

GUSTAV HOLST
David C F Wright, DMus

I do not know what to make of this composer.

I am worried that much of his music is so strongly influenced by other composers that it may challenge his originality, or lack of it. Uranus from *The Planets* is clearly influenced by Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and Neptune is taken from the final movement, *Sirens*, from Debussy's *Nocturnes*. Despite this, there is some originality in Holst's work and it is an interesting paradox that obvious influences do not cancel personal individuality. The great Vaughan Williams was influenced by Holst. The motto theme of his superlative *Symphony no. 4 in F minor* (a real masterpiece) seems to step out of Uranus, the magician. The opening of Vaughan Williams' *Symphony no. 5 in D* is so similar to the opening of Butterworth's orchestral rhapsody, *A Shropshire Lad*.



It is curious that influences do not necessarily make the composer who is influenced a lesser composer. It is said that Mahler influenced Shostakovich, an idea that I cannot endorse. However, Shostakovich, to my mind, is a far better composer than Mahler.

There is a danger that Holst is regarded as a one-work composer and that one work is *The Planets* but, I submit, it may not be his best work. I do not dispute that there are some very fine moments in *The Planets* and it is a rare example of first-class orchestration which may not be present in his other works. The smaller works are better such as the engaging *St Paul's Suite* and *Egdon Heath* which is his finest work. Some of his choral works are worthy of attention. *The Hymn of Jesus* is a splendid work but only if it is given a good performance.

His weakness is shown in his first work, a setting of *Horatius* for chorus and orchestra dating from around 1887. This was six years before he came to London to study with Stanford at the Royal College of Music. All Holst knew was Berlioz's treatise on instrumentation.

His first work to be performed was *Lansdowne Castle* given at the Cheltenham Corn Exchange on 7 February 1893. It was described as an operetta and was a sort of send-up of Sullivan and written for audience approval. He had had some lessons in counterpoint in Oxford and the work is a combination of light-hearted music and an attempt to be academically correct. As with many young composers he wanted to be noticed and included in the score are top Cs. He wanted to rebel against the theorist's law that consecutive fifths were not allowed and so he used them. At one point he instructs the choir to sing an ecclesiastical chant as a magic incantation and to make a big crescendo through closed lips which, of course, is absurd.

The audience were not impressed and when Holst heard Bach's *B minor Mass* at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester Cathedral in September 1893 he was not impressed with his work either. However, he told Boult that the *Sanctus* had a profound effect on him. Holst was writing music that were mere imitations, Sullivan and Grieg being his models and not the best choices. Holst called these works his 'Early Horrors'. Studying with Stanford made him aware that all his music up to that time was poor and merely juvenilia.

Gustav Theodore van Holst was born on 21 September 1874 at 4 Pitville Terrace, Cheltenham of a

musical family. His father was Adolph and his mother was born Clara Lediard. From 1887-91, Gustav was educated at Cheltenham Grammar School. He was a proficient pianist and in 1892 became the organist at Wyck Rissington Church. In 1893 there was the performance of Lansdowne Castle and on 12 April he conducted a choral society at Bourton on the Water. In May he entered the Royal College of Music. It is a pity that he gave up piano technique. This was due to neuritis, inflammation of the nerves but it is true that Holst was never really robust. The following year, 1895, he was awarded a scholarship to study composition at RCM and several months later met Vaughan Williams.

He wrote a comic opera *The Revoke* which he called his opus one, but it was a disaster. Then he became impressed with Wagner and for a decade was taken up with *Tristan und Isolde* one of the greatest operas of all time and Wagner's masterpiece. Holst lived and breathed *Tristan* and he tried to compose an opera, *The Magic Mirror* but his passion for Wagner misled him. His chords were too thick and turgid as one finds in the music of Elgar. He realised the stupidity of this type of pompous music and struggled for some considerable time to let these weaknesses go.

Stanford was a remarkable teacher and was harsh on Holst but it was needed. But Holst did not know which way to turn. Sullivan and Wagner had inspired him and now he turned again to Grieg and, under that influence, composed his *Winter Idyll*.

Holst had to be original and modern and to achieve this he had a predilection for composing with many sevenths. This idea that modern music is only modern because of 'discords' is nonsense. Alun Hoddinott started his career with the same notion as you can see in his *Clarinet Concerto*, op. 3. The intervals of seconds, sevenths and ninths should not be termed as discords. They create tension in music and it must be remembered that the great composers of the past used them to good effect.

Holst wrote *Ornulfs Drapa* for baritone and orchestra a grim work which, again, shows compositional weaknesses. He strove to be inspired and to be a hero to worship and by 1898 was immersed in the work of Ibsen, a natural progression from his infatuation with Grieg. Unlike Schubert, Holst now began to take instruction seriously. He had learned to play the trombone and took Stanford's advice to stick to the rules.

He was now more settled. He was engaged to Isabel Harrison, playing the trombone in the Scottish orchestra and for the Carl Rosa opera company which he did until 1903.

In 1899 he composed his first important work, the *Walt Whitman Overture* which he described as his opus 7. Clearly he was impressed with Whitman's poetry as was Vaughan Williams and others since. He also wrote his *Suite de Ballet* for orchestra and was becoming more interested in country life, the real England, and his Gloucestershire upbringing. The *Cotswolds Symphony* was begun. It is autobiographical but it is difficult to follow his thoughts in this work. The slow movement is an *Elegy* in memory of William Morris which has an intensity that is quite moving and prophetic of other works associated with death and gloom such as *Neptune from the Planets* and *Egdon Heath*.

Holst loved the company of girls and women and it may be true to say that his best works were written for the fairer sex. He enjoyed writing choral works for female voices only. His first choral work of note is a setting of *Ave Maria* for eight female voices. His association with girls' schools led to his *Pastoral* for three female voices and the *Seven Part-songs* Op. 44 for three female voices. Two of his *Four Choral Songs* from the *Rig Veda* are for female voices and is *Hecuba's Lament* and the *Hymn to Dionysus*. Two of his major choral works, the *Choral Symphony* and *A Choral Fantasy* both have one soloist, a soprano.

He wrote many part-songs which are nothing more than exercises and his over-ambitious nature again misled him into an opera, *The Youth's Choice*. It was an absolute failure and Holst would have done well to listen to Vaughan Williams's advice. Holst had no idea about stage presence or arrangements.

What led him to study Sanskrit at London University is not clear to me but this led to the exploration of the Bhagavad Gita. He worked with great industry on translating the hymns from the Rig Veda and the dramatic events in the Ramayana. He composed a symphonic poem, Indra, with these influences in mind but it is a poor work. He composed Invocation to the Dance for baritone and piano, his first setting of a Sanskrit text but, again, it is poor and the piano part is so un-original. It sounds like Chopin.

He married Isabel Harrison on 24 June 1901. They had one child, Imogen Clare who was born on 12 April 1907 when he was appointed director of music at Morley College for Working Men and Women. He remained in this post until 1924.

It is usually considered that all serious composers write a least one symphony and one concerto. Perhaps a violin concerto was in his mind when he wrote A Song of the Night for violin and orchestra. This, with many other pieces, was withdrawn as they were very poor. But his style was changing.

His earliest important work was The Mystic Trumpeter for soprano and orchestra with a text by Whitman. Here a new style appears and there is a move away from chromaticism. Some of the music is very powerful and reminds us of Mars from The Planets. But death is present and it is this gloominess that some find worrying in his music.

Of importance is the Five Tennyson Songs for female voices. Here we find an integration of the vocal and piano parts.

It was, perhaps, the influence of Vaughan Williams that led Holst to investigate folk song. His first venture into this was in his orchestral work Songs of the West. His contribution to Seven Scottish Airs for string orchestra with piano is merely a string of tunes. The Two Songs without Words for orchestra is very poor and weak. His not always knowing what he was doing which explains the quotes from Wagner.

Very serious compositional weakness is also found in the Somerset Rhapsody for orchestra. He said so himself. As part of the learning process he copied out motets by such composers as Lassus and Victoria for the girls at St Paul's School, and this is still an excellent way to learn. This led him to compose the Four Old English Carols, Op. 20B, which are worthy of attention. The song A Babe is Born obviously influenced Britten but Holst's setting is superior. There are some lovely moments.

His fascination with Sanskrit led him to compose the opera Sita. It was not a success and, quite frankly, it is full of dreadful flaws. Holst even said that it was nothing more than 'good old Wagner bawling', which is unfair on Wagner.

It was now 1906. He was 32 years of age. Most of his work to date was very poor indeed. He had major technical problems in composing which the professionals both recognise and admit and, to be fair to Holst, so did he. By the age of 32, Purcell, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven had written masterpieces. So had Iain Hamilton with many prizes and awards given to him for each of his first five works.

In 1907 Holst began working on the Rig Veda. He struggled with technical music problems and in 1908 wrote his one-act opera Savitri which is his most successful work in this genre. But Savitri represents death, and gloom pervades the music. The orchestra is large and some orchestration is very fine although the first scene does not employ the orchestra. But his daughter, Imogen, is reported as saying that good moments in this opera are rare.

In 1905 Holst had become the director of music at St Paul's Girls' School. Obviously, he had to compose less challenging music for them than for professionals. As I have said, his best works are

written with these girls in mind, which have an enviable command of innocence. The Part-songs for children to texts by Whittier have many flaws but the song The swallow leaves her nest has an occasional poignancy.

His Suite in E flat for military band does not work. It is traditional and somewhat banal. The Suite no. 2 in F is based on folk tunes from Hampshire but there are still serious problems in the music. Modulations are both awkward and ineffective to give but one example.

A holiday in Algiers inspired his oriental suite Beni Mora which is a successful piece. He shrugged on the shackles of just writing well known tunes and 'borrowing' the styles of others. To think that the inspiration was from listening to a solo bamboo flute for two and a half hours is hard to assimilate. Sir Malcolm Sargent liked the piece and discussed it at length with some of us in his Kensington flat, complete with two grand pianos!

Holst attempted another oriental piece with his Japanese Suite.

There is a new departure in the Hymn to Dionysus of 1913 for female voices and orchestra. He had obviously been listening to Vaughan Williams for the sound world is more akin to him than to Holst. There is also some influence from Ravel, I think. But this impressionistic beauty and sensual music is, to me, his best work and gives credence to my opening remarks that a composer profoundly influenced by others can write original music, however much a paradox that is.

Two works for the girls' school must be mentioned. Seven Choruses from Alcestis for unison voices, three flutes and harp are dramatic but weak in that his writing for the voices which is too high and does not take into account the change of register for each voice. The accompaniment is sparse at times but there are moments of drama. The St Paul's Suite for string orchestra is a joy.

It is a success because of its simplicity. The Jig is based on Morris dancing themes, the Ostinato is mercurial, the intermezzo has a melody reused in The Perfect Fool and the finale is the same, more or less, as the end of the Suite in F.

In 1913 the new music school was opened.

The Two Psalms for chorus, string orchestra and organ has some telling moments. How refreshing to hear Alleluias sung and not in the style of a town-crier. But gloom reappears in the Dirge of Two Veterans for male voices, brass and percussion to a text by Walt Whitman.

He was rejected for active war service due to neuritis and eye trouble.

The Planets date from 1914 and 1917 and so much has been written about them. I cannot add anything new. What is generally not recognised is the clear influence of Stravinsky and, with such a master behind him the prospect of success for Holst is that very much greater. With World War One looming, Holst wrote Mars, the bringer of war, first. It is very powerful music and, although Holst had strange religious views, his quote from the Kyrie of Bach's B minor Mass is an obvious statement. Venus, the bringer of peace, is clearly a desire for peace and there may be something very personal in the crying oboe melody. Mercury, the winged messenger, had a lightness of touch but suffers from episodic changes which prevents the music being an integral whole. Jupiter has become famous for the tune sung to I vow to thee my country which, with Elgar's land of Hope and Glory, have been nationalistic anthems but, although I may be in the minority, both tunes seem to wallow in sentimentality and may be nauseating sycophantic. This is an important point because sentimentality in Holst is almost nonexistent. This is a fascinating fact and could produce some lively debate. Saturn, the bringer of old age, is Holst's gloom again such as you will find in Egdon Heath. Uranus, the magician, starts with violence and the composition is full of grotesque clumsiness as Imogen said to us once. There is

derision, irreverence and tedious repetition. Despair returns in Neptune the Mystic where the orchestra is directed to play pianissimo throughout, as are the women's voices to be sempre pp.

Much of The Planets was written at long weekends he spent in a cottage in Thaxted which had a choir which was devoted to Bach. The local vicar was also a socialist. At Thaxted's Whitsun Festivals, Holst would have girls from school and some Musicians from Morley College to perform music. Some of this was of his own music including This have I done for my true love.

In 1919 he was appointed to the staff at the Royal College of Music where he stayed until 1924 and had a part-time post at the University of Reading.

Sadly, he had a nervous breakdown in 1924.

Always something of a rebel, Holst decided to research dancing hymns which took him to various periods of musical history. At one time he was besotted with Elizabethan music and then Tudor music but it is right for all musicians and music lovers to study and treat music of different centuries and styles with equal interest and respect. His Six Choral Songs still show a technical insecurity but all his studies were laying the foundation for his Hymn of Jesus. Folk music still interested him and he tried to combine them in a Phantasy String Quartet which is said to be an abysmal attempt. Failure and legions of mistakes are seen in his A Festival Chime originally called Our church-bells at Thaxted.

Every time Holst tried to be adventurous or modern he came unstuck. His Three Carols for unison voices fared better. His Four Songs for voice and violin is an admission that he could not write for the piano although it is said that one day Holst saw in Thaxted Church a woman walking around singing to her own violin accompaniment.

The Hymn of Jesus was not a work of personal faith but rather inspired by Byzantine art and less flattering pictures of the Christ. He visited monasteries looking for inspiration and deliberately avoided the usual and reverential images. Plainsong is his musical impetus here and it is a work that needs to be heard rather than analysed or commented upon. There is a drama and a feeling of exaltation. While I may have a different view it is probably correct to say that it was Holst's best work so far, a much greater work than The Planets.

His preoccupation with Sanskrit and the writings of India with its often emphasis on death led to his Ode to Death from a poem by Walt Whitman but here the Grim Reaper is portrayed as a welcome visitor.

At the end of the war Holst was in the Middle East helping with the demobilisation of troops and organising music entertainments. It was probably here that he conceived the opera The Perfect Fool. It was yet another failure but the ballet music has had some popularity.

Holst was at his wits' end. Stanford's words came back to haunt him, "Stick to the rules, m'boy!".

And so the composer, approaching the age of 50 turned his back on his dislike for theoretical correctness and studied the fugue and other musical disciplines. He was already interested in Bach the great exponent of the fugue. In 1922 Holst wrote his Fugal Overture which he did with great annoyance. This was in 1922 and followed the next year by the Fugal Concerto for flute, oboe and string orchestra. Between these two works was his accident in Reading when he fell from a rostrum while conducting and banged his head.

The Fugal Concerto does not work. He uses 18th century models so that the work could be short. His heart was not in fugal writing. His next idea was to imitate the great Beethoven and he embarked on a Choral Symphony. But, again, its main weakness is that he could not compose in an extended form

and some of the music is pretty dreadful. The Prelude is an invocation to Pan. The Song a setting of Keats' Ode to a Grecian Urn which follows the busy Bacchanal. The song is nothing short of awful is the general opinion of many musicians. The scherzo recalls Mercury the winged messenger. The finale is too long and very weak.

His next work was condemned by all who heard it. At the Boar's Head was a musical interlude in one act. His exploration into Shakespeare was another attempt to attain some distinction but, despite, some vital moments, it is another failure.

So he decided to explore another avenue. He had not written any chamber music since 1903 and so in 1925 he wrote his Terzetto for flute, oboe and viola, undoubtedly his best chamber piece. It is my belief that had he written much chamber music he would have fared better. He composed Seven Part-songs to verses by Robert Bridges. He began work on a second choral symphony but his main activity between 1925 and 1928 was writing music for amateurs to be performed at various festivals. There are some short piano pieces about which I should say nothing. The choral ballet the Golden Goose is so badly written that it makes discerning musicians and listeners squirm. A second choral ballet, The Morning of the Year was written for the English Folk-Dance Society.

I am not seeking to damage Hoist's reputation. He knew that his work was substandard and was very depressed and this led to the composition of Egdon Heath, op. 47, a gloomy orchestral work that described solitude. It is a work of significant interest and in the writing of it did Holst a power of good. The concept of beauty in loneliness is not a new idea but here Holst pours out his soul in a remarkable orchestral essay. Curiously, it is a fine work and Holst was pleased with it and it superseded the Hymn of Jesus as his best work to date. Holst is reported to have said, "It is the only good thing I have written!"

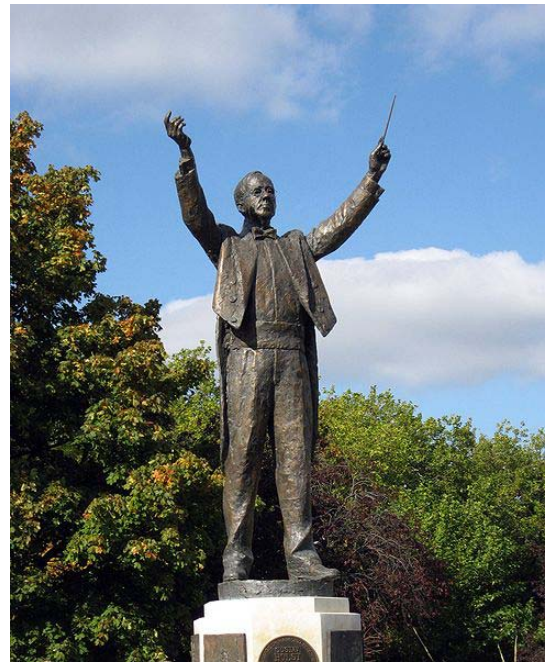
His Twelve Songs of Humbert Wolfe followed. His next work was the Double Concerto for two violins and orchestra which uses the device of the fugue but the music is arid. However, it was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society. He then set about his final opera, The Wandering Scholar based on Helen Waddell's book. Sadly, it was another failure. He could not write an aria or anything lyrical. There is a tedious style of counterpoint and more fugal writing.

He became depressed again and another breakdown followed. Some of the ideas and interests he once held dear no longer mattered to him. His Choral Fantasia of 1933 is a setting of Robert Bridge's Ode to Music and recaptures the despair of his Rig Veda hymn To the unknown God. It was composed for the Three Choirs' Festival. To add to its weakness it was written with Schubert's influence in mind and therefore is repetitious, long-drawn out and wearisome.

Hammersmith, a prelude and scherzo for military band, later orchestrated, is heavy-laden and often crude and contains yet another fugue.

In 1932 he was visiting lecturer in composition at Harvard University but in March was taken ill returning to England on 2 June. He now lived the life of an invalid. He continued to compose including the Lyric Movement for viola and orchestra, his swan song, in which for the first time he achieves warmth in his music. He said, "It took my being an invalid to write music like that!"

It is a good piece.



He died in London on 25 May 1934 two months after the premiere of the Lyric Movement. On 24 June his ashes were interred in Chichester Cathedral.

It will appear to many that this biographical essay about Holst is negative and harshly critical. But it must be remembered that Holst was negative and critical of his work.

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