

## Planet and Sky, Part II



[Opening theme music]

### **Joel McKinnon**

Greetings, friends, and welcome back to Seldon Crisis! Don't be too concerned about my brief diversion from our main story thread as I will be returning to the final chapter of Second Foundation quite soon. For the moment, though, I will stick with the topic I introduced in our last episode and cover the remaining four songs from Planet and Sky, a Cosmic Love Story. Let's start with a quick recap on what was covered in the first four songs. It begins with the prologue, Something is Dreaming, in which the scientists arrive and begin to investigate the mysterious signal emanating from the subsurface of the small, arid planet.

### **Joel**

I described how a man and a woman are sent to investigate and then somehow get transformed into the characters in a creation myth heretofore known as Planet and Sky. In the second song, Round, Sky seduces Planet and they become a romantic couple. In the third song, Travelers, the three cosmic travelers are introduced; only known as the first, second, and third traveler. They embody the psychological perspectives of positivity, negativity and neutrality and represent these perspectives throughout the opera. At the end of the song, the icy body they inhabit, originating in a distant star system is about to collide with the planet.

The fourth song, Eons of Joy, is where the relationship of Planet and Sky really takes off and the planet gets bombarded by asteroids, earthquakes erupting, volcanoes abound and the travelers emerge after their asteroid strikes the planet and they begin to evolve a biosphere. You may recall that the fifth song and the one featured last time, Such is Love, was a love ballad sung by Planet to his paramour above, the heavenly Sky. He celebrated all the joys she brought him, the winds and waters that flowed into his valleys and the delightful abodes for the life they brought into being and his fervent wish that their union would last forever. You may also recall Sky's cautionary note, which I quoted, ending with the enigmatic "fail not your precious hold on me."

Was she aware of a danger that the consistently slow witted Planet had not yet caught onto? We will see that she was indeed unfortunately prescient. The sixth song is entitled "Beautiful Life" and it returns to our three cosmic travelers, now significantly evolved and dispersed plentifully throughout the planet's biosphere. This song has significant musical similarities to the one in which they were introduced, entitled simply, Travelers, it follows the same chord structure but with some significant changes in rhythm and most essentially in tempo. The song begins with the first traveler rhapsodizing on their excellent fortune singing "beautiful life we've found our home," the second characteristically doubtful, and the third just living his best life of contentment.

As the pattern repeats, however, the tempo noticeably slows until by the third series of verses it is virtually crawling and the final resolving note of the song never arrives. This is meant to symbolize the gradual freezing of the travelers as the climate becomes impossibly cold, ending with them becoming frozen as they were when they were first traveling through space. On a practical note, this was really hard for the three of us to sing, as we had to start each verse at a slower tempo than the last. As the voice

of the third traveler, I had it the easiest since my co travelers had already slowed the pace for me. So we know things have taken a bad turn.

In the seventh song, Planet My Love, we get all the gory details. The planet, like Mars, which was its inspiration as described in the first episode on this topic, had insufficient gravity to hold on to its atmosphere. The result is that the aria is performed by Sky as she is evaporating away into space, beginning with the plaintive "Planet my love, I know we are dying." I always intended for this to be the emotional peak of the opera. It's a fairly simple repeating pattern of three sections, which are first sung by Sky, then performed instrumentally with a concluding verse in which Sky proclaims victory against the unfeeling universe with the declaration that their love is so powerful that it transcends the destruction that is currently befalling it.

On a side note, any of you who have followed my Twitter account or listened to the episode of Seldon Crisis on the Art of Science Fiction with Danielle Pajack will know that I love the TV show, The Orville. There is a highly controversial episode that quickly became my favorite because it included a similar subplot in which the Orville's helmsman Gordon Malloy is transported backward in time, gets married to the woman of his dreams and has a family, only to find himself and his loving wife and child to be facing their own erasure from the timeline. At one point, Gordon proclaims, "this family is stronger than time," and I got serious Planet My Love vibes. I'm going to go on with describing the last two songs, but return to the story of Planet My Love because there were some very interesting aspects to bringing it into being in the final form you will hear at the end of this episode.

So now we have a dead planet as the scientists found it when they arrive, so it's fitting. The eighth song is entitled "Empty World" and has no voices. I actually intended this song to follow another well known psychological template, that of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief; denial, anger,

bargaining, depression, and acceptance. It never really worked out that way, as the music kind of took its own path. It starts out with a slow, doleful melody, like a funeral march, then is repeated at a much higher tempo. This is the one song which I gave Melissa co-writing credit on, because I essentially turned it over to her after those first two patterns, and she created an elegant and ultimately joyful resolution of the original melody.

This was the song that took the least work because we all just loved how it came out. On almost the first take, we all played it together. I'll have a lot more to say about the meaning of this section when I get to exploring the podcast version of the opera. I decided to do a full episode on each song, and with no lyrics, I had to come up with something to say about this one. That need spurred me to create a really interesting bit of hard Sci-Fi among the fantastical elements of the rock opera. But we'll get to that later.

Finally, we have arrived at the final song and the chief scientist, and in fact, all of the characters of the opera get involved in the send off. Remember how I'd been inspired by my time in the Mars Society, and particularly by Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy, in which the terraforming of Mars from an arid and desolate world into one capable of supporting a bounty of life is described. I think you can guess where this led me. At this juncture of the story, the scientists have finished decoding the subsurface transmission and have come up with a plan.

You guessed it. They will terraform the planet and bring Planet and Sky back from the dead, along with all of their children. The song, entitled "Wake Up," is introduced by the awakening travelers. Of course, they weren't dead, they had managed to stay viable in their long voyage through the cosmos. So what's a few eons frozen underground going to do? As they awaken, we hear their persistent personalities become engaged, unchanged. The first traveler is ecstatic. "Our promised life is here now,

just as I forecast," and the second is characteristically fearful, while the third is, as usual, just enjoying the ride.

The chief scientist breaks in over a baseline partially stolen from a rapper Byron had introduced me to. He riffs on introductions to his staff on the steps involved in terraforming the planet. When we return to the exultant and evolving travelers, they are reaching new heights. The third traveler, our old, calm and contented friend, now aspires to become a whale, among other things. The last pair of characters to emerge are, of course, the titular duo, Planet and Sky. As Sky had proclaimed, the universe couldn't terminate their love so easily. As the final notes play, the pair exultantly proclaims "new world, new life, wake up!"

Now to return to the story of Planet My Love. I had a particular love for this song from the first time it popped into my head. And like I said, I knew that it had to be the emotional core of the opera. After all, many of the greatest operas have a capstone aria sung by a dying heroine. When I first played it, I sang all the lines myself and enjoyed it immensely. I remember performing it with gusto late at a party with a couple of friends on guitar and drums, and it's still one of my favorite versions, although I must admit it was a bit sloppy, mostly due to alcohol consumption at said event.

Over the next few months, I tried out three different female singers to perform the lead. One of my favorites was a local artist named Nomi Harper, who played guitar and sang the lead at an open mic nearby, along with a brilliant violinist named Colin Fisher, who had won international competitions in Scottish fiddling. His part was amazing, as was Nomi's haunting lead. I fortunately recorded it on my trusty iPhone, and it's still available on YouTube, so I'll be sure to include a link in the show notes. I always intended Melissa to be the ultimate performer, however, and when she got her hands and vocal chords on it, I knew I had my Sky.

It didn't hurt that she is an awesome pianist as well. After a few working sessions, we recorded the version you will hear at the end of this episode. I still wasn't quite satisfied I'd done all I could do to lend the necessary gravitas to the piece, and that's when I met Friedrich and Rebecca. I was at a dinner party near my house and they were the honored guests. Friedrich [Edelmann] was a German bassoonist who had recently retired from the Munich Philharmonic, and Rebecca [Rust] was his American born wife, who was renowned as a world class cellist. They performed a couple of songs for the small group of guests at the party, and I had that handy iPhone ready for the occasion, and I'm sure glad I did.

I informed them that I got it on video and let them know if I'd put it on YouTube for them if they were interested? They were delighted. As good musicians as they were, they had few recordings and were trying to find ways to promote their act. They loved the recording and asked me if I could film an entire concert for them shortly thereafter, and I happily obliged. I've video recorded them several times now. I don't think I was always scheming this or anything, but at one point I found myself asking Rebecca if she would consider performing on a short piece on my rock opera.

She enthusiastically agreed to do so on their next visit in another six months or so, which turned out to be a long wait for me. You'd think I'd be more ready. As it turns out, the day arrived and I had very little in mind for her, and it honestly hadn't occurred to me that a world class cellist would be expecting an actual score. I'm a rock musician, and all the songs I've ever written really just consisted of a bass line over a chord progression, and I typically counted on talented friends to just improvise a good part. When I arrived at their place, I played the piece for them and Rebecca kind of made a face and blurted out, "This is rock!"

I thought I had explained it was a rock opera. The best I could do was to try singing a melody that she might play, but she looked at me askance and said she would need a score to play from. Undeterred. I promised to bring

her one in a week. Now what was I going to do? The answer, of course, was to Google. I found a free notation program called Musecore, which turned out to be pretty easy to use. The hard part was writing it. Melissa's piano part was already done, so I hooked up a midi keyboard, though I'm not a keyboardist, and laboriously got to work, I listened to each phrase of Melissa's part one by one and answered it with my own keyboard phrase.

The whole thing took me the full week, including cleaning it up. I was half convinced that Rebecca would look at my so called score and throw it back in my face. Instead, she treated it with utmost seriousness and performed it note for note. I was particularly pleased with the plucked notes I wrote for the most dramatic section, as I've always loved hearing plucked cello, and it was a thrill to hear it come to life even better than I imagined it. I'm really pleased with how it turned out, so would love to hear what others think. Rebecca told me a great story about her cello, which has quite a history of its own.

It was built in 1791, the year Mozart died, and was once owned and played by a young man who would one day become the King of England, none other than the recently crowned Charles II. Apparently he wasn't particularly enamored of his cello, or maybe he just had no talent for playing it, and dumped it for a surprisingly low price, and it eventually found its way into Rebecca's hands. She is quite enamored of it and has played it all around the world, including on one occasion in which she performed a duet with the Princess of Japan on piano. I'm very honored to have this auspicious instrument on my humble rock opera, but even more so to have a cellist of Rebecca's caliber performing on it.

I will be sure to include some links in the show notes to some music Friedrich and Rebecca have performed. There's another important aspect of this rock opera I alluded to in the last episode on this topic. Once I was asking my older brother, a quite intelligent fellow, about his opinion of the lyrics. He surprised me by saying he really couldn't follow it. I guess when

you are the author of lyrics, especially on such an offbeat topic, you tend to have a lot of understanding kept in hidden recesses of your brain and assume the listeners can pull all that out somewhere to get the complete picture.

I realized I was mistaken and sought a way to rectify this shortcoming someday. One day, down the road, a year or so from completing the album, I was listening to one of my favorite podcasts, Doug Metzger's Literature and History, and decided on a whim to email him and casually let him know I'd written a rock opera. Being a musician himself, he let me know he'd love to hear it, so I sent him a link where he could hear it. He wrote back saying he loved it. It had occurred to me that it might be interesting to do a deeper dive into the opera as a podcast.

When I told Doug what I was considering, he offered to read a part if I was interested. Knowing that he is a fabulous narrator, I boldly asked him what he'd charge me to read the whole thing. He asked how long it would be, I said maybe two or three hours in total and he said "I'll read that for free." I was stunned but did not hesitate to take him up on it. Then I had to write it, which turned out to just be pure joy. When I heard Planet and Sky, the Deeper Story emerge in his sonorous tones, I was and am still overwhelmed with the thrill of having such a great talent as a collaborator.

Doug also helped me enormously as a neophyte writer by editing my manuscript, for which I am deeply grateful. If you haven't listened to Literature in History, you really must try an episode for yourself. His mission is to explore the full history of Anglophone literature and he is doing an impressively comprehensive deep dive into the topic. He starts with the invention of writing in Mesopotamia and takes it from there. Every episode is impeccably researched and crafted with his own music expertly interleaved with his reading. Just take a look at [literatureandhistory.com](http://literatureandhistory.com), also built on his own, to get an idea of the scope and quality of the project.



On top of it all, Doug is a great guy to know and I'm very glad to have made his acquaintance. I might return to this topic again someday to get into the deeper story of Planet and Sky, but there are many tales of its creation I'd love to share. This is, however, a podcast on Isaac Asimov and Foundation and I have gone far enough off topic for now. Thank you for allowing me to indulge in sharing this very special passion. I am already thrilled with the response I have gotten from listeners who are only now discovering it.

As with the last episode, I will close with a song featured on the opera, this time the cathartic turning point when Sky answers Planet's cheerful lullaby with a heavy dose of reality. I give you Planet My Love.

[Song, Planet My Love, plays]