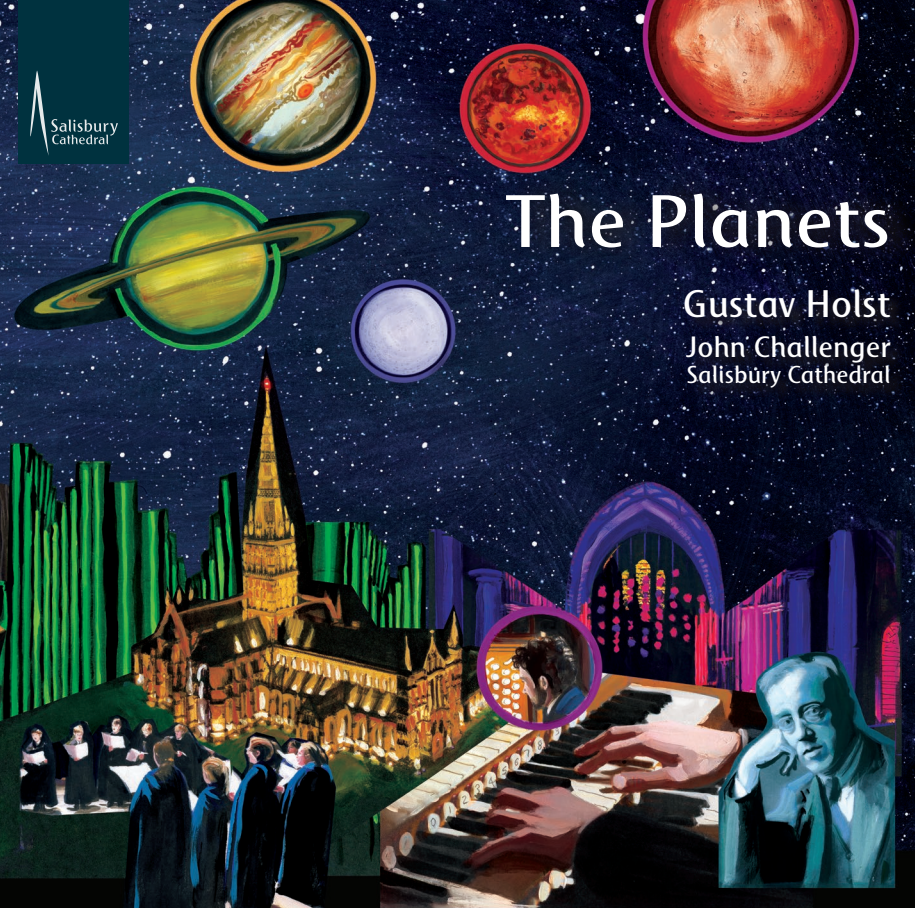


# The Planets

Gustav Holst  
John Challenger  
Salisbury Cathedral



**GUSTAV HOLST** 1874–1934

## The Planets (Opus 32)

Arranged for the Father Willis organ of Salisbury Cathedral by **JOHN CHALLENGER** b. 1988

- |   |                                       |       |
|---|---------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | <b>Mars</b> The Bringer of War        | 9:10  |
| 2 | <b>Venus</b> The Bringer of Peace     | 10:18 |
| 3 | <b>Mercury</b> The Winged Messenger   | 4:56  |
| 4 | <b>Jupiter</b> The Bringer of Jollity | 9:14  |
| 5 | <b>Saturn</b> The Bringer of Old Age  | 9:47  |
| 6 | <b>Uranus</b> The Magician            | 6:42  |
| 7 | <b>Neptune</b> The Mystic             | 10:04 |

Total timings: 60:25

### JOHN CHALLENGER organ

with **THE CHORISTERS OF SALISBURY CATHEDRAL** conducted by **DAVID HALLS** (Track 7)

Audio recorded in Salisbury Cathedral on 25 May and 15, 16 October 2023  
Filmed in Salisbury Cathedral on 15, 16 October 2023 and 27, 28 February 2024

Audio: Andrew Post (Vif Records)  
Film/video: Ben Tomlin (Ben Tomlin Productions) / drone operation: Simon Brown (Overhead Media)  
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# The Planets Out of Darkness

John CHALLENGER organ  
A film by Ben TOMLIN

Scan to watch:





## INTRODUCTIONS

This audio album, and the film which accompanies it, mark the conclusion of a project which has grown significantly, but which began with two simple aims: to arrange Gustav Holst's *The Planets* for Salisbury Cathedral's Father Willis organ, and to share it with young people. An educational element was vital if the project was to take on true meaning, and so it was fantastic that collaborations evolved with four local schools including Exeter House School – Salisbury's school for children with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties – supported by the music charity La Folia.

In workshops with the composer Howard Moody, pupils created new responses to Holst's work: words, music and dance, all performed alongside movements from *The Planets* arranged specially for our celebrated Cathedral organ. The Education Department led pupils in creative sessions with the poet Martin Figura, and the full suite was also heard in a concert setting, a corresponding new poem by Martin preceding each movement.

The beauty of music, art and poetry – especially in the midst of such breathtaking architecture – offer a release from the stress and complexity of life. I can speak of this as a very lucky organist who

is able to practise on a large instrument at the dead of night. Schoolchildren react to our pipe organ with wonder and excitement; it is something we have a responsibility to share. And our Cathedral, built to the glory of God, has for so many generations stirred a profound sense that we belong to something far greater than ourselves.

This whole project has been about people, about gathering in this place to unearth the societal, emotional and spiritual yearnings inherent in Holst's most famous work. But the sense of hearing music in this Cathedral when it is totally empty and silent – a perk to organ practice that I value beyond measure – is something which I am also keen to share. And so, by way of concluding the project, *The Planets* is released in two formats. The first is this audio album, where the music may be heard at full resolution. The second is a film, *The Planets – Out of Darkness*, available on Salisbury Cathedral's YouTube channel (or via the QR code on page 3 of this booklet). I hope that, through these visual and auditory dimensions, we might share with you the unique atmosphere of this space as Holst's music, and our majestic pipe organ, come to life within it.

**John Challenger**

Assistant Director of Music, Salisbury Cathedral



Meeting John Challenger in the street after lockdown was a happy coincidence. I asked him the La Folia question that I ask all creative artists – *what do you want to do?* John immediately knew the answer – to arrange Holst’s *The Planets* for the Cathedral organ, and to be involved in another project with La Folia and Exeter House School – and so the Planets Project was born.

Holst’s music gave us wonderful riffs that became starting points for improvisations. We focused on *Mars*, *Jupiter* and *Neptune* – anger, joy and mystery – taking the students to three different musical zones from which they started to create melodies, songs and lyrics. For the Exeter House students, the three titles became places of colour – *green*, *yellow* and *red*. *Mars* was *anger from inside out*. Their *Jupiter* was a place *where I wake up*



*spinning, dancing on Jupiter*. In the style of Holst’s vocalise at the end of *Neptune*, beautiful lyrics and melodies emerged: *Rainbow dreams, Autumn smiles, hand in hand. Peace and calm.*

We collaborated with students from Salisbury Cathedral School, whose songs came from a place of *imagination inside our heads. We can fly*. I asked for a title of such a planet that can be constantly rediscovered. The result was *Planet Three Eleven Thousand*. Of course! At last I felt able to fulfil a long-held dream to make non-patriotic lyrics for Holst’s well-known tune from *Jupiter*. We were joined by the poet Martin Figura, who asked the groups for everyday impressions of what a planet could be for them – in turn, their responses have informed Martin’s own writing.

Thank you to everyone who has taken part in the project – students, artists, manag-

ers and funders, with Holst’s music and John Challenger’s supreme artistry at its core. The collaboration between Salisbury Cathedral and La Folia is precious!

**Howard Moody**  
Artistic Director, La Folia

As part of the Planets Project we welcomed pupils from St Andrew’s School, Laverstock, and Woodlands Primary School to education days at the Cathedral. Working jointly with Martin Figura, they combined scientific facts about the planets in our solar system with the personalities found in Holst’s own *Planets*, creating fresh perspectives on each movement and exploring how to respond through poetry, which they then performed to each other.

The Cathedral’s Education volunteers led tours around the building, creating links between the musical characteristics of *The Planets* and different features of our Cathedral. For example, *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*, was linked both to our ticking medieval clock and to the great age of the building; *Mars, the Bringer of War*, provided an opportunity to look at the Cathedral’s military flags; the William Pye font, with its still surface and calm, flowing water, presented an opportunity to reflect on *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*.

The pupils sat beneath the Father Willis organ, listening to John play excerpts from *The Planets* before discussions about the music. Following the workshops, Martin has taken elements of the pupils’ own writing to create a special planets-themed poem for each school to keep as a unique memory.

**Katherine Dolphin**  
Education Manager, Salisbury Cathedral





## PERFORMER'S REFLECTIONS

### Holst's Planets – Our Planet

Music is a universal language, and Holst knew this well. In an essay from 1920 on music teaching, he describes 'the wonderful feeling of unity with one's pupils . . . a feeling of contact with their minds other than the contact occasioned by speech'. A life-long advocate of the accessibility of musical education, he recognised the potential power of the arts to transcend society, to express the things words cannot.

If you live with learning difficulties or complex needs, music might take on greater significance still. The work of the music charity La Folia in conjunction with Exeter House pupils is an example of how creativity can be truly life-enhancing. At the Cathedral we are lucky to be able to work regularly with Howard Moody, La Folia, and the amazing students and staff at Exeter House, and to collaborate on work such as the Planets Project and the now-regular *Evening Songs*, an act of worship led by Exeter House pupils who compose their own musical and verbal responses to *Evensong*, and sing among the Cathedral Choir.

As a young man, Holst drew inspiration from the artist, writer and social activist

William Morris, whose own values would have resonated deeply with him: 'I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few'. For Morris, a craftsman, the quest for beauty underpinned the making of everything. Handsome objects (created not by machines but by people) could become meaningful, not merely useful; they could teach responsible stewardship of our resources, while adorning everyday life.

In Martin Figura's amalgamation of the poetry of the St Andrew's pupils from 2023, I found these lines: 'The Sun is ninety-three million miles from us. We feel its warmth, it can turn a grey day into rainbow colours, and if we're careless it can burn to ash the stories of our ancestors.' This Cathedral, standing for eight centuries, reminds us that we are here for only a short time, and it has been stimulating to work on music which invites a contemporary response from young people on the world they will inherit. There is no 'Earth' movement in *The Planets*, but the themes certainly encourage reflection on our surroundings. Life on this globe can be challenging, frightening, wasteful. More than ever, we must feel able to draw on the daily beauties of the natural world and human creativity – we need these things to restore and heal us.

Back in the 1990s, before I became a cathedral chorister, music was a regular part of the timetable at my primary school. I recall the exact pieces of music we listened to; I recognise the social skills that developed through musical interactions. Nowadays, for various societal and political reasons, children are far less likely to be involved with music regularly at school, if at all. Music builds important mental connections, but this is often not acknowledged. Sometimes we fall into the trap of confusing excellence with exclusivity, but we do not have to programme music lacking in substance in order to engage with young minds: *The Planets* is the perfect example of a large-scale 'classical' work of uncompromising quality and craft, and yet everyone can relate to it.

The stylistic elements which bind *The Planets* bring together different walks of life. *Jupiter* contains within it both the religious fervour of a solemn, noble melody and the whirling frisson of a fairground ride. Holst's music displays both sound technical organisation (he had studied composition under the strict Charles Villiers Stanford) and a departure for the new and irresistible colour world of Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. In its day, the suite fell afoul of predictable criticism that it was not born out of a con-

ventional formalistic structure, though it is woven through with crucial musical threads and a clever, underlying harmonic plan. But I believe it is the pivotal ordering of the movements which holds the key, the journey from *Mars* – the stifling heat, the algorithms of our own lives – to the ultimate glimpse of enlightenment through *Neptune's* ethereal voices. Though no words are heard, Holst's melodic lines seem so often vocal, that they possess a very direct emotive power.

Holst hated the fame which *The Planets* brought as it grew in international popularity. He disliked the making of *Jupiter's* central melody into a patriotic hymn. The music is far more introspective than this: it will make unique connections for each of us without the need for words. Just as Edward Elgar displayed such affection for his friends through his *Enigma Variations*, it seems to me that Holst was searching for those musical metaphors that might best enhance the human journey, our relationships, our fears, our hopes, our dreams. It is perhaps not so much about exploring new worlds, but stopping to look at what is amazing about our own.

### **Adaptation for Organ**

Is it necessary to arrange orchestral works for the organ? Why intrude on the repertoire of world-class orchestras?

The organ possesses its own towering canon of repertoire, alongside centuries of church music and choral accompaniments. Unsurprisingly, this great musical heritage goes hand-in-hand with Salisbury's nineteenth-century Romantic instrument. So why look further?

When getting to know a pipe organ you must empty your mind of preconceptions; you have to go with the instrument's character and let it speak to you. And to me, the Salisbury organ seems to reach further than might be expected of a pipe organ: it fathoms musical depths so intense and orchestral in nature. Put simply, in addition to so much of the organ repertoire, this instrument has very often instilled in me a curiosity about other kinds of music.

Despite this, committing *The Planets* to an album and film has required some courage. When the arrangement was heard live in concert there seemed a magic among the audience: it was true music of the moment, a sense which ultimately no microphone can capture. In making this album, I have had to rely on my musical judgements and decisions withstanding repeated listening and close scrutiny. I have also had to trust that the organ will be viewed not as a stand-in for a missing orchestra, but as a valid means of communicating this music in its own right.

During the course of the project, I abandoned the word 'transcription'. Rightly or wrongly, to me the word implies a faithful transference of each note from one medium to another. Certainly, deep study of the orchestral original has been fundamental, but I have come to use words such as 'arrangement' or 'reworking', as they seem better to encapsulate the sense of freedom with which the music was reborn. Some passages had to be completely rewritten in order for appropriate textures and colours to be found: it might therefore be more accurate to describe this project as a *response to Holst's Planets*.

The original work is scored for a very large orchestra, but in this recording you will not hear instruments being copied. Holst's orchestral effects are so specific that attempts at replication would miss the point. I have tried to follow the example of composers who understood the successful adaptation of disciplines: for instance, Maurice Duruflé calls for entirely different timbres in the organ accompaniment to his *Requiem* compared with the orchestral scoring, and Stanford reorganised his orchestral accompaniments substantially to make them idiomatic to the organ. Discovering the musical character, rather than reaching for certain organ stops, should be the starting point.



Of course, it is not the organ alone but also the building which creates the magic. I am obsessed with cathedrals, and how sound and light are transformed within them. The overall tonal character of this organ has not changed since it was built a century and a half ago, and thus there is an inseparable mental association between the sound of the instrument and the surrounding stones which cause it to reverberate. Herbert Howells's well-known fascination with the acoustical qualities of certain buildings may be heard throughout his church music. In particular, he described how Gloucester Cathedral stirred within him a desire to translate 'the frozen poetry of Architecture into the living immemorial sounds of voices in consort'. Sometimes, we should not be able to discern precisely when a low note from the organ began to sound; we may hear voices in harmony, but not know where they are coming from.

Some of the music on this recording may seem slower or more elastic than equivalent orchestral performances; there may be moments where phrasing or dynamics are handled differently from what one might expect. A full symphony orchestra can build so rapidly, so effectively, through a crescendo, without any detail being lost – but on an organ a flexibility of

tempo is often required to handle dynamic risings and fallings, and to allow the music to travel through the building. The general intention with the microphone placement on this album, more distant than close, has been to allow the sound to bloom, and for this instrument in its three separate locations to be heard as one breathing entity.

Of the organ's majestic notes, the lowest can't be heard by our naked ears, but we feel a shift of air as rapture.

30 December 2022 – Martin Figura

One of the most important roles of a church organist lies in judging a musical atmosphere. Committing this otherworldly music to album has relied on years of getting to know this organ and the space in which it stands. Certainly, there are very few other organs on which I would feel confident enough to perform it. Always reluctant to explain his *Planets*, Holst wished simply for each listener to make of it what they will, and this is what I have felt free enough to do.

### **The Planets – Out of Darkness A Note on the Film**

The nineteenth-century writer and art critic John Ruskin is said to have found Salisbury Cathedral profound and gloomy. But it is at night time, over the years I

have worked here, that I have found the building especially remarkable. Except for the tower and spire, which were added a little later, this medieval Cathedral was completed in an astonishing 38-year period. Thus, it possesses a rare and overwhelming architectural uniformity. From west to east, virtually the whole cavernous interior is visible, looming ever larger as darkness falls.

This project elicited, way beyond my imagining, a hugely positive response from the public and the young people we worked with. I would go so far as to suggest that the building's cosmic scale – the feelings evoked when such mystical music emerges from its shadows – was largely responsible. From a musical perspective, I have rarely felt an instrument to be so coherent, or so matching to a particular space, than the organ built for this Cathedral. Even down to appearances, the organ's deadly-plain façade pipes mirror the slenderness of the Purbeck marble columns: undecorated, the whole vertical ensemble works in visual harmony, picking up the colours of the light.

Frequently, audiences and school groups remark that they are better able to engage with the music when the performer is visible via our big screen: it not only

enables an understanding of what the organist is actually doing, but it builds an important emotional connection with the performer. It is, sadly, impractical to invite a class of schoolchildren to climb into our tiny organ loft, and not everyone can attend a concert here in person. Holst loved sharing musical experiences, and it has been our hope that this free-to-watch and easily available film will prove an effective means of sharing the joys of this music way beyond the walls of the Cathedral Close.

Early on, I wondered about including CGI or NASA footage of planets in this film, but as the music's embodiment in this building had always been at the heart of the project, I decided it was important to stick to these roots. We have included some objects which were the focus of the education days: the William Pye font with its engravings of baptismal words, the fourteenth-century clock, the new altar at the Spire Crossing which incorporates text from St Matthew's Gospel. Each, in its own subtle way, reflects the various rites of passage integral to the human story – the very mood pictures Holst was creating.

John Challenger





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who have made not just this recording possible, but the Planets Project as a whole. It is a privilege to be able to work on such music with the support and enthusiasm of so many colleagues and friends, and to hold a common belief that this was music which should be shared widely.

My thanks go to the Dean and Chapter of Salisbury Cathedral, Canon Precentor Anna Macham, David Halls, the Cathedral's Development, Finance, Marketing and Communications, and Liturgy and Music Departments, alongside countless individuals across the organisation who have supported this project with their time, skills, planning, expertise, and generosity. I had always hoped that the voices of young people, rather than adults, might provide the elusive vocal chorus at the end of *Neptune*, and thus I am deeply grateful to our Cathedral Choristers (plus a few altos!) for singing both in the original concert performance, and on this recording.

I am indebted to Andrew Post for his great skill and musicality as audio engineer, editor and producer, and to videographer Ben Tomlin for the imagination and creativity which have gone into the making of this film. The music charity La Folia, the

Cathedral's Education Department, and the four schools made the educational aspect a reality. I am truly grateful to them all: pupils, teachers, musicians, trustees, fundraisers, volunteers and supporting staff. I wish to thank particularly Howard Moody, Cesca Eaton and Katherine Dolphin, as well as those who have enriched the project through composition (Howard Moody), poetry (Martin Figura), lighting (Ricardo da Fonseca), artwork (Shadric Toop) and drone footage (Simon Brown).

I wish also to express my thanks to everyone who has used their skills to publicise this project, particularly Shane Brennan, Tim Croall and Marie Thomas, as well as those who have assisted in preparing the album artwork and booklet, or who have granted permission for use of their images. Many have assisted with technical and practical support, including those who tune and maintain the organ, the Concert Programme Manager, the Cathedral Caretakers, the Canon Treasurer, the Clerk of Works and Works Department, and the Vestry team led by Esther Lycett.

Finally, I would like to thank a very generous anonymous donor for their support of this recording.

John Challenger

## SALISBURY CATHEDRAL ORGAN

The organ in Salisbury Cathedral was built by Henry Willis between 1876–7, replacing earlier instruments by Rhenatus Harris (1710) and Samuel Green (1792). A gift of Miss Chafyn Grove, it cost £3,500 to build, and the casework and blowing apparatus an additional £2,000. The console was originally located in a loft within the north organ case.

In 1934, Henry Willis III undertook an extensive, yet conservative, rebuilding of the instrument. The Cathedral's Organist, Sir Walter Alcock, demanded that very few tonal alterations be made, and indeed no pipes were removed from the building during the work. A few carefully-chosen additions and transfers of stops were made to enhance the original specification, and the organ received its electro-pneumatic console, installed in a loft on the south side, where it remains today.

Further renovations took place in 1969, 1978 and 1993, and aside from small changes of layout, mechanics and specification, the organ remains as Willis left it in 1877. Comprehensive restoration work by the firm Harrison & Harrison between 2019–20 included cleaning and regulation of the pipework, renewal of

the console, key actions and wind system, and simplification of the layout. The tonal scheme has remained unaltered, with the majority of the pipework and soundboards dating from 1876. The instrument retains its historic pitch, and the majority of pipework remains cone-tuned, unique for a cathedral organ in England.

## ORGAN SPECIFICATION

**Great** Double Open Diapason 16 / Open Diapason I 8 / Open Diapason II 8 / Claribel Flute 8 / Stopped Diapason 8 / Principal I 4 / Principal II 4 / Flûte Couverte 4 / Twelfth 2 $\frac{2}{3}$  / Fifteenth 2 / Mixture IV / Trombone 16 / Trumpet 8 / Clarion 4

**Swell** Contra Gamba 16 / Open Diapason 8 / Lieblich Gedackt 8 / Viola-da-Gamba 8 / Vox Angelica 8 / Octave 4 / Flûte Harmonique 4 / Super Octave 2 / Mixture III / Vox Humana 8 / Hautboy 8 / Contra Fagotto 16 / Trompette 8 / Clarion 4 / Tremolo

**Choir** Lieblich Gedackt 16 / Open Diapason 8 / Flûte Harmonique 8 / Lieblich Gedackt 8 / Salicional 8 / Gemshorn 4 / Flûte Harmonique 4 / Lieblich Gedackt 4 / Nazard 2 $\frac{2}{3}$  / Flageolet 2 / Tierce 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  / Trumpet 8 / Tremolo

**Solo** Violoncello 8 / Cello Celestes 8 / Flûte Harmonique 8 / Flûte Harmonique 4 / Cor Anglais 16 / Clarinet 8 / Orchestral Oboe 8 / Tremolo / Tuba 8 / Tuba Clarion 4

**Pedal** Double Open Diapason 32 / Open Bass 16 / Open Diapason I 16 / Open Diapason II 16 / Violone 16 / Bourdon 16 / Lieblich Gedackt (Ch) 16 / Octave 8 / Viola 8 / Flute 8 / Super Octave 4 / Octave Flute 4 / Mixture IV / Contra Posauane 32 / Ophicleide 16 / Clarion 8

**Couplers** Sw to Gt / Sw 4 to Gt / Sw 16 to Gt / Ch to Gt / Ch 4 to Gt / Ch 16 to Gt / So to Gt / So 4 to Gt / So 16 to Gt / So to Sw / Sw 4 / Sw 16 / Sw Unis Off / Sw to Ch / Sw 4 to Ch / Sw 16 to Ch / So to Ch / So 4 to Ch / Gt Reeds on Ch / Ch 4 / Ch 16 / Ch Unis Off / Gt to So / So 4 / So 16 / So Unis Off / Gt to Ped / Sw to Ped / Sw 4 to Ped / Ch to Ped / Ch 4 to Ped / So to Ped / So 4 to Ped





Organist and conductor **John Challenger** has held the post of Assistant Director of Music at Salisbury Cathedral since 2012, where he was appointed at the age of 23. In this role he plays the famous Father Willis organ in the Cathedral, takes a share in the direction of the choirs, and assists in the running of the Cathedral's busy music department. He is also Assistant Conductor of Salisbury Musical Society, and a freelance concert performer.

He received his early musical education while a chorister at Hereford Cathedral, and as an Organ Scholar at St John's College, Cambridge, where he has also acted as Director of Music. He received organ tuition from Jeremy Filsell, David Briggs and the late David Sanger, and he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists in 2008.

John's début solo album of works by Edward Elgar, played on the organ of Salisbury Cathedral, was hailed as 'phenomenal' by *Organists' Review*, and subsequent recordings have won high critical acclaim, his album of organ works by César Franck (2019) receiving praise in *The Guardian* for its 'technical wizardry and infinite sonic variety'. In increasing demand as a concert organist, recent invitations to perform have come from across the UK, as well as Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the United States.



Deeply interested in sharing the benefits of cathedral music more widely, John's recent work at Salisbury has included the annual Organ Prom which draws up to 1,000 audience members, the virtual Father Willis organ, pipe organ days for young people, the album *Salisbury Meditation* (which raises funds for NHS Charities Together), and his arrangement of Holst's *The Planets* for Salisbury Cathedral organ, described by Ivan Hewitt (*The Telegraph*) as 'an amazing feat of virtuosity'. Upcoming work includes a new project with La Folia and the students at Exeter House School, featuring birdsong and the music of Olivier Messiaen.

✕ 📷 @johnorganist

## SALISBURY CATHEDRAL CHOIR

The Choir of Salisbury Cathedral maintains a tradition of choral music stretching back over 800 years in the present Cathedral, and a further 200 years before that in the Cathedral at Old Sarum. Music has always played a vital role in the Daily Offices, and today the singing duties are divided equally between two sets of choristers (boys and girls), who attend Salisbury Cathedral School, and six Lay Vicars. If

you know a child who may be interested in becoming a chorister, please visit [salisburycathedral.org.uk](http://salisburycathedral.org.uk).

Sales of recordings released by the Salisbury Cathedral label continue to support our music funds. To purchase recordings, or to learn more about the work of preserving our musical heritage, please visit the Salisbury Cathedral website.

✂️ @salcathchoir

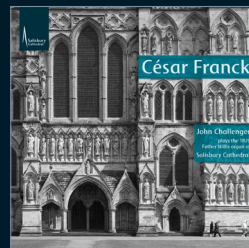


### ON THIS RECORDING (Track 7)

The Choristers of Salisbury Cathedral

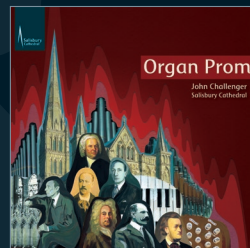
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Director of Music David Halls



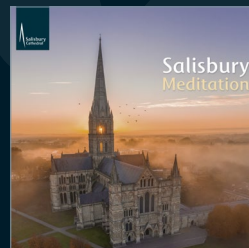
César Franck  
John Challenger

*'Challenger displays technical wizardry and infinite sonic variety throughout'*  
The Guardian



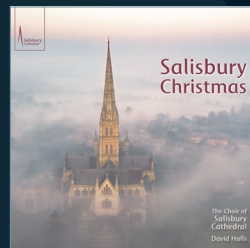
Organ Prom  
John Challenger

*'Gloriously kaleidoscopic earfuls that show off the organ's colours in all their regal majesty'*  
BBC Music Magazine



Salisbury Meditation  
John Challenger

*'This splendid anthology – released to raise funds for NHS Charities Together – is one of the great positives to have come out of these troubled times'*  
Gramophone



Salisbury Christmas  
The Choir of Salisbury Cathedral

*'Beauty and precision . . . Sublime singing and playing set in the scale of Salisbury Cathedral'*  
hi-fi+

[salisburycathedral.org.uk](http://salisburycathedral.org.uk)

