

**Song Exploder**  
**Harry Gregson-Williams - The Martian**  
**Episode 53**

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

*(The Martian audio clip: "I got to figure out a way to grow three years worth of food here on a planet where nothing grows. Luckily, I'm a botanist")*

*("The Martian" by HARRY GREGSON-WILLIAMS)*

Hrishikesh: That's a clip from the film *The Martian*, where Matt Damon plays astronaut Mark Watney, who's stranded on Mars, and has to rely on science and ingenuity in order to survive. At the time of this recording, the film's been No. 1 at the box office for two weeks straight. In this episode, composer Harry Gregson-Williams breaks down his music from the film, where part of his job was to score the excitement of scientific discovery and the grandeur and mystery of Mars itself. He begins with how director Ridley Scott first offered him the job to work on the film.

*("The Martian" by HARRY GREGSON-WILLIAMS)*

*(Music fades)*

Harry: A script plopped through the letterbox one day with a terse little note on it, which said, "Read it. Like it. Do it" [laughter]. I plowed through the script in one hungry sitting, and it was a no-brainer, man. Certainly something I really wanted to do. I'm Harry Gregson-Williams, and I'm the composer of *The Martian* Score.

*(Piano)*

Harry: Our first conversations were about tone and color, and he showed me a very, I thought, very complete first assembly of the film. So the film had really taken shape by the time I came to it. The outcome of the first meeting really was that I should focus on Watney, you know, Matt Damon's character, which is pretty clear that I should from this script. His optimism for life, his love of science and problem-solving that he always seems to be able to handle with humor and charisma. All this should be reflected in the music.

*(Piano fades)*

Harry: You know, there was no reason for the music to be too dark for too long in this film. And that was quite a revelation to begin with because I had thought there will be a lot of darkness and despair. He's only hanging on to a tiny thread of belief there that he could live, but for the most part, this is a guy who's up for the channel. The piece of music that you've picked out here has the technological scientific aspect of him talking into a camera, and no one else there, him alone on Mars, he looks like he's made up his mind. This is it. This is the day that he's going to leave. The key is going to start with bass, low notes and low, Chilean basses.

*(Cello)*

*(Cello fades)*

Harry: This little theme board, [sings cello part], comes a couple of times in the movie, and it's quite austere. It's part of a Mars motif. And then, the mood changes somewhat, brightens. We get to Watney who's smiling.

*(Harp)*

Harry: We hear a little Harp thing,

*(Harp)*

Harry: with a bit of delay on it, which gives us a little spring in our step.

*(Harp)*

Harry: I wanted it to be an organic, played instrument. I wanted a texture, I didn't want it to be guitar, I didn't want it to be piano. And that kind of limited me. Harp seemed absolutely perfect. And then, I'd stick a left-right delay on it.

*(Harp)*

Harry: I wanted that feeling, like a mounting excitement.

*(Harp)*

*(Harp fades)*

Harry: Musically, I had to find a way of embracing a kind of a scientific side of the fun he was having. To begin with, you know, I wanted to have some fun with little arpeggiated synths.

*(Synth)*

Harry: In the past, sometimes I'd say my scores are synth with a little bit of orchestra poking its head through. This one, I think, is the other way round. I think it's more organic with some synths bubbling around in the background.

*(Synth)*

*(Synth fades)*

Harry: So after the cue's been going for a little bit, there's a gap in what Watney is saying and that seemed like a perfect place to start the melody, which is these open 4ths and 5ths.

*(Piano)*

Harry: And it's getting higher and higher, it's very optimistic. For variation, I added a beautiful Alto glockenspiel I have,

*(Alto glockenspiel)*

Harry: which just gives the piano a sparkle.

*(Piano with alto glockenspiel)*

Harry: As we go forward, I needed to vary it one more time and I add an autoharp, which is kind of a small instrument. Very, very, very, very high.

*(Autoharp)*

Harry: So these are the sort of things that one's looking to do, is to be able to cause development without taking the listener out of the movie for a moment. So instead of using piano all the way through, I'm just adding layers.

*(Autoharp)*

Harry: So halfway through the first part of this cue, the synths give over to a string ostinato.

*(String ostinato)*

Harry: So this little figure [sings string ostinato], Ridley was looking for some release here.

*(String ostinato)*

Harry: I realized that that could interweave itself with the synths.

*(Synths join)*

Harry: By the time we get a little bit further, the whole orchestra have been introduced.

*(Strings)*

Harry: It needed to state his theme quite clearly without being too ostentatious, yet let Watney be the star of the scene not the music, because let's face it, I mean Matt Damon's performance really, really pulls this movie, and I really didn't want to get in the way of that.

*(Strings fade)*

Harry: When we go over into the second part of the cue, which is a very different tempo, different feel, different key, the transition is a key change. So there are

*(Strings)*

Harry: two or three string chords in there which say, "Hello, I'm changing key now." We go from C minor to F major to B flat major,

*(Strings end)*

Harry: which is where we really want to be in, a major key. At first, I wrote the back part of this cue in the same key as the front part, in C minor and it didn't seem to give me the lift I was looking for, so I double back and realize that the transition

from the joy of him leaving to the sort of majesty of him crossing Mars, that was a perfect place for a modulation. And then, [snaps fingers] boom, the French horn comes in, in the new key,

*(French horn)*

Harry: with the beginning of the theme.

*(French horn)*

Harry: Also, the choir, they're a London choir, and they're awesome.

*(Choir)*

Harry: They had a text that we found, a poem called *On the Nature of Things* by a Roman philosopher called Lucretius.

*(Choir)*

*(Choir ends)*

Harry: So they are actually singing something that makes sense conceptually, but more importantly for me at that moment, they're singing vowels and consonants. They're not just singing oohs and aahs [laughter]. If, you know, if we're asking the audience to take something really seriously, and the Hollywood choir come in oohing and aahing and cooing, and goodness knows what, it just, it takes the piss a bit. It's like, "What? I don't believe that."

*(Choir)*

Harry: So they're singing about infinite space and their part in this thing, you know, it sounds like something important. These are methods to hopefully make the music more believable.

*(Choir)*

Harry: A lot of my writing time was very pleasurable in this movie. I think it really helps when the movie's so darn good. The acting's good. The writing's good. It was very much a joy.

*(Choir ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the fully assembled score suite from *The Martian*, composed by Harry Gregson-Williams.

*("The Martian" by HARRY GREGSON-WILLIAMS)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information about this episode and *The Martian*. I've put up a photo of Harry Gregson-Williams conducting the orchestra at Abbey Road as they recorded the score. There's also a link to buy *The Martian Score Suite*.

Next time on Song Exploder, Chet Faker.

*("Gold" by CHET FAKER)*

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is part of Radiotopia, a collective of some of my favorite podcasts. Go to [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm) to learn more. You can find me on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, with the username @Song Exploder, and you can subscribe to future episodes at [itunes.com/songexploder](https://itunes.com/songexploder). I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Gold" by CHET FAKER)*

*(Music fades)*