Space is a vacuum with areas where sound cannot travel, but that hasn’t stopped artists from dreaming up the music of the interstellar. As musicians imagine the sounds of space, scientists are also listening to the cosmos using sonification of data, from black holes to the light of nebulas, to deduce patterns in the universe. Learn more in the article “Sounds of the Stars: How Scientists are Listening in on Space,” available through the library catalog.

Music can help reveal the secrets of the galaxy. Physicist and musician Stephon Alexander “uses music to understand physics and cosmology” in his book The Jazz of Physics [QB981.A54 2016]. He points to John Coltrane and Albert Einstein as figures who saw the complimentary nature of the two fields.

Journey across the universe to discover how composers have employed a fusion of the familiar and the strange to compose the cosmos. We have gathered resources on space in cinema, celestial objects in music, and artists inspired by the galaxies. Browse our collection to learn more!
Hand-in-hand with captivating imagery, many space films feature music inspired by the awe of the cosmos. In “Familiar Sounds in a New Place: The Use of the Musical Score Within the Science Fiction Film” from Sounds of the Future [ML2075 .S685 2010], Cara Marisa Deleon describes how interstellar film music places viewers in a comfortable and familiar space that allows the movie to take them to the unfamiliar. Through a score’s recognizable structure and recurring leitmotivs, visuals of an expansive space are made more accessible.

Star Wars [PN1995.9.S26 S796 2004] is an example of the Romantic style remaining prevalent in film long after fading in Western art music. Orchestral swells guide the listener in emotional moments and fanfare accompanies heroic triumphs. In 2001: A Space Odyssey [PN1995.9.S26 T96 2001], filmmaker Stanley Kubrick opted to score modernist composers such as Penderecki, Bartók, and Ligeti alongside the Romantic works Also sprach Zarathustra by Richard Strauss and The Blue Denube by Johann Strauss II. There is a balance between challenging the audience and providing familiarity. The soundtrack was not without dispute. Lux Aeterna [M2092.6.L54 L89 1968] by György Ligeti was controversially used in the film without the composer’s permission.

While scores about space commonly tie to the familiar, some composers have broken from traditional approaches. Bebe and Louis Barron’s score to Forbidden Planet [PN1995.9.S26 F673 2006] is among the first commercial electronic film scores. This groundbreaking work used sounds from electronic circuits recorded on tape to transport audiences. Learn more about the Barrons and their music in the book Louis and Bebe Barron’s Forbidden Planet [ML410.B258 W54 2005].
CELESTIAL OBJECTS

Looking up at the stars, Kaija Saariaho’s *Orion* [Oversize M1045.S2 O7 2004], tells the story of the Greek mythological hero who is put into the constellation, as noted in the program note: “He is, thus, at once an active [even hyper-active] human being and an immobile heavenly object.” In Margaret Brouwer’s *Stardance* [Oversize M1045.B8694 S72 2014], starlight is represented as bursts of sound passed across the orchestra. Brouwer states, “*Stardance* is all about sparkling sounds that are in motion. The music conjures up images of sparkling, shining points of light moving through the dark space of the night sky in dance-like motion.”

Kotoka Suzuki’s *Orbit* encapsulates the motion of a planet. It opens with graphic notation, showing the circular motion of the players. The piece can be played by saxophone octet or an octet of any instrument family and includes moments of free interpretation and improvisation. It is stated on the composer’s website, “Sound movement in relation to space is explored in this work. This work examines various patterns of sound motions in physical space by placing each performer around the audience to form a circular ring. These patterns become more intertwined and complex as the piece progresses.” Planets are also characterized beyond their physical existence with the names of gods. In Gustav Holst’s *The Planets* [CD 2012:1186], the planets take on characteristics inspired by astrology giving positions to their name like “Mercury, the Winged Messenger.”

The mythologizing of celestial bodies continues with Liza Lim’s opera *Moon Spirit Feasting*, featuring Chinese mythological characters like the Monkey King and Chang-O. In the Sixth Scene [available on Naxos] “Chang-O Flies to the Moon,” Chang-O struggles with identity: “While the Monkey King and Queen Mother battle for the truth of her identity, she struggles to reconcile in a single body the many versions of herself that populate her myth.”

Shulamit Ran’s *Moon Songs* [Oversize M1613.3.R18 M66 2018] is inspired by Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, similarly using voice, flute, cello, and piano in the instrumentation. Ran states, “*Moon Songs* uses as its point of departure and inspiration a selection of texts [in some cases just fragments of poems], all of which, in various ways, refer to the moon.” The text paints a picture of the moon as a powerful and chilling presence pairing with atonal, unpredictable music.
Sun Ra

The performance of an alien identity is another form space music takes on. In “Racial Transparency Theory Applied to Musicians who Claim to be Aliens,” William Tsitsos analyzes this through the lens of racial transparency theory: “If racial transparency means that whites are more likely to be viewed as individuals, while non-whites are always viewed in relation to their membership in a racial/ethnic group, then adopting an alien identity allows musical performers to indulge in the other side of racial transparency.”

The alien identity can be used to transcend the limits imposed by earthling society. While some musicians might use the alien identity for an album, Sun Ra, a jazz musician active from the 1950s through the 1980s, claimed the alien identity throughout his career, even legally changing his name.

Sun Ra was born Herman Poole Blount in 1914. In the ebook A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism, Paul Youngquist describes Sun Ra as more than just a “brilliant and innovative musician,” he describes him as, “a poet, a mythmaker, an activist, and a movie star.” Sun Ra’s mythmaking is explored through the ebook in a non-linear narrative weaving together the history around him, Sun Ra’s personal life and his musical career tinged in the language of the stars with a final turn to his impact on Afrofuturism.

Recorded later in his life with his band the Arkestra, Cosmos [Inner City: IC 1020] takes the listener on a journey through the cosmos, envisioning music from another planet. The album cover shows a different perspective of the universe looking from behind Saturn to the Sun, emphasizing its alien identity. The record is available in the Marr Sound Archives.