sandals and winged cap were borrowed from Hermes. To

astrologers, Mercury is “the thinker.” This is a virtuosic scherzo; unstable, nervously changeable in meter and harmony - in a word, mercurial.

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity. More massive than all the other planets put together, Jupiter has at least 63 satellites (one of them larger than the planet Mercury). It is named for the chief Roman God, who the Greeks revered as Zeus. It is his alternate name, Jove that gives us the word “jovial.” According to Noel Tyl, Jupiter “symbolizes expansiveness, scope of enthusiasm, knowledge, honor, and opportunity. . . [and] corresponds to fortune, inheritance, bonanza.” The movement took on an unmistakably English tone in 1921 when Holst set the big tune in the middle as a patriotic song with the words, “I vow to thee, my country.”

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age. Before telescopes, the ringed planet Saturn was the outermost of the planets identified. The god is associated with Cronus and traditionally portrayed as an old man. To quote Tyl again, Saturn is “man’s time on earth, his ambition, his strategic delay, his wisdom toward fulfillment, his disappointments and frustrations.” The movement is serene but static, filled with tolling of bells. Incidentally, it was Holst’s favorite.

Uranus, the Magician. The first planet discovered in the age of the telescope, in 1781 by Sir William Herschel. He wanted to name it in honor of England’s King George III (it does sound a bit like “You’re Highness,” doesn’t it?). In astrology, Uranus rules invention, innovation, and astrology itself. Holst begins with a dazzling triple invocation (trumpets and trombones, then tubas, then timpani) and leads that way into a movement of galumphing dance. At the end, the sinister apparitions disappear into the night.

Neptune, the Mystic. Neptune, discovered in 1846, was at the time considered the farthest planet in our solar system. In astrology, Neptune means confusion and mystic rapport with other worlds. Invisible to the naked eye, it spoke to Holst of distance, mystery, and unanswerable questions. It is characterized by an undulating, swaying, irregular meter with softly dissonant harmony. Holst introduced a wordless women’s chorus singing offstage to create a mysterious, otherworldly effect. At the end, the orchestra becomes silent, with only the voices fading into eternity and endless space.

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