

Toronto Music Alliance/No Strings Theatre: Summer Soundscape Series

presents

“Music of the Spheres”

Gregory Millar, pianist

July 19, 2025. 7:00pm

Remenyi House of Music
109 Vanderhoof Ave Suite 15
Toronto, ON M4G 2H7

I. The Sun & The Moon

Piano-Soleil (from *Six thèmes solaires*) (c. 7.5 min.)

Denis Gougeon (b. 1951)

Clair de lune (from *Suite bergamasque*) (c. 5 min.)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

II. The Planets

Three Movements from “The Planets”
(concert transcription for solo piano by Gregory Millar)

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Mercury, the Winged Messenger (c. 4 min.)

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age (c. 9 min.)

Uranus, the Magician (c. 7 min.)

III. The Stars

“O du, mein Holder Abendstern” (c. 6min.)
(*Recitative & Romanza* from the opera *Tannhäuser*)

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)
arr. Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Image astrale (c. 10min.)

Jean Coulthard (1908-2000)

Program Notes:

A philosophy that dates all the way back to ancient Greece posits that there is a kind of “music” within the universe. Much like how proportions of a vibrating string produce musical pitches, ratios between the orbits and movements of the heavenly bodies also generate “tones” that, while not audible to the human ear, nevertheless are perceived by the soul. The Greeks called this “*musica universalis*”, or the “music of the spheres”, and believed it was an expression of the fundamental balance of the universe.

This evening’s program offers a selection of music that evokes, contemplates, or is inspired by the celestial objects – the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars.

Piano-Soleil, by Québec composer Denis Gougeon, was commissioned for the International Stepping Stone of the Canadian Music Competitions in 1990. Gougeon conceived of a suite of ten pieces, one for each of the various instruments and voices participating in the competition, where each piece portrays a different object in our solar system; the sun, and nine planets. (Pluto was still considered a full-fledged planet at the time!) The collective title of the suite - “*Six thèmes solaires*”, literally translating as “Six Solar Themes” - is a pun on the French phrase for “solar system”.

The piano is cast in the role of the sun, whose explosive power and sizzling energy is conveyed musically through a variety of virtuosic gestures, volcanic eruptions of notes, and blaring, sonorous harmonies. The quieter, more spacious central section of the piece features a haunting melody played *tremolando* – an unusual (and difficult!) technique on the piano – that gives an other-worldly sound.

Claude Debussy’s **Clair de lune**, the central movement of his “*Suite bergamasque*” completed in 1905, is one of the French impressionist composer’s most famous pieces. The antipode of Gougeon’s brilliant and imposing portrayal of the sun, the piece exquisitely evokes the romance and magical beauty of moonlight.

Gustav Holst, an English composer of German descent, is most remembered today for his orchestral suite **The Planets**, which was composed between 1914 and 1917. The Planets is scored for a very large orchestra and is universally admired for its consummate orchestration, yet Holst worked out the piece on two pianos, and the music, in fact, is wonderfully idiomatic for the keyboard. Of the seven movements, three were chosen for this concert transcription for solo piano:

Mercury, the Winged Messenger is a feather-light *scherzo* which breathlessly evokes the nimble Greek god relaying a flurry of messages. This effect is achieved by the fluctuation between two key areas (B-flat and E) and two meters (duple and triple). Another musical element is a rhythmic *ostinato* on a single pitch that is a clever reference to a contemporary war-time mode of communication – Morse code.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age opens with a steady alternation of two dissonant chords – the slow, inexorable beating of Time – around which lugubrious melodic fragments are woven.

Soon the music turns into a solemn procession that builds to a climax of tremendous psychological tension. This tension is released with great effect in a coda that ends the movement in a state of peaceful acceptance. The composer once stated that this was his personal favorite movement of the suite.

Uranus, the Magician is often compared to Paul Dukas' orchestral showpiece "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", but the adventure of Holst's sorcerer is markedly darker in tone. Introduced by a musical motto of four pitches: G – E flat – A – B (which, in German spelling, are the musical letters of Holst's own name), the piece unfolds in a series of sections, each presenting a different tune, none of which ever returns. The last of these sections is a sinister march with a rugged accompaniment based on the four-note motto. This builds to a victorious climax that ultimately is swept away on a large *glissando*. A remarkable epilogue follows: after the smoke clears, a hypnotic, sustained chord remains. It's as if the magician has become lost and weakened. An attempt to gather renewed energy fails, and the music collapses on a note of agonizing defeat, and simply stops.

Richard Wagner's opera **Tannhäuser** was premiered in Dresden in 1845, and the Romanza from Act 3 has become one of its most popular excerpts. Franz Liszt's paraphrase of both it and the preceding recitative appeared in 1849.

This "Song to The Evening Star" (as it is known in English) is sung by the character of Wolfram. At a bleak moment in the drama, Wolfram is left alone in a valley as twilight descends. He begins to sing about how the moment feels like a premonition of Death, but his mood brightens at the appearance of the Evening Star, which he describes as "the loveliest of stars" whose gentle beam of light splits the deepening darkness in two and, like a loyal friend, points the way out of the valley. It is a scene brimming with beautiful symbolism of hope and redemption.

Jean Coulthard had a long, productive, and accomplished career as a composer and educator. Now a quarter century after her passing, her name is firmly in place among the canon of Canadian composers. Her prolific catalogue of works includes numerous compositions for piano that are strongly influenced by those of Debussy, Ravel, Rachmaninov, Brahms, Chopin – and are just as masterfully written for the instrument.

Image astrale was composed in 1980. The title *Image* purposefully recalls Debussy's series of pieces from 1905-07. Coulthard herself provided a program note: "...*Image astrale* is a dramatic work, written about my thoughts and feelings when I contemplate the stars ... how the heavenly bodies provoke our imagination." She continued her note with a remark that seems just as pertinent in our current times than it was close to 50 years ago: "There is such an interest in the universe today that I feel we should try to project ourselves into it, one way or another."

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gregory Miller". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the left of the date.

Toronto. June, 2025.

About the Artist:

Gregory Millar's playing has been described as "compelling", "a *tour-de-force*", and "devastatingly beautiful" (Penny Gumbert, The Muskoka). Originally from Lachine, Quebec, Gregory's career as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral pianist has taken him to several Canadian provinces, the Northeastern United States, and Europe. He appears in the Netflix film *In The Shadow of the Moon* as a concert pianist (whose recital takes a disastrous turn!) Gregory has appeared as concerto soloist with the Kindred Spirits Orchestra and the Mississauga Symphony. He holds a DMA from the Eastman School of Music. Read more at gregorymillar.ca