Twelve Astrological Preludes

By

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Vocal Range: Not applicable

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Contents:

- Virgo
- Libra
- Scorpio
- Sagittarius
- Capricorn
- Aquarius (G)
- Pisces
- Aries
- Taurus
- Gemini
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- Leo

Comments: In Dr. Joseph Seiss’ book, The Gospel in the Stars, the 19th-century Lutheran clergyman contends that the signs of the zodiac have a Biblical origin and that the set of twelve should begin with Virgo, the symbol of the Virgin Mary. Finding his fanciful ideas interesting, I followed them in my Astrological Suite.

Virgo (F #, two minutes, moderately easy)

The twelve-measure main theme is followed by an eight-measure section that develops the sixteenth-note rhythm of measure 3. The main theme returns at measure 21 but is shortened, ending in the heights.

Note that the final three left-hand notes echo the idea of the first three right-hand notes in the first measure.
Comments Cont.:  

**Libra** (B-flat, one minute, moderately difficult)

In the introductory five measures, the lines leaping in contrary motion suggest the swaying as the scales adjust to the weight placed on them, and come to rest at the moment of judgment. Then follow, in measure six, two five-measure phrases; then, two four-measure phrases lead to a pitch of excitement in measure 23. Descending to the depths in measure 24, tension builds to a second climactic moment in measure 29. Calm returns at measure 37 as the original four measures return for a coda.

**Scorpio** (E, one minute, difficult)

Scorpio, representing Satan, the destructive force, demands uniformly harsh dissonance. Three rumbling, grumbling four-measure phrases end with an explosion (measure 12). Four measures of transition lead back to the original material, which ends with a volcanic outburst (measure 24).

**Sagittarius** (A, one minute, difficult)

A pounding, monotonous 9/8 rhythm gives the beating of the hoofs of the horses of doom, mentioned in the Apocalypse. The bass proceeds almost entirely in intervals of fifths, to suggest the bleakness of the last days. The atmosphere is frenetic throughout. There are four sections, all showing the same rhythmic excitement: A, measures 1-25; B, measures 26-40; C, measures 41-57, and D, measure 58 to end.

**Capricorn** (B, three minutes, moderately difficult)

The vast spaces of the mountain slopes where the wild goat resides are suggested by the high soprano notes of the opening phrase, answered by the rising from the depths of the main bass theme (measure 7). Three elements combine in this prelude: 1. The mystic call from the heights (measures 1 and 2 [recurring in the last two measures of the piece]); 2. The tragic outbursts of measures of 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, recurring at measures 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18, and finally in measures 32, 33, 34, and 35; 3. The three-note arpeggio motif in the bass (measure 7), which first starts an eight-measure bass melody, and which is developed starting in measure 19 as it rises to a massive climax in measure 28.
Comments Cont.:

Aquarius  (G, three minutes, moderate difficulty)

Placidly flowing, the mood of this prelude is one of contentment. The customary four-measure phrases are extended to two five-measure phrases, in the opening theme. They are followed by a seven-measure phrase. After a nine-measure interlude comes a repetition of the main theme. The contrasting B section begins on measure 44. There is more motion but the mood of gentle peace is unbroken and at measure 63 a shortened version of the main original theme returns. Then a reminiscence of B ends the piece.

Pisces  (C, under two minutes, moderately easy)

The main theme, a scale-like repetition of six notes (measure 1-4) suggests the motion of the fish through the water. The motion is roughly inverted in the next four measures and in measures 13 and 14 in the bass. The original theme returns at measure 17, with an added inner contrapuntal line. There follows a five-measure coda.

Aries  (F, three minutes, moderately difficult)

A long-breathed melody has two sections: A (in F major) is a ten-measure phrase, followed by B (in A minor), which, after seven measures, returns to a repetition of A for a total of 27 measures. The material is extended for 24 measures.

At measure 52 a variation of the material begins. A faster pace leads to some excitement but calm is restored and at measure 72 the theme returns calmly to a fluttery accompaniment. This time there is only a suggestion of B at measure 86, where it is heard in inversion in both treble and bass.

Taurus  (D-flat, 1 ½ minutes, moderately difficult)

To suggest the awkwardness of the bull, Taurus is in 5/4 time. The main theme is in two phrases, the first four measures, the second, six measures. This theme is repeated with imitative counterpoint and the second phrase is altered harmonically so that a B section may proceed in an unrelated key (measure 19). The contrasting section is only nine measures long and A returns in a foreign key (measure 28) but soon finds itself back in D-flat. The coda (measure 39-40) reintroduces material from B.
Comments Cont.:

Gemini  (D, three minutes, moderately easy)

It seemed appropriate for the twins to be a two-part invention. At no time are more than two notes sounded.

The main theme is twelve measures long, and is followed by a four-measure contrasting commentary. A new section (measures 17-34) returns to the original theme but this time the melody is transferred to the lower voice (last beat, measure 34). Upon its completion comes the same four-measure contrasting figure (measures 46-49). Then the two voices separate so as almost to lose each other, but are still held together harmonically in the original key.

Cancer  (A-flat, 3 ½ minutes, moderately difficult)

The shambling gait of the crab, which reputedly changes its direction with difficulty, is suggested by an 11/8 beat with frequent pauses.

An initial eight-measure phrase is followed by a similar nine-measures in the same vein. The original eight-measure phrase is then repeated. In the middle section (measure 26) a new five-measure melody wavers between the keys of D, E, and C. At measure 38 a hesitant, eight-measure passage leads back to the original A section. At measure 55 a coda merges the A and B sections with fragments from each.

Leo  (E-flat, more than two minutes, moderately easy)

A hymn-like ten-measure theme from the heights is heard twice; the second time, an octave lower. A contrasting section (measure 21) of fifteen measures explores distant keys before returning to a triumphant repetition of the main theme in its original key with an echo of the theme in the bass. All then subsides to a peaceful conclusion. The battle of the Lion of Judah has been won.